

"MY NAME IS PONTIUS PILATE"  
A NEW UNDERSTANDING FOR CHRISTIANS  
OF THE TRAGIC ROOTS OF ANTI-SEMITISM IN THE GOSPELS  
THROUGH THE VOICES OF  
SIMON OF CYRENE, JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA, PONTIUS PILATE,  
HEROD ANTIPAS, CAIAPHAS, AND BARABBAS

A Professional Project  
Presented to the Faculty of  
The School of Theology at Claremont

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry

by  
Robert Burpo Shepard, Jr.

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*This professional project, completed by*

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*has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty  
of the School of Theology at Claremont in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of*

**DOCTOR OF MINISTRY**

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April 8, 1983  
Date

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DEDICATION

For Rabbi Bernard P. King,  
my spiritual brother,  
whose loving spark has kindled flame  
and brought light  
to our common path to God

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## PREFACE

As a child and adolescent, I lived in a post-World War II Jewish neighborhood in Indianapolis, Indiana, where only a few doors from my house stood a synagogue. During these early years in my life, I have vague recollections of photographs from the Holocaust in "Life" magazine. These Jewish skeletons portrayed in black and white---some living, some dead--- were indeed a different kind of people than any I had ever known. Obviously, they were hated, tortured, loathsome, and frightening. Should not I hate them, or at least fear them, too? My Jewish neighbors, who I felt were somehow related to those Jews in the frightening photographs, were also peculiar people. They observed unusual holidays, were privileged to be absent from school for unknown reasons, ate different food, attended synagogue on Fridays and Saturdays, spoke with funny accents, and the men wore odd-looking circular caps on their heads at all times. My playmates, who never discussed these peculiarities with me, went to a special school where they studied and learned secrets that I did not know. Sometimes, when I passed the synagogue, I could hear the mysterious sounds of chanting voices. What did the Jews do behind those forbidding doors?

When I was about twelve years old, I observed one time a neighbor boy about my age picking on a smaller boy. I walked up to the bigger boy, gave him a shove, and cried

out at him, "You dirty Jew! Pick on someone your own size!" I do not know what frightened me more---the rage in his face, or the sound of my own terrible words! Where did I learn to utter what I recognized even then as an ugly anti-Semitic epithet? I must have learned it on the playground, at home, at school, or at church. Yet I do not recall any overt teachings in that regard from any source. Nevertheless, I learned it somewhere.

In the musical, South Pacific, sound the lyrics

You've got to be taught before it's too late,  
 Before you are six or seven or eight,  
 To hate all the people your relatives hate---  
 You've got to be carefully taught!<sup>1</sup>

Most consistently we have been taught to hate the Jews by the Christian Church---not overtly, but covertly, subtly, and sub-consciously---not with intentional maliciousness, but out of ignorance, because every time we read or hear read aloud the Passion Narratives in particular, we have anti-Jewish sentiments reinforced, and we hear the ancient Jews shout, according to our sacred Scriptures, "Crucify him!" (Mark 15:13 and parallels).<sup>2</sup> I do not recall having received any formal teaching in school---even in college or theological seminary

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<sup>1</sup>Oscar Hammerstein, 2nd, and Joshua Logan, South Pacific: A Musical Play (New York: Random House, 1949), pp. 136-137. "You've Got To Be Carefully Taught" used by permission of Williamson Music Company.

<sup>2</sup>All references to The Bible are based on the Revised Standard Version.

---which has directly contradicted the hateful label of "Christ-killer" assigned to the Jews. I suspect that not much is being done today in Christian churches, schools, biblical studies groups, or publications to help us unlearn the anti-Semitism which we have been taught over the years.

These six "first-person" sermons were written to help us as Christians to learn something more of the history surrounding the people and circumstances related to the death of Jesus. They revise the Gospel accounts, hopefully reflecting more accurately the historical situation at the time of Jesus. In any case, it is my hope that what I have written here will help us to understand the historical origins of anti-Semitism within the Gospels, to recognize the tragic consequences of that hatred, to discard forever those anti-Jewish prejudices by gaining a new insight into the history behind the Gospels, and to begin that most crucial and urgent task of improving Christian-Jewish relations within the context of love commanded by both religions.

These sermons are a start, and were designed to be used in at least three obvious settings:

(1) During the six Sundays in Lent, these sermons might either be preached in evening services followed by periods of dialogue and discussion, or used in Lenten study classes. The sermons may not fit as easily within the context of the traditional morning worship service.

(2) In preparation for the observance of Yom Ha-Shoah,

the annual day of remembrance of the Holocaust, these sermons might be used for study as a catalyst for dialogue between Christians and Jews.

(3) In preparation for the increasingly popular religious pilgrimages to Oberammergau, Germany for the Passion Play to be performed next in 1984 and 1990, these sermons might be used as a means of providing a different and helpful perspective on the Passion.

Robert Burpo Shepard, Jr.



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## ABSTRACT

The roots of anti-Semitism are grounded in the Gospels---more specifically in the trial of Jesus, and most blatantly in the alleged cry of the crown of Jews: "His blood be on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25). Each time these words are read aloud by Christians around the world in Lenten and Good Friday services, they unwittingly fan the flames of anti-Semitism.

The Gospels were not written as history, but as theology and as an apologetic of the nascent Christian Church. They were written in a pro-Roman context in order to appease the Romans so that the Christian faith might exist and survive within a hostile Roman environment. In that process the Jews became the convenient scapegoats.

In these six "first-person" sermons, designed to be used during Lent, on Yom Ha-Shoah (the Jewish day of remembrance of the Holocaust), or in preparation for the Oberammergau Passion Play, the events recorded in the Gospels surrounding the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus are re-examined and reinterpreted in the light of other historical information from the first century, with the hope that Christians will better understand the historical origins of anti-Semitism within the Gospels, will recognize the tragic consequences of that hatred, and will forever discard those anti-Jewish prejudices in favor of improved Christian-Jewish

relations within the context of the love commanded by both religions.

Pontius Pilate bears the sole responsibility for the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. The Jews are not now, and never have been, guilty of that hateful charge. We learn the truth through six voices from the past:

My name is Simon of Cyrene	- Jerusalem, 30 C.E.
My name is Joseph of Arimathea	- Jerusalem, 30 C.E.
My name is Pontius Pilate	- Rome, 37 C.E.
My name is Herod Antipas	- Tiberias, 39 C.E.
My name is Caiaphas	- Jerusalem, 65 C.E.
My name is Barabbas	- Masada, 73 C.E.

## Chapter 1

NOT GUILTY!

A Tragedy of Infinite Proportions

Some Christian had to write this book. An apology to Judaism on the part of Christianity has been long overdue. The relation between Christianity and Judaism during the last nineteen centuries is an ethical problem which twentieth century Christianity can no longer afford to ignore. The Christian-Jewish problem may be approached from various angles. This study is concerned with its paramount issue, namely its religious aspect.

The brutal and outrageous persecution of the Jew by the Christian for the religious reason is a matter of historic record. . . .

The student of history is amazed to discover that the results of the historical investigation of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus have not found their way into modern religious education, that text books are still being published which tell the story in the ancient gruesome way. Yet there must be millions of Christians who desire to know what really transpired at Calvary rather than to go on believing the fiction of Oberammergau. . . .

As we write, the Hitler regime promulgates enactment after enactment indirectly or directly concerned with the Jews of Germany. May Germany's Jews be spared further suffering and the Christian-Jewish tragedy not be heightened thereby.

Conrad Henry Moehlman  
Rochester, N. Y.,  
Good Friday, 1933<sup>1</sup>

The irony of Moehlman's words in the preface to his book, The Christian-Jewish Tragedy, is devastating. His benediction for the sparing of further Jewish suffering

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<sup>1</sup>Conrad Henry Moehlman, The Christian-Jewish Tragedy (Rochester: Hart, 1933), pp. vii-ix.

became instead the prologue for the Holocaust---a tragedy of infinite proportions.

Just as Moehlman felt that some Christian had to write that book, I have had a growing conviction that I as Christian had to write this one, and I share Moehlman's opinion that there still "must be millions of Christians who desire to know what really transpired at Calvary."

Yom Ha-Shoah is an annual day of remembrance for the six million Jews who were murdered in the Nazi Holocaust. In 1981 I was invited by the Jewish Federation of Orange County, California to speak at their Yom Ha-Shoah observance. I, the only Christian on the platform, pledged to the audience that I would do all within my power to help Christians understand and reinterpret those portions of the Gospel which have been the root of indescribable pain for the Jews through the centuries. After the program concluded, man came to me and said, "My father was a survivor of Auschwitz. My mother died in Auschwitz. Most of my relatives died in the concentration camps. Until this time, my only hope has been in my memory of them. Now you are my second hope."

Hope is the foundation and heritage of both the Jewish and Christian faiths. The only thing that can counteract a tragedy of infinite proportions is a hope of infinite proportions, which springs from an infinite God. We press toward that hope.

The Roots of Anti-Semitism

The term "anti-Semitism" was not coined until the nineteenth century, and technically is incorrect in connection with the New Testament. It is more correct to use the term "anti-Judaism."<sup>2</sup> Yet the term "anti-Judaism" does not convey quite the same meaning, and the term "anti-Semitism" which is in more frequent usage has unquestionable meaning. The term "anti-Semitism" is therefore preferred.

The roots of anti-Semitism are grounded in the Gospels---more specifically in the trial of Jesus, and most blatantly in the alleged cry of the crowd of Jews: "His blood be on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25). These words, set in the midst of the trial of Jesus of Nazareth before Pontius Pilate, are the source of immeasurable and unfathomable Jewish suffering. Recorded only in Matthew, and of questionable authenticity, this epithet has tragically and repeatedly become reality millions of times in history since the author of Matthew introduced it into his Gospel. Christians in the past have assumed that it was their religious duty to see that this Scriptural apophthegm was fulfilled by hating and killing Jews throughout the centuries.

In the Imperial Constantinian Church what had been pre-Christian, pagan anti-Judaism was given a "Christian"

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<sup>2</sup>Samual Sandmel, Anti-Semitism in the New Testament? (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. xix-xxi.

stamp. And . . . the situation of the Jews became very much more difficult, particularly after the high Middle Ages. Jews were slaughtered in Western Europe during the first three Crusades and Jews in Palestine were exterminated. Three hundred Jewish communities were destroyed in the German Empire from 1348 to 1349; Jews were expelled from England (1290), France (1394), Spain (1492) and Portugal (1497). Later came the horrifyingly virulent anti-Jewish speeches of the elderly Luther. Persecution of Jews continued after the Reformation, there were pogroms in Eastern Europe, and so on. It must be admitted that, during these periods, the Church probably slew more martyrs than it produced. . . . It would be presumptuous to attempt to trace here the terrible history over many centuries of the suffering and death of the Jewish people, culminating in the Nazi mass insanity and mass murder which claimed a third of all Jewry as its victims. . . . After Auschwitz there can be no more excuses. Christendom cannot avoid a clear admission of its guilt.<sup>3</sup>

It is grim and troublesome for Christians to admit that the Persecutions of the Roman Empire, the Christian Crusades, the Inquisition, the Pogroms of Eastern Europe and Russia, the Nazi Holocaust, and the increasing manifestations of anti-Semitism in the world today all stem from those awful, invented words: "His blood be on us and on our children!" Yet, each time these words are read aloud by Christians around the world in annual Lenten and Good Friday services, they fan the flames of anti-Semitism, and reopen the ancient Christian charge of Deicide against the Jews.

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<sup>3</sup>Hans Kung, On Being A Christian (New York: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 168-169.



Toward a New Understanding

Since the words, which are the root of anti-Semitism, are etched in Christian Scripture, they cannot be dismissed or silenced, but they must be freshly understood and newly interpreted within their historical context. In his book, Let My People Live!, Dagobert Runes states:

The New Testament contains 102 references to the Jews of [the] most degrading malevolent and libelous kind, thereby creating in the minds and hearts of the Christian children and adults ineradicable hatred towards the Jewish people.<sup>4</sup>

We shall not attempt to discuss the many anti-Jewish references in the New Testament. "His blood be on us and on our children" is both the epitome and the worst of all. The fact is that Matthew undoubtedly invented this statement, and placed it on the lips of the "crowd" of Jews as a means of implicating the Jewish people as a whole, and making them appear guilty for the death of Jesus. Addressing his Jewish audience, Jesus once asked, "What man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?" (Matthew 7:9-10). The answer is: No man! It is a truism. Likewise, what man would willingly afflict his child with the burden of guilt for a crime which the child did not commit? No man! And no crowd (even if it wanted to)

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<sup>4</sup>Dagobert D. Runes, Let My People Live! (New York: Philosophical Library, 1975), preliminary page entitled: "A Word to the Reader."

is able collectively to place the burden of guilt on future generations. It is not possible. "His blood be on us and on our children" is a non-sequitur. Further, it must be stressed that the Jewish people had no guilt to assume, because the fact remains that ". . . Jesus was sentenced in a Roman court and executed by Roman soldiers in the Roman mode---not for blasphemy, but for sedition."<sup>5</sup>

Why, then, might Matthew have invented these words?

Gerard Sloyan provides a plausible reason:

He is facing the burning question which all within Israel faced: How could God have allowed the destruction of the temple and so many of his people?

Matthew's setting down of the horrible cry, "Let his blood be upon us and upon our children" at 27:25, far from being meant as an incitement to persecution, would then have been an attempted explanation of all the bloodshed that the people had witnessed in the four-year period of siege. In the prophetic tradition it was a judgment against Israel, like many that had gone before it. If such was the setting within which Matthew placed the biblical outcry, then, "Very much against his own intention . . . [he] became one of the principal sources of the persecution of Israel, which has haunted the history of the church down to our own day."<sup>6</sup>

Beyond this particular saying of Matthew's, we still have to inquire about the reasons for other anti-Judaistic material in the New Testament---especially in the Gospels, and more critically in the trial before Pontius Pilate.

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<sup>5</sup>Francis Wright Beare, The Earliest Records of Jesus (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 236.

<sup>6</sup>Gerard S. Sloyan, Jesus on Trial (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), pp. 87-88. [Sloyan's quote at the end of his statement is from Gaston, No Stone Upon Another, p. 486]

There are many differences of scholarly opinion, and not all of them can be correct. It is tempting in the face of these differences to say as did one prominent scholar:

Personally I much prefer the way of agnosticism: to confess that I do not know what happened historically. I see no possibility of reconstructing the facts; I simply give up on the problem.<sup>7</sup>

Too much is at stake, however, simply to give up. History's judgment to date that the Jews must be made to pay eternal reparation for the death of Jesus of Nazareth must be reversed. As Elie Wiesel said,

For almost two thousand years millions of people the world over have been remembering the death of one Jew. Are we to forget the death of six million Jews just three decades ago?<sup>8</sup>

One of the problems related to understanding the anti-Judaistic materials in the Gospels is that the four Gospels are the only reliable source of information about the arrest and trial of Jesus. The problem is that the four Gospels do not agree with each other, and present conflicting information. There is a general historical basis for what is reported, but the factual details are in question. The problem is complicated by the fact that the Gospels were not written for the sake of historical accuracy, but for theological purposes.

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<sup>7</sup>Samuel Sandmel, "The Trial of Jesus: Reservations," Judaism: 1 (Winter 1971), 72.

<sup>8</sup>Elie Wiesel, quoted by Alice L. Eckardt, Midstream 27 (April 1981), 37.

For example, the Gospel according to Mark states from the outset its theological objective: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). Likewise, the Gospel according to John concludes with the statement that the things written in John were deliberately set down so "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God . . ." (John 20:31). It is obvious that the Gospels were not written forward chronologically from birth to death as history, but backwards from resurrection to birth as theology.

The historical accuracy of the Gospels is also in question because the Gospels were written for the apologetic purposes of the nascent church. S. G. F. Brandon argues this point very convincingly, reminding us that the Gospels were written during the war and post-war years of the Jewish revolt against Rome.<sup>9</sup> The Gentiles of the Roman Empire, for whom the Gospels primarily were written, were afraid of worshipping someone who had been executed by the Roman government for sedition. They had seen how Rome treated rebels, and they were not sympathetic with these Jewish revolutionaries, who had caused them so much trouble and suffering. The Gentiles were, therefore, ripe for the propaganda of the Gospels, which made these two crucial points: First, Jesus was not against Rome. He was innocent of the three charges brought against him of

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<sup>9</sup>S. G. F. Brandon, "The Trial of Jesus," Judaism 20:1 (Winter 1971), 44-46.

non-payment of tribute, subversion, and claiming to be king (Luke 23:2). In fact, he had told his disciples to give to Caesar what belonged to Caesar (Luke 20:25). He was not subversive, because he openly taught in the Temple day after day (Luke 22:52-53). He did not claim kingship for himself (Luke 23:3). Therefore, since Rome had nothing to fear from Jesus, it had nothing to fear from his followers either.

Second, Rome was not against Jesus. Pontius Pilate found Jesus innocent---three times! (Luke 23:4, 15, 22). It was not, therefore, Rome's fault that Jesus died; it was the fault of the Jews. If Pilate was not against Jesus, then why should Rome be; and if Rome was not against Jesus, why should Rome be against the followers of Jesus? Even the Roman centurion said about Jesus, "Certainly this man was innocent!" (Luke 23:47), and/or "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39).

This was the apologetic and the propaganda of the Gospels: Rome had nothing to fear from the followers of Jesus; the followers of Jesus should fear nothing from Rome. The Jews then became the convenient scapegoats.

What we forget, however, is that Jesus himself was a Jew! And the early Christian Church was a sect within Judaism. Jews and Christians worshipped side by side daily in the Temple (Acts 2:46). Later, two events strained the relationship between the Jews and the Christians: first, the rapid spread of the Christian faith among the Gentiles under Paul's

leadership; and second, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., which decimated the Jewish-Christian branch of the Church, and left the Gentile branch of the Church in power. The written Gospels took form around and, with the possible exception of Mark, after these two events. Afterwards, the Gentile-Christian community, which was fighting for its survival, had little regard for the Jews. What did it matter, if in her attempt to assuage the Roman government, the Church should absolve Pilate and indict the Jews in the matter of Jesus of Nazareth's death?

The clear fact is that, while the Gospels blame the Jews for the death of Jesus, the Jews, then and now, are not guilty! Knowing full well that it was actually the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, who condemned Jesus to death by Roman crucifixion, we do not denounce the Romans as a whole, or their descendants, the Italians. We do not blame the people of Dallas for the death of John F. Kennedy. We do not condemn the people of Memphis for the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. We do not lay guilt on the people of Los Angeles for the murder of Robert Kennedy. I do not accept personal responsibility for the Holocaust, because I was only a child at the time. Neither can I place collective guilt on my children for the Holocaust, as they were not yet even born. About eighty percent of the Jewish population at the time of Jesus lived in Diaspora, outside of Palestine, and therefore

could neither have known Jesus nor had anything to do with his death. Most of the Jews living in Palestine had never known anything about Jesus either.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, a different kind of question can be raised: Should it make any difference who crucified Jesus? Of whomever did it, Jesus reportedly said, "Father forgive them; they know not what they do." Christians should take the same attitude.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, we cannot blame the Jews collectively under any stretch of the imagination for the death of Jesus.

We cannot delete the words "His blood be on us and on our children" from Christendom's holy Scriptures, but we can challenge their meaning---not to destroy our faith or trust in Scripture, but to understand clearly the historical situation, to read between the lines, and to reinterpret what is there. We must remember that each of the Evangelists attempted to communicate his own personal theological (not historical) perspective, and that is the reason why the name of each Gospel is preceded by the word kata---"according to." Each of the four Evangelists has a different perspective.<sup>12</sup> One thing should be increasingly clear: There is a whole new perspective about the arrest and trial of Jesus which has not been revealed to or viewed by most Christians. This perspective reveals that not

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<sup>10</sup>Clark M. Williamson, Has God Rejected His People? (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), p. 45.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

all which we have learned and been told about the trial is quite as we thought. In the shadows are new elements to be investigated which will help us to see more clearly the roots of anti-Semitism in the Gospels.

### Voices from the Past

We shall learn "what really transpired at Calvary" through six voices from the past: Simon of Cyrene, Joseph of Arimaethea, Pontius Pilate, Herod Antipas, Caiaphas, and Barabbas, all of whom played roles in the Passion of Jesus of Nazareth. Through these voices we shall see the Passion from fresh and different perspectives. While these voices in the form of "first-person" sermons are creative fiction, they are all within the realm of possibility. It must be stressed that they are historical fiction, and that elements of history have been revealed about which most Christians are uninformed.

Simon of Cyrene, who, according to the Gospels, was compelled to carry the cross for Jesus, relates his experience from the standpoint of an African Jew who witnesses and abhors the extreme and unusual cruelty of the Roman form of capital punishment. Jesus was a stranger to Simon, but a fellow-Jew, who suffered at the hands of brutal Roman soldiers a punishment impossible under Jewish law. The setting is in Jerusalem c. 30 C.E.



Joseph of Arimathea, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, recounts his role as a friend of Jesus, who after the crucifixion requested the body of Jesus from Pontius Pilate, and then buried it in his own tomb. That a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin could be a friend of Jesus is crucial to our understanding that the Pharisees and members of the Sanhedrin were not automatically inimical to Jesus as the Gospels indicate. Rather, Jesus was on friendly terms with members of the religious establishment, and it was not until the last third of the first century that the followers of Jesus Christ and the Pharisees became hostile toward each other. The Gospels, written during that period of later animosity, incorrectly assume that the same conflict also existed between Jesus and the Pharisees of his time. The setting is in Jerusalem c. 30 C.E.

Pontius Pilate, Roman Prefect of Judea, divulges his unsavory record with the Jews of Judea. Portrayed in the Gospels in a favorable light as the one who found Jesus innocent of any crime, washed his hands of the affair, and allowed the Jews to assume responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus, Pilate was in reality the only one who had the power to sentence Jesus to death. The blame for the crucifixion of Jesus falls squarely on Pilate and on Pilate alone. In the end Pilate was banished by the emperor for his excess cruelties as Prefect of Judea. The setting is in Rome c. 37 C.E.

Herod Antipas, Tetrach of Galilee, and Pontius Pilate were enemies. In this sermon Antipas tells the reason for this animosity, and informs us that Pilate, not he, sealed the fate of Jesus. Antipas also reports his unhappy family relationships, and sets the record straight about his relationships with two itinerant preachers, John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. The setting is in Tiberias c. 39 C.E.

Caiaphas, High Priest of the Jews, played a lesser role in the Passion than the Gospel writers would have us believe. Unpopular with the people, Caiaphas did not represent the Jewish people at all. Rather, he was an appointee of the Roman Prefect, and collaborated with his Roman superior, because his position, wealth, and status depended on it. Since Caiaphas derived all of his power from Pilate, it was Caiaphas who served Pilate in the crucifixion rather than the other way around. Pilate, not Caiaphas, held the power of crucifixion. Caiaphas recalls these events late in his life. The setting is in Jerusalem c. 65 C.E.

Barabbas, according to the Gospels was an insurrectionist released by Pilate in the place of Jesus. He tells his story as a revolutionary against the Roman government, and enumerates the Roman atrocities against the Jewish people. For both political and religious reasons the Jews were opposed to Rome and her functionaries. As a fellow prisoner with Jesus of Nazareth under Pontius Pilate, Barabbas reveals how it happened that Jesus, rather than himself, became

Pilate's victim of crucifixion. The setting is at Masada c. 73 C.E.

These six sermons are meant to be used in a series so that the listener may benefit from their overall impact. Each must be heard within the context of the others, so that the message may be clear. The message is, of course, that the Jews are in no way guilty of the death of Jesus of Nazareth. From every perspective it is unmistakable that Pontius Pilate bears the sole culpability. Each of the six voices verifies and reinforces that fact.

It is important for Christians to realize that nothing is taken away from the Lordship of Jesus Christ in this revised view of the events in the Gospels. Rather, to understand correctly the history surrounding the death of Jesus, the intentional shaping of that history into anti-Jewish and pro-Roman sentiments as a means of Christian survival in the late first and early second centuries, and the application of necessary correctives to those anti-Jewish sentiments, is to proclaim the Good News and to give power to the teachings of both Jesus and the Torah: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:40 and Leviticus 19:18). The listener or reader is left to assimilate these six sermons, to draw his own conclusions, and to live-out the ethical ramifications of the love commandments of the Torah and Gospel in harmony.

Hans Küng has stated that Christendom has spent centuries trying to convert the Jews, but now it is time for Christians to abandon that approach and be converted themselves.<sup>13</sup> Then, not only can the trial of Jesus be concluded, but the two millenia trial of the Jews by the Christians of the world can also be terminated, and a final verdict of "not guilty" be returned for the Jews.

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<sup>13</sup>Küng, p. 170.

## Chapter 2

## MY NAME IS SIMON OF CYRENE

Prologue

One verse from each of the three Synoptic Gospels tells us all that we know about Simon of Cyrene (Matthew 27: 32; Mark 15:21; and Luke 23:26). A century and a half later, the Christian theologian, Irenaeus, reports an heretical doctrine formulated by Basilides in which Jesus and Simon were both transfigured, so that Simon died on the cross, while Jesus stood nearby and laughed.<sup>1</sup> Beyond that absurdity we know nothing else about Simon of Cyrene.

Cyrene was the capital city of the North African district of Cyrenaica or Libya.<sup>2</sup> Jews first settled there when sent by Ptolemy, son of Lagus, in the third century B.C.E.<sup>3</sup> By 85 B.C.E. the people of Cyrene were divided into four classes: citizens; farmers; resident aliens; and the Jews, who had their own territorial settlement.<sup>4</sup> Among

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<sup>1</sup>Irenaeus, "Against Heresies" in The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), I:349.

<sup>2</sup>E. P. Blair, "Simon," in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), R-Z 357.

<sup>3</sup>Josephus, Ap.ii.44. All references to Josephus and other classical Greek and Latin authors are based on The Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

<sup>4</sup>Josephus, Ant.xiv.114-117.

other things, this separation made the Jews convenient targets of persecution. In 14 B.C.E. the Jews in Cyrene, who were being mistreated and kept from sending their religious donations to the Temple in Jerusalem, sent envoys to Caesar Augustus, who then issued an edict in the Jews' favor, reinforcing their equal civic status, and guaranteeing the safe conduct of their sacred monies to the Temple in Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup>

There was, among many synagogues in Jerusalem, one known as the Synagogue of the Freedmen, which was frequented by Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora and in particular by Jews from Cyrene (Acts 6:9). It is natural to suppose that Simon visited this synagogue.

Crucifixion in the ancient world was both prevalent and obscene.<sup>6</sup> It was so utterly offensive that the word "cross" was used by the lower classes in their profanity as a vulgar taunt.<sup>7</sup> Crucifixion was especially common in Judea, because it was used by Rome as a political punishment for rebellious foreigners (Jews), criminals, and slaves.<sup>8</sup> There are numerous examples of mass executions by Roman crucifixion. When the rebel slave, Spartacus, was defeated in 71 B.C.E.,

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<sup>5</sup>Josephus, Ant.xvi.160-165.

<sup>6</sup>Martin Hengel, Crucifixion (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), p. 22.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 33f, 46f, 51f.

6,000 of his followers were nailed to crosses on the Via Appia between Rome and Capua.<sup>9</sup> Quintilius Varus, governor of Syria, crucified 2,000 Jewish insurrectionists in Judea after the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C.E.<sup>10</sup> In 66 C.E. the Prefect Gessius Florus of Judea massacred 3,600 Jewish men, women, and children---many by crucifixion.<sup>11</sup> And General Titus Flavius, who destroyed Jerusalem in 70 C.E., and later became Emperor of Rome, scourged, tortured, and crucified as many as 500 Jews daily, until their number was so great "that space could not be found for the crosses nor crosses for the bodies."<sup>12</sup> These examples encompass the times both before and after Jesus, and there is no reason to suppose that the Roman excesses in crucifixions were any different at the time of Jesus.

Out of this milieu comes Simon to deliver the sacred monies from his synagogue in Cyrene to the Temple in Jerusalem. Simon, the father of two grown sons, might have been about fifty years of age. The setting for this sermon is late on Friday afternoon on the day of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth c. 30 C.E.

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<sup>9</sup>Appian, Bella Civilia i.120.

<sup>10</sup>Josephus, B.J.ii.75; Ant.xvii.295.

<sup>11</sup>Josephus, B.J.ii.306-308.

<sup>12</sup>Josephus, B.J.v.449-452.

Scripture Lesson

And they led him [Jesus] out to crucify him. And they compelled a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross (Mark 15:20b-21).

Sermon

My name is Simon. Thank you for giving me such a gracious and kind welcome. I arrived here in Jerusalem early this morning, after a lengthy journey from Africa, hoping that I would arrive in time for Passover and to usher-in this Sabbath with you here in the Synagogue of Freedman (Acts 6:9). I bring greetings to you from my brothers at my home synagogue in Cyrene. I know that you have welcomed some of them in the past, including my sons, Rufus and Alexander (Mark 15:21). As you probably remember, Alexander finally returned home to Cyrene, but Rufus, who is more independent and bold, ventured on to Rome where we hear that he has become firmly established in the leadership of the synagogue there (Romans 16:13).

Things are not going well for our Jewish community in Cyrene. When I was a small boy, we were actively persecuted by the other citizens of Cyrene, but Caesar Augustus put a stop to that.<sup>13</sup> In the past few years, since Augustus' death, we have once again become the victims of mistreatment by

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<sup>13</sup>Josephus, Ant.xvi.160-165.



the populace. That is why Rufus left Cyrene, and that is all the greater reason why each year I dream, as all of us Jews from the Diaspora do, of coming home to Jerusalem for Pass-over. Today that dream is a reality, thanks be to the Holy One, blessed be He.

My gratitude is severely diminished, however, by a horrible experience which touched my life only this morning. My cup of joy cannot be full because of it. I had just left the Temple, where I had delivered our sacred monies from the synagogue in Cyrene, and I was passing near the Fortress Antonia, when my way was momentarily blocked at a narrow intersection by a procession of Roman soldiers, prisoners, and a following of hecklers. All three of the prisoners were covered with welts and stripes caused by the flagellum, but one was bleeding more badly than the others from a number of lacerations. Obviously he had been severely scourged. The poor man was so weakened that he staggered and fell under the weight of the cross-beam which he was carrying. He was unable to get up from where the beam lay across his body. The centurion in charge, who was within an easy arms-length of me, reached out, and grabbing my tunic, pulled me forward, and commanded me to carry the cross-beam for the prisoner. I was terrified. Never before today in all my years have I ever witnessed personally a crucifixion, and I pray to the Holy One, blessed be He, that I never witness another. As

I lifted the cross-beam, I read the titulus, which in three languages announced this man's crime: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (John 19:19). I could not see this Jesus' face, since I was walking behind him, but he did not look like any king. No one who had suffered as he had could appear regal. As I labored along the street, moving uphill toward the city gate, I wondered what this man called Jesus had done to receive such a brutal sentence of death. It occurred to me that in these parts there is no king but Caesar himself. If this prisoner had been condemned as a king, then his titulus was an ironic and sarcastic label given to him for contending against the emperor. This man was probably a Zealot who had attempted some kind of revolt against Rome. That was the only sense that I could make of it. Some day I pray that the Zealots will be successful, or that the Messiah will come, so that we shall be free of the scourge of Rome.

When we arrived at the place of execution, a small hill just outside the western gate of the city which the people fittingly called "Golgotha," the soldiers began to prepare the prisoners for execution. I admit that I became physically sick. These soldiers, except for the centurion, were auxiliary legionaries. I have often heard that the soldiers who are assigned to the execution squads become extremely sadistic, trying to find new and ever more

terrible tortures for their victims, such as hanging them upside down<sup>14</sup> or impaling their private parts.<sup>15</sup> These soldiers were not to be out-done, and after some time, they viciously broke both legs of two of the criminals, but when they started to break the legs of the third, the Nazarene, they discovered that he was already dead (John 19:31-33). I think that he had lost too much blood to survive very long.<sup>16</sup>

There were a few pagans among the bystanders who asked the soldiers for nails and leather cords which had been used on previous victims of crucifixion. It seems that they believed that, if these amulets were wrapped in wool and tied around the necks of people suffering from malaria, they would be cured.<sup>17</sup> For the price of a few copper quadrans, these amulets were easily obtained from the soldiers. How could anyone possibly use such an unclean item for any purpose?

For that matter, how can the Romans be so cruel? They may be the conquerors of the civilized world, but they have the barbarians' disregard for the sanctity of life, and that is a major difference between them and us. We have been taught from the beginning that we are created in the image of

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<sup>14</sup>Josephus, B.J.v.451.

<sup>15</sup>Seneca, Dialogue 6: De Consolatione ad Marciam xx.3.

<sup>16</sup>Hengel, p. 32.

<sup>17</sup>Pliny, Natural History xxviii.xi.

the Holy One (Genesis 1:26), and that every human life is sacred. Has it not been said by our teachers that if any man causes a single soul to perish, it is as though he had caused the whole world to perish; and that if any man saves a single soul, it is as though he had saved the whole world?<sup>18</sup> Even in those extreme cases when our Sanhedrins have meted out the sentence of death for those offenses prescribed in our laws, we have used the most humane method of stoning as our standard form of capital punishment, believing that even a condemned criminal must be loved as a neighbor, according to the commandment in Leviticus (19:18), and that he must be accorded the quickest and most beautiful death possible.<sup>19</sup> Never would we allow such a barbaric, cruel, and agonizingly slow death as Roman crucifixion, where the victim remains hanging on his cross for days or weeks on end until he is carrion for the birds and animals.<sup>20</sup> Our law does not allow the body which has been stoned and hanged for display to remain for more than the one day. It is buried before sundown, because it is otherwise repugnant to God (Deuteronomy 21:22-23).

Forgive me for dwelling on these depressing things,

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<sup>18</sup>Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5.

<sup>19</sup>Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin 45a.

<sup>20</sup>Hengel, p. 87.

but they have made a deep and sorrowful impression on me to-day. No matter what Jesus did, the Romans do not have the right to treat any man in such an inhuman and shameful way.

Now, let us change the subject. This is both the time of Passover and of Sabbath, and we should be happy. We celebrate our freedom from slavery to Pharoah, and remember our covenant with the Holy One. Would that we could also celebrate our freedom from slavery to Rome.

It will soon be dark, and it is time to light the menorot. Thank you again for receiving me as your guest.

Baruch ata Adonai Elohenu, melech haolam asher kideshanu bemitsvotav vetsivanu lehadlik neir shel shabbat. . .

"Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who hallows us with His commandments and commands us to kindle the lights of the sabbath. . ." <sup>21</sup>

### Epilogue

Crucifixion was always carried out in public in such a bestial way that it served as a strong deterrent to any anti-Roman activity. It must be noted that crucifixion was a Roman punishment and not a Jewish penalty. The one exception to this which we are aware of in the annals of history,

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<sup>21</sup>We presume that, although the Synagogue of Freedmen in Jerusalem was for the Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora, Hebrew was used in their liturgical formulae.

was the crucifixion of 800 Pharisees by Alexander Jannaeus about one hundred years before the time of Jesus.<sup>22</sup> In that case, the Pharisees had betrayed Alexander to a foreign enemy, causing Alexander to lose a major battle, whereupon Alexander felt that the Pharisees deserved a punishment that would bring to them the greatest humiliation and dishonor. That punishment was the imported, pagan punishment of crucifixion.<sup>23</sup>

This event was

alluded to in the Qumran commentary on the Book of Nahum (4QpNah2:13) with the postscript: "such a thing has never before been done in Israel, for the Scripture (Deut 21:23) designates a man hung up alive as a reproach unto God."<sup>24</sup>

The idea of crucifixion was so foreign to the Jews that they did not even have a word for it in their own language.<sup>25</sup>

In biblical times the Jews used only three methods for capital punishment: stoning (the standard form); burning (almost identical to strangulation); and slaying (usually decapitation by the sword).<sup>26</sup> Although some of the information that we have regarding Jewish attitudes toward capital punishment comes from the rabbis of the period after Jesus,

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<sup>22</sup>Josephus, B.J.i.97; Ant.xiii.380

<sup>23</sup>Hengel, p. 84.

<sup>24</sup>Encyclopedia Judaica (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), V: 1134-1135.

<sup>25</sup>Paul Winter, On the Trial of Jesus (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974), p. 93.

<sup>26</sup>J. Greenberg, "Crimes and Punishments," in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, A-D, 741.

it reflects the attitudes which were also current during and before the lifetime of Jesus. The Jews did not change their laws; they refined them. The tannaim, the Jewish teachers from the Mishnaic times got their names from the word tanna, which means to hand down orally or to repeat.<sup>27</sup> This implies a preservation of the law.

Jewish law required that the defendant be given every benefit of the doubt. He could not be found guilty without the agreement of at least two truthful witnesses.<sup>28</sup> So long as anyone was willing to testify in the accused's behalf, there was the possibility of acquittal, even if the accused himself thought of some new evidence.<sup>29</sup> The execution could not take place on the same day as the trial so that new evidence could be introduced in favor of the accused should it arise.<sup>30</sup> Jesus could not have been arrested, quickly tried, and summarily executed in the due process of Jewish law. The events as they occurred were not only against Jewish law, but against centuries of sensitivities developed in Jewish tradition to insure the utmost fairness in the treatment of the accused. This reinforces the already indisputable evidence that Jesus was tried and sentenced to death not by Jews

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<sup>27</sup>Winter, p. 103.

<sup>28</sup>Mishnah Sanhedrin 5:1-4.

<sup>29</sup>Mishnah Sanhedrin 6:1.

<sup>30</sup>Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:1.

according to their laws or their methods of capital punishment, but by Pilate, according to Roman law and the prescribed Roman form of capital punishment, crucifixion. That it was Pilate and not the Jews who were culpable is attested to by the Roman historian, Tacitus: "Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Tacitus, Annals xv.xliv.



## Chapter 3

## MY NAME IS JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA

Prologue

Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy (Matthew 27:57), respected member of the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:43), who was considered by the early Christians to be a good and righteous man (Luke 23:50) and a disciple of Jesus (Matthew 27:57). It is not recorded in the Gospels (our only source of information about Joseph) whether he was a Sadducee or a Pharisee, but since Joseph was friendly with Jesus, it may be presumed that Joseph was a Pharisee for the following reasons: first, while there is no record of friendly relations between Jesus and the Sadducees, there are at least two incidents which indicate that Jesus was on friendly terms with the Pharisees (John 3:1-2 and Luke 7:36-50) so that he shared both ideas and table fellowship with them; and, second, the Sadducees did not believe in oral law<sup>1</sup> or resurrection,<sup>2</sup> while Jesus and the Pharisees did,<sup>3</sup> so that Jesus in fact argued with the Sadducees regarding resurrection (Mark 12:18-27 and parallels).

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<sup>1</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.16-17.

<sup>2</sup>Josephus, B.J.ii.164-165.

<sup>3</sup>Josephus, B.J.ii.162-163.

The Gospel writers portray the Pharisees in violent opposition to Jesus. The fact is, however, that in the Synoptic Passion Narratives (considered to be the earliest formulated part of the Gospel tradition<sup>4</sup>) the Pharisees are not mentioned even once among those who arrested, tried, or crucified Jesus. The anti-Pharisaic stance of the Gospel writers stems from the fact that the early Jewish-Christians, during the time that the Gospels were finally recorded (c. 70-100 C.E.), found themselves in conflict with the post-70 C.E. Pharisees, and it seemed to the Gospel writers that, if the Pharisees were enemies of the Christians in the post-70 period, they must have also been the enemies of Jesus in his era between forty and seventy years before.<sup>5</sup> The stigma placed on the Pharisees by the Gospel writers is unwarranted and unjust. According to Josephus, the Pharisees were very popular with the common people,<sup>6</sup> and Jesus himself acknowledged the Pharisees as the religious and legal authorities of his time when he said, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you. . . ." (Matthew 23:1). Thus, it seems that Jesus might easily have

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<sup>4</sup>Francis Wright Beare, The Earliest Records of Jesus (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), pp. 219-221.

<sup>5</sup>Charlotte Klein, Anti-Semitism in Christian Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 90.

<sup>6</sup>Josephus, Ant.xiii.298; B.J.ii.166.

enjoyed the close fellowship of many Pharisees, including Joseph of Arimathea.

As a member of the Sanhedrin, Joseph of Arimathea is also living proof in his friendship with Jesus that the Sanhedrin as a whole cannot be stereotyped as inimical towards Jesus.

The setting for this sermon is in Jerusalem on Friday evening following the crucifixion and burial of Jesus of Nazareth, c. 30 C.E.

#### Scripture Lesson

And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus. And Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. And he bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud, and laid him in a tomb, which had been hewn out of rock; and he rolled a stone against the door of the tomb (Mark 15:42-46).

#### Sermon

My name is Joseph of Arimathea. Go immediately and tell your master, Ruben, that Nicodemus and I have arrived. . . . Ruben, my dear young friend, shabbat shalom! I came from Arimathea as soon as I could. Your servant arrived on the back of a half-alive horse about five o'clock this morning.

At first I could not grasp the improbable news that Jesus had been arrested by Pontius Pilate's soldiers, but the sense of breathless urgency in your messenger's voice soon persuaded me to head for Jerusalem in all haste to intercede, if at all possible. Unfortunately the roads to Jerusalem were all swollen with Passover pilgrims, and I was delayed, so that by the time I reached Antonia Fortress and located the jailer it was already well past noon, and I discovered that Pilate had already sentenced Jesus to death by crucifixion. With numb disbelief I hurried over to Golgotha where I was painfully shocked at the sight of our kind friend hanging in agony on a cross. It took what seemed an eternity for him to die, but in reality that time came at about three o'clock. Then it suddenly dawned on me that Jesus must be buried before sundown in accordance with our Law (Deuteronomy 21:23).<sup>7</sup>

I asked the Centurion in charge to release the body of Jesus, but he said that he had no authority to do so, and he referred me to Pilate himself. I hastened over to the Praetorium, but Pilate kept me waiting deliberately, I am sure. The malevolent viper! He would not release the body to me until he had summoned the Centurion to announce officially that Jesus was dead. Even then the heathen wretch lectured me about this being a benevolent exception to his rule of leaving criminals on the cross until carrion birds

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<sup>7</sup>Josephus, B.J.iv.317.

had picked clean their bones.<sup>8</sup> Is there nothing that we can do to be rid of this Roman scourge? The High Priest and President of our Sanhedrin, Caiaphas, is Pilate's agent,<sup>9</sup> and for that reason, we shall never be able to act with the strength of our entire body. Caiaphas and the Sadducees, because they are dependent upon Rome, will block our every move. We must find a way to work around them---perhaps even with the Zealots. In the meantime I suppose that we should be thankful that we were able to bury Jesus before the sun went down. By the time Pilate finally ordered that the body of Jesus be turned over to me, there was not time to make other arrangements, so Nicodemus helped me anoint and wrap the body, and then we placed the body in my own family tomb near Golgotha. It was the only decent thing that I could do for our friend.

Those of us who have known and respected this compassionate man, who have conversed with him by the hour and have even debated with him, who have shared table fellowship with him, learned from him, and sought his advice, cannot yet realize in our shock and stunning grief what a great friend and teacher we have lost. The Romans have struck another disastrous blow against us!

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<sup>8</sup>Martin Hengel, Crucifixion (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), p. 87.

<sup>9</sup>Solomon Zeitlin, Who Crucified Jesus? (New York: Bloch, 1964), pp. 50-51.

Nicodemus, you are one of the leading teachers, if not the master teacher in all Judea (John 3:1, 10). Yet even you were able to learn from our friend, Jesus. Truly he is...was...a teacher sent from the Holy One Himself, blessed be His name (John 1:2). When others condemned his teaching, even though they had never heard him first-hand, you, Nicodemus, took it upon yourself to be fair to Jesus by listening to him with your own ears (John 7:51), and what you heard from this young, new teacher stirred your own thinking. I remember the night that you met with him to discuss in more detail some of the ideas he professed. You returned from that conversation with a whole new concept of the ruach---the creative spirit of God (John 3:5-9). We shall miss the ways in which he stimulated our own spirits. Even more we shall miss the kind and gentle ways in which he treated us all.

You, Ruben, especially understand what I mean by this last remark, don't you? I shall never forget your impetuous visit to Jesus. You had studied with Nicodemus and all of the other great teachers in Judea. To each one you had asked the same question: "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17) and none of them ever said to you what Jesus said. The Sadducean teachers laughed at you and scolded you, telling you that there is no such thing as eternal life; the Pharisaic teachers, including Nicodemus told you to observe the commandments of God; but Jesus got straight to the

heart of the matter when he told you to sell your possessions and give to the poor (Mark 10:21). Your wealth, which you did not yet know how to handle, had consumed your total energy and all your time to the extent that it had taken priority over everything else in your life. Then you were so hurt by the abrupt bluntness of Jesus that you walked away from him. Yet he came after you, and was so loving (Mark 10:21) in the way he treated you. See how your life has changed and how much more contented you are since you turned to tzedakah. It was from Jesus that you learned "charity saves from death."<sup>10</sup>

And at Simon's house we all learned something about forgiveness that we shall never forget. There we were breaking bread together at the dinner table, all of us, when that prostitute invited herself into the house through the open door, and began to anoint the feet of Jesus with expensive ointment, all the while weeping and kissing his feet. We were shocked out of our senses by the appalling and brazen performance of this social and religious outcast. She had made him unclean and defiled us all by her presence, but Jesus taught us that she had been made clean by her love, and in forgiving her he cleansed her and all of us (Luke 7: 36-50). Today I heard his last words from the cross. They were also words of forgiveness. Jesus said with his last

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<sup>10</sup>Nathan Ausubel, A Treasury of Jewish Folklore (New York: Crown, 1967), p. 123.

breath, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do!" (Luke 23:34). Even in dying, as in life, Jesus has instructed us. Nevertheless, it will be difficult for me ever to forgive Pontius Pilate!

Tonight is supposed to be a time of rejoicing as we celebrate Passover and the Sabbath. As a people we celebrate our freedom from slavery in Egypt. Yet we say that our own joy is dampened by the drowning of our Egyptian enemies in the Sea of Reeds. So we spill wine from our cups to symbolize our lessened joy. Tonight, however, the wine that remains in our cups will be diluted and made bitter by our tears of grief.

Come, let us go now to Mary. I know not what comfort we may bring to her on this black night of death, but she will be expecting us.

### Epilogue

We know nothing more of Joseph of Arimathea than what is disclosed in the Gospels. An early Christian legend claims that Joseph kept Mary, the mother of Jesus, in his own "house until her assumption into the heavens."<sup>11</sup> The passage itself, however, reveals a theology later than the first century.

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<sup>11</sup>John, "The Passing of Mary," The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), VIII:594.



Another legend developed that Joseph came to England with the Holy Grail and built the first church in England at Glastonbury, but this was first recorded c. 1130 C.E.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond the legendary material about Joseph of Arimathea, however, it is instructive to see that Joseph, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, was a friend of Jesus. This fact does much to disarm the early Christian claim in the Gospels that the Pharisees and the Sanhedrin plotted the death of Jesus.

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<sup>12</sup>Lionel Smithett Lewis, St. Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury (London: Mowbray, 1937).

## Chapter 4

## MY NAME IS PONTIUS PILATE

Prologue

There are few sources of information about Pontius Pilate apart from the New Testament. He is mentioned briefly by the Roman historian, Tacitus (c. 115 C.E.), and by the Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria (c. 25-30 C.E.). Flavius Josephus, the Jewish historian of the first century C.E., describes succinctly three incidents during Pilate's prefecture in Judea.<sup>1</sup>

In the New Testament there are passing references to Pilate in I Timothy 6:13, and in Acts 3:13, 4:27, and 13:28, but the major blocks of material concerning Pilate appear in the four Gospels.<sup>2</sup> The sources of the Gospel writers are unknown, but we might ask in regard to the material about Pilate and the trial of Jesus, who gave the Gospel writers their information? Who were the Christian eye-witnesses to the trial? "On the evangelists' own admission, none of the followers of Jesus witnessed the course of their Master's trial: '. . .and they all left him and fled.'"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Samuel Sandmel, "Pilate, Pontius," in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), K-Q, 811.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Paul Winter, "A Letter from Pontius Pilate," Novum Testamentum 7 (1964/65), 43.

The only other historical evidence of Pilate was unearthed in Caesarea, Israel in 1961, when archaeologists found an ancient stone with Pilate's name inscribed on it.<sup>4</sup> Pontius Pilate was Prefect of Judea from 26-36 C.E. We do not know what finally happened to Pilate. According to Josephus, Pilate was removed from office by Vitellius, Governor of Syria, and ordered to report to Emperor Tiberius in Rome. However, Tiberius died while Pilate was en route to Rome.<sup>5</sup> Since Caligula succeeded Tiberius as Emperor of Rome, it may be supposed that Pilate was required to report to Caligula. The setting for the following sermon is in Rome during the year 37 C.E.

#### Scripture Lesson

And as soon as it was morning the chief priests, with the elders and scribes, and the whole council held a consultation; and they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him to Pilate. And Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And he answered him, "You have said so." And the chief priests accused him of many things. And Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you." But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate wondered. Now at the feast he used to release for them one prisoner whom they asked. And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas. And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he was wont to do for them. And he answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests

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<sup>4</sup>Jack Finegan, The Archeology of the New Testament (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 80.

<sup>5</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.88-89.

had delivered him up. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead. And Pilate again said to them, "Then what shall I do with the man whom you call the King of the Jews?" And they cried out again, "Crucify him." And Pilate said to them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him." So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas; and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified (Mark 15:1-15).

### Sermon

My name is Pontius Pilate. Right now the future is very uncertain. Within the hour I shall be called into the presence of his divine majesty, Emperor Gaius Julius Caesar Germanicus of Rome---better known as Caligula---for an audience to defend my conduct as Prefect of the minor province of Judea. Six months ago I was disgraced by Vitellius, the Roman Governor of Syria, when he relieved me from my post as Prefect of Judea, and ordered me to report directly to Emperor Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus to explain in person the circumstances surrounding the deaths of several prominent Samaritans, who were killed by my soldiers last year at Mount Gerizim.<sup>6</sup> It has taken nearly half of a year for me to travel by land from Judea to Rome, because the sea routes were not safe during this time of year, and as fate would have it, Tiberius died only a few weeks before my arrival in Rome. I would have preferred to face Tiberius, because

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<sup>6</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.85-89.

although he was stern, I believe that he would have found my actions justifiable. As it is now, however, I have no way of predicting how Caligula, Tiberius' nephew and successor, will receive me. I have heard several discreet reports since my arrival in Rome that Caligula is a cruel madman.

Eleven years ago I was appointed by Tiberius as Prefect of Judea. I should have been appointed Governor of Syria instead. My experience with the Praetorian Guard as personal aide to Tiberius, my reputation as a fearless soldier, and my distinction as a cunning advisor qualified me eminently above all others. Aelius Sejanus, Prefect of the Praetorian Guard and my immediate superior, however, was jealous of me, and he was the real power behind the throne.<sup>7</sup> It was he who blocked my meritorious promotion by Tiberius to Senatorial rank from Equestrian rank, and it was he who persuaded Tiberius that Vitellius should be appointed Governor of Syria in my place. The only thing that Sejanus and I ever had in common was our mutual hatred of the Jews.<sup>8</sup>

My task as military commander of Judea was to maintain the fragile peace between Judea and Rome, and my job as civil administrator for the Empire was to collect taxes and

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<sup>7</sup>Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History ii.v.7; Josephus, Ant.xviii.181.

<sup>8</sup>Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History ii.v.7; Philo, Legation to Caius 160.

tribute for Tiberius.<sup>9</sup> With the help of the Jewish tax-collectors, whose authority among the Jews was supported by the presence of my soldiers, there was no difficulty in collecting enough taxes with a few bronze coins left over for the tax-collectors, and a number of silver shekels to line my own purse. The difficult part of my assignment was to keep the peace in the midst of the constant murmuring of seditious voices priming the peasants to revolt against Caesar's beneficent rule.

My headquarters in Judea were in that gorgeous port city of Caesarea on the edge of the Great Sea. It is a beautiful and modern seaport built just fifty years ago by Herod the Great, and named by him in honor of Emperor Caesar Augustus. During my first year as Prefect, it was politically expedient for me also to honor Emperor Tiberius, so I caused a temple to be erected at Caesarea, and on the cornerstone I had the master stonemason chisel the following inscription: "Pontius Pilate the Prefect of Judea has dedicated to the people of Caesarea a temple in honor of Tiberius."<sup>10</sup> It was a stroke of genius on my part to link my name with that of the Emperor Tiberius, because it gave me added status with the people, and with my name carved in stone the world cannot

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<sup>9</sup>H. H. Ben-Sasson (ed.) A History of the Jewish People (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 248.

<sup>10</sup>Finegan, p. 80.

soon forget me.

My soldiers were housed in fine, stone barracks. Most of them had enlisted from among the gentiles of the region, and were formed into auxiliary cohorts. I would have preferred to have a regular Roman Legion at my command, but the regular army is assigned to the Governor of Syria.<sup>11</sup> My auxiliary cohorts are not as disciplined and reliable as the legionaries, but I have my way with them.

I remained in Caesarea with its golden sand dunes, its sheltered beach, and its shallow, blue-green waters as much as I possibly could. I prefer this coastal resort to the crowded and cacophonous city of Jerusalem. Yet duty required me to go up to Jerusalem at its most congested and noisiest times, during religious festivals, when the population was swelled with pilgrims coming to the Temple. Every year at Passover and the Day of Atonement I had to take an extra contingent of soldiers to strengthen the permanent garrison at the Antonia Fortress next to the Temple.<sup>12</sup> A strong show of force always discourages those who plan to create disturbances against Rome.

Although the duty in Judea was beneath my dignity, it was often pleasant enough---especially in Caesarea where I could be entertained in the amphitheater and the stadium.

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<sup>11</sup>Ben-Sasson, p. 248.

<sup>12</sup>Edward Lohse, The New Testament Environment (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976), p. 42.

I still don't understand how I lost my command. Things were going so well. After ten years I was well in control of the province, and yet circumstances seemed to go against me. I used only the force necessary to preserve order and to remind the people from time to time of who was in command and whose subjects they were.

The peasants of Judea by comparison to our sophisticated Roman culture are undisciplined dogs and uncivilized pigs. They have a most peculiar religion in which they claim a god they cannot even see. At least we Romans know what one of our gods, the Emperor, looks like, and we can negotiate with him along with our other gods and goddesses, but the Jews believe that their god gave them unnegotiable laws. Among other things they practice a painful and barbaric ritual called circumcision; they are prohibited from promiscuous sexual relationships; they have a law which forbids killing; they refuse to work on their holy days; and they constantly wash to purify themselves.

One of their laws prohibits them from making graven images or statues. I learned how important this law was to the Jews during my first year in Judea. I had sent a contingent of soldiers from Caesarea to Jerusalem, and my troops carried tall standards at the head of their columns. It is common practice for these standards to bear the image of our Emperor. I was aware that these medallions were against local law, and I had been warned that they might



meet with opposition, so I sent my troops into Jerusalem in the dark of night. When dawn came and the Jews saw these standards posted near the Temple on the steps of the Antonia Fortress, they went wild with anger. Gathering numbers as they came across the countryside they rushed to Caesarea, and begged me to have the images of our Emperor-god removed from atop our standards, but I refused the superstitious dogs.

Then the most remarkable thing happened. These Jews---several hundred of them---fell prone in the courtyard of my headquarters, and remained motionless for five days and five nights. Enough was enough, so I summoned the mob to the great stadium on the pretext that I was finally going to give-in to them. However, when they were all gathered, I had my soldiers, wearing full battle armor, surround them, three men deep. The Jews were dumbfounded. Then I stood before them and declared, "If you do not accept the images of Caesar on our standards, I will have my soldiers cut you to pieces." That announcement was a prearranged signal for my soldiers to draw their swords. I could barely believe what happened next. The Jews called my bluff. All of them fell to the ground and bared their necks to my soldiers' swords, shouting that they would rather be killed than to transgress the law of their god. I must say that I was amazed at their courage and religious fervor, so I released them, and ordered

the standards to be returned to Caesarea from Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup> It angered me, however, to keep the peace under the terms of the Jews, and I never forgot or forgave the way in which they made a fool of me in front of my troops, so I determined to make life more miserable for them from that moment on.

The following year, for example, I took several gilded shields on which the Emperor's name was inscribed, and had them displayed in Herod the Great's old palace in Jerusalem. These shields had been dedicated to the service of the Emperor, and once again the Jews were incensed. They were able to gain the favorable attention of four of Herod's sons, who then complained directly to the Emperor. He in turn ordered me to remove the shields.<sup>14</sup> King Herod's son, Herod Antipas, who rules over the area of Galilee, was the one who most influenced the Emperor, and since that time I have carried a burning grudge against Herod Antipas.

On another occasion I determined to use the Temple treasury to pay for a fifty mile long aqueduct to carry water into the city of Jerusalem. I got the idea from other aqueducts built by Herod the Great. It would have been especially beneficial at the Temple to have an aqueduct supply fresh water for cleaning-up after the incessant slaughtering of sacrificial animals, but when the Jews found out that I had

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<sup>13</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.55-59;B.J.ii.169-174.

<sup>14</sup>Philo, Legation to Caius 299-305.

used their Temple treasury to finance the construction, they were roused to a fury, and when I hurried to Jerusalem, they surrounded my podium and shouted insults at me. I had been informed that the crowd might try to turn against me, so I had taken the precaution to have my soldiers mix with the crowd. They wore civilian clothing over their armor, and carried clubs under their tunics. When the Jews shouted at me and insulted me, I simply gave the signal, and my soldiers beat the crowd with their cudgels, killing many of them, and many others were trampled to death by the panicked crowds as they dispersed.<sup>15</sup>

There were other times when I was charged by the people with briberies, robberies, outrages, injuries, executions without trial, and ceaseless cruelty,<sup>16</sup> but they were animals who deserved what they got. Actually, I'm rather proud of my tough reputation. The people had to be shown that I had authority and was in absolute control. Besides, life is somewhat dull in these outlying provinces, and we had to create our own excitement once in a while. Yet I had to be cautious. I didn't want too many damaging reports to reach the Emperor's ears.

There is one minor incident which may have had greater consequences than I first thought it would. It

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<sup>15</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.60-62;B.J.ii.175-177.

<sup>16</sup>Philo, Legation to Caius 302.

had to do with an itinerant preacher named Jesus, who came from Nazareth in the region of Galilee. My officers had brought me intelligence reports on this man, as they did routinely about any indigenous leaders who had the hearing of a sizeable group of followers. Jesus had growing numbers of people who came to listen to him, and who followed him around the countryside. His reputation was growing. I believe that his following was at first mostly religious fanatics, but religion is not my cup to drink, so I paid little attention in the beginning. After all, what do I care about religion. I am a soldier, and the Emperor is my god. They told me that this Jesus claimed to be the truth, the way, and the life (John 14:6), but what is truth (John 18:38)? What way is there besides the way of power? And what life is there besides the two-score-and-ten allotted to us by the Fates. No, religion was not my quarrel with this preacher. My quarrel with him was over his politics. Increasing numbers of people were beginning to look upon Jesus as their leader. My intelligence officers had reported that Jesus had come riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, and that he claimed to be some kind of king. There were further reports that the bloody band of revolutionaries called the Zealots were talking about asking Jesus to use his influence with the people to raise a rebellion against Rome. I could not allow anyone to gain that kind of popular support and power, which might later be used to contest Rome's

sovereignty, so I decided to have this Jesus of Nazareth arrested on charges of stirring-up the people against Rome. Late one night in the spring, during the Jewish Passover, I sent a military tribune with a cohort of soldiers to arrest Jesus (John 18:3, 12). They were able to accomplish the task easily under the cover of darkness, and with a minimum of resistance from his small band of disciples, who were his constant companions.

In the meantime I had solicited help from Caiaphas, the High Priest of the Jews, as I often did in such cases. He could not refuse, because he depended on me for his appointment as High Priest.<sup>17</sup> He gave me added information that Jesus had recently caused some disturbance among the money-changers at the Temple. This confirmed my opinion that the Nazarene was a trouble-maker. So I arranged for Jesus, after his arrest, to be turned over to Caiaphas and his Temple officers for questioning. It had long been my belief that Jewish prisoners are more willing to answer questions from their own people than from Roman inquisitors who are less familiar with language and customs of the Jews.

The next morning I sent my tribune to the High Priest's quarters to claim the prisoner. The tribune returned with Jesus and a few of his inquisitors. Then I

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<sup>17</sup>F. F. Bruce, Israel and the Nations (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), p. 200.

asked, "What are the charges against this prisoner?" They responded, "We found this man perverting our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ a king." And I asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He replied, "You have said so" (Luke 23:2-3).

Then the High Priest's spokesman said, "He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place." The High Priest was always worried about riots and potential armed conflict with Rome, because he knew that if that happened he would lose his own status and wealth. At the spokesman's mention of Galilee, however, I remembered suddenly that Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee, was in Jerusalem for the Passover. Antipas and I had despised each other since the time he and his brothers reported me to the Emperor. I decided to send Jesus to Antipas with the hope that I might both embarrass and frighten him by sending him one of his own subjects from Galilee (Luke 23:6-7), who had been caught plotting insurrection. I was certain that Antipas would not want to be subjected to the wrath of Rome for his failure to keep his own subjects under control.

While Jesus was seeing Antipas, my wife sent me a cryptic message. She wrote: "Have nothing to do with that man, for I have suffered much over him today in a dream"

(Matthew 27:19). There was no time to question my wife about her strange dream, because by this time Jesus had been returned to me by Antipas. Antipas claimed that he had no jurisdiction over Jesus while he was in Jerusalem, but undoubtedly he got my message that he was to keep his unruly subjects under better control, or else.

By this time a group of observers had gathered as usual during the daily sentencing of prisoners. On this particular day the group was a little larger than usual, and I suspected that their real interest was in another group of prisoners---Barabbas and two of his men, who were Zealots arrested the day before. The crowd was probably composed of fellow Zealots, but I could not prove it without a test, so I said to them, "Jesus has done nothing deserving death; I will therefore chastise him and release him" (Luke 23:16). Then to test the sympathies of the observers, I told them that, as a gesture of goodwill to the Jewish people at the time of Passover, I would release to them one prisoner of their choice. They shouted for Barabbas. Then I knew that he was one of them. At that point the Nazarene finally found his voice, and he asked me to release Barabbas. The crowd continued to call for Barabbas. These nationalistic troublemakers were desperate to have their compatriot released. Jesus meant nothing to them. Well, he meant nothing to me either. Besides that, through my cleverness I had identified

more of the Zealots whom I would soon have followed back to their camp. So I released Barabbas and ordered Jesus to be scourged and crucified. I also had the precise charge written on a board and nailed to the crossbeam: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (John 19:19).

All of that took place seven years ago. My work in Judea had been fairly routine since that time, until a year ago, when the incident occurred which brought about my downfall. A large crowd of Samaritans had gathered at Mount Gerizim. A man claiming to be their Messiah had promised to show them some ancient, sacred relics from the time of Moses, which he claimed had been buried for over 1,200 years. The crowd, however, was armed, and I feared a revolt, so I sent a detachment of cavalry and infantry, which quickly dispersed the crowd and killed a number of the Samaritans. I ordered the execution of their false messiah along with some of their leaders, and I imprisoned still others. The Samaritans reported these actions to Vitellius, the military Governor of Syria, who knew that I coveted his post. The Samaritans told him that while they were armed, their intent was peaceful. This deceitful witness against me was the cause of my being relieved and deported to Rome by Vitellius.<sup>18</sup>

Listen! I hear the Tribune coming for me with his

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<sup>18</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.85-89.



guards. In a moment I shall have to explain all of this to Emperor Caligula. Even though it was the incident last year with the Samaritans that brought my downfall, I have the strangest feeling from time to time that I should have listened to my wife's warning about her dream. Mind you, I'm not superstitious, but there was something about the voice of Jesus, and a look in his eyes which still haunts me!

### Epilogue

Pontius Pilate was a thoroughly cruel man. In Rome Pilate was trained by Sejanus, the commander of the Praetorian Guard. Sejanus was openly anti-Jewish, and Pilate was undoubtedly influenced by Sejanus.<sup>19</sup> Philo, a contemporary of Pilate, wrote of Pilate as one who constantly ordered "executions without trial."<sup>20</sup> It is ludicrous to think, therefore, that Pilate gave second thought to the death sentence which he meted out to Jesus. Pilate had caused the deaths of so many that he would not be moved by the death of one more. It is also preposterous to think that Pilate might be afraid of incurring Jewish displeasure at his actions. Pilate was not afraid of any riot. He had suppressed many in

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<sup>19</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.181; Philo, Legation to Caius 160.

<sup>20</sup>Philo, Legation to Caius 302.

his career, and he had handled mobs with swift and cruel violence.<sup>21</sup> More likely the proceedings against Jesus were also swift and cruel: Pilate had Jesus arrested on charges of sedition; Pilate passed sentence; and Jesus was scourged, mocked, and crucified by Pilate's order.

During the time that the Gospels were written, the Christian Church was fighting for its survival within a hostile Roman Empire. The authors of the Gospels, therefore, tried to convince Rome that the Christians were no threat to Rome. According to the Gospels, even Pontius Pilate, the Roman Prefect, found Jesus innocent, as did the Roman Centurion at the crucifixion (Luke 23:4, 20, 22, 47). The Pilate we see in the Gospels, however, is not the real Pilate.

The stern Pilate grows more mellow from Gospel to Gospel. In Mark he is greatly astonished and offers to release Jesus in whom he can find no guilt. In Matthew he renounces responsibility for the execution which he nevertheless orders. In Luke he repeats three times his assertion of Jesus' innocence, yet gives in to the will of the Jews. In John he hands Jesus over for execution to the Jews themselves. Post-canonical traditions stress even more Pilate's benevolent disposition. The stature of Pilate grows and increases in favour with God and men. The more removed from history, the more sympathetic a character he becomes.<sup>22</sup>

As time went on the credal formulation of the early Christian Church caused Pilate to appear less guilty. Whereas the

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<sup>21</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.55-62,85-89; B.J.ii.169-177.

<sup>22</sup>Paul Winter, On the Trial of Jesus (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974), p. 88.

Roman historian, Tacitus, had stated that Christ was put to death by Pilate,<sup>23</sup> Justin Martyr wrote that the Son of God was crucified under Pilate by the Jews.<sup>24</sup> The Apostles' Creed adopted that intent and that language.<sup>25</sup> By the third century the Church Father, Tertullian, was convinced that Pilate was already in his own conscience a Christian.<sup>26</sup> Eventually, Pilate and his wife both became saints in the Ethiopian Christian Church.<sup>27</sup> Finally, by the time of Emperor Constantine it was well established that Pilate had been exonerated of any guilt, and the Jews had been blamed. After Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 312 C.E., making Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, it was no longer necessary for the Christian Church to depict Pilate as a friend of Jesus in order to press the point that the Christian Church was friendly and not dangerous to Rome. However, the damage was already done. While Pilate was no longer exonerated, the Jews were still tragically held to blame.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Tactitus, Annals xv.xliv.

<sup>24</sup>Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho 85.

<sup>25</sup>Conrad Henry Moehlman, The Christian-Jewish Tragedy (Rochester: Hart, 1933), pp. 64-65.

<sup>26</sup>Tertullian, Apologeticus xxi.24.

<sup>27</sup>Moehlman, p. 84.

<sup>28</sup>Winter, On the Trial of Jesus, pp. 88-89.

## Chapter 5

## MY NAME IS HEROD ANTIPAS

Prologue

Our primary sources of information about Herod Antipas are the Synoptic Gospels and the writings of Josephus. The appearance of Jesus, after his arrest, before Herod Antipas is recorded only in the Gospel according to Luke (Luke 23:6-16), and, therefore, is unique. Since there is no corresponding passage in Matthew, Mark, or John, many scholars believe that this passage is legendary rather than historical.<sup>1</sup> However, because the lack of historicity cannot be proved, and because the passage exists, it must be treated as historical.

We do not know for certain when Herod Antipas was born, but we estimate 20 B.C.E.<sup>2</sup> He became tetrarch of Galilee and Perea in 4 B.C.E. and retained that position until 39 C.E., when he was deposed.

The setting for the sermon is in Tiberias in the year 39 C.E.

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<sup>1</sup>S. Sandmel, "Herod (Family)," in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), E-J, 593.

<sup>2</sup>Harold W. Hoehner, Herod Antipas (Cambridge: University Press, 1972), pp. 11-12.

Scripture Lesson

When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him. So he questioned him at some length; but he made no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then, arraying him in gorgeous apparel, he sent him back to Pilate. And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other.

Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers of the people, and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him; neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Behold, nothing deserving death has been done by him; I will therefore chastise him and release him." (Luke 23:6-16)

Sermon

My name is Antipas---Herod Antipas. Undoubtedly you remember my father's name better than mine. He was known simply as Herod the Great. Only there was nothing simple about him. He was the most complex man I have ever known. With ten wives and fourteen children<sup>3</sup> my father was a slave to all the intrigues generated by the passions of family jealousy and power-struggle, and he was as hatefully

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<sup>3</sup>Josephus, B.J.i.562

cold-blooded and cruel in his dealings with us as he was with those outside the family bonds.

Father was called "Great" because he was the eldest of his father's sons,<sup>4</sup> but he was also Great because he endured. He reigned as king for thirty-four years (37-4 B.C.E.),<sup>5</sup> during which time he built the magnificent Temple in Jerusalem<sup>6</sup> with Fortress Antonia adjacent to it<sup>7</sup> and commanding the Temple Mount; he erected marvelous palaces and fortresses at Jerusalem,<sup>8</sup> Jericho,<sup>9</sup> Masada,<sup>10</sup> and Herodium;<sup>11</sup> and he constructed that wonderful seaport, Caesarea,<sup>12</sup> which he named in honor of the Emperor, Caesar Augustus. Those are the things for which most people remember Herod the Great.

I remember my father for entirely different reasons. If he was a master in the construction of stone and mortar, he also excelled in the destruction of flesh and blood.

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<sup>4</sup>Hoehner, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup>Josephus, B.J.i.665.

<sup>6</sup>Josephus, B.J.i.401.

<sup>7</sup>Josephus, B.J.i.401-402.

<sup>8</sup>Josephus, B.J.,i.402.

<sup>9</sup>Josephus, B.J.i.417.

<sup>10</sup>Josephus, B.J.vii.285-303.

<sup>11</sup>Josephus, B.J.i.419.

<sup>12</sup>Josephus, B.J.i.408-415.

Shortly before he died, he was responsible for the slaughter of hundreds of innocent babies in the region of Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16). During fits of rage he had his favorite wife, Mariamme, murdered,<sup>13</sup> as well as three of my brothers ---Alexander, Aristobulus,<sup>14</sup> and Antipater.<sup>15</sup> I remember when I first heard of the deaths of Alexander and Aristobulus. I was a boy of thirteen at the time, and I was studying in Rome.<sup>16</sup> I remember how safe and secure it was---how enjoyable to study Plato and Aristotle---to learn about the gods and goddesses. My teacher, Pollio was a devoted friend of my father.<sup>17</sup> Earlier Pollio had taught my brothers, Alexander and Aristobulus. Now he was teaching me and my brothers, Archelaus and Philip. We were in the middle of a Greek lesson with Pollio, when a messenger suddenly burst into the room, and excitedly whispered in Pollio's ear. His countenance fell as he gasped, and his face palled. Immediately he dismissed us, but the news could not be kept from us. It was all over Rome. Herod the Great had ordered soldiers to strangle his sons, Alexander and Aristobulus.<sup>18</sup> Even Emperor

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<sup>13</sup>Josephus, B.J.i.443-444.

<sup>14</sup>Josephus, B.J.i.551.

<sup>15</sup>Josephus, B.J.i.664.

<sup>16</sup>Josephus, Ant.xvii.20.

<sup>17</sup>Josephus, Ant.xv.342-343.

<sup>18</sup>Josephus, B.J.i.552.

Caesar Augustus was saddened by the news, which prompted him to use a Greek pun, saying that it would be safer to be a hus than a huios of Herod the Great---better to be a pig than a son of Herod.<sup>19</sup> After that, I began to have nightmares. These are my memories of Herod the Great.

My father was hated universally. He was neither a Jew nor a Judean. He came from Idumea where conversion to Judaism had been forced upon the Idumeans. My mother, Malthace, was a Samaritan.<sup>20</sup> With a foreign father and an unclean mother, you understand what that made me in the eyes of the Jews! Father had married a Jewish princess early in his reign.<sup>21</sup> He married her in order to gain favor with the Jews, but it didn't work. So father was Idumean by descent, a pretended Jew by marriage, Roman by alliance, Greek by culture, and despised by all. That's the inheritance I received from Herod the Great.

Before father died, he named me in his will to succeed him to the throne, but he changed his will on his death bed, naming Archelaus as king, and dividing the kingdom between Archelaus, Philip, and me.<sup>22</sup> However, father's will had to

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<sup>19</sup>Macrobius, The Saturnalia, II,4,11 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 171.

<sup>20</sup>Josephus, B.J.i.562.

<sup>21</sup>Josephus, B.J.i.241.

<sup>22</sup>Josephus, Ant.xvii.188.



be ratified by the Emperor before the appointments became effective.<sup>23</sup> Archelaus sailed promptly for Rome with our mother, Malthace, to make his claim as king. I sailed soon thereafter for Rome in order to make my claim under the earlier will as king. Mother soon joined me in supporting my claim.<sup>24</sup> A large delegation of Jews also arrived in Rome at the same time, hoping to persuade Caesar that Rome could do a better job of ruling the country than the Herod brothers.<sup>25</sup> As you can plainly see, there was mutual hate between the Jews and the Herods. In the end, though, we all lost our cases. The Emperor refused to hear my claim under father's earlier will; he refused to make Archelaus a king; and he refused the request of the Jews for a Roman governor or prefect. Thus, the Emperor made Archelaus Ethnarch of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea; and gave lower rank of Tetrarch to me and Philip. Philip received the northeastern territory, including Gaulanitis, and I received the territories of Galilee and Perea.<sup>26</sup> At that time I promised myself that I would take revenge some day against Archelaus. Ten years later I joined with a delegation of Jews and Samaritans requesting Caesar to

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<sup>23</sup>Josephus, B.J.i.669.

<sup>24</sup>Josephus, B.J.ii.21.

<sup>25</sup>Josephus, B.J.ii.80; cf. Luke 19:12-14.

<sup>26</sup>Josephus, B.J.ii.94-95; Ant.xvii.318.

remove Archelaus because of the cruel treatment of his subjects.<sup>27</sup> Archelaus was deposed and exiled to Vienna, a city in Gaul.<sup>28</sup> I was certain that Caesar would bestow Archelaus' territories on me, but he appointed a Roman prefect instead.<sup>29</sup> I was stuck with Galilee.

Galilee was dull by comparison to Judea. I missed Jerusalem and the city life, so I built my own cities: Sepphoris near Nazareth; Livias in Perea---named in honor of Livia, the wife of Caesar Augustus; and Tiberias---named in honor of the Emperor Tiberius himself. I was especially proud of Tiberias, and it became my capital city.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, I visited that glorious city of Jerusalem whenever I could. So the years passed.

About thirty years after I became Tetrarch of Galilee, Emperor Tiberius appointed a man named Pontius Pilate as the Prefect of Judea. He was incompetent for the post. He had no idea how to manipulate the people into doing what he wanted done. Rather, he used brute force to accomplish his goals, and the people were always on the verge of rebellion. On one occasion Pilate exercised extremely poor judgment in

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<sup>27</sup>Strabo, The Geography of Strabo 16.2.46; Dio Cassius, Dio's Roman History iv.27.6; Hoehner, p. 105.

<sup>28</sup>Josephus, Ant.xvii.342-344.

<sup>29</sup>Josephus, B.J.ii.118.

<sup>30</sup>Hoehner, pp. 84-94.

hanging several gilded shields inscribed with the name of the Emperor at my father's old palace in Jerusalem. The Jews were furious that their customs had been so blatantly disregarded by the Emperor's emissary. The Zealots could turn such an event into a revolution. We did not need that blood on our hands, so I reported Pilate directly to the Emperor, who severely reprimanded Pilate, and ordered him to remove the offensive shields to Caesarea.<sup>31</sup> Pontius Pilate never forgave me for that (Luke 23:12), and I never forgot his bungling stupidity. Pilate and I were enemies from that time on. It was shortly after that when I encountered a man named John the Baptist. He was an itinerant preacher and prophet---one of those prophets of doom who is always shouting "Repent!" (Matthew 3:2). I thought that John's preaching of the kingdom of heaven might be a euphemism for a Zealot revolution, and he was gaining such a strong gathering of followers that I feared sedition.<sup>32</sup> While I was trying to decide what to do with John, he attacked me personally, because he did not approve of my recent marriage to Herodias. I had divorced a Nabatean princess, the daughter of Aretas, King of Petra, in order to marry Herodias.<sup>33</sup> Herodias was an extremely desirable woman. She was married to my half-brother, Herod

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<sup>31</sup>Philo, Legation to Caius 299-305.

<sup>32</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.118.

<sup>33</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.109-112.

Philip,<sup>34</sup> and I fell in love with her while visiting them. She was also our niece---the daughter of our older, murdered brother, Aristobulus. Herod Philip and Herodias had a daughter, Salome, who was even more beautiful than her mother. Herodias and Salome joined me in Tiberias, and when John the Baptist heard about it, he preached, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife" (Mark 6:18). Herodias felt defamed, and she wanted to kill John (Mark 6:19), but I would not, because I felt that he was a good and holy man, despite the seditious aspects of his following.<sup>35</sup> I did have him arrested and imprisoned in hopes of quieting his voice.

A few days later, at my birthday party, Salome, the daughter of Herodias, danced for me and my guests. Seldom have I seen such grace and beauty or such sensual charm. I was immensely pleased, and slightly drunk, so I told Salome that she could have anything she wanted---even half of my kingdom. I was not prepared for her request however. Salome asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. I could not lose face in front of my guests, who were among the leading men of Galilee, so I ordered the execution (Mark 6:17-29 and parallels). It was the next day, and I was sober when the

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<sup>34</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.136.

<sup>35</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.117.

head of John the Baptist was delivered, and I have never since been able to rid my mind of the image of that bloody, bearded, sad-eyed man. The nightmares which I had suffered since my boyhood began to increase, and I cannot begin to count the times I have dreamed of that bodiless head hovering over me, shouting, "Repent, Antipas!" It is as if John has returned from the dead to haunt me these nine years (Mark 6:14-16 and parallels).

Another itinerent preacher and prophet showed up in Galilee immediately after John the Baptist's death. He preached the same message: "Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand!" (Matthew 4:17). At first I thought that John the Baptist had returned from the dead in a different body in order to torment me (Mark 6:14-16 and parallels). I discovered that this preacher's name was Jesus of Nazareth, and I wanted to kill him (Luke 13:31), also, so that the nightmares might go away, but it was only an idle threat, because I could not stand the thought of his death causing me more nightmares, and I was worried that the people might turn against me as they almost had when John the Baptist was killed. Just as John had attacked me personally, I received reports that Jesus of Nazareth also had publicly attacked me, calling me a "fox" (Luke 13:32). Who did he think he was---the lion of Judah? I was both angered that he should call me by a despicable name, and awed at his bravado. I wanted to meet this man, and yet, somehow, I was afraid of him.

I met Jesus in an unexpected way. Pontius Pilate had him in custody for some reason. I was visiting in Jerusalem, because I enjoy the holiday festivities there, but when Pilate heard that I was in Jerusalem, and knowing that Jesus was one of my subjects in Galilee, he sent Jesus to me. I was annoyed with Pilate, because Pilate was passing his own problem on to me. Pilate had caused enough major confrontations with the Jews during his career, including the one for which I had reported him to the Emperor. Pilate saw that he might have a tiger by the tail, so he hoped that I would grab it for him. I had no intentions of doing so. As it turned out, I was extremely glad to see this Jesus of Nazareth after all, because, after questioning him at length, it became very obvious that he was not John the Baptist returned from the dead after all. Rather, he seemed to be some kind of a miracle-worker. Yet he was either unwilling or unable to perform any miracles for me, so my guards and I simply scorned him. Pilate had sent word that he was calling himself "king of the Jews." That was something that not even I had achieved. No one had been king in these parts since my father. So we mockingly dressed Jesus in one of my old, fancy cloaks, and sent him back to Pilate. Then I promptly forgot about the incident.

It has been more than eight years since that time. Three years ago, my former father-in-law, King Aretas, still harboring a grudge over my divorce from his daughter, waged

war against me, and soundly defeated my armies. There are many who say that my defeat at the hands of Aretas was divine and just vengeance for my part in the death of John the Baptist.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps they are right. My nightmares still persist.

My brother, Philip, died five years ago. Recently his tetrarchy was given to Agrippa, who is my wife's brother. Emperor Caligula has just appointed him as king of that tetrarchy, and he becomes the first king since my father reigned. Herodias and I are both excited over the prospect that Caligula will surely offer me the same title. So now we are off to Rome to pay our respects to Caligula. Before I go, I must say that I have recently been thinking more and more about this Jesus of Nazareth, because his followers have multiplied here in Galilee, and there is a quality about their lives that is attractive. The more I hear about what Jesus preached, taught, and did, the more I think he was a good man. As I think back on that brief encounter with Jesus of Nazareth eight years ago, and try to put it in perspective with my forty-three years as Tetrarch of Galilee, I am left with an impression which I share with you now as I leave. I think of Jesus of Nazareth as a rather young and fearless prophet, who had many good things to say, and who seemed genuinely to love all people. Farewell! I sail for Rome!

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<sup>36</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.116.

### Epilogue

When Herod Antipas and Herodias arrived in Rome, they discovered that her brother, Agrippa, had already speedily delivered to Caligula some erroneous reports falsely accusing Antipas of treasonable acts. Caligula thereupon relieved Antipas of his tetrarchy and condemned Antipas to perpetual exile in Lyons, a city in Gaul. Herodias was offered a reprieve, but she refused and faithfully followed Antipas to Gaul where some time later they died.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.247-255; B.J.ii.183.



## Chapter 6

## MY NAME IS CAIAPHAS

Prologue

It is a curious fact that, while the four Gospel writers all know full-well the name of Pontius Pilate, who in their view is innocent of the death of Jesus of Nazareth, they neither know nor agree on the name of the high priest, whom they do blame for the death of Jesus. Mark does not give the name of the high priest in a single instance;<sup>1</sup> Luke calls the high priest (singular) "Annas" and "Caiaphas" (plural) in Luke 3:2; Matthew names the high priest as Caiaphas (Matthew 26:57); and John, in very confusing terms, talks about the high priest, Annas, interrogating Jesus before he is led to the high priest, Caiaphas (John 18:13, 19, 24). If the Evangelists do not even know or agree upon whom the high priest is, how can they presume to know what he says or does? As time went on and the tradition was embellished, more emphasis was placed on the guilt of the priests and less on the guilt of Pilate. In its original form, however, without the name of the high priest as part of the tradition, it would seem that the high priest played a lesser

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<sup>1</sup>Paul Winter, On the Trial of Jesus (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974), p. 44.

role than the Evangelists would have us believe.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, "since the trial scenes in the gospels are scarcely accurate history, the details are scarcely apt to be accurate."<sup>3</sup>

In the sermon which follows, the Gospel according to Mark has been chosen for Caiaphas to discuss for the following reasons:

(1) Mark, the first of the Gospels to be written, was transcribed c. 64-70 C.E. By that time Caiaphas would have been about 79-85 years of age. It is less likely that he would have lived to read any of the other Gospels;

(2) Matthew and Luke are generally considered to be dependent upon Mark, and they tend to embellish what Mark has already said;

(3) John contains no mention of a trial or hearing in the presence of the Sanhedrin.

The setting for the following sermon is in Jerusalem in the year 65 C.E.

#### Scripture Lesson

So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council, and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on thus, every one

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>3</sup>Samuel Sandmel, "Caiaphas," in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), A-D, 482.

will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all; you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish" (John 11:47-50).

### Sermon

My name is Caiaphas---Joseph Caiaphas. A most amazing document has recently been delivered to me. It is entitled simply: Kata Markon---"According to Mark." It opens with these words: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). For this reason I understand that the Christians are calling it the Gospel---the Good News. I have never before seen anything like this document,<sup>4</sup> and the only other gospel I have ever heard was announced as some benefit for the empire by the "gracious authority of Caesar, the divinely appointed ruler of Rome," I believe they used to say.<sup>5</sup> I am disturbed by the contents of this document, because it proclaims Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, and it reports certain details about his arrest, trial and crucifixion at the hands of Pontius Pilate, which implicate me. It has been a long time ago---perhaps three or four decades since these

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<sup>4</sup>Howard Clark Kee, Jesus in History (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), p. 122. Mark "created a new genre of literature."

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

events took place---and my memory is not what it used to be now that I am entering my ninth decade of life,<sup>6</sup> but I was Ha-Kohen Ha-Gadol---the High Priest---at that time, and I recall things quite differently than what is recorded Kata Markon.

I was appointed High Priest by the Roman Prefect, Valerius Gratus<sup>7</sup> when I was thirty-three years old, and I remained in that office for eighteen years until Vitellius, the governor of Syria, removed me from my appointment,<sup>8</sup> just as he had dismissed Pontius Pilate the year before.<sup>9</sup> I learned very early in my priestly career to do absolutely nothing which might disturb the Roman authorities, if I wished to keep my office. That lesson served me well, because no other High Priest in the past century has served in office as long as I.<sup>10</sup> My three predecessors lasted only one year each under Gratus, because they would not do as he instructed, and they were quickly dispatched for their lack of cooperation.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>In arriving at these times, it is presumed that: Caiaphas was born c. 15 B.C.E.; Caiaphas was appointed High Priest c. 18 C.E.; Jesus was crucified c. 30 C.E.; and that Mark was written c. 64-70 C.E.

<sup>7</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.35.

<sup>8</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.95.

<sup>9</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.89.

<sup>10</sup>Joachim Jeremias, Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), pp. 377-378.

<sup>11</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.33-35.

To state the case plainly: I took orders from Rome; I did not presume to give orders to or for Rome. All of my official pronouncements and planned actions having to do with my administrative and judicial duties were screened in advance by the Roman prefect. I did not act without his prior knowledge or approval.

In earlier years the High Priest was the most powerful individual in our nation next to our king,<sup>12</sup> and one attained the High Priesthood hereditarily and for life. However, with the advent of the Roman empire and her puppet king, Herod the Great, the High Priest became no more than a sacerdotal figurehead, because Herod appointed whom he chose as High Priest for as long as he alone willed.<sup>13</sup> Since the High Priesthood was no longer a matter of heredity, it became a matter of bribery.<sup>14</sup> He who could pay the most for the post usually won the appointment. I myself paid five-thousand silver denarii to Gratus for the privilege of being named High Priest of the Jews.<sup>15</sup>

I was not even able to wear my formal vestments---the robes and ornaments which were the symbols of my office as

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<sup>12</sup>Jeremias, p. 148.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 158-159.

<sup>14</sup>F. F. Bruce, New Testament History (New York: Doubleday, 1971), p. 63.

<sup>15</sup>Jeremias, p. 98.

High Priest, without the approval of the prefect. Since the time of Herod the Great, all the vestments were locked under official seals in a stone chamber in the Roman Fortress Antonia.<sup>16</sup> Herod thought by this method to prevent the High Priest from leading the people to insurrection against Rome.<sup>17</sup> This practice was continued until after I was relieved as High Priest.<sup>18</sup> The vestments were released to the High Priest only for the three major festivals plus the Day of Atonement,<sup>19</sup> when I as the High Priest was the only human being on earth with the right to enter the Holy of Holies on behalf of the whole community of Jews. The vestments had to be returned to the Roman military commander the next day.<sup>20</sup> As you can see, the Prefect kept tight reins on me, and I was always wary lest I might displease him, because my office, my prestige, my power, my wealth, and my life itself depended on the good graces of the Roman Prefect.

It was worth the price, because there were many perquisites to the office of High Priest which brought me additional wealth, and allowed me to establish a fine home with a large courtyard and many servants in a very prestigious

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<sup>16</sup>Josephus, Ant.xv.403.

<sup>17</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.92.

<sup>18</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.95.

<sup>19</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.94.

<sup>20</sup>Josephus, Ant.xv.408.

area of Mount Zion (Mark 14:47, 53, 66). The sale of the skins and hides from all of the sacrificial animals accrued to my benefit;<sup>21</sup> the Temple treasury supported my needs; and I received a percentage from the Temple money changers and vendors. Also, needless to say, the 7,200 priests and the 9,600 Levites, who took turns serving in the Temple,<sup>22</sup> were happy to indulge me for the opportunity to have the choicest times and positions to serve.

For eighteen years I managed to maintain my status--- eight servile years under Valerius Gratus, and ten more submissive years under Pontius Pilate. Then, when Vitellius ordered Pilate to Rome, and appointed Marcellus as interim Prefect, I was ordered to step down to make room for a new High Priest, Jonathan, son of Ananus, who later was assassinated by the sicarii,<sup>23</sup> assassins of the Zealot persuasion. Better him than me.

But I digress---a failing of my advancing age. Where was I? Oh, yes---the facts According to Mark are not as I remember them. In fact, some of what he reports simply is not possible under our law. Mark reports that Jesus was arrested by a crowd from the chief priests and scribes and elders, armed with swords and clubs, and that one of the

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<sup>21</sup>Jeremias, p. 98.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>23</sup>Josephus, B.J.ii.256; Ant.xx.162-164.

followers of Jesus struck one of my servants with a sword (Mark 14:43-47). Mark must have obtained his information from a dreamer. The chief priests, my peers, would not degrade themselves by being part of such a menial action. They are the wealthy nobility, and remain apart from such common affairs. And when last did the scribes of the Pharisees make an alliance with us Sadducees? We have been at odds with each other since the time of Alexander Jannaeus.<sup>24</sup>

The fact is that the only ones armed with swords were the Roman soldiers. Not even the Temple police could carry swords. If one of my servants was struck by a sword that night, I have no recollection of it. Jesus was arrested by a Roman military tribune accompanied by part of his cohort of troops (John 18:3, 12). A few of my Temple police, customarily armed with clubs, accompanied the Romans, because it had been arranged that Jesus was to be turned over to me after his arrest. You see, Pilate had conferred with me about this Jesus of Nazareth. Pilate had his own intelligence officers who kept him informed of any activities among the populace which might lead to riots or other subversive activities. There is always one group or another speaking out against Rome. Numerous political revolutionaries have emerged, and Rome has always hastily dispatched them---usually by having them crucified. Pilate had received reports that Jesus had been hailed

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<sup>24</sup>Josephus, B.J.i.98. Alexander Jannaeus executed 800 Pharisees in order to place the Sadducees in power.



as some kind of hero by a throng of people as he rode into Jerusalem near the time of Passover. That was particularly dangerous for Rome, because the city was swelled with additional visitors who had come to Jerusalem for the holy days. Such a crowd could easily get out of hand. There were also reports that Jesus had been speaking to large crowds about loyalties to another kingdom. Pilate did not like what he heard. He asked me what I knew about this itinerant Jew named Jesus of Nazareth. All I knew was that Jesus had caused some disturbance with the money changers at the Temple, but it happened so quickly, no one seemed to know what it was all about. That additional information made Jesus seem like a trouble-maker to Pilate, so Pilate ordered Jesus arrested on political charges of stirring up the people against Rome. Pilate then asked me to have Jesus interrogated first. Pilate often required this, as he thought that it might be more expeditious for us as Jews to obtain information from Jewish prisoners than to have his own Roman soldiers attempt the interrogation of hostile prisoners whose customs and language might impede the questioning. After the arrest, then, the Tribune brought Jesus to my house, turned him over to my Temple police for questioning, and there Jesus remained throughout the night. Mark is correct in stating that Jesus was brought to my residence, but Mark completely misunderstood or misrepresented the purpose.

Either Mark is ignorant of Jewish law, or he deliberately maligns the Sanhedrin, because Mark reports that the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled at my house on the eve of the Passover (Mark 15:42); that during the night the whole Sanhedrin sought testimony against Jesus in order to put him to death (Mark 14:53-55); that many bore false witness against Jesus; that their witness did not agree (Mark 14:56-59); that I asked Jesus if he were the Messiah; that Jesus replied that he was; and that I tore my garments and charged Jesus with blasphemy (Mark 14:61-64). According to our Law, however, the Sanhedrin does not have jurisdiction outside the Hall of Hewn Stones in the Temple precincts;<sup>25</sup> a criminal trial cannot be conducted on the eve of any feast day;<sup>26</sup> a criminal trial cannot be conducted at night;<sup>27</sup> a criminal cannot be convicted unless there are at least two independent and truthful witnesses in agreement;<sup>28</sup> a criminal cannot be convicted on his own confession;<sup>29</sup> and blasphemy does not occur unless the accused in the presence of witnesses pronounced the name of God (Leviticus 24:16).

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<sup>25</sup>Mishnah Middoth 5:4; Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin 86b.

<sup>26</sup>Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin 32a.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Tosefta Sanhedrin 11:1.

<sup>29</sup>Tosefta Shavuot 3:8.

Furthermore, Mark forgets that Jesus was executed by Pilate for the political charge of sedition, not for the religious charge of blasphemy. Mark might fool the gentiles with this nonsense about a Sanhedrin trial at night on the eve of Passover at my house, but he will never convince any Jew who knows the law of our religion.

In the morning Pilate's military tribune came to find out what we had learned from interrogating Jesus during the night. We had learned absolutely nothing more than we already knew from having heard Jesus speak openly day by day in the Temple. The tribune then led Jesus away to Pontius Pilate in the Praetorium. I had nothing more to do with the matter, because I could not enter the Praetorium without defiling myself for the Passover (John 18:28). Later I learned that Pilate had ordered the crucifixion of Jesus, and that it had been carried out immediately. I cannot say that I was sorry. If Jesus had continued to arouse the people so that his following grew and became rebellious against Rome, the Romans at the least would have retaliated against me and my priests for not keeping our people under control, and at the most would have acted swiftly in a way which might have brought about the destruction of our Temple and our nation both. I have always thought it expedient that one man should die so that the whole nation should not perish (John 11:47-50).

As it is now there are rumblings of war. The Zealots

gain strength and popularity daily among our people. Rome will not sit idle and allow these revolutionaries to contest Roman power and authority. If the Roman Prefect, Gessius Florus, could only capture the Zealot leader, Eleazar ben Yair, and his second in command, Barabbas, war might yet be averted. It would be better also for those two men to die than for the whole nation to perish under the Roman sword.

I must stop now. I am old, and this exertion tires me; but last let me say that if you should be tempted to read this Kata Markon, study it critically, because his agenda is concerned with this new gospel more than it is with history!

### Epilogue

A few months later, the Jewish-Roman War did erupt, and by 70 C.E. both the Temple and the city of Jerusalem lay in ruins. The fears of Caiaphas were real.

Caiaphas was a member of several minority groups: he belonged to the priestly aristocracy from whom were chosen the High Priests of the Jews; he was a wealthy land-owner; and he was a Sadducee.<sup>30</sup> None of these alliances endeared him to the common people. Josephus reports that the Sadducees had ". . .the confidence of the wealthy alone but no following among the populace."<sup>31</sup> In comparison to the Pharisees, who

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<sup>30</sup>Jeremias, pp. 96, 230.

<sup>31</sup>Josephus, Ant.xiii.298.

were "affectionate to each other," and who cultivated "harmonious relations with the community," the Sadducees even among themselves were "rather boorish in their behavior, and in their intercourse with their peers. . .as rude as to aliens."<sup>32</sup>

There were certain wellborn, wealthy priestly families, including the Boethus, Phiabi, and Annas families (the latter of which was the family of Caiaphas) from whom most of the High Priests were appointed. There were family ties between these priestly families which favored keeping the prominent Temple positions within the families. These are the so-called "chief priests" of the New Testament. The attitude of the people toward these families found acrid expression in these words:

Woe is me because of the house of Boethus!  
 Woe is me because of their staves!  
 Woe is me because of the house of Hanim!  
 Woe is me because of their whispering!  
 Woe is me because of the house of Kathros!  
 Woe is me because of their pens!  
 Woe is me because of the house of Ishmael son of Phiabi!  
 Woe is me because of their fists!  
 For they are the high priests,  
 Their sons treasurers,  
 Their sons-in-law trustees,  
 And their slaves beat the people with staves!<sup>33</sup>

During the Jewish-Roman War, the Zealots dominated Jerusalem for a time, and the hatred of the people toward the

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<sup>32</sup>Josephus, B.J..ii.166.

<sup>33</sup>Babylonian Talmud: Pesahim 57a; Tosefta Menahot 13:21.

aristocratic high priesthood found expression in their murder by the Zealots, who then chose their own high priest from among the ordinary priests. That man became the last Jewish high priest.<sup>34</sup>

It is clear that Caiaphas in no way represented the Jewish people; they despised him. Therefore, it is difficult to comprehend, even if Caiaphas might have collaborated with Pilate in the arrest of Jesus, how the common people might ever have sided with Caiaphas against Jesus, as the Gospels would have us believe. The fact also remains that, despite the reasons for Caiaphas to be apprehensive about Jesus as one who might be an agitator disrupting the status quo between the Romans and the Judeans, and simultaneously threatening the security of the priests, Jesus was allowed by the priests to teach daily in the Temple.

Scholars disagree over whether or not the Sanhedrin at the time of Jesus had jurisdiction in the case of capital crimes. However, it makes little difference. If it had no capital crime jurisdiction, there would be no reason to place Jesus on trial before the Sanhedrin and to demand his death, because the Sanhedrin would not be able to sentence him to death. If the Sanhedrin did have capital crime jurisdiction, then there would be no need for a trial under Pilate, because

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<sup>34</sup>Encyclopedia Judaica (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), XIII:1088.

the Sanhedrin could have carried out the execution of Jesus on its own authority. Yet it was Pilate who executed Jesus, indicating that only he had jurisdiction. Caiaphas neither could have demanded the death of Jesus, nor presided over any Sanhedrin asking for his death.

"Apart from the NT [New Testament] there is no additional information of substance about. . .Caiaphas, though legends based on the NT arose (e.g., that Caiaphas became a Christian)."<sup>35</sup> That also is typical anti-Jewish propaganda of the early Christian Church.

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<sup>35</sup>Sandmel, p. 481.

## Chapter 7

## MY NAME IS BARABBAS

Prologue

We know nothing about Barabbas beyond what is mentioned in a few verses of the Gospels (Matthew 27:15-26; Mark 15:6-15; Luke 23:17-25; and John 18:39-40). The name Barabbas in Hebrew literally means "Son of (the) father." Some old Gospel manuscripts give the more complete name of Jesus Barabbas,<sup>1</sup> which has given rise to speculation that Jesus Bar Abba(s) is simply another appellation for Jesus of Nazareth, Son of the Father, God.<sup>2</sup> However, other old manuscripts render a different spelling in the form of Jesus Bar Rabbas, meaning Jesus son of (the) teacher.<sup>3</sup> This makes less likely any equation of Jesus of Nazareth with Jesus Barabbas. Also, if Jesus of Nazareth had been known as Barabbas, surely this name would have appeared other places within the Gospels or in the Christological formulae of the nascent Church. Since the name does not appear anywhere in identification with Jesus of Nazareth, it must be concluded that

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<sup>1</sup>Paul Winter, On the Trial of Jesus (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974), p. 137.

<sup>2</sup>Horace Abram Rigg, Jr., "Barabbas," in Journal of Biblical Literature 64 (1945), 417-456.

<sup>3</sup>Winter, p. 137.



Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus Barabbas are two separate individuals.

The Gospels mention a "custom" in which a prisoner is released at feast time to the crowd at its request, but there are problems with this. In Matthew it is the governor's custom; in Mark it is Pilate's custom; in John it is the Jew's custom; and Luke mentions no such custom. Not only do the Gospels contradict each other about such a custom, but there is not any record of such a custom in either Jewish or Roman history, and the actual practice of such a privilegium paschale is in serious question.<sup>4</sup> If it was a Jewish custom why did Pilate have to remind the Jews of their own custom (John 18:39)? If the crowd could have any prisoner for whom it asked, why should Pilate offer only two from which to choose? If Pilate truly preferred to release Jesus, why did he accede to the demands of the crowd to release Barabbas? If Pilate thought that Jesus was innocent, why did he not release Jesus also? Finally, it is extremely unlikely that Pontius Pilate, a Roman Prefect, would have released a prisoner charged with "insurrection" and murder" (Mark 15:7; Luke 23:19), who might later become involved again with still another insurrection against Rome.

The Barabbas incident is both brief and problematic, and there are reasons to question the historicity of the

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 133-134.

event and the individual. Nevertheless, the Barabbas story in its primitive form is probably historical. What happened precisely in the episode between Pilate, Barabbas, and Jesus is much more nebulous, and we have absolutely no information about Barabbas following his release by Pilate.

Barabbas is described as a lestes---a robber (John 18:40). We know from Josephus that the term lestes is used synonymously with insurrectionary groups such as the Zealots and the Sicarii.<sup>5</sup> From that we can infer that Barabbas was a Zealot or a Sicarius who might later have fought against Rome in the Jewish War of 66-73 C.E. We might further imagine that Barabbas was present at the fall of Masada in 73 C.E. It is this setting which has been chosen for the sermon which follows. Supposing that Barabbas was about ten years younger than Jesus, Barabbas in 73 C.E. might have been about sixty-nine years old.

#### Scripture Lesson

Now at the feast he used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked. And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas. And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he was wont to do for them. And he answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have

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<sup>5</sup>Karl Heinrich Rengstorff (ed.) A Complete Concordance to Flavii Josephus (Leiden: Brill, 1979), III:29.

him release for them Barabbas instead. And Pilate again said to them, "Then what shall I do with the man whom you call the King of the Jews?" And they cried out again, "Crucify him." And Pilate said to them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him." So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas; and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified (Mark 15:6-15).

### Sermon

My name is Jesus Barabbas. Tonight I shall die. A thousand more will die with me here at Masada. I am not afraid---only mournful. I have no regrets about my own life, because God, blessed be He, has been good to me; but my heart is tormented about the younger ones---especially the children, who are so innocent and yet made so wise beyond their years by this incessant war. Nevertheless, the decision has been made, and there is no reversing our commitment to that decision. Eleazar ben Yair,<sup>6</sup> our leader, my cousin and life-long friend, has confided in me, and we agree on the tragic task which is ours. It will not be easy, but it will be best.

Our lives are totally committed to God and our freedom to live for Him only. We shall never acknowledge any but God alone as our master and king. Through the years we have clung tenaciously to our freedom from Rome whose emperor would have us yield to his sovereignty. This we have pledged never to do. It is better to die freely than to live in

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<sup>6</sup>Josephus, B.J.vii.253.

slavery.<sup>7</sup> Tomorrow the Romans will attack. We can no longer defend ourselves, and they cannot be beaten, so we shall take the victory from them by taking our own lives. In that way our wives will not be dishonored and our children will not know slavery.<sup>8</sup> We have already heard reports of what happened three years ago when the Roman Legions captured and destroyed Jerusalem. They not only killed thousands of armed resistants, but they slew the old and feeble as well. Those over seventeen years of age were sent in chains to Egypt, and those under seventeen were sold as slaves. Multitudes were sent to the Roman provinces to die in the arenas by sword or wild beast. Eleven thousand more died of starvation.<sup>9</sup> Then Titus shipped seven hundred of our most handsome young men to Rome for his triumphal return.<sup>10</sup> We are not fools. We know what would await us, even if we surrendered peacefully.

I have come here to the synagogue for my last hours. I remember how we built it with our own hands<sup>11</sup> when we came here seven years ago. It has been a lengthy seige. From here I can look around over our plateau which sits like a great fortress high above the Salt Sea. We have done very

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<sup>7</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.23.

<sup>8</sup>Josephus, B.J.vii.334.

<sup>9</sup>Josephus, B.J.vi.414-420.

<sup>10</sup>Josephus, B.J.vii.118.

<sup>11</sup>Yigael Yadin, Masada (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 184.

well here. We still have corn, oil, dates, and wine in our storehouses, and water in our cisterns. Our arsenals are intact and well supplied.<sup>12</sup> Herod's palaces and bath-houses have been a luxury for us. By day we have had shade and water to cool us. In contrast to our comfort, as I gaze down the steep precipice of Masada, I observe the Roman soldiers, twelve hundred feet below, sweating in the scorching sun. All of their water and rations must be packed-in from Jerusalem, Jericho, or En-Gedi.

During the past three years, General Flavius Silva with his Tenth Roman Legion has encircled the base of Masada with a stone wall and eight walled garrisons. He has used tens of thousands of auxiliary troops, slave laborers, and prisoners of war to build the stone and earthen ramp which now encroaches on our western approach. This morning the Romans rolled their seige tower up the ramp, hurled stones, and used a battering ram to breach our wall, which they set on fire with flaming arrows.<sup>13</sup> The final assault will come tomorrow. When I finish this document, I will bury it along with our sacred scrolls here in the synagogue.<sup>14</sup> Then I shall pray.

As I recall my seven decades of life, I wonder how I

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<sup>12</sup>Josephus, B.J.vii.296-299.

<sup>13</sup>Josephus, B.J.vii.252, 275-279, 304-319.

<sup>14</sup>Yadin, pp. 187-188.

might have lived them differently. I was born into a family of Zealots---both religious and political, because the two cannot be divorced. If one is zealous for God, one must necessarily be zealous against Rome, since God is the only sovereign One.<sup>15</sup> For four generations my family has been devoted to the overthrow of Rome. It began with my great-grandfather Hezekiah, who revolted against Rome when Herod the Great was sent to be their ruler. Herod had him executed.<sup>16</sup> Then when Sulpicius Quirinius ordered a census of Judea in order to increase taxation, my grandfather, Judas the Galilean, led another rebellion.<sup>17</sup> His followers did not have the strength to confront the superior Roman forces directly, so they hid in the hills and developed surprise hit-and-run tactics. Judas the Galilean's sons continued the sporadic struggle against Rome. Two of them---my father, Simon, and my uncle James---were captured and crucified by the Roman Prefect Tiberias Alexander twenty-five years ago,<sup>18</sup> but one of them---Eleazar's father, Yair---escaped. The memory of that horrible day can never be erased, and all my life I have fought against Rome with all my power.

There were many different groups of Zealots<sup>19</sup> before

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<sup>15</sup>Josephus, B.J.vii.323.

<sup>16</sup>Josephus, B.J.i.204; Ant.ii.56.

<sup>17</sup>Josephus, B.J.ii.118; Ant.xviii.4,23; Acts 5:37.

<sup>18</sup>Josephus, Ant.xx.102.

<sup>19</sup>Josephus, B.J.vii.262-270.

the War---some in Jerusalem and others in Galilee. My family came from Galilee. For some time we attempted non-violent tactics against Rome, because that was safer. Once, when Pilate introduced busts of the emperor in Jerusalem against our law, we went directly to Caesarea and loudly protested for several days. When Pilate finally set his soldiers on us, we bared our throats to their swords to show them our readiness to die for our God.<sup>20</sup> Not long after that we realized that we would have to be more militant, and we came to be known as the Sicarii, named after the sica---the short dagger---that each of us carried concealed in his clothing.<sup>21</sup> In crowded situations we could strike quickly and easily, and then lose ourselves in the crowd before we could be detected. It was not easy to strike directly at armed Roman soldiers, so we concentrated on those among our people who collaborated with the Romans. The most notorious of my targets was the High Priest Jonathan, son of Ananus,<sup>22</sup> who was a traitor to the Jews of the worst sort, and a puppet of the Romans of the first rank. It was Jonathan who personally requested Caesar to send Felix as Prefect of Judea,<sup>23</sup> and it was Felix's cruelty and oppression which sparked this War we are now fighting.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Josephus, Ant.xviii.55-59.

<sup>21</sup>Josephus, Ant.xx.186-187; B.J.ii.254-256.

<sup>22</sup>Josephus, B.J.ii.256; Ant.xx.164-165.

<sup>23</sup>Josephus, Ant.xx.162.

<sup>24</sup>Josephus, Ant.xx.182; Tacitus, Annals.xii.liv.

The only time that I was ever caught and arrested was when I was about twenty-six years old. Pontius Pilate had stolen funds from the Temple treasury to construct an aqueduct in Jerusalem.<sup>25</sup> When we found out about it, we were enraged. We formed a mob around Pilate's tribunal in Jerusalem, but Pilate used Sicarii tactics and had his soldiers disguised in civilian dress with clubs hidden under their tunics. They suddenly began beating us. Many were beaten to death, and others were trampled to death as they fled.<sup>26</sup> I managed to use my sica against a few soldiers, but eventually I was overpowered and arrested along with two of my comrades. We were taken to the Antonia Fortress. Immediately we knew what our fate would be. The Roman government never wasted time with rebels. They were always crucified immediately, just as my father and uncle had been. Pilate had an especially bad reputation for the quick dispatching of such cases.<sup>27</sup> So Pilate held three of us Sicarii, or lestai, as we were also known. There was a fourth prisoner who was brought in later. His name was Jesus of Nazareth. He had also been arrested as a lestes, but he was not one or I would have known it. One of his disciples, Simon, had been a lestes, and I had known him well at one time, but he had abandoned our cause to

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<sup>25</sup> Josephus, Ant.xviii.60-62; B.J.ii.175; Luke 23:19.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Philo, Legation to Caius, 299-305.



to follow this Jesus (Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13).

The following day we were brought before Pilate for sentencing. The two comrades who had been captured with me had already been sentenced to crucifixion. The charges against me were insurrection and murder; the charges against Jesus were seditious perversion of the Jews, forbidding payment of tribute to Caesar, and calling himself a king (Luke 23:2). It was clear to me that Jesus and I would also be sentenced to die by crucifixion. Then in the midst of the proceedings, for some inexplicable reason, Pilate said that he would release one of us as a gesture of goodwill to the Jewish people at Passover time. He said that he was inclined to release Jesus, but voices from the crowd of observers called for my release, because they knew me to be an anti-Roman patriot. Jesus, who had not spoken much up to this time, suddenly said, "Let Barabbas go. Crucify me, if you must, but release Barabbas." Then he said something which I have never forgotten: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). These words convinced Pilate more than ever that Jesus was one of us---a lestes. He had been arrested as a lestes (Mark 14:48); he had been convicted as a lestes (Luke 23:2); and he was later crucified between two lestai (Mark 15:27). But Jesus was not a lestes; he was, I would say, a kindly prophet of God, who saved my life.

Jesus is not here to save my life today. It is growing late, and Eleazar ben Yair has summoned us all together for the most solemn and tragic speech of our lives. There is nothing else that I can say except what we Jews have always said in such circumstances: Shema Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad. . . "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. . ."

### Epilogue

Before Eleazar ben Yair had finished his tragic oration, his followers became impatient to carry out the plan. The men, "while they caressed and embraced their wives and took their children in their arms, clinging in tears to those parting kisses,"<sup>28</sup> at the same instant killed them. Then, having set their stores and personal possessions on fire, they laid down next to their families, and allowed ten executioners, selected by lots from among their ranks, to cut their throats. The ten in turn drew lots, and nine yielded to the last executioner, who at last thrust his own sword through his body. There were 960 Sicarii men, women and children who died that day on Masada at their own hands.<sup>29</sup>

At daybreak the following day, May 2, 73 C.E., the Romans attacked the Sicarii on the top of Masada. They were

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<sup>28</sup>Josephus, B.J.vii.391.

<sup>29</sup>Josephus, B.J.vii.389-401.

astounded when they were met by no opposition, but only by an awful silence, and seven survivors---two women (one of whom was a relative of Eleazar) and five children, who had hidden themselves in an underground aqueduct.<sup>30</sup> These survivors reported what had happened.

The Jewish War ended soon thereafter. The Jews and the Romans continued to view each other as enemies. Since Christians were considered by the Romans to be a sect group within Judaism, the Christians were also considered enemies of Rome. At the same time, the Jewish-Christian branch of the Church in Jerusalem had been destroyed and dispersed, leaving Paul's rapidly growing Gentile branch of the Church in power. It was then that the early Christian Church made a conscious decision to dissociate itself from Judaism in order to win favor with Rome so that it could conduct its missionary activity without jeopardy. It was during this period that the Gospels were written and deliberately formulated into their anti-Jewish, pro-Roman style as a means of survival for the Christian Church.

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<sup>30</sup>Josephus, B.J.vii.399-406.

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