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The Career of Pontius Pilate

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If it were not for his role in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, Pontius Pilate would be an unknown name in a list of ancient governors of Judea. But Pilate's name is a household word. He is forever labeled as the Roman official who ordered the unfair and inhumane death of Jesus. Who was this man who made history based on a tragic political decree?

The Governor of Judea

After the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C., his kingdom was divided among his sons. Archelaus became the ruler of Judea, including the city of Jerusalem. But Archelaus failed miserably at this post, and the Roman Emperor Tiberius deposed him in A.D. 6. Tiberius then designated Judea as a Roman province to be governed by prefects (later called procurators)¹ who were directly appointed by the Emperor. Pontius Pilate became the fifth prefect to rule in Judea, and he held this position from A.D. 26 – 36.² An inscription, discovered in Caesarea in 1961, bears the name of Pilate and identifies him as the prefect of Judea during the reign of Tiberius, verifying the biblical record.³

When Tiberius appointed Pilate, a man by the name of Sejanus was wielding great influence in Rome. Sejanus had become Tiberius' most trusted advisor and, in effect, determined Roman policy while Tiberius sought seclusion. Sejanus was responsible for Pilate's appointment as prefect of Judea. Later,

when Sejanus began to aspire to the highest office of Rome, Tiberius deposed him. This put Pilate's position in jeopardy, and may account for why Pilate was so willing to appease the Jewish leaders when they demanded the death of Jesus.⁴

Pilate's Disdain for the Jews

The ancient historian Philo described Pilate as "a man of a very inflexible disposition, and very merciless as well as very obstinate."⁵ This characterization is accurate based on Pilate's actions while in office as the governor of Judea.

When Pilate first arrived in Judea, he moved his winter quarters from Caesarea to Jerusalem. Under the cover of night, Pilate erected military standards bearing the image of Caesar. Such images were repulsive to the Jews, who quickly requested that Pilate remove the images. Pilate refused, surrounded the protesters with soldiers, and threatened to massacre them if they did not withdraw. The Jews threw themselves to the ground and declared that they would rather die than allow God's Law forbidding idolatry to be violated in Jerusalem. Pilate retracted his demand and removed the standards.⁶

Some time later, Pilate built an aqueduct to bring water into the city of Jerusalem. Since the Temple was a major recipient of the water supply, Pilate appropriated money from the Temple treasury to help pay the costs of constructing the aqueduct. The people again protested, but this time Pilate sent soldiers in plain clothes among the people. The soldiers beat and killed some of the protesters and the crowd dispersed. Pilate won this battle, but lost even more favor with the Jews.⁷

A third incident in Pilate's governorship reveals his disdain for the Jews. Pilate attempted to dedicate a number of golden shields in Herod's palace in Jerusalem in honor of Tiberius. These shields did not bear any images, but probably referred to the deity of the Emperor. The Jews again protested, and this time sent a delegation to Tiberius in Rome. Tiberius ordered Pilate to remove the offensive shields.⁸

The Bible records one further act of violence on Pilate's part. In Luke 13:1 a group of people reported to Jesus that Pilate had killed a number of Galilean worshippers, mixing their blood

with that of their sacrifices at the Temple. This act of violence may in part account for Pilate's disfavor with Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee (Luke 23:12). It certainly verifies Pilate's cruel nature.

Pilate's Role in the Crucifixion of Jesus

Among Christians, Pontius Pilate is best known for his role in condemning Jesus to death on the cross. During Jewish feast days, it was normal for the Roman governor to reside in Jerusalem. When the Jewish leaders concluded that Jesus should die, they sent Jesus to Pilate. Only the Roman authorities could, at that time, inflict the death penalty.

The Gospels portray Pilate as a reluctant accomplice in Jesus' death. The Jews accused Jesus of insurrection and demanded that Pilate have Jesus executed. In private, Pilate asked Jesus to identify Himself, and Jesus told Pilate that He was the King of a spiritual kingdom (John 18:33-38). Having heard the case against Jesus, Pilate said that he found no fault in Jesus (Luke 23:4). During the trial proceedings, Pilate's wife sent word to Pilate that she had had a dream regarding Jesus and that Pilate should avoid any involvement in the case (Matthew 27:19). Pilate had Jesus flogged, and then again stated his intention to let Jesus go. But again the Jewish leaders insisted that Jesus should die (John 19:1-6). They said that Jesus claimed to be God, a claim that disturbed Pilate (John 19:7-11). Finally, the Jews accused Pilate of disloyalty to Caesar (John 19:12-16). Since Jesus claimed to be a king, Pilate would be opposing Caesar unless he put Jesus to death. It was this final charge that tipped the scales in Pilate's thinking. Pilate turned Jesus over to be crucified.

Since Pilate had received his appointment from Sejanus, and since Sejanus had just come under Tiberius' disfavor, Pilate was now on shaky ground with the Emperor. Pilate's willingness to succumb to the demands of the Jewish leaders was doubtless a political move. Pilate condemned an innocent man in order to protect his own political interests. He sent Jesus to the cross. History will always remember Pilate for this unjust crime against God's Son.

The End of a Desperate Career

Pilate's final act of violence took place in A.D. 36. In an attempt to stop a religious procession, Pilate killed and imprisoned many of followers of a false prophet in Samaria. Pilate was forced to return to Rome to answer for this act. But by the time Pilate arrived in Rome, Tiberius had died. His successor, Caligula, refused to reappoint Pilate as governor of Judea.⁹

Traditions vary regarding the death of Pilate. One suggests that he suffered banishment. Another says that he tried to hide from his crimes, including his unjust sentencing of Jesus, in the lake country of modern day Switzerland. He may have committed suicide.¹⁰ Pilate's life is a tragic reminder that rejecting Jesus in order to gain personal success only leads to emptiness. Jesus alone offers meaning, hope, and love.

¹ Bruce, F. F. *New Testament History*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969, p. 16.

² Hoehner, Harold W. *Herod Antipas*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972, p. 172.

³ Tenney, Merrill C. *New Testament Times*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965, p.154.

⁴ Tenney, p. 153.

⁵ Philo. *On the Embassy to Gaius* (301). In *The Works of Philo*. Translated by C. D. Yonge. Hendrickson Publishers, 1993, p. 784.

⁶ Tenney, p.155.

⁷ Bruce, pp. 36-37.

⁸ Bruce, p. 34.

⁹ Bruce, pp. 37-38.

¹⁰ Unger, Merrill F. *Unger's Bible Dictionary*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1966, p. 866.