

Pontius Pilate: Prefect, not Proconsul, of Judea; Sejanus: Chief Administrator to Tiberius; the 3d Trial of Christ: before the Sanhedrin; the 4th Trial: before Pilate

"What Is Truth?"
Pontius Pilate's Fatal Question
Easter Sunday, 23 March 2008

1. *Pontius Pilate*

The nomen, *Pontius* \pon'-shi-us\ (Πόντιος *Pontios*), the second of the three usual names of the Roman male, indicates the stock, or family name from which Pilate was descended.

The cognomen, *Pilatus* \pī-la'-tus\ (Πειλάτος, *Peilatos*), the third of the three usual names of the Roman male (his praenomen, or first name of the three, is not known) refers to the branch of the *gens Pontius*, to which Pilate belonged.

He is known to biblical students as Pontius Pilate, and most Bible dictionaries assign to him the title of Procurator of the Roman Province of Judea.

A **procurator** was a Roman official superior to prefect and deputy of a provincial governor.

A **prefect** is a commander of auxiliary units, the Praetorian Guard; a citizen of equestrian status. Prefects also governed Egypt and, between A.D. 6 and 41, the Province of Judea.

Recent archaeological evidence reveals that the Roman authority over the Province of Judaea was not a procurator but a prefect. The prefect over Judea served under the governor of Syria based in Caesarea \ses-a-rē'-a\.

Pilate was the fifth Roman prefect of Judea, appointed c. A.D. 26 by emperor Tiberius to replace Valerius Gratus \va-lir'-ē-as grä'-tus\.

The English New Testament translates the Greek word ἡγεμών, *hēgemōn* with the word "governor" to indicate Pontius Pilate's title. This is obviously confusing so some explanation is needed.

Before A.D. 53, those who governed the province of Judea were called "prefects." After A.D. 53 they were called "procurators." What added to the confusion is that the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus referred to the ruler of Judea as "prefect," "procurator," and "governor."

The prefects were of the second highest social class called Equites, or Equestrians. They were members of the Roman order of knighthood which required them to have a net worth of 400,000 sesterces \ses-ter'-cēz\ (¼ denarius = \$20,000), not much to us but in those days a denarius, or 20¢, was a day's wage in Rome. For us at a minimum of \$7 an hour for eight hours would be 22.4-million dollars.

The definition, rank, and authority of these titles are brought into focus by an archaeological discovery in Caesarea in 1961. For details we turn to:

Dando-Collins, Stephen. “The Uniqueness of the Legion Commands in Egypt and Judea.” App. C in *Caesar’s Legions: The Epic Saga of Julius Caesar’s Elite Tenth Legion and the Armies of Rome*. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2002), 277-279:

During his reign Augustus [27 B.C.–A.D.14] appointed officials of Equestrian Order rank to govern Egypt and decreed that no Roman of senatorial rank could even enter the province of Egypt, at any time, for any reason, without the emperor’s specific permission. This was because Egypt was at the time considered the breadbasket of the empire. He who controlled the grain supply could control Rome, and to ensure that no senator ever even thought about challenging the emperor by taking the revolutionary road via Egypt, it was off-limits. For this reason the governor of Egypt was always a **prefect** [Commander of the Praetorian Guard; colonel], an officer of Equestrian rank, never of consular [senatorial] rank, as in other important provinces. He was also paid as much as a top proconsul, to maintain his loyalty and his incorruptibility.

Yet there were always legions in Egypt. Imperial legions were ordinarily commanded by **legates** [legion commanders: brigadier general], officers of senatorial rank. If legates had commanded legions in Egypt, their presence would have contravened the law of Augustus. (p. 277)

Tacitus [tas'-a-tas] [(c. A.D. 56-120) Roman orator, politician, and historian] confirms that from the time of Augustus, Rome’s armed forces in Egypt were always commanded by knight of the Equestrian Order—colonels. So a unique but simple solution was arrived at to solve the Egyptian dilemma. A precedent was set regarding the command of the legions in Egypt. In deference to the Augustan law, legions stationed in Egypt were commanded by their second-in-command, a **senior tribune** [colonel], an officer of the Equestrian rank, and these officers were subordinate to the Prefect of Egypt [also a colonel], who outranked them in terms of Equestrian Order seniority. (pp. 277-78)

A similar situation existed regarding the garrison in Judea. One or two writers have put forward the theory that no legion could have been stationed in Judea prior to A.D. 70, and the province could only have been garrisoned by auxiliaries [Noncitizens serving in Roman army; paid less than a legionary; granted citizenship on discharge], because the governor of the province was merely a procurator [superior to a prefect and deputy to a provincial governor], and the general, or legate, commanding a legion in his province would have outranked him, an unacceptable situation.

As it happens, the administrator of Judea until the reign of Claudius [A.D. 41] was not a procurator at all, but a prefect. Pontius Pilatus, celebrated famously in countless books, films, and television programs as Pilate, the *Procurator* of Judea, similarly held the appointment as *Prefect* of Judea, not Procurator, a fact confirmed by an inscription relating to Pilate found at Caesarea in 1961. And in the same way that the prefect of Egypt could command legions stationed in his province because they were led by their senior tribunes, so the Prefect of Judea could command legionary forces in his province.

There is ample evidence that legions were stationed in Judea during this period. Varus [Roman general and consul], Governor of Syria, stationed a legion, the 10th, in Jerusalem in 4 B.C. The Jewish historian Josephus several times writes of “legionaries” of the Judea garrison in the years leading up to the First Jewish Revolt of A.D. 66-70, and provides plenty of clues about the identity of the legion stationed in the province between A.D. 48-66—“the Augustans,” “the Syrians,” “the men from Beirut”—for us to know that it was the 3rd Augusta, a Syrian legion with a major recruitment station at Beirut. The fact that elements of the 3rd Augusta Legion were stationed at Jerusalem and Caesarea is confirmed by the Christian Bible [Acts 27:1, “When it was decided we would sail to Italy, they handed over Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion (1stLt) of the Augustan Cohort (commander of 100 legionaries of the 3rd Augusta) named Julius.”], which talks of men of the “Augustan” legion saving and escorting St. Paul the Apostle in A.D. 58-61.

There were three “Augustan” legions, and the 2nd Augusta and the 8th Augusta were never stationed in the East, but the 3rd was. There is never a mention of a general [a legate] commanding the legion stationed in Judea prior to A.D. 70. (p. 278)

The conclusion that can be drawn is that until A.D. 70 Judea was treated in the same way as Egypt—the officer commanding the legion based in the province was its senior tribune [a colonel], normally the legion's second-in-command, who would have been outranked by the prefect [also a colonel but with seniority] and could therefore take orders from him. As with the legions in Egypt, when the Judea legion left the province, a legate [brigadier general] could be appointed to command it. (p. 279)

In the Author's Note preceding the first chapter of his book, Dando-Collins makes this observation, “Enough material exists, from sources classical and modern to write whole books ... on the 3rd Augusta, the legion that saved the life of St. Paul the Apostle ...” (p. viii)

Consequently, we are able to conclude that Pontius Pilate was not a procurator but rather a prefect which may be compared to the rank of colonel in the US Army. He was thus supervised by two men whose headquarters were in Caesarea: the provincial governor, or legate, and his deputy, who did hold the title of procurator, neither of whom is mentioned in Scripture by name or deed.

As prefect, Pontius Pilatus was commander of the Praetorian Guard and governed the province of Judea. To him was delegated the power of life and death.

He was appointed to his position by Lucius Aelius Sejanus \si-jā'-nas\, Emperor Tiberius's chief administrator. Sejanus influenced Tiberius to retire to the island of Capri \kā'-prē\ in the Tyrrhenian \ta-rē'-nē-an\ Sea and to leave him in charge of the empire.

Pilate disliked the Jews and did many things to intimidate them but when they complained to Rome, Sejanus protected Pilate and Pilate was dependent upon Sejanus.

2. *The Third Trial of Christ*

By the time Jesus arrived at Pilate's official residence, a palace referred to by the Romans as the Praetorium, he had already faced three trials. The third, had been before the Sanhedrin, (συνέδριον, *sunedrion*: from the proposition σύν, *sun*: together, and the noun ἔδρα, *hedra*, seat: to council together). As far back as the third century B.C. it was referred to as the *gerousia* (γερονσία), Greek for “senate” or “elders.”

The Sanhedrin was composed of seventy members made up of the high priest, tribal heads called elders, scribes who were the experts in the Law, Pharisees, and Sadducees. Its jurisdiction was limited to the province of Judea and therefore it had no legal authority over Jesus as long as He remained in the province of Galilee. Within Judea the Sanhedrin had legal authority over the Jewish community that was not reserved to the prefect himself.

The first two trials were conducted in the residences of Annas, the high priest emeritus, and of his son-in-law, Caiaphas, the current high priest, respectively. These trials were conducted at night which violated Jewish law. Therefore, the third trial took place after sunrise at the Sanhedrin in order for the conviction of Jesus to comply with Jewish laws.

Had word gotten back to Pilate that the Jews were involved in a miscarriage of justice members of the Sanhedrin could have come under Roman investigation.

Expediency demanded prudence and this required the daylight trial before the entire assembly of the Sanhedrin's membership.

Luke 22:66 - And as day dawned, the ruling elders of the people, both priests and scribes, were brought together at the Sanhedrin saying,

v. 67 - "If [**1CC**] you are the Messiah tell us! But He said to them, "If [**3CC**] I told you, you would not believe Me,

Luke 22:68 - and if [**3CC**] I ask you, you will not answer."

The Lord's response to the council indicates His understanding of their rejection of His true identity. If He did tell them who He was they would not believe it and if He asked them who He was they would not respond correctly. To emphasize who He claims to be he continues:

Luke 22:69 - "But in the future the Son of Man will be sitting at the right hand of the power of God."

In this statement Jesus proclaimed Himself to be the Messiah. It is a quote from Psalm 110:1b where the Father instructs David's greater Son to: "Sit down at My right hand ...!" This is a strong affirmation of deity and Messiahship, to which the council responds:

Luke 22:70 - Then they all said, "You then are the Son of God?" And He said to them, "You say that I am."

In the idiom of the day Jesus confirms their question. He allows their accusation to stand as an affirmation of His true identity. To the council's prejudiced ear the Lord's affirmation is regarded as a condemnation:

Luke 22:71 - And they said, "Why do we need any more testimony? We ourselves have heard it from His own mouth!"

The prosecution rests with a verdict of blasphemy, a capital crime under Jewish law. But the Jews do not have authority to execute a prisoner.

The desire is to neutralize the troublemaker as quickly as possible but Roman law prohibited them from officially inflicting capital punishment. Some note to the contrary the stoning of Stephen but this was a violation of the law which was ignored by the prefect who preferred to conveniently overlook it.

Unable to carry out an execution, the Sanhedrin adjourned, transferring the prisoner to the headquarters of Prefect Pontius Pilatus.

3. *The Fourth Trial of Christ*

John 18:28 - Then they brought Jesus from Caiaphas to the Praetorium. (Now it was very early morning.) They did not enter the Praetorium in order that they might not be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover.

The Praetorium was the temporary residence of the governor of Syria whose permanent residence was in Caesarea. It was the permanent residence of the prefect who at this time was Pontius Pilatus.

Since this was the residence of a Gentile, the Jewish authorities refused to enter since to do so would render them defiled and thus disqualify them from eating that evening's Passover Seder.

The refusal of Jewish leadership to accept Jesus as their Messiah is expressed by this verse: They wanted to expedite the slaying of Jesus, their true Passover so that they might be ceremonially clean to eat the ritual Passover that evening. Ritual trumped Reality.

Ritual is designed to teach about the Reality, yet the Jews placed primary emphasis on the ritual thus assuming God is more impressed with the ritual of Passover than the Reality of Passover.

They rejected the love of God through Jesus the Christ, who died spiritual death on Calvary's cross for their sins.

This contrast between ritual and reality is expressed by the Lord in John 3:36 which may be paraphrased:

John 3:36 - "He who believes in the Reality has eternal life. He who believes in the ritual shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."

John 18:29 - So Pilate came outside to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this Man?"

On this occasion Pilate was involved in the judgment of cases brought before him by litigants throughout the Province of Judea. He heard the arguments in the order they arrived at the Praetorium.

These adjudications were taking place as usual in the palace's inner court when the Jewish throng arrived at the entrance to the palace demanding an audience with Pilate.

Pilate's decision to concede to the religious demands of Jewish leadership was the catalyst to the most significant sequence of events in all of human history. Had he demanded that the Jews disband and go through proper channels chances are that things might have turned out quite differently.

But such is "iffy history." What really happened was Pilate being victimized by Alinsky tactics: "If we don't get our way we will demonstrate, and a demonstration might very well turn into a riot, and you surely don't want Tiberius to get wind of an uprising in Judea, do you!"