

## Poor Pilate—wrong place, wrong time

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According to John 18:12, there was a *chiliarch* among those who went to the Garden of Gethsemane to arrest Jesus. Well now, a *chiliarch* commanded a thousand men (or perhaps a cohort, about 600). There would scarcely be more than one of them stationed in Jerusalem, so he was presumably the top commanding military officer in town. So what was the top military commander doing in Gethsemane at 2:00 a.m.? If he was there, it was because the governor, Pilate, had sent him. And why would Pilate do something like that? He had his reasons.

As governor, Pilate represented the Roman Empire. He was responsible for keeping the peace, according to Caesar's interests. In those days the city of Jerusalem was not very big, and keeping well informed would not have been difficult. Pilate was doubtless well aware of Jesus, and would have followed His career with attention. Someone with a large public following could be a threat. Moreover, since it was the chief priests' man who led the expedition, and they kept the prisoner, it is clear that they had gone to Pilate and convinced him that Jesus represented enough of a threat that something needed to be done about it. (Jesus had used violence in cleansing the temple, as well as totally disregarding their authority. Why would He not do the same against Rome?) Even so, just why Pilate decided to send his *chiliarch* is hard to say; perhaps to be sure that things were done professionally, as well as to form a professional opinion as to the nature of the threat. Certain it is that Pilate and the chief priests had agreed on a plan of action, as John makes clear, a plan that included death by crucifixion.

Both Mark 15:1 and John 18:28 inform us that it was early morning when Jesus was taken to Pilate, but John 19:14 states that it was around 6:00 a.m. when Pilate pronounced sentence. Even allowing that 'around' 6:00 was perhaps five or ten minutes after the hour, it could not have been later than 5:30 when the chief priests pounded on Pilate's door. Now then, we all know that one just does not go pounding on a governor's door at such an hour, especially a conquered people. Not only that, Pilate was dressed and waiting. Actually, he had doubtless been up, waiting for the *chiliarch's* report. But at that point he changed the game-plan. He went out and asked, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" (John 18:29). Their reply was petulant, "If he were not an evil-doer we would not have handed him over to you." They thought that they had an agreement, but something had made Pilate change his mind.

To understand what happened, we need to go back to Gethsemane, and the *chiliarch*. The traitor had told them that there would be eleven men besides Jesus, and that they had two swords (Luke 22:38). But they were country bumpkins with no fighting ability. Even so, the *chiliarch* probably had over twice as many men, and all were armed—he doubtless expected some attempt at resistance. When they arrived and stated their business, Jesus calmly identified Himself, but at His word they all fell to the ground (John 18:6). Later, after the traitor's kiss, Peter managed to slice off an ear, but not only did Jesus tell him to quit it, He healed the ear (Luke 22:51)! Then the disciples abandoned Jesus, and He allowed Himself to be bound, without resistance. So what sort of report would the *chiliarch* give to

Pilate? It was more than obvious that Jesus was no wild-eyed insurrectionist. He had supernatural power, and yet submitted peacefully. And Jesus was impressive! Pilate had to conclude that the picture that the chief priests had painted was wrong, and so the agreement could not stand.

Now a *chiliarch* was a hardened and seasoned warrior, not easily impressed. He probably told Pilate that if it were up to him, he would leave Jesus alone! But Pilate had to deal with the chief priests, and he knew it would not be easy. In Acts 3:13 Peter affirms that Pilate was determined to let Jesus go, but the chief priests got what they wanted in the end. Close attention to the Record makes clear that Peter's affirmation is correct. Pilate wanted no part of killing Jesus! He made repeated attempts to 'get off the hook'. Consider:

1) Pilate answered their petulant response with, "You take him and judge him according to your law." To this they responded, "We are not permitted to execute anyone." This exchange indicates that execution had been in the agreement, but Pilate also rubbed salt in their wound, making them recognize that they were a subjugated people. Even so, he told them to do the judging, which would make them responsible.

2) Luke 23:2 probably gives the first concrete accusation: "We found this fellow perverting the nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, declaring himself to be Christ, a king." The part about taxes was a plain lie, but the part about the Christ was true. In any case, Pilate could not safely ignore such accusations, so he interrogated Jesus.

3) Matthew 27:11, Mark 15:2, Luke 23:3 and John 18:33-38 all refer to this first interrogation. It revolved around the kingship of Jesus, which could be a crime against Caesar. Jesus affirms that He is a king, but His kingdom "is not of this world" (John 18:36). A kingdom that was not of this world would not represent a threat to Rome. So Pilate went out and said to the crowd, "I find no crime in him at all." If there was no crime, there should be no punishment.

4) This led to a barrage of further accusations, to which Jesus did not answer, which surprised Pilate (Matthew 27:12-14, Mark 15:3-5 and Luke 23:5). But among the accusations they mentioned Galilee, which allowed Pilate to learn that Jesus was a Galilean, thereby belonging to Herod's jurisdiction. As 'luck' would have it, Herod was in town and nearby. (He had doubtless been informed about what was afoot, since he also was up and dressed at that early hour.)

5) So Pilate sent Jesus to Herod, probably hoping that Herod would take responsibility. Luke is the only one who records this side-trip (23:7-12). But Jesus refused to speak; and what can you do with someone who won't talk? From the Lord's point of view, Herod was irrelevant; it was Pilate who had the authority to crucify. So, frustrated, Herod sent Him back, only now arrayed in a gorgeous robe. The whole side-trip probably took no more than fifteen minutes.

6) Poor Pilate, what was he to do? Next he tried the 'releasing a prisoner at Passover' gambit, hoping to release Jesus, but the crowd demanded Barabbas. (Both Matthew and Mark record that Pilate knew that the chief priests had acted out of envy.) In the middle of this proceeding, Pilate received a message from his wife, about her dream (Matthew 27:19)

[she had probably been told why he didn't go to bed that night]. When Pilate asked what he should do with Jesus, they demanded that he be crucified. When Pilate asked what evil Jesus had done, they just yelled all the louder. Luke gives us a little further information. Pilate affirmed that neither he nor Herod had found guilt in Jesus, but because of their fury he offered to flog Jesus, hoping that would appease them.

7) Matthew, Mark and John give some account of the treatment Jesus received from the soldiers. They made a crown of thorns, probably poisonous, and then drove the thorns into His scalp by beating on the crown with a rod. The poison would cause the scalp to swell, and blood would ooze from the wounds. They covered His face with spittle. Although none of the Evangelists mentions it, Isaiah 50:6 was presumably fulfilled as well—a soldier grabbing a fistful of beard and giving a violent yank would tear away the skin holding the hair, which would leave a painful and ugly wound. The total effect must have been horrible, leaving Jesus unrecognizable—Isaiah 52:14 was literally fulfilled. Then Pilate had Him brought out and said, “Look at the man!” (He had repeated that he found no crime in Him.) Pilate was hoping that when the crowd saw how much Jesus had already suffered, they would be satisfied, but it only made them worse!

8) To their “Crucify! Crucify him!” Pilate answered, “You take and crucify him, because I find no crime in him.” The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and according to our law he ought to die, because he made himself ‘Son of God’!” That statement made Pilate more afraid than ever (John 19:6-8). So he took Jesus inside for a second interview. Although Pilate represented the greatest temporal power at that time, Jesus calmly affirmed that there was a higher power, and that He, Jesus, represented that higher power. It appears to me that Pilate at least half believed Him, because John 19:12 says, “From that moment Pilate really tried to release Him.” But the Jews did an ‘end run’.

9) They kept shouting: “If you release this fellow you are no friend of Caesar’s! Whoever makes himself a king is opposing Caesar!” Oops! Pilate owed his position to Caesar’s good graces, and simply could not afford to do something that could be construed (even with a little twisting) as treason. He was beaten and knew it. But he still managed to get them to declare that their only king was Caesar.

10) Sitting on the judgment seat, Pilate called for water, washed his hands in front of the crowd, and said: “I am innocent of the blood of this righteous man. It’s your problem!” So in answer all the people said, “His blood be upon us and upon our children!” (Matthew 27:24-25). Terrible, terrible, terrible! This may well be the worst curse that any parents ever placed upon their descendants. Since Pilate declared Jesus to be righteous, and since the Jews took full responsibility, I suspect that God will not hold Pilate responsible. After all, he was fulfilling the Plan: Jesus had to die by crucifixion.

Before bringing this article to a close, I would like to call attention to several further items that bear on Pilate’s attitude.

1) Pilate had Jesus’ ‘crime’ posted in *three* languages; he evidently wanted as wide an audience as possible. All four Gospels mention this, and from them we may understand that the full Accusation was: This is Jesus the Natsorean, the King of the Jews. That Pilate

put “**the Natsorean**” (not Natsarene [Nazarene]) indicates that he had researched Jesus. The reference is to Isaiah 11:1; Jesus was David’s Branch, the Messiah. Pilate was making a statement. When the chief priests complained, he answered, “What I have written, I have written!” (John 19:21-22).

2) All four Gospels mention the burial, but only Mark registers that when Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for permission to remove Jesus’ body, Pilate was surprised that Jesus was already dead. So he summoned the centurion to confirm the fact (15:44-45). As soon as Jesus died, the centurion most probably had left the scene, going back to headquarters, leaving the four soldiers to guard the two malefactors. Of course Pilate had experienced the three hours of darkness, and had felt the earthquake, but he was not on the scene. He knew that a person on a cross dies from asphyxiation. The weight of the body pushes the diaphragm against the lungs and he can’t breathe. Nailing the feet was a sadistic procedure that prolonged the agony—rather than die they would push against the nail to get a breath. Finally, when too weak to do that they would die for lack of air. (That is why they broke the legs of the two thieves; they then died within a few minutes.) Jesus had been on the cross for six hours, but victims could last several times that long. Whether just then or later, Pilate doubtless got a full report from the centurion. Jesus had given a great shout and then died. Obviously, if you are dying without air, you can’t shout! The centurion knew that the cross had not killed Jesus. But what mere human can just tell his spirit to leave?  $2 + 2 = 4$ . Jesus had to be the Son of God.

3) Only Matthew mentions the sealing and guarding of the tomb (27:62-66). The chief priests went to Pilate requesting that the tomb be made secure until the third day. To this Pilate replied, “You have a guard; go make it as secure as you can!” His turn of phrase is interesting, “make it as secure as you can”. In other words, he was hinting that it would not make any difference. I rather suspect that Pilate believed that Jesus would do what He said.

We learn from Tertullian that Pilate wrote a letter to the emperor suggesting that Jesus be added to the roster of Roman deities. Now to make a suggestion like that involved an element of risk. But evidently Pilate was sufficiently convinced that he took the risk. If I someday meet Pilate in Heaven, I will not be surprised. If his experience with Jesus resulted in his salvation, Pilate would likely suggest a different title for this study: Blessed Pilate—right place, right time!