

FACT QUESTIONS

1. In what sense did Judas "repent"? Contrast the repentance of Peter and that of Judas, showing why one led to life and the other to death.
2. What was it that convinced Judas to repent?
3. By whom had Jesus been condemned when Judas saw it and repented?
4. Where and how did Judas return the betrayal money? Where were the priests when he approached them? Defend your answer.
5. On what Scriptural basis could the priests have established their decision to refuse to accept the blood money into the temple treasury?
6. Who were the "strangers" for whom the potter's field was bought as a cemetery? Why should a special cemetery for them be needed?
7. Indicate the source of the prediction Matthew cites as fulfilled here. Who wrote the prophecy? Deal with the supposed contradictions connected with this question.
8. How does the book of Acts report this account? What differences distinguish the two accounts? How harmonize these divergencies?
9. Why was the field called "the field of blood"?

SECTION 73

JESUS IS TRIED BY PILATE,
CONDEMNED AND SCOURGED

(Parallels: Mark 15:2-20; Luke 23:1-25; John 18:28—19:16)

TEXT: 27:2, 11-31

2 and they bound him, and led him away, and delivered him up to Pilate the governor.

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11 Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, saying, Art thou the King of the Jews? And Jesus said unto him, Thou sayest. 12 And when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he answered nothing. 13 Then saith Pilate unto him, Hearst thou now how many things they witness against thee? 14 And he gave him no answer, not even to one word; insomuch that the governor marvelled greatly. 15 Now at the feast the governor was

went to release unto the multitude one prisoner, whom they would. 16 And they had then a notable prisoner, called Barabbas. 17 When therefore they were gathered together, Pilate said unto them, whom will ye that I released unto you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ? 18 For he knew that for envy they had delivered him up. 19 And while he was sitting on the judgment-seat, his wife sent unto him, saying, Have thou nothing to do with that righteous man; for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him. 20 Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas, and destroy Jesus. 21 But the governor answered and said unto them, Which of the two will ye that I release unto you? And they said, Barabbas. 22 Pilate saith unto them, What then shall I do unto Jesus who is called Christ? They all say, Let him be crucified. 23 And he said, Why, what evil hath he done? But they cried out exceedingly, saying, Let him be crucified. 24 So when Pilate saw that he prevailed nothing, but rather that a tumult was arising, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this righteous man; see ye *to it*. 25 And all the people answered and said, His blood *be* on us, and on our children. 26 Then released he unto them Barabbas; but Jesus he scourged and delivered to be crucified.

27 Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium, and gathered unto him the whole band. 28 And they stripped him, and put on him a scarlet robe. 29 And they platted crown of thorns and put it upon his head, and a reed in his right hand; and they kneeled down before him, and mocked him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews! 30 And they spat upon him, and took the reed and smote him on the head. 31 And when they had mocked him, they took off from him the robe, and put on him his garments, and led him away to crucify him.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Where did Pilate get the idea Jesus claimed to be a King of the Jews?
- b. Even though the authorities charged Jesus with perverting the nation, refusing to give tribute to Caesar and claiming to be a king, why do you suppose Matthew limited the interrogation by Pilate to the latter accusation?

- c. Why did Jesus say, "You have said so" instead of answering frankly "Yes" or "No"?
- d. Why did not Jesus answer the charges laid against Him?
- e. What made Pilate marvel at Jesus' silence?
- f. What do you think caused Pilate to decide so rapidly that Jesus was innocent, even though He admitted to being a king?
- g. Why was a choice offered between Jesus and Barabbas? If Pilate really wanted justice for Jesus, why refer so important a choice to a mob like that?
- h. Why do you think Pilate limited the choice of prisoners for release just to these two?
- i. How do you suppose the governor learned the true, secret motive for the leaders' determination to eliminate Jesus?
- j. If Pilate knew Jesus were innocent, why did he not acquit Him immediately and throw the hierarchy's case out of court?
- k. What is your opinion of Pilate's wife's dream? Was it from God? or the natural result of her own perplexity about Jesus? What effect do you think her urgent message had on Pilate's judgment?
- l. In the shouts of "Crucify Him! Away with Him!" do you see any evidence of fickleness in the crowds? Are these the same people who a few days before yelled, "Hosanna to the Son of David"?
- m. Why do you think Pilate finally gave up trying to defend Jesus' right to a fair trial? Why would he have been so anxious to please the Jewish people? Was it his nature to be conciliatory?
- n. What could have caused the riot that Pilate so deeply feared?
- o. The crowds yelled, "His blood be on us and on our children." Do you think God gave them their wish? In what way(s)?
- p. Do you think Pilate's act of washing his hands before the multitude really freed him from responsibility for Jesus' political assassination?
- q. Why did Pilate scourge Jesus, if he was so sure of His innocence? What would he have done to Him if he thought he were guilty?!
- r. Why did the soldiers cruelly mock Jesus? Does not even a condemned man have rights?
- s. What does Jesus' behavior under fire reveal about Him? How does His example help you?
- t. How does Pilate's behavior under fire differ from yours when called upon to stand up for truth and righteousness? In what shameful ways are we tempted to repeat his moral spinelessness?

- u. Despite the fact that the political charges against Him were false, do you think Jesus was a politician in any sense? Did He intend to form public policy? To what extent?
- v. Since the major responsibility for Jesus' death lies with the people of God, what lessons come out of this realization?

PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

The entire Sanhedrin stood up, tied Jesus and led Him from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor and turned Him over to Pilate. It was early in the morning. They personally did not enter the governor's palace, so as to avoid ceremonial uncleanness and be able to eat the festal meals of the Passover week. So Pilate went outside to them.

"What charge do you bring against this man?" Pilate began.

"If this guy had not done something wrong," they snapped, "we would not have handed him over to you!"

To this Pilate retorted, "All right, YOU take him and judge him under your own law!"

To this the Jews objected, "But we are not permitted to execute anyone." (This is how Jesus' words came true when He predicted the nature of His impending death.) They opened their case against Jesus, alleging, "We discovered this fellow subverting our nation, opposing payment of taxes to Caesar and asserting that he himself is an anointed king."

Pilate re-entered the palace and summoned Jesus. When He stood before the governor, Pilate put this question to Him: "Are YOU the King of the Jews?"

"Are you using the word 'king' as YOU would use it (to mean rebel against Roman authority)," Jesus countered, "or as others would use it (to mean Hebrew Messiah)?"

"I am not a Jew, am I?" Pilate objected. "It was your own people and the hierarchy that turned you over to me! What have you done anyway?"

"I am not an earthly king," Jesus responded. "If I were, my men would be fighting to prevent my being handed over to the Jews. My kingdom, however, does not have its source in this sort of thing."

Pilate pressed Him, "So you ARE a king?"

"Yes, you may say that I am a king," Jesus responded. "The very reason I was born and the task for which I came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone who is open to truth listens to me."

“What is truth?” Pilate mused. So saying, he went back outside to the Jewish authorities and the crowd and announced, “As far as I’m concerned, I find no basis for a charge against this man.”

The religious authorities began multiplying accusations against Jesus. Confronted by these charges, He made no defense. So Pilate questioned Him once more, “Have you nothing to say for yourself? Do you not hear all the accusations they level against you?”

Nevertheless, He offered no rebuttal, not even to one single charge. The governor was completely astounded. But the priests persisted, “He’s a rabble-rouser, teaching all over the land of the Jews. He began in Galilee and has come all the way here!”

When Pilate heard “Galilee,” he wondered whether Jesus might be a Galilean. Upon ascertaining that He came under Herod’s jurisdiction, he referred the case of Herod, who was personally present in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was uncommonly pleased, because he had been wanting to have a look at Him for a long time. He had been hearing about Him and was even hoping to see Him perform some miracle. Although Herod plied Him with many questions, Jesus completely ignored them. The hierarchy and the theologians stood by, violently pressing their accusations. Then Herod and his soldiers treated Jesus with contempt and made fun of Him. Then they dressed Him in an elegant robe and sent Him back to Pilate. That very day Herod and Pilate became personal friends. Previously, in fact, they had been mutual enemies.

Pilate reconvened the religious and civil authorities and the people. “You have brought this man before me,” he began, “on a charge of subversion. Here I have examined him in your presence, but I find him not guilty of any of your accusations against him. So did Herod, so he referred him back to us. Clearly, he has done nothing to deserve death. I propose, therefore, to have him whipped and released.”

Now at every Passover festival it was customary for the governor to grant amnesty to one prisoner, anyone the crowd chose. However, among the revolutionaries in jail for assassinating someone during the uprising, there was a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So when the crowd went up to petition Pilate to grant them the usual privilege, Pilate said, “You have a custom that I should release one man for you during the Passover festival. Whom do you want me to release for you? Jesus Barabbas or Jesus the so-called Christ, ‘the king of the Jews?’” (In fact, he well knew that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him because they were jealous.)

While Pilate was sitting on the tribunal, his wife sent him a message that read, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man. In fact, I have suffered a great deal today because of a dream I had about him."

Meanwhile, however, the religious and civil authorities instigated the mob to demand the release of Barabbas to them and to demand Jesus' execution. So, when the governor repeated his question, "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" they all yelled with one voice, "Not this guy! Get him out of here! We want Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a brigand who had been imprisoned for an insurrection that had broken out in the city and for murder.

Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate addressed them once more, "But in that case, what am I to do with Jesus, the man you call Christ, the King of the Jews?"

Again they all roared back, "To the cross with him! Nail him to a cross!"

For the third time Pilate argued with them, "Why? What harm has he done? I have found in him no basis for the death penalty! I repeat: I will just punish him and let him go."

At this Pilate took Jesus and had Him lashed with a scourge. The soldiers twisted a thorny wreath and crowned Him with it, and threw over Him a reddish-purple cloak. They came up to Him repeatedly, saying, "O King of the Jews, we salute you!" then slapped Him in the face.

Pilate went out again and addressed the Jews, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to show you that I find him not guilty!"

So Jesus came out, wearing the thorny crown and the purple robe. Pilate proclaimed, "Here is the man!"

When the chief priests and their henchmen caught sight of Him, they roared, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

Pilate, exasperated, retorted, "YOU take him and do the crucifying! I find him NOT GUILTY!"

"We have a law," the Jews returned, "and by that law he ought to die, because he claimed to be God's Son."

When Pilate heard this, he became deeply alarmed. He went back into the palace again and quizzed Jesus, "Where ARE you from anyway?!"

Jesus, however, gave him no answer. So Pilate continued, "You refuse to talk to me? Don't you realize that I have the authority to set you free and the authority to nail you to a cross?!"

"You would have no authority over me," Jesus began, "if it had not been delegated to you from God. This is why the people who handed me over to you are guilty of the greater injustice."

From this point on Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, "If you let that man go, you are no friend of Caesar! Anyone who claims to be a king defies Caesar!"

When Pilate heard this, he had Jesus brought out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place called "the Stone Pavement." (*Gabbatha* is the Hebrew word for it.) The time was now about six o'clock in the morning on Friday of Passover week. Pilate announced to the Jews, "Here is your King! But they kept insisting, shouting all the louder and demanding, "Take him away! Get him out of here! Hang him on a cross!"

"Shall I crucify your king?!" demanded Pilate.

"We have no king," the chief priests replied, "but Caesar!"

So, when Pilate realized that he was getting nowhere and a riot was brewing, he took water and washed his hands in the presence of the crowd, affirming, "I am not responsible for this man's death. It is your concern."

At this all the people shouted back, "We'll take the responsibility for his death—we and our descendants!"

Their shouting won the battle. Pilate decided to grant their demands. Desiring to satisfy the people, he released the man who had been imprisoned for terrorism, the one they wanted, even Barabbas! Having already scourged Jesus, he surrendered Him over to them to be crucified just as they desired.

Then the governor's soldiers led Jesus away into the courtyard of the barracks (i.e. the governor's headquarters). There they mustered the entire battalion before Jesus. Next they stripped Him and robed Him in a scarlet mantle. Weaving a wreath of thorny branches they put it on His head, and placed a reed staff in His right hand. They bowed low before Him in mock salute: "Long live the King of the Jews!" They spit on Him and took the reed and began beating Him over the head with it. After this mockery was over, they stripped Him of the purple cloak, and dressed Him in His own clothes and led Him out to be crucified.

SUMMARY

After all-night trials before Jewish authorities, in the early morning hours Jesus was tried hurriedly by the entire Sanhedrin, hauled before Pilate who quickly recognized Jesus' innocence of the charges of political insurrection. This verdict was confirmed by Herod and a

dream of Pilate's wife. Pilate drove for an easy compromise by proposing to release Jesus under the Passover-amnesty, and then by trying to arouse sympathy for Jesus by scourging Him. None of this dallying worked to convince the adamant Jewish opposition to Jesus. Rather, the mob howled for the release of a terrorist and for the execution of Pilate's uncondemned prisoner, Jesus. Before the final verdict Pilate wavered toward outright sympathy for Jesus, but at last crumbled before political blackmail. Jesus was mocked by Pilate's and Herod's men. Throughout the barrage of Jewish accusations and Roman crudity, Jesus maintained a majestic calm, His spirit under God's control, saying nothing more than absolutely necessary to affirm His true mission and identity.

NOTES

THE JUDGE ON TRIAL

Our Lord who will judge the world in righteousness permitted Himself to be tried and condemned before such sinners, even though "He had done no violence nor was any deceit in his mouth" (Isa. 53:9). He knew where this was all leading, and was prepared to go to the limit undeservedly!

For Jesus' consignment to *Pilate*, see on 27:2. Pilate was both *procurator* and *prefect*. An agent of the emperor to whom he was directly responsible for the management of the financial affairs of the province, he was *procurator* (Tacitus, *Annals*, XV, 44). As administrative official and magistrate over the province of Judea, he was *prefect*. (Concerning *Pilate*, cf. *Ant.* XVIII, 2, 2; 3, 1f.; 4: 1f.; *Wars*, II, 9, 2-4.) His long administration was due more to Tiberius' negligence than to Pilate's virtue as a ruler (*Ant.* XVIII 6, 5).

Prefect he was; perfect he was not. That he was given to maladministration was no secret. Philo of Alexandria wrote a letter to the Emperor Caligula for Herod Agrippa I, characterizing this procurator as "inflexible, merciless and stubborn." Among the defects of his administration are cited "fraud, violence, theft, torture, insults, frequent executions without due trial and a constant, intolerable cruelty" (*De Legatione ad Caium* § 38). Even though the Jews considered Pilate cruel, when it is their turn to be crude and cruel, they need him. Often visible in Jesus' trial is an abandonment of strict justice in favor of expediency that seems to be characteristic of the man. Even though he was not given to compliant accommodation, his

political wisdom would demand he be no more provocative than necessary. In fact, the priestly aristocracy had few serious problems with Pilate, since in the ten years of his mandate (26-36 A.D.), he never substituted Caiaphas, high priest from 18-37 A.D. But an uneasy calm does not mean peace or agreement when it is merely a cease-fire and the protagonists continue to maneuver for supremacy. So it must not be supposed that Pilate would *willingly* collaborate with the aristocracy to eliminate Jesus as a favor to them.

The Jewish rulers knew their man and the strategy to use to break him. They simply pressured him constantly until he cracked. That he would crumble was never in question, the only uncertainty being how soon. On both sides, when one tactic failed, another was introduced. The Jews simply had more flexibility, more determination to achieve their goal and more audacity.

Summarizing, Matthew focuses on the main points of Pilate's interrogation, without specifying, however, what the Roman knew about the case or the reason for his questions. While Jesus was hauled inside the Praetorium, His legalistic accusers, refusing to enter a contaminating pagan building, piously waited outside. There Pilate, deferring to their scruples, met them to learn the nature of the charges lodged against Jesus (John 18:28f.).

PLAN A: They attempt to bluff the Prefect into signing Jesus' death warrant without opening the case. Labelling Jesus an "evil-doer" they both imply they have already judged Him by due process of Jewish law and that Pilate should simply rubber-stamp the verdict of their court. Grasping their insinuation, he implied that, if the obvious Jewishness of the question rendered it so difficult of explanation before a Roman tribunal, they themselves should try the case. (Cf. Acts 18:12-15.) He did not wish to embroil himself in a local religious quarrel. Since he did not foresee a capital sentence involved, it is clear he had no secret agreement with Caiaphas to eliminate a mutual Enemy, as some suspect. The rulers are thus forced to uncover their own judiciary impotence: legally, they themselves cannot execute the death penalty (John 18:29-32). Even if, as some affirm on the basis of texts such as *Ant.* XX,9,1; *Wars* VI,2,4; Acts 6:12—7:60; 22:30; 21:28f.; 22:30; 25:9-11; possibly *Mishna, Sanh.* 7.1f.; *Gemara* 52b; *Tosephta* 9.11, the Sanhedrin could pronounce a death sentence in *religious* cases, they had cut the ground from under themselves by referring Jesus' case to Pilate on a strictly *political* charge.

The same authority that had stripped this high council of the power of the death penalty also required the Roman judges to examine capital

cases, not privately, but publicly; not on vague suspicions but on specific accusations. In harmony with the essentially public character of Roman justice (cf. Acts 16:19f.; 17:6; 18:12, 17; 25:6f.; *War* II,9, 3; II,14,8), this Roman magistrate justly refused to hand down a death penalty in a case untried by him. So, he rightly chose to open and try the case himself.

PLAN B: They are forced to prefer formal charges on which to proceed legally against the Defendant: "We found this man subverting our nation, He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar, and claims to be Christ a king" (Luke 23:2). These three accusations rise in a crescendo from a generic indictment of subversion to two specific counts of hostility to Roman authority, that culminate in His claim to be an anointed monarch (*christòn basiléa*). The real charge, blasphemy, is carefully kept out of sight, lest the Procurator throw their case out of court without even hearing it (cf. Acts 18:14-16).

The clergy's procedure is completely unprincipled. There is no objective validity in their blatantly political accusation that Jesus claims to be *king of the Jews*, because they attribute to Him their own subjective views as to what Messiahship means. If, as they conceived it, political and military power were wrapped up in Messiahship, then, for Jesus to claim to be "Son of David," hence truly *king of the Jews*, is tantamount to claiming to be supernatural Ruler, the Son of man and Son of God and claiming the right to exercise His regal power on behalf of Israel against all her enemies, now particularly Rome! So, from their own standpoint, it is not completely correct to say that the Jews radically transformed their own religious quarrels into political accusations of such a nature as would interest the governor, because, for them, the true Messiah would be both religious, political and supernatural. They had astutely formulated an indictment large enough to convict Jesus before any court, Roman or Jewish.

Two judges meet

27:11 Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, saying, Art thou the King of the Jews? And Jesus said unto him, Thou sayest. In the Praetorium now, Jesus stood before the governor. Anyone, whose scruples permitted him to enter, could witness this interrogation.

This experienced governor knew men and could sense that this quiet, dignified man before him was perhaps a harmless religious fanatic, but certainly no wild-eyed revolutionary or rival claimant to Caesar's authority. The situation was too unreal for Pilate to take the charge seriously, but, for form's sake, he must ask this ridiculous question. Selecting the main thrust of the accusations, Pilate perhaps meant, "Do YOU, who lack every indication of proud ambition and the other marks of world power, claim to be the Jew's king?"

However, this question contains an unfortunate misunderstanding. *King of the Jews* smacks of a state title as compared with the more intimately religious expression, "the King of Israel" (27:42; cf. John 1:49). So, before answering it, the Lord must clarify the issue, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me" (John 18:34)?

1. The question is not Pilate's own desire to know about God's Messianic Kingdom. This is but the opening gambit of the trial. The personality of Jesus had not yet begun to produce any effect on Pilate. Instead, he is repeating only the Jewish charges.
2. Further, if the question were Pilate's own, the title, *the King of the Jews*, would suggest seditious connotations, but if Jewish, Jesus could explain its true Messianic connotations.

Although Pilate comprehended Him, as a Roman he denied sharing Jewish expectations, implying no personal interest in such things. He had based this question on strictly Jewish premises. Then, to clarify the indefinite, blanket accusations, Pilate tried a direct approach, pressing his Prisoner to talk about His activities. Jesus explained simply that the essentially unworldly character of His royal authority excluded any earthly political ambitions, Jewish or Gentile. This excludes the use of contemporary world power to establish the universal supremacy He envisioned. That no military uprising had materialized to rescue Him was circumstantial evidence that His dominion is not a thing of this world. Still perplexed, Pilate came back, "So you are a king after all" (John 18:33-37)?

Thou sayest implies, therefore, "The words are yours. I must qualify the terminology, inasmuch as it does not accurately reflect my own view of my identity. I cannot answer your question with an unqualified yes or no, but I shall answer it, Yes, with reservations." (See notes on 26:64.) Some editors see Jesus' answer in all four Gospels (*sù legeis hòti basileùs eimi*) as a question: "Would you say sō

[that I am a king]?" Using Pilate's own definition of "king," Jesus challenged him to decide on the basis of the knowable facts of His life, ministry and movement. To interpret Jesus' answer this way neither considers it a "doubtful answer" nor ambiguous, as if the doubt were His, but to show by what route Jesus amply removed the doubt concerning the meaning of Pilate's words. To clarify a doubt does not create ambiguity, but removes it.

Next, the Lord proceeded to explain of what sort kingdom He is ruler. The sovereignty of truth, rather than military might or political acumen, is the basis of the Kingdom over which He was born to rule (John 18:37, 38). His Kingdom's universal character denied exclusively Jewish privilege and was open to "everyone who is of the truth [and] hears my voice" (John 18:37). Although the superficial Pilate, governed by a worldly realism, failed to see how idealistic, absolute truth could have anything concrete to do with earthly rule, he correctly grasped that this divine realism was the true sense in which Jesus claimed to be *King of the Jews*. (Cf. Zech. 9:9; Isa. 9:6; Ps. 2:6; 110:1, etc.) In this light, Pilate could only acquit Jesus of being a political agitator.

At this point Pilate went out to the Jews and announced Jesus' acquittal (John 18:38). The trial should have been over, but Pilate lacked the decisiveness and conscience of a Claudius Lysias to throw Roman power into the equation and save Jesus. (Cf. Acts 23:16-35.) There followed no order to release the Nazarene, no dismissal of the throng, nothing. Pilate's first judicial error was perhaps perceived essential to avoid turning his audience into bitter accusers before Tiberius.

He apparently took Jesus outside with him (John 18:38; cf. Matt. 26:12f.). This afforded him opportunity for a direct confrontation between the accusers and the Accused. Furious over the Roman acquittal, the chief priests opened fire, unleashing an avalanche of imputations (Mark 15:3). Perhaps they poured out details to support the initial charges (Luke 23:2): "He stirs up the people teaching through all Judea, from Galilee even to this place" (Luke 23:5). The thrust of these furious efforts would be to establish the widespread character of His defiance toward the authorities, their traditional law and leadership, pointing to a rebellious spirit toward authority capable of deep hostility toward Roman supremacy.

Majestic silence

27:12 **And when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he answered them nothing.** Jesus' attackers are one solid front: *elders*, i.e. Sanhedrinists, *and the chief priests*. Matthew's one article treats both groups as one unit. For both of these holders of religio-political power Jesus was a danger because in various ways He put in doubt some of the fundamental tenets of traditional Judaism (12:8; 15:1-20; John 4:21; Mark 7:19, etc.). His preaching of the Kingdom of God, even if theoretically the hope of the aristocracy too, could be interpreted as a threat to their political and social position.

Having already answered the one question on which His testimony was required, *He answered them nothing*. Why should He participate in a mindless debate where only irreligious political considerations are paramount, its sinister charges false and no one is seriously interested in the truth? (Cf. Isa. 50:6-9.) Here is exemplified the moral power of a God-controlled life under fire: "when they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly" (I Peter 2:18ff.).

Magnificent imperturbability under strain

23:13 **Then saith Pilate unto him, Hearest thou not how many things they witness against thee?** Having observed the Lord's un-fanatical, deep sincerity and wisdom, the procurator recognized how unfounded were the charges, but, as dispassionate magistrate, he could not appear to favor the accused by answering them himself. It was up to Jesus to refute them. Pilate had never concluded a trial where there were no counter-arguments. Had Jesus answered the charges, He would have relieved Pilate of the responsibility.

Jesus, the man who had a brilliant comeback for everyone, should be worshipped not only for His treasured sayings, but also for His marvellous silence in the presence of people who prejudged Him and whose only principle of truth and justice was a calculating pragmatism. Such prejudice and expediency has no taste for final truth. Neither takes the Lord seriously, so why should He talk?

The might of meekness

27:14 **And he gave him no answer, not even to one word: insomuch that the governor marvelled greatly.** Pilate is surprised and perplexed

by Jesus' adamant silence, because He had been so pleasant and helpful before. Why not talk now? Was he above all fear of death? He was certainly not the political trouble-maker of wild-eyed demagogue the authorities had described Him to be. The judge sees Him as the victim of a vicious plot, admirably unmoved by the ferocity of His enemies and patient to a fault.

Yet His mysterious suffering in silence is not the dumbness of stupidity but the discipline of self-possession. His consciousness of mission gave Him moral power immeasurably superior to His seemingly powerful accusers. While everyone around wavered or plotted, Jesus continued to keep His mind on what was really happening:

1. Jesus knew that, without His making a strenuous personal defense, Pilate could discern for himself the falseness and ill-disgusted malice of the charges. No rebuttal is so powerful as that which arises from arguments supplied by the opposition.
2. Without disrespect for this court, Jesus need not answer charges which its judge had already recognized as unfounded (Luke 23:4; John 18:38). Did Pilate's former verdict mean nothing?
3. Would Pilate have had the moral courage to free Him, had He satisfactorily silenced every charge?
4. Even if arguments and counter-arguments could keep such dead-end investigations going for months, Jesus is not here to win the debate or be justified, but to give His life for the sins of the world. He would not now frustrate the reason for His whole earthly mission (20:28; John 12:23-33).
5. Jesus could wait for His truer, worthier justification in the Father's approval (John 5:41, 44; 7:18). Pilate could not guess, however, that Jesus' impressive silence had already been decided long before (Isa. 53:7).

The prefect was bogged down in the uncomfortable dilemma of doing his duty as an objective magistrate in which case he must anger the Jewish high council and commit political suicide or please the Jews, corrupt his office and commit moral suicide. Just then the chance word, "Galilee," in the prosecution's desperate harangue suggested a possible escape: the embarrassing Prisoner is a Galilean, therefore, under the jurisdiction of Herod to whom He could be referred (Luke 23:5-12). This is another error, because why, after acquitting Him, send Jesus to Antipas? The trial has started to slide into bargaining and maneuvering that will become uncontrollable.

However, Pilate was to learn that his clever little master-stroke of diplomacy only half-succeeded. Even if the petty king deeply appreciated the unexpected courtesy (cf. Luke 9:9) and became his ally, nevertheless, this shrewd politician bounced the responsibility back into Pilate's court. Unfortunately for Pilate, the delay of sending Jesus to Herod gave the hierarchy time to regroup and organize their strategy to demand the release of Barabbas (Mark 15:8).

Nevertheless, the interrogation before Herod, reported in Pilate's summation (Luke 23:14f.), served to underscore Jesus' innocence recognized by all magistrates to whom His case was submitted. (It is unlikely that jealous Antipas would have returned a really guilty man to his Roman rival with whom he appears to have had a jurisdictional dispute.) As protectors of the innocent, both Herod and Pilate were obligated to acquit Jesus without hesitation. But because both men declined to save Jesus despite the falsity of the charges against Him, history rightly charges them with moral complicity along with the Sanhedrin and priesthood (Acts 4:25-27).

In fact, Pilate was on the point of releasing Jesus when he wavered. First, he inconsistently expressed willingness to scourge an innocent man to pacify the priests. These, however, discerned that a magistrate who offered to concede this much might yet be pressured to give the death sentence (Luke 23:16). To break him, all they needed was patience.

Next, the idea of liberating the Nazarene gave him another idea: why not liberate Him as an act of clemency?

THE BLOCKED EMERGENCY EXIT

27:15 Now at the feast the governor was wont to release unto the multitudes one prisoner, whom they would. Of apparently Jewish origin (cf. John 18:39: "You have a custom"), this practice was continued by Roman rulers to foster political good-will toward Rome in this occupied, restless nation, by releasing *one prisoner* among the Jews' countrymen. (Cf. *Ant.* XX,9,3.) *At the feast (katà heortên:* "feast after feast") seems to be a general expression for the celebration, not necessarily to the supper itself. (Cf. "at the Passover" John 18:39.)

Was this custom first appealed to by Pilate as an excuse for releasing Jesus (cf. John 18:39), or by the Jews who, upon hearing Pilate's proposal to release Jesus, are reminded of this yearly custom and

so appeal to its usual terms to get what they want? Or was this mechanism urged by a disciple in a futile, desperate effort to save Jesus, which His enemies twisted into a weapon against Him? (Cf. Mark 15:8; see the PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY for my tentative sequence of events.) Whatever the sequence, it is clear that, to deflect their unreasoning fury from Jesus, Pilate promptly seized upon this suggestion, hoping to appeal to the best in these men by presenting a prisoner already sufficiently punished as the candidate for liberation this year. However, this gave the people, rather than the governor, the right to name the man to be released. Even so, Pilate is prepared to take this risk, because it would verify his suspicion that Jesus' popularity, rather than treason, lay at the base of the jealousy of the ruling class.

Although the *official* antagonism to Jesus had turned up nothing concretely treasonable, Pilate's political sixth sense may have detected further developments possible in the case. What did *the people* think about a political king? Pilate would not be as much interested in whether Jesus or anyone else considered himself a political messiah, as in *whether* the people thought He was and *why*. So, if they chose to follow this harmless Teacher, as Pilate imagined they would, Rome would have no problems from Him or them. If they chose the true terrorist instead, real trouble was ahead for Roman authority. In this event Barabbas would serve contemporaneously as a test case to measure this danger and as a means to save Jesus.

THE TRUE ALTERNATIVE TO JESUS CHRIST

27:16 **And they had then a notable prisoner, called Barabbas.** A *notable prisoner* indeed! The chance pawn in this dirty game was apparently one of several notorious terrorists who had "committed murder to the insurrection" (Mark 15:7) which "started in the city" of Jerusalem (Luke 23:19, 25). Further, John (18:40) indicates: "Now Barabbas was a robber" (*leistés*). Although *leistés* certainly is a "robber, highwayman, bandit," this term also depicted a "revolutionary, insurrectionist" (Arndt-Gingrich, 474; Rocci, 1144). When the campaigns of the underground do not enjoy adequate financial backing, its clandestine activities must be financed by banditry. (Cf. Josephus, *Wars* II,12,5; cf. *Ant.* XVIII, 1,1; XVII,10.)

While both Roman and Jewish authorities agreed that upsetting the status quo was as unwelcome as it was dangerous, they would not

necessarily have agreed on *what* should be done with these insurrectionists or *when*.

1. The Roman governor could consider it his duty to crucify these terrorists, making it indisputably clear by this show of Roman justice who is really in power and what happens to those brazen souls that dare defy the Empire. The maximum effect could be gained by such exemplary executions especially on a feast day when Jerusalem would be crowded with pilgrims from all over the Empire. (Cf. Varus' iron-fisted approach: *Wars*, II,5,2.)
2. The Jewish authorities could well surmise that other Jewish terrorists would vindicate the death of its popular patriotic heroes, and the escalation must explode in revolt. (Cf. *Ant.* XVII,6,2-4; 9:1-3.) Therefore, the charged atmosphere of a feast like the Passover was the worst possible moment for eliminating elements subversive even to the Jewish authorities themselves. (Cf. *Wars* II,12,1.)

Consequently, even though the Sadducean priesthood, because of its virtual dependence upon Rome, was favorable to the execution of all subversives, since an explosive Jewish Palestine Liberation Organization threatened the delicate balance in the political and economic interests of Caiaphas and company, these latter must have clearly discerned that, to avoid touching off an explosive grass-roots rebellion, *they must save the life of Barabbas almost as much as they must eliminate the Nazarene.*

A chance pawn in a dirty game

27:17 **When therefore they were gathered together, Pilate said unto them, Whom will ye that I release unto you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?** The Jews' gathering together suggests two situations that are not mutually exclusive:

1. A temporary recess had been called while Jesus was sent to Herod (Luke 23:7-16). The elders, chief priests and their henchmen are now reassembled. Their numbers could qualify as a "crowd" (Mark 15:8).
2. A crowd is beginning to gather outside the Praetorium as word of the trial spreads over the city (27:17; Mark 15:8).

So, if Pilate grasped the political tensions which dictated the choices of the Jewish politicians, he could pit their own fears against them and save the Nazarene rabbi. Pilate was no fool. He too sensed that the

charged atmosphere of a popular feast was no time to make an exaggerated display of Roman force by crucifying the insurrectionists without risking the very peace he was charged with maintaining.

His ploy is to play these two radically contrasting types of men against each other in the hope that the Jews themselves would have understood that there is no serious reason to execute Jesus. By presenting the Jewish public with a relatively easy either/or choice, they would be morally bound to request the release of Jesus. Further, he perceived that if he could succeed in dividing the Jewish public from their leadership—had not the masses enthusiastically acclaimed the Galilean a few days earlier?—he could hope these popular supporters could out-shout the rulers and rescue Jesus. This would free Pilate to crucify Barabbas later and Roman justice would be satisfied.

Some manuscripts write the terrorist's name "Jesus Barabbas." (Cf. *A Textual Commentary*, 67f.) It would appear that Barabbas' personal name was Jesus, and was suppressed by Christian scribes out of reverence for Christ. Whether Pilate understood it or not, Jewish listeners could catch the striking word-play in the governor's options: Jesus (= "Savior") *Barabbas* (= "son of a father") or *Jesus* (= "Savior") *who is called Christ*, who had called God His Father.

Jesus who is called Christ is not Pilate's sarcastic invention nor the dreamed-up conviction of his wife, but the authorities' original accusation (Luke 23:2). That Mark and John substitute "the King of the Jews" for *Christ*, suggests that these terms were in some sense synonymous and echo the authorities' charge. Further, by using this title, he reminded any friends Jesus had in the crowd of His claim to be Messiah, expecting them to react positively to the Man who just a day or so before was thus acclaimed by so many. It also handed Pilate the advantage of sounding out the crowd's attitude toward a title which their rulers considered a terrible insult when applied to Jesus. This choice had all the advantages. So what could go wrong? But Pilate was not to crawl out of his dilemma so easily.

The real motivation

27:18 For he knew that for envy they had delivered him up. The requirements of his office demanded that Pilate cultivate informers among the Jews to keep him abreast of events and current opinion. He

was aware that the Galilean's real crime was not insurrection, about which the rulers would be considerably less concerned, but the intolerable competition of His wide popularity and influence as a teacher. The prefect could guess that, if Jesus were really guilty of the crimes attributed to Him, He would not be the object of such violent hatred as these Sanhedrinists and priests manifest. The simplest explanation for their behavior is that they were uncontrollably jealous of Him.

An unsolicited vote for Jesus

27:19 And while he was sitting on the judgment-seat, his wife sent unto him, saying, Have thou nothing to do with that righteous man; for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him. Pilate has taken his place on the judge's bench (*béma*) located at "the Pavement" (John 19:13). His own conclusions reassured by Herod's favorable finding, the Prefect launched his "easy alternative," and now awaits the Jewish answer. At this point he is interrupted by an urgent note from his wife.

Her husband had arisen early to open the Roman tribunal for justice. Sleeping late, she was shaken by a vivid dream so convincing that she felt compelled to warn Pilate against trifling with the guileless Jesus. Whether or not this Roman gave particular credence or signs as from God, this ominous message clearly confirmed the conclusion to which he himself had already come: Jesus is innocent.

But his wife's advice was to prove impossible. To *have nothing to do with that righteous man* was something Pilate could *not* do. Although he must decide, he was trying every means to escape his responsibility as judge. He should simply have thrown the case out of court, but he chose not to.

Is it significant for Matthew's readers that, beside Pilates' feeble efforts, the only voice raised in Jesus' defense in that terrible hour was that of *a Gentile woman*? Did God speak to her as to the other Roman, Cornelius (Acts 10)? Was the timing planned to be God's merciful second warning to Pilate to beware of trifling with truth and to defend Him in justice? Why record this weird, eventually ineffectual dream? Did God wish the guiltlessness of His Son established beyond all doubt, even defended by *a Gentile woman*?

When in doubt, let others do your thinking

27:20 Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas, and destroy Jesus. While it is

unquestionably *the chief priests* and their associates who lead the drive for Jesus' destruction, *the elders* "of the people" (cf. 26:3, 47, 57, 59; 27:1, 3, 41, 62?; 28:12) are as much involved in *persuading the multitudes to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus* as are the ecclesiastics. The united shout of these august elders of Israel in the front row alone would effectively sway the others. Taking no chances, they and their henchmen also actively infiltrated the crowd to advise and intimidate, inciting it to act. (*anéseisan* > *se ò*, "shake up, stir up, instigate." cf. Mark 15:11). As the crowd grew, every new-comer could be "instructed" how to vote when the issue was raised. With what arguments? A vote for Barabbas was a vote for nationalism and freedom. As for the Galilean prophet, had not the nation's highest tribunal itself heard His "blasphemy?" No one is allowed to see the contradiction that Jesus is accused before Pilate of the same crime for which they recommend Barabbas to the people.

Were there any present who, just a few days earlier, had shouted, "Hosanna"? Although it is quite possible that, at this early morning hour, few if any of Jesus' Galilean followers were stirring or had yet learned of His betrayal, arrests and trials, nevertheless, in a city where the many transfers of Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate to Herod and back would not be missed and the excited word-of-mouth news of His trials must have sent a shock-wave of horror among His followers, why would they not appear? But if some disciples came, their shock at seeing their presumed Messiah dragged around as a beaten man in the hands of a pagan prefect may have proved too much. How could that poor beggar be the true Christ of God? Again, lately He had not acted much like a world leader, refusing to use His supernatural power to obliterate opposition to His program. So their own deep doubts and disillusionment, the unrelenting pressure of the priests' partisans and the anonymity of the crowd conspired to counsel this radical shift of loyalty, making them quite ready to yell for the "imposter's" death.

However, the suspicion that the crowds were fickle may itself be unjust. Granted, Sunday's hero may become Friday's criminal in the popular ratings. But that crowd at the Praetorium and those shouting Hosanna at the Triumphal Entry *may not be the same people*, because Matthew clearly distinguished the Jerusalemites from Jesus' supporters (21:10f.). Who can deny that the voices of any friends of Jesus would have been totally ignored, shouted down or completely unheard in the roar of the multitude?

The moment of truth

27:21 **But the governor answered and said unto them, Which of the two will ye that I release unto you? And they said, Barabbas.** Perhaps bringing out the two men together in the prevailing juridical confusion, Pilate called for a decision. But under the influence of the hierarchy, the crowds bypassed Pilate's candidate in favor of Barabbas, perhaps even admired by the baser elements of this mob. In a wall of sound his answer came back, *Barabbas!* (Luke 23:18). Although true before, now as never, our Lord "was despised and rejected by men" (Isa. 53:3).

The inescapable question

27:22 **Pilate saith unto them, What then shall I do unto Jesus who is called Christ? They all say, Let him be crucified.** Pilate found himself, not with a neat political solution, but obligated to release a dangerous criminal and with Jesus still on his hands for judgment. In addressing them once more Pilate desired to release Jesus (Luke 23:20).

Some attack Pilate's question as devoid of historical authenticity, because it could hardly be admitted that a Roman governor would submit the choice of punishment for the prisoner *not* to be released. He could dicker with them over *which* prisoner to release, given the annual custom to liberate one. But by what rule would he barter with them over the *sentencing* of the other? But is this the correct question? Granted, Pilate appears incredibly willing to leave the fate of Jesus to their caprice. But does this simply prove that the man fell beneath the responsibilities of his high office? Many anomalies in this trial find their explanation in Pilate's character.

They all say, Let him be crucified. Their repeated, vehement reply is unmistakable, unanimous rejection (Mark 15:13; Luke 23:21). Over any other form of execution, they demand the prolonged shame and cruel torture of a Roman crucifixion. (Cf. Num. 25:4; Deut. 21:22f.; II Sam. 21:6; *Wars* VII,6,4.) However even a Jew had crucified Jews before (*Ant.* XIII,14,2; *Wars*, I,4,6). Such a sentence would resoundingly crush all suspicion that the Nazarene were Israel's Messiah. Hanging Him on a tree would leave Him under the stigma of being, not the Chosen of God, but the Cursed of God (Deut. 21:22f.; Gal. 3:13). "Christ crucified" would always be a scandal to unbelieving Israel (I Cor. 1:23). Further it would deflect all bitterness

over His death to the Romans and significantly defuse the possibility of a grass-roots uprising against Jewish leaders among His followers.

When truth is on the other side, yell louder

27:23 And he said, Why, what evil hath he done? But they cried out exceedingly, saying, Let him be crucified. Two opposite views of Pilate's earnest protest are possible:

1. Unwilling to believe their unjust popular choice, Pilate stubbornly and quite unstrategically continued a verbal duel with a mob after it expressed its will. It would have been easier to tame a hurricane with a lullaby!
2. Pilate combines frankness and subtlety by openly implying Jesus innocence while learning whether the crowd really believes the position they have taken.

Either way, this question represents the third clear expression of Pilate's conviction of the groundlessness of their charges and that Jesus has done nothing deserving death. (a. Luke 23:4 = John 18:38. b. Luke 23:14f. c. Luke 23:22.) John registers two more attempts of Pilate to convince the Jews of Jesus' juridical innocence (John 19:4, 6).

Exasperated by this non-trial, Pilate tried another tack by scourging Jesus: the tender mercy of lashing a man half to death (Luke 23:22; John 19:1ff.; see notes on 27:26)! To appeal to their humanity, he brought out the pitiful Figure. But the well-oiled religious machine rolled over compassion and demanded Jesus' crucifixion. Again Pilate threw the case out of court (John 19:4, 6). "Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no crime in him" (John 19:6).

Even this answer is attacked as having no historical truth, because the Jews, if they could carry out the death sentence, would have stoned Jesus (as the penalty for blasphemy) or they would have strangled Him (as penalty for false prophecy). Consequently, these protestations of Jesus' innocence on the part of Pilate are viewed as an artifice of the Evangelist to place the blame more firmly on the Jews. But the criticism itself is invalid, in that Pilate's language is spoken in his own idiom in terms of his own Roman penal code ("crucify him"). He talks like a Roman, not intending to express himself in harmony with the Jewish penal code (strangulation or stoning). Others see his words as simply ironic, since Pilate knew they had no right to crucify anyone.

The prefect finally determined to release Jesus, only to find himself blocked by blackmail: "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend; everyone who makes himself a king sets himself against Caesar" (John 19:12). Pilate should have answered that Jesus had convincingly proven that His kingdom in no way imperiled Caesar. However, no longer reasoning calmly, the governor began to react out of brute fear, because the Jews had touched a sensitive nerve in this time-serving petty politician.

John times this moment as 6:00 a.m. Friday morning of Passover week (John 19:14 = 6th hour from midnight, sometimes referred to as Roman time). Mark notes that Jesus was on the cross three hours later, at 9:00 a.m. (Mark 15:25 = 3rd hour reckoned according to Jewish time from 6:00 a.m.; cf. Mark 15:33 = Matt. 27:45 = Luke 23:44). This early hour was facilitated by the opening of Roman tribunals at daybreak (Westcott). Their time notices were estimated relatively, i.e. by the sun, not measured by Swiss watches or Roman buglers.

Pilate dramatically sat down on the judgment seat, brought Jesus out before the mob, and with obvious irony announced, "Here is your King" (John 19:13f.)! Suggesting that this victim of Roman justice is the only king the Jews are likely to have, his vengeful taunt only infuriated the mob. But, Pilate, like Caiaphas, uttered an unintended truth: this representative Man shall yet be shown to be the only true King of the people of God.

But they cried out exceedingly, saying, Let him be crucified. Despite Pilate's repeated efforts to be reasonable, the authorities have no intention of reasoning or letting others do so. To cover their lack of proof and verifiable arguments, they substitute the angry shouting of the death chant.

Perhaps stunned that Jesus had no friends, when every earlier indication suggested otherwise, Pilate countered, "Shall I crucify your king" (John 19:15)? This may not be sarcastic, because by calling Him "your king," he makes one final stab at the conscience of anyone who might rise to claim Him. But because it suited their purpose, *the chief priests* made a most self-degrading declaration, "We have no king but Caesar." This claim of loyalty to Caesar constitutes the definitive heresy of the official representatives of theocratic Israel: in their desperate bargaining, they surrender the fundamental truth that God is their true King. (Cf. Judg. 8:23; I Sam. 8:7; 12:12.) Whether they intend it or not, their claim denies their own faith and

irresponsibly cancels Israel's theocratic position under the immediate sovereignty of God and, consequently, its nationalistic hopes. Although God's kingship would be unfailingly present with the Davidic dynasty (cf. II Sam. 7:12-16), they publicly renounce the hope that another would arise to set up the Kingdom of the Messiah. Casting themselves on the loving kindness of Caesar rather than on God's covenant promise, they unwittingly sealed their destiny. In that generation the legions of their chosen king, Caesar, invaded Palestine to wipe out their Temple, their City and their nation (Luke 19:41ff.; 23:27ff.).

The pressures of the practical,
the immediate, the tangible

27:24 So when Pilate saw that he prevailed nothing, but rather that a tumult was arising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this righteous man; see ye to it. This visual demonstration had a double value:

1. It returned crowd control back to Pilate. Their increasingly violent shouting had made it abundantly clear that he must act decisively to get the situation back under control. By this deliberate theatrical gesture, he got their attention. Curious, they stopped yelling.
2. Not only used among Gentiles, but also possibly part of Pilate's cultural awareness of Jewish practice, this ceremony was clear to the Jews in that it claimed innocence of a crime perpetrated by others (Deut. 21:6-9; II Sam. 3:28; Ps. 26:6; 73:13; cf. Acts 20:26). Pilate's solemn act did more than disclaim all responsibility for the judicial murder of their man, Jesus. It communicated to Israel not only his intention to exonerate his court but also the clear message that no tribunal would dare continue to demand sentence of death. In this thoroughly Jewish idiom he washed his hands of the case, not merely of the guilt of Jesus' crucifixion. Everyone should have dropped the question right there.

In reality, however, this unjust judge could not so easily exempt himself from real responsibility, because (1) no less than five times he had declared Jesus innocent. To permit this execution now is tantamount to murder. (2) Although it was the Jews alone who demanded Jesus' death, he was a magistrate! As representative of the constituted authority in Palestine with the power of life and death

at that time, he could not, on the basis of law and justice, turn Him over to them. *See ye to it* attempts to dump blame on others for acts that stain his own hands. (Cf. the rulers' disclaimer to Judas, 27:4.) The mistakes in his career plus the compromises on this day rose up to block his desire to save the most innocent victim of injustice in his career. He had sinned so long he could not now do right.

Here is written the moral paralysis of one supposedly powerful man. What brought about Pilate's surrender?

1. The emotion-driven mob is in an ugly mood. The governor had every reason to be nervous, because he had provoked bloody riots in similar circumstances during his administration. (Cf. Luke 13:1f.) His mission was to maintain the peace in the provinces, but he had already several unforgiven, unforgotten incidents on his record. With upwards of three million Jews in and around Jerusalem and only a cohort with which to maintain order, violence was Pilate's least defensible option. (Cf. *Wars II, XIV, 3; VI, 9, 3* for Passover crowd estimates in 65 and 70 A.D.)
2. When it finally surfaced, the real, root charge bewildered him: "We have a law, and by that law he ought to die, because he has made himself the Son of God" (John 19:7; Lev. 24:16). Since Roman authority was committed, wherever possible, to respect Jewish laws and traditions, Pilate was trapped between two legal codes, the Roman, which acquitted Jesus, and the Jewish, which would execute Him.
3. The rulers pressured Pilate by insinuating that they could ruin him politically by accusing him before a suspicious Tiberius for appearing to condone treason (John 19:12).
4. Mark uncovered another motivation, "wishing to satisfy the crowd . . ." (Mark 15:15). Political opportunism pure and simple.
5. Pilate jumped to the unwarranted conclusion that Jesus' popularity had evaporated. So why should anyone risk his own neck by throwing his weight behind a friendless wretch?

So, in Pilate's battle with his conscience, obedience lost out to expedience. Rather than risk his own political future, the now cowardly Pilate would sacrifice an innocent man. What is one Galilean more or less—especially if his own people are clamoring for his elimination? Little could any of them guess that this expedient not only temporarily saved people's lives by quenching a revolt in the making, but procured eternal salvation for all humanity!

Portentious words with
far-reaching consequences

27:25 And all the people answered and said, His blood be on us, and on our children. In the mind of Matthew what sense or value would the expression, *all the people*, have? Does he mean to inculcate the entire Jewish nation, when, as is likely, only a small, probably hand-picked minority of the people were present in front of the Praetorium that morning? *All the people*, as a technical phrase, may refer to the normal method of judgment and execution among the Jews. Whereas the witnesses cast the first stones, the death of the condemned is accomplished "by the hand of *all the people*" (Lev. 20:2, 27: 24:14; Num. 15:35f.; Deut. 13:9; 17:7; 21:21). In the sense that this cry is instigated by Israel's highest authorities acting in their official capacity, it becomes tantamount to inculcating the whole nation.

They who had maneuvered so long to bring about His death could smell victory in the air at last. Nothing can stop them now, so they recklessly utter this fearful self-curse. *His blood be on us, and on our children.* *Blood on someone's head* means "guilt for the life and death" of either that person or someone else (II Sam. 1:16; 3:28f.; cf. 14:9; Jer. 51:35; Acts 18:6). Eagerly seizing Pilate's "it is your responsibility!" (v. 24), the authorities and their supporters welcome the fearful responsibility for Jesus' execution.

Was their proud death-wish realized? In reality, it became an unintended, self-fulfilling prophecy. It would be one more of the paradoxes of this awful history, that, having preferred a violent terrorist over the Son of God, they would be destroyed by violence (22:7; 23:34ff.; 24:15ff.; *Wars*). Witness the deposing, banishment, suicide and death of the protagonists, Annas, Caiaphas, Herod, Pilate. Others would be crucified sooner or later (*Wars* II,14,9; V,11,1). All those who did not submit to Jesus' Lordship suffered the terrible war. (Cf. 24:15ff.) *And on our children*: how long this awesome fate must hang over their descendants, God only knows, because only He could know their individual responsibility and attitude toward His Son. (Cf. Deut. 5:9; I Thess. 2:14ff.) Complete release from this terrible curse was offered all Israel from the very next Pentecost onward (Acts 2; 3:17-26). Each person evidenced his personal repudiation of the rulers' sentence by his own conversion to Jesus (Acts 2:40; 3:26; 5:31; Heb. 10:29).

And yet, this assumption of full responsibility for Jesus' death was only a hypocritical gambit to obtain an immediate objective, because,

the outraged priests accused the early Gospel preachers, "You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood" (Acts 5:28).

But the inclusion of this mob-rule outcry on the part of Matthew is not a Christian effort to heap undeserved guilt on Israel, for Matthew paints Pilate in dark colors too. (See on 27:26.) Who, except on the basis of mere assertion, can prove that this supposed "apologetic interest of Matthew" is his tardy, prejudicial rewriting of history rather than the product of objective reporting? Must his facts be doubted, solely because they lead to conclusions distasteful to modern critics who, in the name of ecumenicity and tolerance, seem determined at all cost to diminish Jewish responsibility for this execution? In the name of justice, modern Germans can exercise a mature self-criticism that rightly condemns their nation's Jewish holocausts. Is it asking too much that everyone, including the Jews and their modern apologists, rise to the same objectivity to recognize and rectify the judicial farce perpetrated against Jesus so long ago? Further, God's punishment of Israel does not preclude mercy and forgiveness to everyone who turns in penitent faith to Jesus, be he Jewish or Gentile. Certainly, the Holy Spirit could never intend this verse to justify racial hatred or anti-Semitism. But it will do no good toward racial understanding to attempt to rewrite the facts on this ugly page of history. They can only be admitted and forgiven.

So far from being an anti-Jewish diatribe, Matthew's testimony preaches that the only way the stain of blood-guiltiness can be taken from any of us is through the mercy of that One Jew the power of whose blood can cleanse us from all unrighteousness (20:28; 26:27).

The unjustifiable sentence

27:26 Then released he unto them Barabbas; but Jesus he scourged and delivered to be crucified. So he collapsed, the tool of a race he despised, forced into a deed with which he had no sympathy. Is this gutless capitulation by Pilate a formal sentence? After Pilate's repeated protestations of Jesus' innocence (Luke 23:4; John 18:38; Luke 23:14f.; Matt. 27:23 = Mark 15:14 = Luke 23:22; John 19:4, 6; Matt. 27:24), it would seem juridically impossible that any death sentence could be given. Luke seems to affirm that "Pilate gave sentence that their demands should be granted" (Luke 23:24: *kai Pilátos epékrinen genésthai tò aítēma autôn*).

Even though *epikrino* can mean "decide, decree, choose, judge" (Rocci, 717), Arndt-Gingrich (294f) render Luke 23:24 "he decided that their demand should be granted."

This does not appear to be formal condemnation of Jesus on the basis of law, but merely the authorization required for crucifixion, extracted under duress. He only did what was necessary to get them off his back. Pilate's "frequent executions without preliminary sentencing" suggest that he might not have given formal sentence here either.

Symbolically, the prefect handed Him over to the priests (John 19:16) to the will of the people (Luke 23:25) but literally to the soldiers who did the will of the priests and people (27:27). *But Jesus he . . . delivered to be crucified (paradidomi)*. How many times Jesus was consigned to others: by Judas to the Sanhedrin, to Pilate and now to the soldiers! But none could have touched Him, had not God consigned Him to suffering and death (Isa. 53:4, 6, 10, 12).

But Jesus he scourged and delivered to be crucified. One must twist the facts to assert that the Gospel writers, living in a Roman world, tended more and more to excuse the Romans and incriminate the Jews with whom they had less to do. Although Pilate could and should have saved Jesus, it is an uncontestable fact that he, speaking for Caesar who spoke for the civilized world, sitting on a Roman tribunal and acting as a Roman judge, turned the uncondemnable Jesus over to Roman soldiers for a Roman-style execution.

But having *released unto them Barabbas*, Pilate must now take seriously the position of Jesus, whether he wanted to or not. He had played his last card and lost. His remaining choice is to *scourge and deliver [Jesus] to be crucified (tòn dè lesoūn fragellòsas parédoken hina staurothêi)*. Does this argue that the Romans *scoured Jesus twice*?

1. The participle (*phragellòsas*) could be translated as the ASV. However, because this rendering unnecessarily creates the impression that Jesus was scourged twice, it is better rendered, "having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified." Thus, Matthew and Mark merely summarize Jesus' tortures, rather than affirm that He was scourged again at this point, i.e. twice. (Cf. John 19:1-4.) Despite their postponing mention of the scourging until now, Matthew and Mark incidentally confirm John's account. Lenski (*Matthew*, 1097) argues that because Pilate's plan was to release Jesus after the mocking and scourging, it is less likely that these two events were repeated after the trial, but go together during it. He thinks John's sequence definitive and exclusive.

2. If it be thought that crucifixion is the paramount concern of the Jews, therefore, of Pilate, then perhaps care was taken not to exaggerate the scourging, lest the victim die under it before he could be crucified, then would not a second lashing in the same day be thought detrimental to this goal? Scourging intensified the poor wretch's suffering and hastened his death. On the other hand, Jesus' cross was carried by another: was He already too weakened to bear it Himself? Further, the prefect marvelled that Jesus died so quickly . . . (Mark 15:44).

Jesus' he scourged. A degrading punishment in itself, scourging, often if not always, preceded crucifixion. (Cf. *Wars* II,14,9; V,11,1; *Livy* xxxiii,36 cited by *I.S.B.E.*,2704.) Many died from this brutal torture inflicted by a whip made of leather thongs loaded with pieces of bone or metal. (Cf. Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* IV,15,4.) The only worthwhile comment and explanation of this wholly unjustifiable act is Isaiah's: "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (53:5).

Some view this scourging as reason for doubting the historicity of the account, because juridically absurd. In fact, despite one declaration of Jesus' innocence after another, Pilate ordered Jesus *scourged* and permitted his soldiers to torment Him?! (Luke 23:22; John 19:1-4!) If Jesus was innocent, why *scourge* Him? If guilty, why not crucify Him without hypocritically protesting His innocence?! Several reasons:

1. Scourging prior to the verdict even for innocent people was not at all thought irregular in that cruel era, being justified as part of the regular preliminary investigation to extract confessions or information (Acts 22:24; Eusebius, *loc. cit.*). Unsurprisingly, Pilate reiterated Jesus' innocence *after* the flagellation (John 19:4).
2. Jesus was not totally innocent: He had created what the rulers defined as disorders in Jewish society. For these, scourging would be judged an adequate penalty, from Pilate's point of view.
3. However, as the lesser of two evils Pilate unjustly subjected Jesus to a terrible scourging to bypass the worse death sentence, hoping that the crowd, moved to pity, would be content with this and allow His release (Luke 23:22; John 19:1-8). By presenting a battered, ridiculous clown-king, Pilate could argue the absurdity of thinking this contemptible dreamer able to foment the revolution with which they accused Him.

Neither understanding his Prisoner nor His accusers, Pilate could not have been more wrong: they would settle for nothing less than His death.

ROMAN SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

27:27 Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium, and gathered unto him the whole band. Is this a second mocking, the first having taken place earlier at the time of the scourging (John 19:1-3)? Or, should this paragraph be considered parallel to that earlier event, i.e. only one mocking, taking place in connection with the scourging? One must not assume that evil men bent on mocking God's Son must stop, satisfied with only one session of ridicule! That Luke (23:11) reports the derision by Herod and his men does not exclude a renewal of this crude sport by Pilate's men.

To face His accusers Jesus had been brought out of *the Praetorium*. (Cf. John 18:28; 19:13.) Now they return inside the open courtyard (Mark 15:16: *aulês*; cf. 26:69). *The whole band* (*hòlen tén spefan*) would normally number 600 men. (See on 26:47.) Here, the expression presumably includes everyone not on duty elsewhere. The number would be large because it is more than likely that the detachment would be confined to their barracks during the Passover, ready for action but keeping a low profile to avoid unnecessary incidents. Naturally bored by confinement, they were ready for any diversion these circumstances afforded.

What these Romans did may not be as significant as *why* they did it. Because Jesus was a condemned "King of the Jews," however misunderstood His own position thereabouts, these pagan Romans (some think they were Syrians in the service of Rome) waste no time to show contempt for the subject people by ridiculing the Jews' Messianic expectations. (Cf. *Wars* II,12:1f.; Philo of Alexandria, *In Flaccum*, 36-39, recounted a similar mockery by the Greeks during a visit of King Agrippa to Alexandria. Later, after the ill-fated Bar-Cochbah uprising in 114-117 A.D., Romans in Egypt did a similar burlesque. Flusser, *Jesus*, 172.)

Further, although Jesus was condemned to death, did He have no rights? Could these soldiers do with Him as they pleased? Here is exposed the seamier side of Roman justice and crude barracks life among the glorious Roman troops. Were such activities encouraged by their superiors to keep morale high and the troops merciless and

hard? That Pilate tacitly approved is suggested by there being no evident punishment of its perpetrators and by his publicly presenting Jesus costumed by the soldiers. To make a buffoon of the object of Jewish hatred furthered his purpose too (John 19:5). He may have simply ordered his men to "show the Jews what sort of a king their Jesus was" (Lenski, *Matthew*, 1100).

The Jewish clown-king ridiculed

27:28 And they stripped him, and put on him a scarlet robe. Was He a king? Let him be *stripped* of his peasant rags and robed worthily of his office! Was this Herod's gorgeous mantle (Luke 23:11), or, as is more likely, the common maroon-colored cloak of the soldier in imitation of the royal purple? On His bruised, bleeding back, anything would be rough.

27:29 And they platted a crown of thorns and put it upon his head, and a reed in his right hand; and they kneeled down before him, and mocked him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews! A thorny plant close at hand is rapidly twisted into a rude wreath. Whether it was their purpose to scoff or to wound him with the *thorns* is unimportant since, by weaving Him a wreath (*stéfanon*) of such *thorns*, they achieve both. Its leaves consciously imitated the laurel crown of the Emperor. The scepter *in his right hand* was but a *reed*. Who could guess that He would turn this *reed* into a rod of iron with which to rule the nations (Rev. 12:5; 19:15; Ps. 2:9)?

They kneeled down before him, and mocked him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews! Their sarcastic, pretended reverence for a crowned king is hardly aimed at Jesus personally about whom they may have known very little, much less personally hated. He is a thing, a symbol, not a real man before them. The rude mockery of these Romans aimed to degrade the Jews as a people for whom they had little love.

27:30 And they spat upon him, and took the reed and smote him on the head. As the time for His crucifixion drew near, the already rough game becomes more sadistic. The blows drive the crown of thorns further onto His head. Redemption is expensive! God's program, however, remained unchanged: Jesus must become Master *through* the caricature of His royalty which He endured (Heb. 5:8ff.).

27:31 And when they had mocked him, they took off from him the robe, and put on him his garments, and led him away to crucify him.

Did Jesus wear the crown of thorns to the cross? Although Pilate presented Jesus as a clown-king with robe and crown to the chief priests and officers (John 19:5), the purpose of the mocking is past. If *they took off from him the robe, and put on him his garments*, then the scarlet cloak and thorn-crown may have also been tossed aside, now useless.

What is to be done with Jesus Christ? Ever since Pilate asked it, everyone must confront this fateful question. Despite the falsity of political charges against Jesus, His message is far more political than the threatened armed revolution of the Zealots. Even if Christianity is no nationalistic rival to constituted authority, its uncompromising message of first loyalty to God and its impartial treatment of all men is far more radical and dangerous to the lords of this earth than that of small-time revolutionaries (18:1ff.; 20:25-28; Luke 22:25-27). It is an immature comprehension of the Christian message that fails to see how profoundly far-reaching Christ's demands are. This is not to foresee a City of God overtake the whole earth before Christ's return. It is to recognize how deeply all His claims on our allegiance and service reach into human society to transform it.

How many situations have we faced when, like Pilate, we should have defended Christ against a surging mob of unbelievers, and failed? Let us return in the grace of Christ, unashamedly determined to stand by Him no matter the cost. Let us dare to be the Christian our conscience demands. But poor Jesus took that mockery, because He loved us unto death and could foresee how it would break our hearts to see Him endure it.

These sufferings of Christ must awaken in us more than repugnance and indignation toward those who perpetrated them. Instead, they must stir in us a hatred toward those sins of our own that made this suffering necessary.

FACT QUESTIONS

1. From available sources prepare a file on Pilate.
2. Although Matthew does not state it, what must have been the charge brought before Pilate against Jesus? On what reasonable basis could Pilate have known to ask this?
3. Describe the political ramifications of each segment of this trial before Pilate, showing the pressure points involved.
4. Discuss: Pilate had as much political motive to crucify Jesus as

did the Jews themselves, and his attempts to save Jesus are a fabrication of the Gospel writers.

5. To what question did Jesus answer "Thou sayest"? What did He mean?
6. Explain how Jesus could confess to being a king, but Pilate would never consider it treason.
7. List the various efforts which Pilate made to release Jesus or to get out of condemning Him.
8. Was Pilate the first to remind the Jews of the political favor granted them of releasing a prisoner during the feast? How do you know?
9. When did Pilate's wife report her dream to Pilate? When did she have it? What was her testimony to Jesus' character?
10. Explain why Pilate's effort to trade Barabbas off for Jesus' release did not work.
11. Explain the people's expression: "His blood be on us and on our children."
12. When was Jesus scourged? Was He scourged more than once?
13. Where, when and how was He mocked by the soldiers? How many participated in this?
14. Give good reasons why Roman soldiers, who presumably would have no personal spite against Jesus, could be so cruel.
15. List every evidence of Jesus' moral stature as His trial before Pilate reveals this.

SECTION 74

JESUS IS CRUCIFIED AND BURIED

(Parallels: Mark 15:20-46; Luke 23:26-54; John 19:16-42)

DID MATTHEW FORGET THE PROPHECIES?

Anyone who has followed Matthew this far has encountered a formidable array of prophetic quotations that establish Jesus' divinely authenticated Messiahship. By contrast, Matthew now strangely omitted a number of prophetic fulfillments surrounding the crucifixion. Perhaps this is because this master writer knew that his Jewish readers would be so permeated with Psalm 22 that Jesus' Aramaic cry on the cross would, alone, be sufficient to suggest the details of the entire Psalm. (Could this have been Jesus' own purpose for shouting these specific words rather than something else?) Further, Isaiah's Servant of Jahveh may be discerned in every part of this entire section (Isa. 53). Simply to underscore every allusion of word of the Psalmist or