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The Roman Trial of Jesus Christ

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Pilate was the sixth procurator of Judea (Sabinus, Coponius, Ambivus, Rufus, Gratus) who was appointed by Tiberius Caesar. His wife was named Claudia. They normally lived in the Roman headquarters at Caesarea on the coast (Acts 23:35). But, at the time of major feasts, they would have come to Jerusalem and stayed in the Praetorium.

Roman procurators were hardened rulers trained to deal harshly with situations of dissent. Pilate had not always been kind to the nation he ruled. Philo and Josephus tell of at least three occasions where Pilate offended the Jews. He had ordered a garrison of Roman soldiers to carry their standards with the image of Tiberius into the City of Jerusalem by night. He ordered the construction of an aqueduct system from the Pools of Solomon to Jerusalem using appropriated funds from the Temple treasury called Corban. He insisted on hanging gilt shields dedicated to Tiberius in the halls of Herod's palace in Jerusalem.

Roman procurators were tolerant of all religions as long as the Roman symbols of deity were hailed, taxes were paid to Caesar and everyday life was peaceful.

When the sunlight began to shine over the Mount of Olives (it was early morning, John 18:28), the Roman procurator found himself presented with a serious judicial situation. The Sanhedrin had brought a criminal before him and they were unwilling to enter the palace because of the Feast. The whole multitude, referring to the Sanhedrin (Mark 15:2) which consisted of the Chief Priests (heads of the twenty-four priestly courses), the Scribes or lawyers, and the Elders, were representatives of the people. Thus approximately seventy men were there to bring the accusations against Jesus. The Sanhedrin had the right to pass sentence of death, but did not have the power to execute that sentence (John 18:31; 19:7). That power had been taken from the Sanhedrin when Judea became a Roman province.

When Pilate asked, "What accusation bring you against this man?", he was asking for a definite formal charge against this man? The reply was: "If He were not a malefactor" (literally, one doing evil), we would not be here (John 18:30 or a criminal from kakos, "evil" and ergon "work" meaning a evil worker or doer in Luke 23:32, 33, 39, and 2 Tim. 2:9). Pilate was not ready for such a vague charge and replied that they should handle the case according to their own law. Pilate did not want to be involved with their religious disputes. Luke records the specific charges by the chief priests as (1) stirring up or exciting (perverting) the people (nation), (2) prohibition of payment of the tribute-money to Caesar, and (3) the assumption of the title of Christ as "King of the Jews" (Luke 23:2). Pilate knew the first assertion was false. The second charge was a deliberate falsehood (Matt. 22:14-22). Pilate would examine privately Jesus on the nature of his kingdom and "truth."

Entering into the Praetorium (judgment hall or palace), Pilate's judicial inquiry of Jesus was with the question of treason "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus explains that his kingdom was a spiritual kingdom and not a political kingdom that would threaten the Roman Empire. He did not gather a political army to provoke a rebellion against Rome. His kingdom was based upon spiritual "truth" rather than political "philosophy" or power (John 18:33-37). No defendant can be found guilty on his own testimony.

Pilate responded with the second question, "What is truth?" Pilate returns outside and announces the official acquittal: "I

find no fault in this man" (Luke 23:4; John 18:38). This meant that Pilate found no legal ground for punishment. Since there was no crime against Roman law, the charges should have been dropped.

After Pilate's attempt to change the circumstances based upon jurisdiction, he calls "the chief priest and rulers and people" together and restates his conclusion. Neither Pilate nor Herod Antipas has found any fault/crime "in this man touching those things whereof you accuse him and nothing worthy of death" (Luke 23:14). Pilate attempts to avoid the judgment of condemnation again by suggesting that he would chastise him and release him (Luke 23:15). Pilate recognized that the Jewish leaders were motivated by envy (Matt. 27:18; Mark 15:10) and were persistent in their attempts to condemn Jesus. This was the second acquittal.

The Gospel of John mentions a "custom" at the Feast of releasing a prisoner. The origin of the custom is obscure. Nevertheless, Pilate asked the Jews whether he should release "the King of the Jews" (Mark 15:9; John 18:39) or Barabbas (Matt. 27:17). The chief priest persuaded or stirred up the multitude that they should ask for Barabbas. After the soldiers had put a crown of thorns on the head of Jesus and a purple garment, they came out saying, "Hail, King of the Jews." Pilate said, "I bring him out to you, that you may know that I find no crime in him" (John 19:4). This is the third statement of acquittal.

When the chief priest and other officers saw Jesus, they cried out, "Crucify him." Pilate responded with the question, "What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ and whom you call the King of the Jews?" And the multitude cried out, "Let him be crucified."

Pilate's response is, "Why, what evil has he done?" Luke's account adds, "I find no cause of death in him" (Luke 23:22; John 19:6). Both Pilate's wife and Pilate called Jesus a just or innocent man (Matt. 27:19, 24).

In spite of the fourth statement of acquittal, the Jews insist that there is "a law, and by that law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God" (John 19:7). The Jews punished criminals by stoning (Lev. 24:16; Deut. 17:7), but the Romans crucified the worst criminals.

Pilate is more fearful when he hears the new charge that "he made himself the Son of God." Pilate enters the Praetorium the fifth time with Jesus and asks him, "Whence are you?" No self-incriminating statement is forward coming. Jesus does not answer. Pilate responds that he has power to release or crucify Jesus. Then Jesus answers that Pilate would have no power "against me, except it was given from above" (John 19:9-10).

Pilate goes out to the crowd and seeks to release Jesus. But the crowd has grown more intense by responding, "If you release this man, you are not a friend of Caesar." Pilate knew he must not be charged with not being "a friend of Caesar." When he brings Jesus outside the crowd responds with loud voices and continues with an increasingly tumultuous cry. Pilate consents to the multitude giving sentence that "the King of the Jews" was to be crucified. The multitude had no king but Caesar.

Pilate had acquitted Jesus four times and then allowed the verdict of a mob to rule.

All of this was a matter of prophecy "that the words of Jesus might be fulfilled." For if the prophecies of Jesus were to be fulfilled (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32), he must be "lifted up" by crucifixion and not die by stoning.

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