

# Pilate

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from several sources, including:

Josephus, Flavius, *Antiquities*; and *Wars of the Jews*

Edersheim, Alfred, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life; The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*; and *The Temple*.

Bond, Helen, *Pontius Pilate*

## Background

Pontius Pilate was the fifth governor of the Roman province of Judaea. His rule began in 26 AD and lasted until early in 37 AD. See Luke 3:1; Matt. 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; and John 18,19.

He granted the request of Joseph of Arimathea, to be allowed to bury Christ: Matt. 27:57; Mark 15:42; Luke 23:50; John 19:38.

See also Acts 3:13; 4:27; 13:28, and 1 Tim. 6:13.

## The Province

When Herod I died in 4 BC, Augustus upheld his will and divided the kingdom between three of Herod's surviving sons. Antipas was allotted Galilee and Peraea, and Philip was given Batanaea, Trachonitis, Auranitis and certain parts of Zeno around Panias (or Ituraea). Both were given the title tetrarch, literally the ruler of a fourth part of a kingdom. The remainder, amounting to half of the kingdom and comprising of Idumaea, Judaea and Samaria, was given to Archelaus with the title ethnarch.

Ten years later a combination of dynastic intrigue amongst the Herodians, Roman expansionist policies in the Near East and perhaps Archelaus' brutality, again led to Augustus' intervention in Judean affairs. Archelaus was exiled and his territory transformed into a Roman province. Although it included Samaria and Idumaea, the new province was known simply as Judaea. The year was 6 AD.

Judaea was formally a third class imperial province. These provinces, which were few in number, tended to be those which were least important in terms of expanse and revenue. Often they were territories in which the indigenous population presented particular problems.

The governors of these provinces were drawn from the equestrian rank and commanded only auxiliary troops.

Though technically independent, the new province was to a large extent under the guidance of the powerful and strategically important neighboring province of Syria. The Syrian legate, a man of consular standing, had three Roman legions at his disposal to which a fourth was added after 18 AD. He could be relied on to intervene with military support in times of crisis and could be called upon as an arbitrator by either the Judean governor or the people if the need arose.

Aside from the brief reign of Herod Agrippa I (41-44 AD), Judaea continued as a Roman province from 6 AD until the outbreak of the Jewish Revolt in 66 AD. Its borders remained unchanged throughout the first period of Roman rule but underwent some alterations in the second, 44-66 AD.

The province of Judaea was extremely small. In its first phase, to which Pilate's governorship belongs,

it measured only approximately 160 km north to south and 70 km west to east. Yet despite its size, the population of the province came from ethnically diverse groups - Jews, Samaritans and pagans. This last group were located particularly in the pagan cities of Caesarea and Sebaste. To a certain degree, the province had two capital cities. The traditional capital, Jerusalem, continued as the focus of Jewish religious; but the governor resided in Caesarea together with his troops and entourage, transforming the city into the Roman administrative headquarters. On occasion, the governor would move to Jerusalem, particularly during festivals both to keep the peace and to hear criminal cases.

## The Governor

**Rank:** As was customary in relatively unimportant imperial provinces, the governors of Judaea were usually drawn from the equestrian rank. Equestrians formed the middle rank of the Roman nobility and under Augustus their order provided suitable men for a variety of essential public offices ranging from military commands to the collection of taxes and jury work.

**Duties:** Rome had few officials in its provinces; an imperial province would be administered by only the governor and a small number of personal staff. The governor's concerns, therefore, had to be limited to essentials, principally the maintenance of law and order, judicial matters and the collection of taxes. To enable him to carry out his duties, the governor possessed *imperium*, or the supreme administrative power in the province.

**Law and Order:** The primary responsibility of the governor of Judaea was military. This crucial aspect of the governor's task is emphasized by his title which, in the period before Agrippa I reign (41 to 44 AD) was *prefect* (praefectus/eparcos). The appointment of men to a military *prefecture* shows the determination of early emperors to hold on to a newly subjugated territory and to bring the native inhabitants firmly under Roman control.

Under Claudius, however, *prefect* was changed to a civilian title, *procurator* (procurator/epitropos) which may have been designed to underscore the success of the pacification process. This change explains the confusion in the literary sources regarding the governor's title.

The governors of Judaea had only auxiliary troops at their disposal. These appear to have been de-

scendents of the Herodian troops drawn predominantly from Caesarea and Sebaste. They amounted to five infantry cohorts and one cavalry regiment scattered throughout the province. One cohort was permanently posted in the Antonia Fortress in Jerusalem.

**Judicial Matters:** The governor possessed the supreme judicial authority within the province. He would presumably have had a system of assizes to which cases could be brought and receive a hearing. The precise division of judicial competence between the governor and native courts varied in different provinces. There is not enough evidence to determine whether or not Jewish courts could inflict the death penalty at this period; scholarly opinion is sharply divided on this issue. The Roman governor would doubtlessly wish to maintain his jurisdiction over political offences but it is not impossible that Jewish courts were able to execute when their own law had been contravened.

**Collection of Taxes:** Rome relied to a large extent on the help of local authorities and private agents in the collection of taxes. Supervising these was the governor, acting as the emperor's personal financial agent. The heaviest of these taxes was the tributum; by the first century AD this was primarily a tax on provincial land and the amount of tribute required from each person was worked out by means of a census. Only one census appears to have been conducted in Judaea, that organized by Quirinius at the formation of the new province in 6 AD

**General Administration:** In accordance with general Roman practice, the entire day-to-day administration of the nation was left largely to the Jewish High Priest and aristocracy in Jerusalem. The Romans expected them to uphold imperial interests whilst the local aristocracies could expect their own privileged positions to be safeguarded by Rome in return. The Roman governors recognized the political importance of the High Priesthood and sought to keep a tight control over it, appointing and deposing High Priests at will.

## Pontius Pilate

Nothing is known of Pilate prior to his arrival in Judea. Advancement at the time depended on patronage; a man's chances of promotion to public office depended on connections and influences in the imperial court. In all probability, Pilate was

helped to office by powerful patrons, perhaps even Tiberius himself or his powerful friend Sejanus.

Pilate may well have had previous military experience before coming to the province, but records are completely lacking. Most governors ruled over Judaea between two and four years; Pilate and his predecessor Gratus, however, each governed the province for approximately eleven years. This is probably not an indication that these two governors were especially competent since Josephus tells us that part of Tiberius' provincial policy was to keep men in office for a long time.

In general, Pilate's term of office corresponds to the general picture of Judean governors sketched above. Two points, however, distinguish Pilate's governorship to some extent from the others.

The first is the lack of a Syrian legate for the first six years of Pilate's term of office. Tiberius appointed L. Aelius Lamia to the post but kept him in Rome, presumably trying out a form of centralized government. This may not have been altogether successful as subsequent legates governed from the Syrian capital, Antioch. The implication of this is that for the early part of his governorship Pilate had no legate on hand in Syria on whom he could call in an emergency. Unlike his predecessors, Pilate could not rely on the immediate support of the legions in case of unrest. This would mean that Pilate was more than usually dependent on his auxiliaries and that any potential uprising had to be put down quickly before it could escalate.

A second distinctive feature of Pilate's governorship is that, unlike his predecessor Gratus who changed the High Priest four times in his eleven years, Pilate made no change to the incumbent of the High Priesthood. This was presumably not out of any wish to respect Jewish sensitivities but rather because he found in Gratus' last appointee, Caiaphas, a man who could be relied on to support Roman interests and who could command some respect amongst the people.

## Sources of Information for Pilate's Governorship

These fall into two groups: archaeological and literary.

**Archaeological.** We have two archaeological links with Pilate. The first is an inscription found on a block of limestone at Caesarea Maritima in 1961.

Much of the inscription is mutilated, but the lettering is still visible.

The inscriptions are tentative and extremely hypothetical in nature, three things are evident. The first is that the second line refers to Pontius Pilate, giving the first of his three names in the mutilated left side. Secondly, his title is clearly *praefectus Iudaeae*, prefect of Judaea. Thirdly, the inscription appears to have been attached to a building known as a “Tiberiúum”. This was presumably either a temple or a secular building dedicated to Tiberius.

The second archaeological link with Pilate is a number of bronze coins struck by the prefect from 29 to 32 AD. Each depicts a distinctively Jewish design on one side along with a pagan symbol on the other. The first shows three ears of barley on the obverse and a *simpulum* (a sacrificial vessel or wine bowl) on the reverse. The second and third both contain the same design with a *lituus* (an augur’s crooked staff or wand) on the obverse and a wreath with berries on the reverse. This blending of Jewish and pagan designs may stem from an attempt to integrate the Jewish people further into the empire. That the coins were not generally regarded as offensive is apparent from the fact that the coins would have been used until Agrippa’s reign and he only changed the design in his second year.

**Literary Sources.** Specific events from Pilate’s governorship are recorded in the writings of six first century authors - Josephus, Philo and the four Christian evangelists.

## Josephus

By far the greatest amount of information comes from the Jewish writer Flavius Josephus who composed his two great works, the Antiquities of the Jews and the Jewish War, towards the end of the first century. Important as Josephus’ accounts are, however, they can only be used with a certain amount of caution. Apologetic and rhetorical motives have shaped each narrative to a large extent, particularly his desire to impress on other nations the futility of revolt against Rome, his attempt to stress the antiquity of Judaism, and his endeavor (in the Antiquities) to put some of the blame for the Jewish revolt on the Roman governors of Judaea.

In all, Josephus describes four incidents involving Pilate. His earlier work, the Jewish War, describes Pilate’s introduction of iconic standards into Jerusalem and his construction of an aqueduct for the city. The Antiquities repeats these

two stories (with slightly different emphases) and adds two more - the story of the execution of Jesus of Nazareth and an incident involving Samaritans which eventually led to Pilate’s removal from the province.

### The Standards (War 2.169-174, Antiq 18.55-59)

Josephus accuses Pilate of deliberately bringing standards containing offensive effigies of Caesar into Jerusalem by night. The Antiquities account goes so far as to accuse Pilate of deliberately wanting to subvert Jewish practices. Seeing what had happened, the Jewish people flocked to Caesarea and surrounded Pilate’s house for five days, imploring him to remove the standards. When Pilate eventually encircled the people with his troops, they declared that they were willing to die rather than see their ancestral laws contravened. Amazed at their devotion, Pilate had the standards removed.

Josephus has clearly allowed his rhetorical concerns to influence this story, particularly the description of Pilate’s deliberate provocation and the people’s unflinching devotion to their ancestral religion. Yet it may be possible to piece together something of the historical event behind the narrative.

Due to its position at the beginning of the accounts in both the War and the Antiquities, most scholars assume that this incident took place early on in Pilate’s term of office, perhaps as early as winter 26 AD. A squadron could not be separated from its standards; if new standards were brought into Jerusalem that meant that an entirely new squadron was being stationed in Jerusalem, one which had not been used in the city previously. As a military prefect, Pilate’s interest would have been in the troops themselves and their strategic positioning; the particular emblems on their standards would not have been particularly important. As a new governor, Pilate may not even have realized that this particular cohort would cause offence in Jerusalem because of its standards. Or, if he had been warned, it might have seemed absurd to him that troops which could be deployed in Caesarea could not be moved to Jerusalem. The account gives the impression of a new governor anxious to take no nonsense from the people he is to govern. The fact that he was willing to reconsider the position and did eventually change the troops shows a certain amount of prudence and concern to avoid unnecessary hostilities.

### **The Aqueduct (War 2.175-177, Antiq 18.60-62)**

Again Josephus accuses Pilate of deliberately attempting to arouse hostilities, this time by using temple money to build an aqueduct for Jerusalem. Matters came to a head during a visit of Pilate to Jerusalem when the people rioted and many were killed.

As with the previous incident, Josephus' bias is evident, particularly in his description of Pilate's motivations. The building of an aqueduct for the city was surely a commendable undertaking, one which would have benefited the inhabitants enormously. The point of conflict seems to have been around the use of temple money for the project. Pilate must have had the co-operation (whether voluntary or forced) of Caiaphas and the temple authorities whose duty it was to administer the treasury; if he had taken the money by aggression Josephus would surely have mentioned it. What may have led to hostilities, however, was if Pilate had begun to demand more than simply the surplus for his building venture. The War's use of the verb *exanaliskon* in 2.175, whilst perhaps over-exaggerated, may imply that Pilate began to demand ever increasing amounts, draining temple supplies and treating the treasury as his own personal  *fiscus*. The date of this incident is unknown.

### **The Execution of Jesus of Nazareth (Antiq 18.63-64)**

This passage, recorded only in the Antiquities, is generally referred to as the *Testimonium Flavianum*. Scholars are generally agreed that it has suffered at the hands of later Christian interpreters and that the original wording is now lost. Given the context, the original text probably recorded another disturbance in the time of Pilate, centering on Jesus or his followers after his death. As it now stands, the *Testimonium Flavianum* adds little to our picture of the historical Pilate. He is shown working closely with the Jewish hierarchy to eliminate a common threat. It may also be significant that he has only the messianic leader executed and not his followers, a fact which may show a dislike for excessive violence. This event is usually dated to either 30 or 33 CE on the basis of astronomical and calendrical information derived from the gospels.

### **The Samaritan Uprising and Pilate's Return to Rome (Antiq 18.85-89)**

According to the Antiquities, a messianic figure stirred up the Samaritans to climb Mt Gerizim with him. They assembled in a nearby village carrying weapons and prepared to ascend the mountain. Before they could get very far, however, Pilate had his men block their route and some were killed. Many prisoners were taken and their leaders put to death. Later, the council of the Samaritans complained to Vitellius, the legate of Syria, about Pilate's harsh treatment. Vitellius sent his friend Marcellus to take charge of Judaea and ordered Pilate to Rome. Pilate hurried to Rome but reached the city after Tiberius' death (March 37 CE), suggesting that he was ordered to leave the province in the first few weeks of 37 CE.

In view of the fact that the Samaritans appear to have been armed as they undertook their trek up Mt Gerizim, Pilate's actions do not appear to be unnecessarily severe. Any Roman prefect neglecting to deal with such an uprising would surely have been failing in his duty. As in the previous incident, only the ringleaders were executed.

What happened to Pilate in Rome is unknown. The fact that the new emperor, Gaius, did not reappoint him does not necessarily indicate an unfavorable outcome to his trial. After eleven years in Judaea, Pilate may have accepted another commission.

### **Philo of Alexandria**

A fifth incident from Pilate's term of office is described in Philo's *Legatio ad Gaium*, an incident in which Pilate set up gilded shields in Jerusalem (Legatio 299-305). Although written only a few years after Pilate's departure from Judaea, this work is highly polemical in nature. The story is part of a letter, supposedly from Agrippa I to Gaius Caligula, in which the Jewish king attempts to persuade the emperor not to set up his statue in the Jerusalem temple. Philo uses all the drama and rhetoric at his disposal to cast Pilate in a particularly brutal light and to contrast him with the virtuous Tiberius, an emperor who (unlike Gaius) was intent upon preserving the Jewish law.

Pilate is described as corrupt, violent, abusive and cruel (§§ 301, 302). He is accused of intentionally annoying the Jewish people by setting up gilded shields in Herod's palace in Jerusalem. These shields contained no picture but only an inscription

stating the name of the dedicator and the name of the person to whom they were dedicated. When the significance of this inscription was widely known, the people chose four Herodian princes to appeal to Pilate on their behalf and ask for the removal of the shields. When Pilate refused, they threatened to send an embassy to Tiberius. According to Philo, this worried Pilate enormously because of the atrocities committed throughout his governorship. The embassy went ahead and Tiberius upheld the Herodian complaints, ordering Pilate to remove the shields to the temple of Augustus at Caesarea.

Although Philo's picture of the ruthless Pilate is obviously over-exaggerated in accordance with his rhetorical aims, there is clearly some basis to the story. The most important starting point for any reconstruction is the shields themselves. Such honorific shields were common in the ancient world; generally they would contain both a portrait and an inscription. Pilate's shields were of this type, but even Philo has to admit that they differed by the fact that they contained no images. This suggests that, rather than deliberately acting against the Jewish law, Pilate took steps to avoid offending the people. Furthermore, they were set up inside the Roman governor's praetorium in Jerusalem, surely the most appropriate place in the city for such shields.

If this event occurred after the commotion caused by the introduction of iconic standards narrated by Josephus, then Pilate's behavior was both understandable and prudent. He wanted to honor the emperor without antagonizing the people. Where he went wrong, however, was in the wording of the inscription. This would have contained both Pilate's name and that of Tiberius. In official inscriptions the emperor was referred to as: *Ti. Caesari divi Augusti f. (divi Iuli nepoti) Augusto pontifici Maximo*. The reference to the divine Augustus could have been seen as offensive by some Jews, particularly when it was situated in the holy city. That not everyone found this immediately offensive is suggested by Philo's description of the Jewish reaction which is rather oddly put in § 300; it seems to give the impression that the wording of the inscription was generally known before its significance was realized. This reconstruction fits in well with the final part of the story. If Pilate had set out to be deliberately provocative, it is extraordinary that he would allow an embassy to go to Tiberius and inform the emperor of his atrocities. If, however, the shields were designed to honor the emperor and Pilate had deliberately tried to avoid

offence by omitting images, his decision to allow Tiberius to adjudicate makes perfect sense.

The date of this incident is uncertain, but it probably occurred after the incident with the standards.

## The Gospels

The trial of Jesus of Nazareth before Pontius Pilate is described in all four gospels (Mt 27.1-26, Mk 15.1-15, Lk 23.1-25 and John 18.28-19.16a). Although Matthew and Luke - and quite possibly John - used Mark's version as a source, each of the trial narratives is quite different and reflects the concerns of their own particular early Christian community. Similarly, the portrayal of Pilate in each is significantly different. It is often assumed that Pilate is a "weak" character in the gospels in contrast to the "harsh" prefect of the Jewish sources. When the gospels are read more closely and in a first century context, however, this generalization does not hold. In Mark's gospel, Pilate's repeated references to "the King of the Jews" and then "your king" seem calculated to embitter the crowd who shout all the more for Jesus' execution. In the same way in John's Gospel, Pilate orders the execution of Jesus only when he has pushed "the Jews" into declaring Caesar to be their only king (19.15f). Pilate is weak in Luke's gospel and it is this weakness which allows Jesus' opponents to have their own way. Nevertheless, as a Roman judge, Pilate's three-fold declaration of Jesus' innocence serves an important apologetic point in the two-volume work Luke-Acts. In Matthew's narrative Pilate plays a secondary role, the emphasis is rather on Jesus' Jewish protagonists. Pilate is often referred to not by name but by the rather vague title hegemon, perhaps indicating that for Matthew he is representative of other Roman judges before whom members of his community may be forced to stand trial.

## Later References to Pilate

Church tradition portrayed Pilate in increasingly favorable terms. In the second century Gospel of Peter, Jesus is condemned not by Pilate but by Herod Antipas. Tertullian asserted that Pilate was a Christian at heart and that he wrote a letter to Tiberius to explain what had happened at Jesus' trial (Apology 21). Eusebius cited a tradition that Pilate had committed suicide in the reign of Gaius Caligula out of remorse for his part in Jesus' condemnation (Hist. Eccl. 2.7.1). The fourth or fifth

century Gospel of Nicodemus (which contains the Acts of Pilate), though far from “Christianizing” Pilate, also depicts the governor as more friendly towards Jesus than any of the canonical gospels. Pilate was canonized by the Coptic and Ethiopic churches.

## Quotations from Original Sources

### Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 2.169-174

“Pilate, being sent by Tiberius as procurator to Judaea, introduced into Jerusalem by night and under cover the effigies of Caesar which are called standards. This proceeding, when day broke, aroused immense excitement among the Jews; those on the spot were in consternation, considering their laws to have been trampled under foot, as those laws permit no image to be erected in the city; while the indignation of the townspeople stirred the country folk, who flocked together in crowds. Hastening after Pilate to Caesarea, the Jews implored him to remove the standards from Jerusalem and to uphold the laws of their ancestors. When Pilate refused, they fell prostrate around his house and for five whole days and nights remained motionless in that position. On the ensuing day Pilate took his seat on his tribunal in the great stadium and summoning the multitude, with the apparent intention of answering them, gave the arranged signal to his armed soldiers to surround the Jews. Finding themselves in a ring of troops, three deep, the Jews were struck dumb at this unexpected sight. Pilate, after threatening to cut them down, if they refused to admit Caesar’s images, signaled to the soldiers to draw their swords. Thereupon the Jews, as by concerted action, flung themselves in a body on the ground, extended their necks, and exclaimed that they were ready rather to die than to transgress the law. Overcome with astonishment at such intense religious zeal, Pilate gave orders for the immediate removal of the standards from Jerusalem.”

### Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.55-59

“Now Pilate, the procurator of Judaea, when he brought his army from Caesarea and removed it to winter quarters in Jerusalem, took a bold step in subversion of the Jewish practices, by introducing into the city the busts of the emperor that were attached to the military standards, for our law forbids the making of images. It was for this reason that the previous procurators, when they entered the city, used standards that had no such ornaments. Pilate was the first to bring the images into Jerusalem and set them up, doing it without the knowledge of the people, for he entered at night. But when the people discovered it, they went in a throng to Caesarea and for many days entreated him to take away the images. He refused to yield, since to do so would be an outrage to the emperor; however, since they did not cease entreating him, on the sixth day he secretly armed and placed his troops in position, while he himself came to the speaker’s stand. This had been constructed in the stadium, which provided concealment for the army that lay in wait. When the Jews again engaged in supplication, at a pre-arranged signal he surrounded them with his soldiers and threatened to punish them at once with death if they did not put an end to their tumult and return to their own places. But they, casting themselves prostrate and baring their throats, declared that they had gladly welcomed death rather than make bold to transgress the wise provisions of the laws. Pilate, astonished at the strength of their devotion to the laws, straightway removed the images from Jerusalem and brought them back to Caesarea.”

### Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 2.175-177

“On a later occasion he provoked a fresh uproar by expending upon the construction of an aqueduct the sacred treasure known as Corbonas; the water was brought from a distance of 400

furlongs. Indignant at this proceeding, the populace formed a ring round the tribunal of Pilate, then on a visit to Jerusalem, and besieged him with angry clamor. He, foreseeing the tumult, had interspersed among the crowd a troop of his soldiers, armed but disguised in civilian dress, with orders not to use their swords, but to beat any rioters with cudgels. He now from his tribunal gave the agreed signal. Large numbers of the Jews perished, some from the blows which they received, others trodden to death by their companions in the ensuing flight. Cowed by the fate of the victims, the multitude was reduced to silence.”

**Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.60-62**

“He spent money from the sacred treasury in the construction of an aqueduct to bring water into Jerusalem, intercepting the source of the stream at a distance of 200 furlongs. The Jews did not acquiesce in the operations that this involved; and tens of thousands of men assembled and cried out against him, bidding him relinquish his promotion of such designs. Some too even hurled insults and abuse of the sort that a throng will commonly engage in. He thereupon ordered a large number of soldiers to be dressed in Jewish garments, under which they carried clubs, and he sent them off this way and that, thus surrounding the Jews, whom he ordered to

withdraw. When the Jews were in full torrent of abuse he gave his soldiers the prearranged signal. They, however, inflicted much harder blows than Pilate had ordered, punishing alike both those who were rioting and those who were not. But the Jews showed no faint-heartedness; and so, caught unarmed, as they were, by men delivering a prepared attack, many of them actually were slain on the spot, while some withdrew disabled by blows. Thus ended the uprising.”

**Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.63-64**

”About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvelous things about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.”