

Jews and Romans in the Trial of Jesus

The account of Jesus' trial, involving first the Jewish authorities and then the Roman, brings us face to face with the complexities of power-play within an occupied country. In a month when we hear about this hasty sequence of events, it's useful to take a look at the historical context.

The narrative is similar in all four gospels, although there is some variation in the detail. John is unique in making no reference to the involvement of the Council of the Jews (i.e. the Sanhedrin); only Luke refers to Pilate's attempt to pass the buck by sending Jesus to be judged by Herod, who was in Jerusalem at the time; and it is only John who states that Jesus was first taken to Annas, the father-in-law of the High Priest Caiaphas, before being taken to Caiaphas himself. Since Annas had been the previous High Priest, this suggests that he still exercised considerable authority and that Caiaphas deferred to him to some extent. However, neither had the last word. If what they wanted was Jesus' death by crucifixion (the capital punishment routinely used by the Romans for common criminals), they had to bring the case to the Roman authority — and for this the backing of the Sanhedrin was needed. This was a long-established judicial body which dealt with legal matters relating to the practice of the Jewish religion. When originally founded, the High Priest presided, but after 191 BC the Sanhedrin had its own distinct President. The Romans, following their usual custom of allowing local administration to continue provided it did not conflict with the interests of the Empire, recognised the Sanhedrin as a body with which it could do business. In the case of Jesus' trial, however, while the Jewish position was that Jesus deserved death because he had blasphemed, this religious violation would have cut no ice with the Romans; instead, when making the case to Pilate, the Jews adapted the way they framed the charge, insisting that Jesus claimed to be the King of the Jews. By Roman standards this was treasonous, and in the context of Judaea was dangerously inflammatory because the Romans supported a family of puppet kings (the Herodians) that was not even of Jewish descent. It is worth noting also that although the Sanhedrin was 'allowed' by the occupying power as a way of gaining a degree of acceptance among the Jews, the High Priests had become Roman appointments. Additionally, while the Romans controlled the death penalty throughout the Empire and were not at all squeamish about using it, they did not like it when others tried to manoeuvre them into using it to serve what they saw as purely local interests. We are dealing here with thoroughly poisonous politics!

Pilate, as the Procurator or Prefect of Judaea, was a middle-ranking functionary, subordinate to the Governor of Syria, so he wouldn't have wanted to rock the boat. In any case he was temporarily in a very exposed position, being in Jerusalem with only a small auxiliary force for the duration of the Passover in order to forestall trouble on the streets at a time of year when crowds assembled and Jewish national feeling ran high. His normal residence was in the much safer enclave of Herod's palace on the coast at Caesarea Maritima, which was then functioning as Judaea's Roman capital. It is here, in the 1960s, that archaeologists found what is so far the only surviving stone inscription bearing Pontius Pilate's name.

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Professor Joyce Hill is Emeritus Professor of Medieval Literature at the University of Leeds