

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

The Life and Mythologizing of Pontius Pilate

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by

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Research Methodology

The research methodology for this paper follows the instructions given in paragraph three of the Biographical Study-Overview. As many primary or secondary sources as possible from the time of Pontius Pilate through the first several centuries of the common era have been examined to put the subject in his historical context. Attempts have been made using current research to determine the validity of those sources and research has been done to understand the world Pontius Pilate was living in and the groups with whom he interacted. Of course, the Bible is included as source documents for this biography, but it should be noted that Pilate's interactions with Jesus Christ form a very small portion of the Prefect's time in Judea and his life in general.

Introduction

Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of the Imperial Province of Judea from around 26AD to 36AD.¹ During his tenure there were several events that made the histories of different writers including Josephus, Philo, the New Testament writers, and Tacitus. Each of these events involved incidents where Pilate either caused or helped end crises of religion among the Jews and Samaritans. While Pontius Pilate was mythologized by later Christians due to his involvement in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, contemporary sources show him to be an average Roman bureaucrat.

¹ Helen K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1.

Background

Not much is known of Pontius Pilate before his promotion to provincial government of a small distant part of the Roman Empire. He most likely grew up in Rome but was considered a provincial due to his ancestry. He was a descendent of the Samnites peoples who were from a region to the south of Rome. They were brought into the empire in 290 BC and were brutally repressed by Rome in 86 BC when they tried to gain independence during a civil war. Their leaders were executed, and the people were dispersed around northern and central Italy.²

His father was likely a successful member of the Roman military as Pilate is similar to Pilatus which means “skilled with the javelin.”³ At some point Pilate rose to the social class of an Equestrian, the Roman version of a knight. It is likely that he rose to the rank via an early career as an officer in the military.⁴ He would have joined at age 18 and served several tours as a tribune and a prefect for cavalries or auxiliaries making 50,000 sesteres a year.⁵

² Ann Wroe, *Pontius Pilate* (New York, NY: Random House, 2000), 17. The history of Pilate’s people has some obvious similarities to the history of the Jewish people with exiles and attempts to regain independence. One has to wonder how this affected his view of the Jewish people when he became governor of Judah.

³ Wroe, 19.

⁴ The origin of the rank of equestrian has to do with the cavalry in the Roman military.

⁵ Wroe, 23.

An Equestrian

To be of the equestrian class he had to have a minimum of 400,000 sesteres⁶ in addition to the requirements to be of good moral standing, good health, and of free birth.⁷ Once he met the requirements, he was given the symbol of the Equestrian class. The *anulus aureus*, a gold ring, was only to be worn by members of the Equestrian class.⁸ During the reign of Augustus, who had been an equestrian himself and the emperor prior to Pilate becoming a governor, the equestrian rank was used as a candidate pool for government offices in the empire.⁹ Under Augustus the order was also audited via a census every five years with members both leaving and being added based on their current wealth, health, and character. The amount of 400,000 sesteres set Equestrians as wealthy, but not fabulously so. Those near the bottom level of wealth were constantly aware that they could easily lose their status.¹⁰

Another clue to Pilate's status comes from the Roman senator and historian Publius Cornelius Tacitus. In AD 115 Tacitus referred to Pilate as a procurator.¹¹ A procurator was an equestrian who rose through the military and civil service to become governor of a lesser province.¹²

⁶ The value of a sesteres is hard to pin down, especially since it was a commodity currency and not fiat. The consensus seems to be between \$1-2 making the rank of equestrian require the equivalent of at least \$400,000.

⁷ Bond, 8-9.

⁸ Davenport, 216-18. For a time, the wearing of a gold ring was popular with men who did not have the rank of Equestrian. It was not well regulated until AD 23 when the Senate passed an ultimatum restricting the ring to the Equestrians. The next year Emperor Tiberius went further and decreed that only the emperor could bestow the ring.

⁹ Bond, 8-10.

¹⁰ Caillan Davenport, *A History of the Roman Equestrian Order* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 205.

¹¹ Wroe, 65.

¹² Daniel Swartz, "Pontius Pilate," *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 397.

While this seems to be a perfect fit for Pilate with what we know of his history, it is unlikely a title he held during his lifetime as the title was put in place by Emperor Claudius who came to power in AD 41.¹³

A Governor

In AD 26 Pilate was appointed governor of Judea by Lucius Aelius Sejanus, the prefect of the Pretorian Guard who ruled the empire in all but name from AD 26 to AD 31. Prior to Sejanus, the Roman Emperor Augustus was supportive of the Jews, possibly mollifying some of the anger over the actions of Ptolemy. Emperor Augustus allowed the Jews of Rome to send their first fruits to Jerusalem, protected their interests in the city, and even paid for a daily sacrifice to Yahweh. This generally positive policy towards the Jews seems to have carried over into the beginning of the reign of Tiberius.¹⁴ However according to the Hellenistic Jewish historian Philo, once Tiberius began to be influenced by Sejanus, policies towards the Jews changed drastically. Philo states that Sejanus was behind the expulsion of the Jews from Rome in AD 19. During that incident the Jews were forced to burn their religious vestments and 4000 of them were forcibly constricted into the army and sent to Sardinia. In AD 26 Sejanus became emperor in all but name with the semi-retirement of Tiberius. This was the same year that Pilate was appointed governor and probably seriously influenced Pilate's policies as governor of Judea.¹⁵

¹³ Bond, 12.

¹⁴ Bond, 27-28.

¹⁵ Paul L. Maier, "Sejanus, Pilate, and the Date of the Crucifixion," *Church History* 37, no. 01 (1968): 8-11. Sejanus became the personal advisor to Tiberius and was left in charge when the emperor semi-retired. From that point until his execution in AD 31 Sejanus controlled the flow of information to the emperor, arranged the deaths of his rivals, and almost succeeded in becoming the actual emperor of Rome.

A Prefect of Judea

In 63 BC Israel was annexed by Rome as a client state after the Siege of Jerusalem by Pompey the Great. It was a rocky start between the Jews and Rome after Pompey, out of curiosity, entered the Holy of Holies. In 37 BC Herod the Great, who had the favor of Rome, took power and ruled as king until his death around 4 BC.¹⁶ His will left his kingdom divided among his three sons. The oldest, Herod Archelaus, was made Ethnarch of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea. This Herod enraged his Jewish population by marrying the widow of his step-brother and generally ruling as a tyrant. When Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were returning to Israel from Egypt with Jesus, they were warned to not settle in Judea because of the tyrant Herod Archelaus. They instead went to Nazareth which was outside of the kingdom of Judah (Matthew 2:13-23).¹⁷ By AD 6 Herod Archelaus had made himself so unpopular that he was deposed and exiled to Gaul. His kingdom was declared a province of the Roman Empire and put under the leadership of a provincial governor.¹⁸

Roman governors in Judea did not tend to hold the office for very long. Of fourteen governors, most served only two to four years. Coponius served from 6-9 CE, Marus Ambivulus from 9-12 CE, and Annius Rufus from 12-15 CE. The rapid procession of governors ended when Tiberius became emperor and decided that provincial governors should remain in power for longer periods of time.

¹⁶ J. Julius. Scott, *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 89-90. The actual date of Herod's death is debatable and may have occurred in 1 BC, which will become important to the timeline later in this paper. For more information see Andrew Steinmann, "When Did Herod the Great Reign?," *Novum Testamentum* 51, no. 1 (2009): 1-29.

¹⁷ Unless otherwise noted, Bible verses are sourced from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version Containing the Old and New Testaments* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

¹⁸ Scott, 97.

He appointed Valerius Gratus who served from 15 CE to 26 CE and Pilate served from 26 CE to 37 CE.¹⁹ Still, by the time Pilate took over as governor of the province, the territory had had 5 governors in only 20 years.²⁰

Pilate arrived in Judea in 26 CE with his family and a small group including his personal staff and companions. He did have troops under his command, but only five infantry cohorts and a cavalry regiment. If there was trouble he could theoretically call on the Syrian Legate who had four legions under his command, but the Syrian Legate was in Rome until AD 32.²¹ With his small number of auxiliary troops, Pilate was expected to keep the peace in Judea, oversee legal matters in the province, collect taxes for Rome, and mint coins.²² To achieve all of this he had to work with the Jewish high priest and in the case of Pilate this meant Caiaphas. The high priest controlled the day-to-day operation of the province including enforcing Jewish law and ordinances. The high priest served at the pleasure of the governor who could depose him and promote another at will. Evidently Caiaphas did this to Pilate's satisfaction as he remained high priest until Pilate was recalled to Rome in AD 37.²³ In contrast Pilate's predecessor, Valerius Gratus, appointed four high priests during roughly the same amount of time as governor.²⁴

¹⁹ There is some question as to how long Valerius Gratus served. In the first three years of his rule he deposed four high priests. The next high priest, Caiphas, served almost twenty years and was left office when Pilate returned to Rome in 36 or 37 CE. Because of this change it is possible that Pilate replaced Gratus in 18 CE, explaining why Caiphas had a tenure as high priest for almost two decades. See R. Steven Notley, "Pontius Pilate: Sadist or Saint," *The Biblical Archaeology Review* 43, no. 4 (July 1, 2017), 46.

²⁰ Noteley, 45.

²¹ Bond, 5,14.

²² Bond, 203.

²³ Bond, 17-19. The governor even had control of the high priest's vestments which were necessary for rituals during the Jewish festivals. Seven days prior to them being needed, the vestments would be turned over for ritual purification and then confiscated until the next festival.

²⁴ Notley, 45.

Three Peoples and Many Factions

Pilate took over a province that was made up of several different peoples and factions. Influential Jews in Judea were split into various sects including the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Herodians. The Pharisees were rigid followers of Levitical law as well as the Oral Torah, which they used to fence off any potential Torah violations. The Sadducees were the high Jewish society with control of the Temple as well as most of the seats in the Sanhedrin. They rejected the Pharisees' Oral Torah, holding that only the regulations in the written Torah should be observed. Not much is known about the Herodians except that they supported the Herodian family and were pro Roman.²⁵

In addition to the Jews the province also contained a population of Samaritans. The Samaritans formed in the depopulated Northern Kingdom when the Assyrians mixed other peoples into the area. The beliefs of the remaining Israelites were merged with those of the other cultures moved into the territory forming a religion that was like Judaism but with key differences. Of these, instead of Mount Moriah being the mountain of Yahweh, the Samaritans held that this distinction went to Mount Gerizim which is in the modern-day West Bank territory. Instead of accepting the Torah, the Samaritans had their own version of the Pentateuch which they created in the second century BC. Besides the religious differences, the Samaritans were despised by the Jews for their actions during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes. While the Jews were being persecuted, including the desecration of the Jewish Temple, the Samaritans denounced them and dedicated their temple to Zeus Hellonios. In return, the Maccabean ruler John Hyrcanus destroyed their temple in 108 BC and later devastated the city of Samaria.²⁶

²⁵ Scott, 204-209.

²⁶ Scott, 197-199.

There was also a Greek population. While the Decapolis cities were autonomous under Roman rule, Judea did include the two other Greek cities, Caesarea Marittima and Sabaste.²⁷ Pilate established his residence in one of these cities, Caesarea Marittima, 57 miles to the northwest of Jerusalem. Caesarea Maritime was a major port city that was rebuilt by Herod the Great in Greco Roman style with imported white marble. The city had an amphitheater, hippodrome, aqueducts, sewers, and a temple dedicated to emperor worship.²⁸

This was much closer in form to other Roman cities and was more comfortable for Pilate and his family who were from Italy. The city was also a port which meant it couldn't easily be placed under siege and there was a clear path of communication with Rome.²⁹ It is in Caesarea Marittima that the only archeological evidence of Pilate is found. The Pilot Stone, which was originally part of a temple dedicated to Emperor Tiberius, was unearthed in 1961. It contained a Latin inscription which read “[Po]ntius Pilate, [pref]ect of Jud[e]a, [made and d]e[dicated] Tiberieum to the [divine August]us.”³⁰

On the down side, it was a fair distance from the capital, so Pilate also had to keep a residence in Jerusalem so he could have a presence at the various Jewish festivals that occurred throughout the year.³¹

²⁷ Bond, 6-7.

²⁸ Robert J Bull, “Caesarea Maritima: The Search for Herod's City,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 8, no. 3 (1982): 26-27.

²⁹ Bond, 7.

³⁰ Notley, 43.

³¹ Bond, 7.

It was also very different compared to Jerusalem in the things that its populace would allow without civil unrest. However, one would imagine the governor living in Caesarea was a constant reminder to the Jews that their nation was under the control of a pagan empire.

Run-ins with the Locals

While Pilate was the governor of Judea, there are three events which led to direct confrontations with the Jews. Pilate would handle each event in a different way as he was influenced by local populations and the leadership of the Roman Empire.

The Standards Incident

The first occurred shortly after his arrival and involved what were called Roman standards. Roman standards were pennants or banners that were attached to a pole to identify Roman troops. According to the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, Pilate brought his troops with him to winter quarters in Jerusalem. These troops had standards with busts of the emperor attached. This did not go over well with the Jews who saw the busts as a violation of the Second Commandment, which forbade idolatry.³²

A large group of Jews left Jerusalem and went to Caesarea to demand that Pilate remove the standards. This went on for several days with neither side willing to back down. By the sixth day Pilate had had enough and ordered his soldiers to surround the Jews. Now in a position of power, Pilate ordered the people to stop their protest or be killed by the soldiers.

³² Flavius Josephus and Ralph Marcus, *Jewish Antiquities*, vol. 18 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 55-59.

In response, the people prostrated themselves on the ground while baring their throats to the soldiers. They stated that they were so committed to removing the idols from Jerusalem that they would rather be executed than back down. Pilate, probably expecting his show of force would quickly disperse the crowd, was stunned by the devotion of the Jews to their laws and God. He ordered the standards removed to Caesarea and the protest ended.³³

Josephus affirms that the incident occurred at the beginning of Pilate's tenure as governor.³⁴ It is likely that he was surprised by what would seem to him to be a standard relocation of soldiers. When the Jews came to Caesarea to protest, he would have felt like his status as governor was being tested. While the Jews previously had a patron in the Roman emperors Augustus and Tiberius, this support ended with the recent rise of Sejanus.

While there is not much evidence that Pilate was an anti-Semite³⁵, he would have felt bolstered by Sejanus's anti-Jewish stance to start imposing Roman law on Judea. Fully expecting the protestors to back down when threatened with death by armed soldiers, he was completely surprised when they in turn willingly accepted death rather than back down by offering their exposed necks. Rather than massacre them, Pilate is the one that backs down and the standards are removed from Jerusalem.

³³ Josephus and Marcus, 55-59.

³⁴ Josephus and Marcus, 55-59.

³⁵ On the other hand, Philo stated that Pilate was a man of an inflexible, stubborn, and cruel disposition," known for "his venality, his violence, his thievery, his assaults, his abusive behavior, his frequent executions of untried prisoners and his endless savage ferocity." See Steven, 48.

The Aqueduct Incident

The second incident with the Jews involved the building of an aqueduct in Jerusalem. The aqueduct had been ordered by Herod the Great but would not be finished until the reign of Herod Agrippa. The aqueduct itself was not a point of conflict with the people of Jerusalem, rather the source of the building funds. Working with the chief priests, Pilate had used temple funds to pay for the construction which were supposed to be used for obtaining temple sacrifices. When the people found out some of them rioted. Pilate, who was in Jerusalem, was surrounded by the rioters. With an order from Pilate his soldiers, who were dressed as civilians, beat the rioters with cudgels. Some of the rioters died from the blows and others were crushed when their companions started to flee.³⁶

The aqueduct incident is odd because its hard to determine what Pilate did to anger the populace to the point that they rioted. He was working with the chief priests, so the money was not stolen or otherwise obtained by force. The aqueduct was a public works project that would benefit the residents of Jerusalem with fresh water. The money from the Temple treasury could be used not only for sacrifices, but for projects that benefited Jerusalem. In the end a seeming non-issue led to a riot that Pilate had to put down violently for his own protection.³⁷

³⁶ Notley, 46.

³⁷ Wroe, 107-109.

The Golden Shields Incident

The final incident that angered the Jews involved golden shields and probably happened around AD 32. This is important because in AD 31 Tiberius returned to power after the execution of Sejanus. The Prefect of Rome had become too ambitious in his rise to power and was arrested and garroted. His relatives and friends were also killed. Since Pilate had been appointed governor by Sejanus, this put him in a potentially dangerous situation.³⁸

To show his loyalty to Emperor Tiberius, Pilate had a set of shields made, coated in gold, and dedicated to the emperor. He then installed the shields in Herod's Palace in Jerusalem. He attempted to placate the Jews of Jerusalem by keeping the shields free of any image that would indicate that they were idols. The shields only contained a small inscription stating their creator and who they were dedicated to. However, their installation into Herod's palace enraged the Jews who gathered their leaders, including the four sons of Herod, and confronted Pilate. As with the standards, Pilate initially refused to remove the shields.³⁹

This time, instead of offering their throats or rioting, the Jews threatened to send a letter to Emperor Tiberius. This shows that the incident took place after the removal of Sejanus as the Jews would not have had this option while he was still in power. Neither side backed down and the people made good on their threat. The four sons of Herod knew important people in Rome, their father had been a friend of Emperor Augustus, and sent a letter that was read by the emperor.

³⁸ Wroe, 110.

³⁹ Paul L. Maier, "The Episode of the Golden Roman Shields at Jerusalem," *Harvard Theological Review* 62, no. 01 (1969): 109-121, 110-111.

Augustus responded with a letter of his own ordering Pilate to remove the shields and install them in Caesarea in the temple of his adopted father, Augustus. Pilate complied with the order and the third incident ended.⁴⁰

The Crucifixion of Jesus Christ

The most famous event of Pilate's governorship, after the fact, was the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. While Christians for almost two millennia have considered this to be the defining moment in redemptive history, at the time for Pilate it was just a request by the Jewish authorities to condemn a criminal to death. When Caiaphas brought Jesus to Pilate, he had already decided that He should be condemned for blasphemy. Unfortunately for Caiaphas and the Jewish authorities, they had to get permission from Pilate in death penalty cases (John 18:31).⁴¹ Pilate is not interested in condemning a man for blasphemy and Jesus's accusers were careful not to make that the basis of their request for execution. Instead they charged him with rebelling against Rome by encouraging not paying taxes and declaring Himself a king (Luke 23:2).⁴²

When Jesus indicates that His kingdom is spiritual and not political, Pilate attempts to get out of having to decide Jesus's fate. He realizes that Jesus is from Galilee which is outside of the borders of Judea and under the control of Herod Antipas. As it was Passover, Herod Antipas was in Jerusalem. When Pilate approached Herod the ruler of Galilee indicated that he was even

⁴⁰ Wroe, 111-114.

⁴¹ Notley, 41.

⁴² Thomas Lea and David Alan. Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message* (Nashville, Tn: B&H Publishing Group, 2003), 278.

curious to see Jesus. However, when Jesus was brought before Herod, he answered the monarch's questions with silence. After he had his fill of silence, Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate.⁴³

With Jesus back under Pilate's jurisdiction, the governor is faced not only with the Jewish authorities, but with a mob of the people of Jerusalem. The trial would have taken place on a raised platform in front of the governor's residence in Jerusalem and would have been completely in public view.⁴⁴ Not sure how the mob felt about Jesus since they had welcomed him as to their city days before (Matthew 21:1-11), Pilate offers to release a prisoner in honor of the Passover festival.⁴⁵ The two put forth are Jesus and Barabbas, a notorious prisoner (Matthew 27:16). The crowd chooses Barabbas⁴⁶ and once again Pilate is put in the position of having to decide the punishment of Jesus. Pilate finally gives in after a final ploy for sympathy by having Jesus scourged fails, and orders him crucified the following morning. In a famous scene the governor washes his hands in a final attempt to remove any guilt over the impending execution.⁴⁷

While many scholars think that the hesitation of Pilate to execute Jesus is an invention of Christians after the fact⁴⁸, it's also possible that it had to do with the removal of Sejanus in Rome. If the common date of Jesus's birth based on the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC is used, Jesus would have been crucified on April 7, AD 30, well before the execution of Sejanus. However, if

⁴³ Lea and Black, 278.

⁴⁴ R. T. France, *Matthew: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 394.

⁴⁵ Some have tried to show the commutation of a prisoner's sentence to be an annual event. However, there is little evidence to support it being more than a one-time occurrence. See France, 394.

⁴⁶ Some copies of Matthew have the first name of Barabbas as Jesus. This is mentioned by Origen who wanted to suppress the fact that the criminal Barabbas shared the same first name as Christ. See France, 394.

⁴⁷ Lea and Black, 278.

⁴⁸ Notley, 42.

a date of April 3, AD 33 is used, also a Friday, the crucifixion occurs after the fall of Sejanus.⁴⁹ This would also place it after the proposed date of the Golden Shield incident in AD 32. In that context Pilate was in a situation where he was afraid to anger the Jewish authorities and or the people because of the consequences of them reporting on him to Tiberius. His hesitation and attempts to pass Jesus off to others was a calculated process to make it through the incident while keeping his governorship, and possibly his life if he could be connected to Sejanus, intact.⁵⁰

The End of the Governorship of Pilate

The end of Pilate's governorship came not from the Jews, but from the Samaritans. In AD 36⁵¹, one of their number claimed that he would lead a group to Mount Gerizim to see sacred vessels buried by Moses. The news spread and an armed crowd formed in the village of Tirathana to climb the mountain. The news also reached Pilate of an armed group and he had their path blocked with cavalry and infantry. A pitched battle started between the Roman troops and the crowd which led to its dispersal. The leaders of the movement were then captured and put to death.⁵²

While Pilate was seemingly just putting down a potential armed rebellion by a messianic group, the Samaritans did not see it that way. They claimed that the group was made up of refugees escaping the persecution of Pilate. Their complaint was taken to the Roman Legate

⁴⁹ Maier, 4-8.

⁵⁰ Maier, 10.

⁵¹ I am basing this date on the fact that Tiberius died in March of AD 37 and it would have taken several months for the following events to play out.

⁵² Flavius Josephus and Ralph Marcus, *Jewish Antiquities*, vol. 9 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 43-51.

Vitellius, who by then is actually in Syria, and Pilate was ordered to appear before Emperor Tiberius to give account of the situation. By the time Pilate arrives in Rome, Emperor Tiberius had passed away and been replaced by Caligula.⁵³

From that point on, nothing about Pilate has made it into the annals of reliable history. It is probable that he was appointed to a different position in the empire as he had already been the governor of Judea for a decade and Tiberius was dead.⁵⁴ Even though he had presided over the most important trial in history, to the Roman leadership he was just an equestrian and bureaucrat that had been in charge of a small province in the fringes of the empire.

The Mythologizing of Pontius Pilate

In the centuries following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, many Christians wanted to know more about Pontius Pilate. He had played such a critical role in the death of their savior that they wanted the rest of his life to play out with grander events than were most likely the case. To fill the void of available information, these Christians created mythologies around Pontius Pilate and his family that were quite impressive. One text *Paradosis Pilati*, or the Giving up of Pilate, has the former governor brought before the emperor to answer for condemning Christ.

When the report reached Rome and had been read to Caesar, with not a few standing by, all were amazed that it was because of the lawlessness of Pilate that the darkness and the earthquake had come upon the whole world; and Caesar, filled with anger, sent soldiers with

⁵³ Bond, 73.

⁵⁴ Bond, 204.

orders to bring Pilate a prisoner. And when he had been brought to the city of the Romans and Caesar heard that Pilate was there, he sat down in the temple of the gods in the presence of the whole senate and the whole army and all the multitude of his forces. And he commanded Pilate to stand forward and said to him, 'How could you dare to do such a thing, you most impious one, when you had seen such great signs concerning that man? By daring to do an evil deed you have destroyed the whole world'. Pilate answered, 'Almighty King, I am innocent of these things; it is the multitude of the Jews who are reckless and guilty.' Caesar asked, 'Who are they?' Pilate said, 'Herod, Archelaus, Philip, Annas and Caiaphas, and all the multitude of the Jews.' Caesar said, 'Why did you follow their advice?' Pilate said, 'This nation is rebellious and disorderly, and does not submit to your power.' Caesar said, 'As soon as they handed him over to you, you should have kept him secure and sent him to me, and not have obeyed them and crucified such a man who was righteous and did such wonderful signs as you have mentioned in your report. For it is clear from these signs that Jesus was the Christ, the king of the Jews.'⁴. And when Caesar said this and named the name of Christ, all the multitude of the gods fell down, and became as dust where Caesar sat with the senate.

And all the people who stood by Caesar trembled because of the utterance of the word and the fall of their gods, and gripped by fear, they all went away, each to his own house, marveling at what had taken place.⁵⁵

Strangely the story continues with the emperor declaring that the entire Jewish nation should be destroyed⁵⁶. While this did happen in AD 70, that was well after the fact.

⁵⁵ J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal Jesus Legends of the Early Church* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 91-92.

⁵⁶ Eliot, 93.

Another text, called *The Death of Pontius Pilate*, records that after being called before Emperor Caligula, Pilate committed suicide. The emperor has him bound to a block of stone and thrown in the Tiber river. What follows is a strange series of events where Pilate's body is followed by evil spirits and the people move his corpse from river to river until reaching his final resting place in what is modern day Switzerland. For this reason, a mountain in Lucerne, Switzerland is named Mount Pilatus.⁵⁷

In some mythologies Pilate is a hero and others a villain. The Coptic and Ethiopic churches canonized him as a saint. There are letters from Pilate to Emperor Tiberius⁵⁸ and stories of how Pilate's Wife was warned in a dream to tell her husband not to condemn Jesus. Many of these works are anti-Semitic in nature with an agenda to use the vindication of Pilate to vilify the Jews.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Pontius Pilate holds a strange place in history. He was an average bureaucrat to the Romans, a tyrant and monster to many Jews including Philo and some early Christians, and a saint to other Christians in the following centuries. Wading through the politics of the day and the later mythologizing of Pilate, history shows that Pontius Pilate was a standard equestrian who took a job in Judea for a decade and then probably moved on to other positions and out of history.

⁵⁷ Eliot 89, 94.

⁵⁸ Eliot, 91.

⁵⁹ Eliot, 295.

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