

PONTIUS PILATE

Pontius Pilate (Marcus Pontius Pilatus) was the governor of Judaea under the emperor Tiberius from A.D. 26 – 36. He is the man who presided at the trial of Jesus and gave the order for his crucifixion. According to the traditional account of his life he was from Italy, a Roman equestrian (knight) of the Samnite clan of the Pontii (hence his name Pontius).

Pilate is mentioned by name over 50 times in the Bible. There is obviously a reason why he is mentioned so many times in the Bible. Perhaps we can learn something from reflecting on his life. The first reference to him in the Bible is: **“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracoonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” (Luke 3:1,2)** Luke’s attention to detail made him the target of a young skeptic in England named William Ramsay. Luke was so specific about so many things that Ramsay felt it would be easy to prove him wrong. After decades of research Ramsay never found Luke to be in error about anything. The reliability of biblical evidence caused Ramsay himself to become a Christian. It is comforting to know that archeologists also confirm what the Bible states about Pilate. One notable example was the discovery of Pilate’s Stone in Caesarea in 1961. This artifact is particularly significant because it is an archaeological find of an authentic 1st-century Roman inscription mentioning the name and title of “Pontius Pilatus”. It was written during Pilate’s lifetime and confirms what the Bible says about him.

The last time Pilate is mentioned in the Bible is in 1 Timothy 6:11-16: **“But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen.”**

The second Bible reference to Pilate is also from the Gospel of Luke. **“Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.” (Luke 13:1).** Pilate’s cruelty to the Jews is also confirmed by secular historians. Josephus, for example, recounts an incident in which Pilate spent money from the temple treasury to build an aqueduct. When the Jews objected, Pilate had soldiers hidden in the crowd and when he gave the signal the soldiers began to randomly attack and kill the protestors. In describing Pilate's personality, Philo, who lived from 20 B.C. to 50 A.D. writes that Pilate had *"vindictiveness and furious temper"*, and was *"naturally inflexible, a blend of self-will and relentlessness"*. Referring to Pilate's governance, Philo further describes *"his corruption, and his acts of insolence, and his rapine, and his habit of insulting people, and his cruelty, and his continual murders of people untried and uncondemned, and his never ending, and gratuitous, and most grievous inhumanity"*.

Luke is the only Gospel writer who mentions the friendship of Pilate and Herod (Luke 23:5-12). Luke also mentions Pilate in Peter’s sermon in Solomon’s Colonnade (Acts 3:11-16) and also in connection with the resurrection fulfilling a prophecy made in the second Psalm (Acts 4:23-31).

Pilate is best known, of course, for his part in the trial of Jesus. While we will not mention every reference to Pilate in the Bible, we will attempt to provide a complete chronology of the trial and the events that followed. As we quote from all four Gospels, there will, of course, be some overlap and repetition.

- **“Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness they did not enter the palace, because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover.” (John 18:28)**
- **“Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, made their plans. So they bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate. ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ asked Pilate. ‘You have said so’ Jesus replied. The chief priests accused him of many things. So again Pilate asked him, ‘Aren’t you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.’ But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.” (Mark 15:1-5).**
- **“So Pilate came out to them and asked, ‘What charges are you bringing against this man?’ ‘If he were not a criminal,’ they replied, ‘we would not have handed him over to you.’ Pilate said, ‘Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.’ ‘But we have no right to execute anyone,” they objected. This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die. Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ ‘Is that your own idea,’ Jesus asked, ‘or did others talk to you about me?’ ‘Am I a Jew?’ Pilate replied. ‘Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?’ Jesus said, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place. ‘You are a king, then!’ said Pilate. Jesus answered, ‘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.’ ‘What is truth?’ retorted Pilate.” (John 18:29-38)**
- **“Then Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, ‘I find no basis for a charge against this man.’ But they insisted, ‘He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here.’ On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean. When he learned that Jesus was under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform a sign of some sort. He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him. Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate. That day Herod and Pilate became friends—before this they had been enemies.” Luke 23:4-12)**
- **“Now it was the governor’s custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, ‘Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?’ For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him. While Pilate was sitting on the judge’s seat, his wife sent him this message: ‘Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.’ But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed. ‘Which of the two do you want me to release to you?’**

asked the governor. ‘Barabbas,’ they answered. ‘What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?’ Pilate asked. They all answered, ‘Crucify him!’ ‘Why? What crime has he committed?’ asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, ‘Crucify him!’ When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood,’ he said. ‘It is your responsibility!’” (Matthew 27:15-24).

■ “Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, and said to them, ‘You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. Therefore, I will punish him and then release him.’ But the whole crowd shouted, ‘Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us! (Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder.) Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. But they kept shouting, ‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’ For the third time he spoke to them: ‘Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have him punished and then release him.’ But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demand. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will.” (Luke 23:13-24)

■ “Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again, saying, ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ And they slapped him in the face. Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews gathered there, ‘Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him.’ When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, ‘Here is the man!’ As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, ‘Crucify! Crucify!’ But Pilate answered, ‘You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him.’ The Jewish leaders insisted, ‘We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.’ When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, and he went back inside the palace. ‘Where do you come from?’ he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. ‘Do you refuse to speak to me?’ Pilate said. ‘Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?’ Jesus answered, ‘You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.’” (John 19:1-11)

■ “Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified” (Mark 15:15).

■ So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). There they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle. Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: Jesus of nazareth, the king of the jews. Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, ‘Do not write The King of the Jews, but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.’ Pilate answered, “What I have written, I have written.” (John 19:16-22)

■ “Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: ‘Not one of his bones will be broken,’ and, as another scripture says, ‘They will look on the one they have pierced.’” (John 19:31-37)

■ “Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate’s permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus’ body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.” (John 19:38-42)

■ “The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. ‘Sir,’ they said, ‘we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise again.’ So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.’ ‘Take a guard,’ Pilate answered. ‘Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how.’ So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.” (Matthew 27:62-65)

■ “After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.’ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. ‘Greetings,’ he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.’ While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.” (Matthew 28:1-15)

PILATE AND THE JEWS

Normally Pilate was in Caesarea. At Passover time, however, he came to Jerusalem to ensure there were no riots or revolutions. Pilate had a history of problems with the Jews. Josephus tells of a confrontation involving images and effigies of Caesar. They were smuggled into Jerusalem at night and when the citizens discovered them they demanded that they be removed. After five days of deliberation Pilate had his soldiers surround the demonstrators and threaten them with death. The Jews were willing to die rather than violate Mosaic Law. Finally, Pilate backed down and removed the images.

Philo describes a later incident in which Pilate set up gold coated shields in Herod's palace in Jerusalem. Pilate was said to have done this "not so much as to honor Tiberius as to annoy the multitude". The Jews protested first to Pilate, and then to Tiberius himself. Philo reports that after reading the letters Tiberius "wrote to Pilate with a host of reproaches and rebukes for his audacious violation of precedent and bade him at once take down the shields and have them transferred from the capital to Caesarea." According to Josephus, Caesarea was the scene in 26 A.D. another major act of civil disobedience resulted from Pilate's order to plant eagle standards on the [Temple Mount in Jerusalem](#).

Since Pilate was responsible for imperial tax collections in Judaea, the conversions of tax collectors like Levi and Zacchaeus may have come to his attention. This, however, did not prevent Pilate from having a special relationship with the Jewish leaders. Note that when the soldiers who guarded the tomb were paid a large sum of money to not tell what truly happened, the Jewish leaders told them: **"If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble" (Matthew 28:14).**

Pilate's rule in Judaea ended, according to Josephus, when a large number of Samaritans ascended Mt. Gerizim to see artifacts allegedly buried there by Moses. Pilate sent in soldiers who slew some and put others to flight. Many prisoners were taken and the most influential ones were put to death. The Samaritans then complained to Vitellius, the Roman governor of Syria. He was over Pilate in the Roman hierarchy. Vitellius ordered Pilate to go to Rome and explain his actions. Before Pilate got there, however, Tiberius died.

Josephus. In his *Antiquities of the Jews*, wrote about 60 years after this event took place. He states that Pilate arrived in Rome in March 37 A.D. By this time Tiberius was dead and Caligula was the new emperor. Eusebius reported that Pontius Pilate committed suicide at this time.

PILATE'S CHOICE

- In the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve had a choice. They could do the will of God, or their own will!
- Pilate had the same choice. The decision was not complicated. He could chose to do the will of God, or his own will!
- Both Adam and Pilate made the wrong choice!

- Do not let the devil deceive you by clouding the issue with distracting details. Every choice we make is just this simple. We chose to do God's will, or our own!
- Jesus chose to do the will of God! What will you choose?

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