

2. PONTIUS PILATE INSCRIPTION*

Pontius Pilate (Πόντιος Πίλατος) is one of the most well known figures of ancient history, most of his familiarity based on his judgment of Jesus the Messiah recorded in the New Testament. Jesus' appearance before Pontius Pilate is recorded by all four Gospels (Matt. 27:2; Mark 15:1-15; Luke 23:1-5; John 18:28-19:16), but information about him also occurs in the writings of Josephus, Tertullian, Eusebius, Philo, Tacitus and Agapius of Hierapolis. For example, Tacitus says regarding Pilate:

Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular.¹

He has been vilified by some and canonized by others,² considered as evil since he sentenced Jesus to death and viewed as a Christian by others who influenced Tiberius to be favorable to Christianity.³

Pilate was the fifth Roman governor of Judea, and had a troubled, and less than lustrous (undistinguished), career in that capacity. The date of his appointment and dismissal is subject to debate, but Pilate is commonly thought to have been appointed governor in A.D. 26 or 27, and removed from office in A.D. 36. He is reported to have died by suicide.⁴

He had a rugged rule in Judea. Previous rulers in Judea had respected Jewish customs and sensitivities, but Pilate seemed to have little regard for them. He sneaked in images of the emperor ensigns brought into Jerusalem at night, which he finally removed due to the protests of the Jews. He, first, threatened them with death, but afterwards relented. At another time, he received a rebuke from emperor Tiberius after he had

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¹ Cornelius Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, quoted from *Early Christian Writings*, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/tacitus.html> (last visited November 8, 2011).

² A. N. Sherwin-White, "Pontius Pilate," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised*, Ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988; 2002): "Origen described Pilate's wife as a convert, and the Coptic church ultimately canonized Pilate himself." Coptic should probably be understood as Ethiopic. "The Coptic Church or the Abyssinian Coptic Orthodox Church referred to in this article is the Ethiopian church, but they are sometimes confused because of their origins in Egypt. The fourth or fifth century Gospel of Nicodemus (which contains the Acts of Pilate), does not make Pilate a Christian, but depicts him as more friendly towards Jesus than any of the canonical gospels. Pilate was soon canonized by the Ethiopic churches. See Questions and Answers, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States, <http://www.suscopts.org/q&a/index.php?qid=766&catid=446> (last visited November 8, 2011).

³ See discussion in Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series Vol. I* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 105-06. Numerous stories arose regarding Pilate seeking to exonerate him or recognize him as a Christian. "For instance, the apocryphal Acts of Pilate recounts the trial showing that Pilate's decision was forced upon him. Colorful embellishments bring home the point: when Jesus enters Pilate's praetorium, the imperial standards miraculously bow down. Tertullian even speaks of Pilate as a "Christian at heart" and contributes to the legendary conversion of both Pilate and his wife (who later gains the name Procula)." Gary M. Burge, "Pilate, Pontius," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* Eds. Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988), 1694-95.

⁴ The suicide is described by Eusebius (H.E. 2.7) was precipitated by his actions against the Samaritans, discussed by Arthur Cushman McGiffert, "Eusebius: Church History," in Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995, second printing), 110, n 13.

"Pilate's downfall occurred in the following manner. A leader of the Samaritans had promised to disclose the sacred treasures which Moses was reported to have concealed upon Mt. Gerizim, and the Samaritans came together in great numbers from all quarters. Pilate, supposing the gathering to be with rebellious purpose, sent troops against them and defeated them with great slaughter. The Samaritans complained to Vitellius, governor of Syria, who sent Pilate to Rome (36 a.d.) to answer the charges brought against him. Upon reaching Rome he found Tiberius dead and Caius upon the throne. He was unsuccessful in his attempt to defend himself, and, according to tradition, was banished to Vienne in Gaul, where a monument is still shown as Pilate's tomb. According to another tradition he committed suicide upon the mountain near Lake Lucerne, which bears his name." Ibid. Also see, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988; 2002).

irritated the Jews to insurrection when he set up gold-coated shields in Herod's palace, having Pilate to remove the shields to Caesarea and place them in the temple of Augustus.⁵

In the second episode, Pilate was not so pliable. He had appropriated funds from the temple treasury to pay for the construction of an aqueduct, to carry water to Jerusalem. Josephus does not say that this action violated Jewish law, but he does say that the indignant Jerusalemites surrounded Pilate as he heard cases, and protested angrily. Pilate, however, had taken the precaution of planting "plain-clothes" soldiers among the crowd. At the appropriate moment he signaled for them to draw their clubs and beat the protesters. Josephus says that many Jews perished, either from the blows or from being trampled in the escape. Thus, under Pilate, the Jews were reduced to fearful silence (2.177).⁶

His last vicious act was to have his cavalry and infantry kill a number of Samaritans who went for religious purposes to Mount Gerizim.⁷ After the Samaritans complained, the Roman governor of Syria, Vitellius, sent Pilate to Rome to explain himself to Tiberius, but before Pilate arrived, Tiberius had died.⁸ The successor to Tiberius, Gaius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, removed Pilate from his position and exiled him to Vienna-on-Rhone. He is believed to have committed suicide while in exile during the reign of Caligula.⁹

THE PONTIUS PILATE INSCRIPTION

Though we have literary evidence for Pontius Pilate, no physical evidence existed until 1961, when Antonio Frova, and a team of archaeologists, discovered an inscription on a stone dated to A.D. 26-37,¹⁰ which was part of a stairway¹¹ in the theater at Caesarea Maritima, on the coast of Israel, though "Undoubtedly, the stone was first used as part of some important building called a Tiberium, possibly a temple, which was dedicated in honor of the emperor Tiberius."¹² Even though the stone is in poor condition, three of the four lines of the text may be partially reconstructed.

The inscription reads:

[]S TIBERIEUM	(Tiberieum)
[PO]NTIUS PILATUS	(Pontius Pilate)
[PRAEF]ECTUS IUDA[EA]E	(Prefect of Judea)
[]	

Historians have often referred to Pilate as a procurator, but later governors after emperor Claudius

⁵ Philo, *On The Embassy of Gaius*, Book XXXVIII 299-305. See the translation of this event in Charles Duke Yonge, *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 784. See Paul L. Maier, "The Episode of the Golden Roman Shields at Jerusalem, *Harvard Theological Review* 62 (1969): 109-121.

⁶ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.3.2. See the following for discussion of this, and other acts of Pilate: Steve Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992).

⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.4.1

⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.4.1

⁹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.7: "It is worthy of note that Pilate himself, who was governor in the time of our Saviour, is reported to have fallen into such misfortunes under Caius, whose times we are recording, that he was forced to become his own murderer and executioner; and thus divine vengeance, as it seems, was not long in overtaking him. This is stated by those Greek historians who have recorded the Olympiads, together with the respective events which have taken place in each period." Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series Vol. I* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 110.

¹⁰ A. Frova, 'L'Iscrizione de Ponzio Pilato a Cesarea', *Istituto Lombardo, Rendiconti. Classe di Lettere e Scienze morale e storiche*, 95 (1961) 419-34, cited from Alan Millard, "The Knowledge Of Writing In Iron Age Palestine," *Tyndale Bulletin*, Vol. 46 (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1995), 214.

¹¹ Alan Millard, "The Knowledge Of Writing In Iron Age Palestine," *Tyndale Bulletin*, Vol 46 (1; Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1995), 206-xx, 214.

¹² John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 204.

were so known, while earlier governors like Pilate were known as prefects, as found in the inscription.¹³

The life and career of Pontius Pilate has been known in literary sources since the days of the first century, but the inscription further substantiates the existence and position of this Roman who played a pivotal, though unfortunate role, in the plan of God for Messiah Jesus.

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¹³ For example, Pilate lived in Herod's palace, described by Philo as "the residence of the prefects." See Philo, *Delegation to Gaius* 38.