THE DEATH of the MESSIAH
Jesus before Pilate, the Roman Governor
Series Outline

- **First Sunday in Lent**: Introduction
- **Second Sunday in Lent**: Jesus prays and is arrested in Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, Across the Kidron
- **Third Sunday in Lent**: Jesus Before the Jewish Authorities
- **Fourth Sunday in Lent**: Jesus before Pilate, the Roman Governor
- **Fifth Sunday in Lent**: Jesus is crucified and dies on Golgotha. He is buried nearby
References

References

References

*A Crucified Christ in Holy Week. Essays on the Four Gospel Passion Narratives*
Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Collect, Fourth Sunday in Lent, Book of Common Prayer, p. 219
Introduction
Introduction

Formation of the Passion Narratives

- There may have been one or more oral (and possibly written) pre-Gospel Passion narratives.
- Mark wrote his Passion Narrative using *only* these pre-Gospel narratives.
- Matthew wrote his Passion Narrative:
  - Drawing heavily from Mark’s narrative, and
  - Weaving additional material from “pre-Matthian” traditions known to him.
Introduction

Formation of the Passion Narratives

Luke wrote his Passion Narrative:
- Also drawing heavily – but more freely – from Mark’s narrative, and
- Weaving additional material from oral “pre-Lukan” traditions known to him.

John wrote his Passion Narrative independently from Mark, Matthew, and Luke using “pre-Johannine” traditions known only to him.
- He also had access to some of the same “pre-Lucan” traditions Luke used.
Introduction
Passion Narratives as Drama

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Introduction
Passion Narratives as Drama

Act III: Jesus Before Pilate, The Roman Governor

The third Act of the Passion Narrative describes how Jesus, having been given over to Pilate, was interrogated by him about being the King of the Jews. Although Pilate was not convinced of Jesus' guilt, the crowds preferred the release of Barabbas, a criminal, demanding that Jesus be crucified. Pilate acceded, had Jesus scourged, and gave him over to be crucified by Roman soldiers who first mocked and abused him.
Introduction
Where Would We Have Stood?

Where would we have stood as part of the Passion narratives?
- With the disciples who fled from danger, abandoning Jesus?
- With Peter, denying Jesus?
- With Judas, betraying Jesus?
- With the Pilate of John, trying to avoid a decision between good and evil?
- With the Pilate of Matthew, washing our hands of a bad decision so to appear blameless?
- With the religious leaders (many sincerely religious) who condemned Jesus?
Introduction
Different Facets of Jesus

Each of the Gospel writers had a distinctive outlook on the Passion. Each knows a different facet of Jesus:

- The Jesus in Mark and Matthew plumbs the depths of abandonment, only to be vindicated after his death.
- The Jesus in Luke worries about others, gently dispenses forgiveness and heals in the midst of his ordeal.
- The Jesus in John reigns victoriously from the cross in control of all that happens.

No one of these perspectives exhausts the meaning of Jesus. It is as if one walks around a large diamond to look at it from three different angles.
Background: The Roman Rule in Judea (6-66 AD)
Roman Prefecture in Judea

Two Periods of the Roman Prefecture in Judea 6 AD to 66 AD:

1. “Pre-Agrippa” period 6 AD to 41 AD.
   - Interlude: Jewish kingship restored 41-44 AD (Herod Agrippa).

2. “Post-Agrippa” period 44 AD to 66 AD.

Prefecture ended with the Jewish Revolt, which led to:

- occupation by the Roman army (led by Vespasian, declared emperor in 69 AD) and
- the destruction of the second Temple.

Vespasian, 9th Emperor of Rome, reign 69 AD to 79 AD,
Roman Prefecture in Judea

Pre-Agrippa period (6 AD – 41 AD) was a time of relative peace.

Roman Prefecture in Judea was not simply a hostile occupation:

After the baneful era of Jewish client kings (Herod the Great, Herod Archelaus), an era marked by oppression and persecution, Roman rule was more sane and orderly.

Jewish leaders had *petitioned* Caesar to *end* the reign of Herod Archelaus.
Roman Prefecture in Judea

During Jesus’ adult years (7 AD to ~33 AD), there was:
- No evidence of armed revolt.
- No Roman executions of notorious brigands, would-be kings, prophets, or revolutionaries.
Background: The Prefecture of Pontius Pilate in Judea (26-36 AD)
Pontius Pilate
Some Biographical Facts

- Pontius Pilate was of Equestrian rank (lower Roman nobility), as opposed to the higher Senatorial rank.
- Suggests he probably had a military career before his appointment as Prefect / Governor of Judea.
Pontius Pilate
Some Biographical Facts

- **Name:**
  - **Nomen** (gens or tribe / clan): Pontius, of Samnite origin.
  - **Cognomen** (family): Pilatus (origin from pileus, “cap, helmet,” or pilum, “spear.”)
  - **Praenomen** (personal name): unknown.

- **Order:** Praenomen, Nomen, Cognomen.

- **Examples:** Marcus Tullius Cicero, Gaius Julius Caesar.
Pontius Pilate
Some Biographical Facts

Pure *legend* (no data to support):

**Praenomen** (personal name): **Lucius**.

*Full name*: Lucius Pontius Pilate.

Came from Seville (in southern Spain).

Married **Claudia** (the youngest daughter of **Julia**, the daughter of **Caesar Augustus**) with the approval of **Caesar Tiberius**, and was then immediately sent to **Judea**.

**Claudia** also known in later Christian literature as **Procia** (also spelled Proculia or Procula), or **Claudia Procia**.
Pontius Pilate
Some Biographical Facts

Pontius Pilate was the 5th of a total of 14 Roman Prefects / Governors in Judea.

Pilate’s 10 year rule of the Roman Province of Judea, and his predecessor’s (Valerius Gratus) 11 year rule, stand out in longevity among the all the other Prefects.
Pontius Pilate
Some Biographical Facts

Pontius Pilate may have been appointed by Roman noble Lucius Aelius Sejanus:

In 26-27 AD, Caesar Tiberius left Rome, eventually settling on the Isle of Capri (an island in Italy’s Bay of Naples).

Sejanus was left by Caesar Tiberius in Rome to deal with routine administration of the empire.
In 31 AD, treasonous ambitions of Sejanus uncovered, and he perished.

Tiberius Caesar dismissed many of the Sejanus’ appointees.

Pontius Pilate however survived, and remained in office another 5 years.

Pilate’s longevity as Governor of Judea should caution us against prejudging him as irresponsible or extremely controversial.
**Pontius Pilate**

**Estimations of Pilate**

Mark’s portrait of Pilate is *unflattering*. Pilate – knowing that Jesus had been handed over only because of jealous envy – does little to help Jesus.

Matthew, Luke, and John portray a *nobler* Pilate, who tries to deliver Jesus from exaggerated / false charges.

Tertullian (155- after 220 AD, an early Christian writer and theologian, originally from Carthage): Pilate a Christian at heart.
Apocryphal *Acts of Pilate*: Pilate is sympathetic to a portion of the Jewish multitude that weeps for Jesus not be put to death.

5th and 6th century: Ethiopian homilies speak of Pilate’s conversion and martyrdom.

6th and 7th century: Pilate became a baptismal name among Coptic Christians.

Pilate is today a saint in the Coptic Church (his feast day is June 25).

Pilate’s wife Claudia or Procia is a saint in the Orthodox Church (her feast day is October 27).
Non-Christian sources tend to give an *unfavorable* picture of Pilate:

- Jewish writers *Philo* (20 BC to 50 AD) and *Josephus* (37 AD to 93 AD).
- Roman historian *Tacitus* (56 to 115 AD).

However, these writer’s reports may have been exaggerated or inaccurate:

- For example: *Tacitus* often wrote unfavorably of any appointee of *Equestrian Rank*. 
Pontius Pilate
Estimations of Pilate

Brown: historical record suggests Pontius Pilate:
- was an unsubtle man, without native diplomatic skills, sometimes out of touch with Jewish sensitivities;
- was not however a stubborn tyrant to the point of savagery;
- sometimes underestimated the brutality of his own soldiers, so that the violence of repressive actions during his prefecture may not have reflected his own wishes.
Background:
Site of Jesus’ Trial: The Praetorium
Site of Jesus’ Trial

- **Mark, Matthew, Luke:** Jesus stands before Pilate *in public, outdoors.*
- **John:**
  - Jesus questioned by Pilate *in private, inside* the “Praetorium,” with Jewish leaders and crowd *outside.*
  - Pilate shuttles back and forth between Jesus *inside* and the crowd *outside.*
  - Finally (19:13), Jesus is led *outside,* and Pilate “sat on the judgment seat (*bema*) in the place called *Lithostrotos* (Stone Pavement), but in Hebrew *Gabbatha.*"
Site of Jesus’ Trial

- **Praetorium**: the Governor’s residence
- **Pilate’s main praetorium was in Caesarea**
Site of Jesus’ Trial

Two candidates for Pilate’s residence (praetorium) when he was in Jerusalem:

1. Fortress Antonia

- Castle on eastern hill of Jerusalem, on high rock formation dominating the NW corner of the Temple area.
- Part of the Northern Defense of the city, a fortress for the Temple.
Site of Jesus’ Trial

Two candidates for Pilate’s residence (praetorium) when he was in Jerusalem:

2. “Palace of the King”
   - Another fortress dwelling of Herod the Great.
   - On the western hill of the city, also part of the Northern Defenses.
   - Was the fortress for the upper city, as Antonia was fortress for the Temple.
   - Exterior included three immense towers.
   - In luxury and extravagance, said to be indescribable.
   - Was most likely the temporary Jerusalem praetorium of Pilate during the Passover.
Background: Roman Trial of Jesus
Roman Trial of Jesus

Sources

- Gospel accounts are dramatizing the *religious* meaning of Jesus’ condemnation.
- Practically *no legal details* of the trial are given in the Gospel accounts. No court record has survived. No witness sympathetic to Jesus said to be present.
- With involvement of soldiers, servants, opponents, *some* information of the contents of the trial would have circulated.
Relation of Roman Trial to Sanhedrin Trial:

1. A confirmation of the Jewish Trial (an *exsequatur* = let it be carried out)?

2. An independent trial to determine if an offense against Roman law had been committed?

Majority scholarly opinion: independent trial.
Normal Roman judicial procedures seemingly not followed.

However, Jesus not a Roman citizen, so Pilate was free to conduct a trial extra ordinem (without full specifications of Roman law):

In particular, he could conduct a simple cognitio or investigation:

- Draw information from local authorities without the proof of veracity demanded by ordinary law,
- Then summarily reach a decision about guilt or punishment.
Roman Trial of Jesus
Roman Judicial Procedure

Typical trial would have included *assessores* (junior barristers), *comites* (attendants) and a translator. None of these are mentioned, but Gospel writers clearly left out many details.

Biblical scholar and Catholic University professor Joseph Fitzmyer (1920-2016) has speculated that Jesus and Pilate may have spoken to each other in Greek, since no translator is mentioned in the Passion narratives.
Charge Against Jesus: “King of the Jews”

Offense against *Lex Iulia de maiestate* (offenses against the majesty of Caesar), which bore death penalty.

Cicero (106 BC to 43 BC): “diminishing *maiestas* consists of taking away something from the dignity or the fullness or the power of the people or from those to whom the people have given power.”

Commentary by Marcion (85-160 AD) on *Lex Iulia de maiestate* includes as offenders a private person who acts as if he had an office or magistracy.
The release of Barrabas is a subject of much scholarly controversy: this custom not described in other sources.

Gospels agree there was a festal custom attached to Passover to release a prisoner whom the Jewish crowds chose.

Disagreement:

- Was it a custom of Pilate? OR
- Was it a Jewish custom recognized by Pilate?
Roman Trial of Jesus
Outcry to “Crucify” Jesus

- Jewish crowds cry out “Crucify him” – as if they have say in the Roman judge’s decision.

- There is an Eastern custom of decision by *acclamatio populi* (“acclamation of the people”):
  - Some cases in Hellenized cities, (e.g. the Ten Cities constituting the Decapolis, east of Galilee, in the Province of Syria) were decided by *acclamatio populi*.

- Not a Jewish custom.

- Brown: Best considered mob pressure, not voice of a “jury.”
Jesus Before Pilate
Mark’s Passion Narrative
Mark

Mark 15:1: refers to a morning consultation of the Sanhedrin.

Not clear if it is a second meeting of the Sanhedrin, or a continuation of the meeting begun at night.

Mark does not explain to reader why the Sanhedrin must bind and deliver Jesus to Pilate.

Pilate already seems aware of what has been going on, and immediately confronts Jesus with question, “Are you the King of the Jews?”
The charges at the Sanhedrin Trial (Destroying the Temple, Messiah / Son of God) do not come up during the Roman Trial.

Jesus’ affirmation to Pilate’s question, “Are you the King of the Jews?” is ambiguous: “You have said so.” (Mark 15:4).

Pilate wonders at Jesus –

As nations wondered at the Suffering Servant of the Lord (Isaiah 52:15 Septuagint).
The chief priests, unable to get Pilate to condemn Jesus, do succeed in getting a crowd to demand for the release of a prisoner on the feast.

Pilate, knowing priests are acting out of envious zeal, offer Jesus to the crowd.

Chief priests persuade the crowd to demand: the Release of Barabbas, an imprisoned murderous rebel, and the Crucifixion of Jesus.

Pilate’s last quoted words: “Why, what evil has he done?” underline Jesus’ outrageous treatment.
Mark

Mark’s portrait of Pilate is less developed and less sympathetic than Matthew’s, Luke’s, and John’s portrait:

- Pilate makes no special effort on Jesus’ behalf,
- He yields rather easily to crowd’s demands to avoid unpopularity.

The impression Mark gives is:

- not that of a favorable Roman versus hostile Jews,
- but no support on any side for Jesus.
Jesus’ lack of any support reinforced by the gratuitous brutality of the Roman soldiers:

- They interrupt flogging the criminal to strike and spit on him, mocking the “King of the Jews.”

Both Sanhedrin Trial and Roman Trial end with the mockery of Jesus:

- Sanhedrin Trial: Mocking of a prophet.
- Roman Trial: Mocking of a king.
Mark

Disciples, Jewish leaders, and Roman leader *all* participate and share guilt in Mark:

- **Judas** hands Jesus over to the chief priests,
- **Chief priests** hand Jesus over to Pilate,
- **Pilate** hands Jesus over to be crucified.
Jesus Before Pilate
Matthew’s Passion Narrative
Confronting Pilate who can decree his death, Jesus remains silent.

His silence puts Pilate on the defensive.

Matthew, as do all the four gospels, describes the custom of releasing a prisoner at the Passover feast – a possible out for Pilate.
Unique to Matthew: the dream of Pilate’s wife.

Gives us the contrast between:

- A Gentile woman who in a dream-revelation recognizes Jesus’ innocence and works for his release, versus:
- Jewish leaders who work the crowd to have a notorious criminal released and the innocent Jesus crucified.
Some manuscripts phrase Pilate’s question in 26:17 as “Whom do you want me to release to you – Jesus Barabbas or Jesus called Christ?”

Barabbas: probably means “Son of the Father.”

Pilate thus faced with irony of choosing between “Jesus, Son of the Father,” and “Jesus, Son of God.”
Matthew

- Also unique to Matthew: Pilate publicly washes his hands to signify “I am innocent of this [just] man’s blood.”
- Again, a Gentile is recognizing Jesus’ innocence.
- “All the people” answer “His blood on us and on our children”
- Echoes the Old Testament language of those who must be considered responsible for a death (2 Samuel 3:28-29; Joshua 2:19; Jer. 26:15).
Matthew

The line “His blood on us and on our children” has embittered Christian – Jewish relationship through the centuries.

Matthew tends to be generalizing and hostile to Jews:
- He calls Pharisees and Sadducees a “brood of vipers.”

Consider the crowd’s cry: “His blood on us and on our children” and Jesus’ own words, that his blood is “poured out for many [all] for the forgiveness of sins.” (Matthew 26:27)
Matthew

Pilate finally passes on Jesus the same sentence the Jewish Sanhedrin passed on him.
Pilate orders Jesus to be flogged and then crucified.
At the end of the Roman Trial, Jesus is mocked and spat upon – as he had been at the end of the Sanhedrin trial.
Although Pilate and his wife are favorable to Jesus, ultimately both the Gentiles and the Jews reject Jesus.
Luke

Luke’s description of the **Roman Trial** much more elaborate than Mark or Matthew.

The charge **“King of the Jews”** and the offer of releasing a prisoner are also in Luke.

Luke also describes:

- Details of violations of Roman law and the majesty of Caesar,
- Indifference of the Romans to the religious issues involved,
- A desire to let the prisoner go after a whipping only.
Luke

**Unique to Luke:** On learning Jesus is from Galilee, Pilate sends Jesus to the client king of the Galilee area, **Herod Antipas** (ruled 4 BC to 39 AD), who happens to be in Jerusalem for the Passover feast.

The same Herod that killed John the Baptist.
Christian memories and images of the Herods:

- **Herod the Great** – conspired to kill baby Jesus (Matt. 2).
- **Herod Antipas** – killed John the Baptist (Mark 6:17-29; Matt 14:3-12), and reputedly tried to kill Jesus.
- **Herod Agrippa I** – killed James, son of Zebedee, and sought to kill Peter (Acts 12:1-5).

Apocryphal *Gospel of Peter*: Herod is Jesus’ chief adversary and crucifies him.
Luke

Herod Antipas is annoyed by Jesus’ silence and mocks him.

In the end he confirms Pilate’s judgment that Jesus innocent.

Herod Antipas’s contact with Jesus heals the enmity between himself and Governor Pilate.

Jesus is again the healer, even for those who maltreat him.

Recall, unique to Luke: Jesus had healed the ear of the High Priest’s slave after a follower cut it off.

Herod, James Tissot, 1886-1894
Jesus Before Pilate
John’s Passion Narrative
John

We find in John a much different picture of Jesus facing Pilate.

Unlike Mark / Matthew / Luke, Jesus is not questioned by Pilate outside and in public with the chief priests looking on.

Rather, Jesus is questioned privately by Pilate inside the Praetorium, while all the chief priests are standing outside with a crowd.
John

Pilate shuttles back and forth between the Chief Priests and the crowd outside, and Jesus inside.

Outside: ceaseless pressure, conniving, outcry;

Inside: calm and penetrating dialog.

Unlike Mark / Matthew / Luke, Jesus is not silent, but eloquent and supremely self-assured.
To Pilate’s question: “So you are a king?”, Jesus does not refuse the title, but says the real reason he came into the world was to testify to the truth (18:37).

So eloquent and self-assured is Jesus, that it is as if Pilate is the one on trial, to determine if he is of the truth.

Pilate is calmly told he has no independent power over Jesus (19:10-11).
John

Pilate knows the truth that Jesus is innocent.

The question is whether Pilate will:

- bear witness to this truth, or
- betray himself in order to appease the crowd.

In the end, Pilate betrays the truth and bows to the crowd, exacting from them an insincere pledge of allegiance to Caesar.
John

Unique to John: the scourging and mockery of Jesus is not after the trial, but at the center of the trial.

Leads to climactic moment where Jesus, scourged, mocked, draped in a purple cloak, and wearing a crown of thorns, is brought from inside the Praetorium outside to the crowd.
The crowd cries “Crucify him!” as in the other Gospels, but in John the cry is in response to:
- the sight of the scourged Jesus, and
- Pilate’s Ecce homo “Here is the man!”

Makes the rejection of Jesus seem even more inhumane.

Rejection of Jesus by the crowd, combined with their expressed preference for Caesar, implies abandonment by the Jews of their own messianic hopes.

“The Man” may reflect an ancient Christological title for Jesus, akin to the “Son of Man.”
John’s hostility towards “the Jews” perhaps arises from the experience of his Christian community and the synagogue.

Members of John’s community have been driven out of the synagogue and persecuted for professing Jesus the Messiah (9:22, 12:42).

Within decades of John’s gospel, a curse against deviants from Judaism will be added to the synagogue prayer (Shemoneh Esreh or the Eighteen Benedictions).

Being driven from the synagogue exposed Christians to Roman investigation, punishment, sometimes death.
John

Pilate exacts from the priests:
- A denial of their royal messianic hopes,
- A pledge of allegiance to the pitiful Tiberius Caesar (who has given up the day-to-day running of the empire, and lives in seclusion on the Isle of Capri).

He then turns Jesus over to the chief priests to be crucified.
Next week:

THE DEATH of the MESSIAH

Jesus is crucified and dies on Golgotha. He is buried nearby.