

mystery of His will according to the good pleasure, which He purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ”.

The time from the end of the forty-nine years in 1997 to the time when “the full number of the Gentiles has come in” is not revealed, just as the time from the birth of Christ at the end of 434 years to his baptism at the commencement of his 3½-year ministry was not revealed. Just as the first 3½ period was a ministry to the Jews, so the second period will relate only to the Jews, the saints having been taken to judgement and the gospel no longer going forth to the Gentiles.

I would like to emphasise a difference between the sixty-nine ‘sevens’ on the one hand and the one ‘seven’ on the other. Whilst the Gentiles watch the signs of the times during both parts of the former (the Magi in the first part, for example, and the Christadelphians in the second part), the one ‘seven’, split into two halves, is applicable only to Jews, as stated above.

One problem with the above is that one would expect that, just as Messiah came at the end of the sixty-two ‘sevens’, in the sense of his being born, so there should be a coming of the Messiah at the end of the seven ‘sevens’, in accordance with Daniel 9:25: “From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the Ruler, *comes*, there will be seven ‘sevens’, and sixty-two ‘sevens’”. However, there is no verb there for ‘come’ in the Hebrew. The RV is more correct: “from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the anointed one, the prince, shall be seven

weeks: and threescore and two weeks . . .”. Maybe the Messiah has been more active in the world since 1996-7 in some way which we cannot yet discern, perhaps to do with the break-up of the peace process and the development of the situation that will bring the nations against Israel.⁵

Conclusion

The advantage of the revised interpretation proposed in this article is that *all* start and end points of the subdivisions match important events:

- 1 The sixty-two weeks (434 days) begin with the issuing of the first decree for restoration of the *city* of Jerusalem with its *walls*, the date of which can be ascertained approximately. It ends with the birth of Jesus Christ, the date of which is also known approximately;
- 2 The first half-week (3½ years) starts at the beginning of the ministry of the Lord Jesus and ends with his crucifixion;
- 3 The seven weeks (forty-nine years) begins with the establishment of the modern State of Israel and ends with the beginning of turmoil in Israel after the attempts to achieve a peace agreement in the mid 1990s and the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995. The final half-week (3½ years) has not yet begun, but will do so after a gap of unknown duration.

5. Readers may recall the idea, put forward particularly by Brother W. H. Carter in *Times and Seasons*, that there are seventy jubilee periods of forty-nine years each commencing with Israel’s occupation of the land. Under his calculation, the final jubilee period runs from Jewish year 1946-47 to 1995-96.

Pilate

Alan Fowler

PILATE IS an enigmatic figure. Very little is known of him apart from what is in the New Testament. His own state records have disappeared. The surviving documents are seven paragraphs in Josephus¹ and two or three pages from Philo of Alexandria. In A.D. 36, after ten years as governor of Judea, Pilate was recalled to Rome by Tiberius when the Samaritans had complained of his heavy-handed tactics. But before Pilate reached Rome Tiberius had died and Pilate disappears from contemporary history.

The New Testament does not condemn Pilate for crucifying Jesus. Peter laid the blame on the Jewish leaders: “Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36, RSV). Peter repeats this indictment in Acts 4:10, and in Acts 3:13 he contrasts the Jews’ insistence that Jesus must die with Pilate’s determination to release him: “. . . Jesus;

1. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XVIII, 3, 1-3; 4, 1-2; *Wars of the Jews*, II, 9, 4.

whom ye delivered up, and denied him in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let him go”.

Notwithstanding Peter’s statement, widely differing conclusions have been drawn from the Gospel accounts of the trial. The Roman Church demonised Pilate, who was consigned to the lowest part of hell. In myths, legends, apocryphal gospels and medieval mystery plays, Pilate was generally depicted as evil, and even his attempts to release Jesus were regarded as a pose. To this day, visitors to Lake Lucerne are told that, when thunder and lightning and black clouds cover Mount Pilatus, they represent Pilate suffering the torments of hell.

On the other hand, Pilate is included in the calendar of saints of both the Ethiopian and Coptic Churches. Pilate is seen as a kind of priest who proclaimed Jesus innocent, washed his hands, and broke his body on the cross. If Peter, who betrayed his Master on three occasions, was forgiven, why not Pilate, who declared three times, “I find no fault in him” (Jno. 18:38; 19:4,6)?

Confronted by these conflicting assessments of Pilate, can we find further enlightenment by looking carefully at the Gospel records in the context of what we can learn about Roman governors and their responsibilities? I believe that we can.

Historical background

Pilate was the fifth in a line of procurators who had been assigned to the governorship of Judea. Governors were directly responsible to the emperor, to whom they had to report regularly. Pilate would have had a small army acting as an armed police force. Governors were not only soldiers, they were also chief judges, and were responsible for sending regular revenues to Rome.

Apart from matters of security of state, the Romans gave their subjects considerable freedom to govern themselves. This self-government meant that governors could easily be bribed (see Acts 24:26). They would soon learn that peace (the Pax Romana) was best maintained by ‘bread and circuses’. Hence the prevalence of theatres, amphitheatres and hippodromes in Roman cities.

But bread and circuses would not suffice to keep the peace in Judea. The conflicts between Judaism and loyalty to Caesar, and the divisions within Judaism, meant that the governor of Judea had a very difficult task, requiring tact and

diplomacy. Pilate lacked these qualities. He was impulsive, obstinate and heavy-handed, and demonstrated these characteristics on three notable occasions in refusing to accommodate Jewish religious practices.

- 1 In Roman cities images of the emperor were ubiquitous. But, unlike his predecessors, Pilate decided that Jerusalem would be no exception. Soon after taking office he brought the imperial ensigns bearing the image of Tiberius Caesar into the city and fixed them to the walls of the Antonia fortress. This resulted in a prolonged and ugly confrontation with the Jews, which was only resolved when Pilate gave way after realising that the Jews would allow themselves to be massacred rather than submit to his action.²
- 2 Pilate’s second miscalculation arose from his decision to use temple funds (Corban money) to build an aqueduct to bring water into Jerusalem. On this occasion Pilate was determined not to give way and sent troops in disguise to capture the ringleaders of the protesters. Unfortunately, the soldiers got out of control, resulting in a large number of the protesters being killed or wounded.
- 3 A further and even more serious blunder occurred when Pilate decided to take golden shields, dedicated to Tiberius, into Herod’s Palace in Jerusalem. The Herodian princes were furious and reported Pilate to Tiberius, who ordered him to remove them. Pilate had been humiliated; worse still, he had incurred the displeasure of Tiberius.

This brings us to the other problem facing Pilate: his relationship with Tiberius Caesar. Emperors were omnipotent, and to incur the wrath of Caesar was to be ‘crushed by God’. In his later years Tiberius became paranoid. He became a ruthless killer of his perceived enemies, so that all offences against him were capital; he executed his ‘enemies’ on the least word of any informer.³

It appears that Pilate was not punished by Tiberius for the incident of the shields, but he

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2. It is possible that Galilean worshippers visiting Jerusalem might have been involved in this incident, hence the reference in Luke 13:1 to “Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices”.
 3. There is good evidence that Tiberius’s savage irrationality may have been due to lead poisoning caused by the widespread use of lead-lined vessels for boiling the grape syrup that was added to wine.

could not afford to offend again. To do so could be fatal. The Jews would know this, and they would know the cold rush of fear that would arise in Pilate's heart if they threatened to report him to the emperor.

The Gospel records of the trial

With this historical background we shall now review the record of the trial using a harmony of the four Gospel accounts.⁴ Jesus faced six trials, three Jewish followed by three Roman. The Jewish trials resulted in an illegally obtained conviction for blasphemy. But such a charge would carry no weight with Pilate, so the Jews had to persuade him to charge Jesus with treason and thereby obtain a Roman death sentence for a nonexistent Jewish crime. Pilate was aware of their strategy; we are told that "he knew that for envy they had delivered him" (Mt. 27:18).

The three Roman trials were before Pilate, then Herod, and finally before Pilate again. An important feature of the trials before Pilate was that Pilate sat in the hall of judgement, or Praetorium, in Herod's Palace, but the Jewish leaders insisted on remaining outside "lest they should be defiled" and therefore unable to keep the Passover (Jno. 18:28). This arrangement meant that Pilate's conversations with Jesus were not heard by his accusers, and Pilate had to step outside in order to converse with them.

As we follow the events of the trials before Pilate it is evident that we have throughout a power struggle between Pilate, who was determined to release Jesus (Acts 3:13), and the Jews, who were determined to obtain a conviction.

The trial began early in the morning, when the Jews took Jesus into the hall of judgement (Jno. 18:28). As pointed out by Frank Morison,⁵ the Jews had evidently made an arrangement with Pilate to start the trial early in the morning so that it could be completed before the Passover. Pilate opened the trial by asking the Jews to provide evidence for their case against Jesus (v. 29). This resulted in an angry response from the Jews: "If this man were not an evildoer, we would not have handed him over" (v. 30, RSV). It is clear, therefore, that the Jews had also come to an agreement with Pilate (probably with an appropriate bribe) that he would not reopen the case, but would simply pass sentence. Pilate, however, had changed his mind,⁶ and he told the Jews that they should judge him by their law (v. 31), thereby implying that the charges against Jesus would not merit a death sentence. But the

Jews insisted that Jesus was guilty of treason, alleging that he had refused to pay taxes and had claimed to be a king (Lk. 23:2).

Pilate then asked Jesus if he was the King of the Jews (Jno. 18:33). Jesus admitted that he was a king, but made it clear that he was not seeking a worldly kingdom, but had come to witness to the truth. Although Pilate was baffled by this reply he concluded that Jesus was no threat to the Pax Romana and therefore declared that he found no fault in him (v. 38; Lk. 23:4). But Luke tells us that the Jews would not accept this verdict, and accused Jesus of causing widespread unrest, beginning in Galilee. This prompted Pilate to refer Jesus to Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee, and, although Jesus refused to speak, Herod came to the same conclusion as Pilate, who then told the Jews that neither Herod nor he regarded Jesus as worthy of death (Lk. 23:15).

Pilate therefore suggested to the Jews that they should now agree that he should release Jesus according to their custom of releasing a prisoner at Passover (Mt. 27:15). At this juncture the trial was interrupted by Pilate's wife, who sent a message urging him to abandon the trial. But the Jews were insistent with their demand for the release of Barabbas and the crucifixion of Jesus (vv. 19,20). Pilate again asked them to bring evidence for their case against Jesus, but they were deaf to his appeal, and the clamour and shouting increased. So when Pilate saw that he could not prevail, and that a riot was likely, he washed his hands and, echoing the words of his wife, declared, "I am innocent of the blood of this just person" (v. 24).

But Pilate had not yet accepted defeat. He decided to scourge Jesus (Jno. 19:1). According to Roman custom, scourging was a legitimate means of extracting evidence from a recalcitrant

4. *A Harmony of the Four Gospels*, Edward Robinson, 1845.

5. *And Pilate Said*, 1939.

6. This change of mind probably arose from the influence of Pilate's wife, Claudia Procula. On hearing from Pilate that he planned to get up early the following morning to ratify the death sentence she probably urged him to reconsider this illegal procedure. Going to bed with these thoughts in mind, she had a vivid dream about Jesus, which made her even more determined to stop Pilate from being involved. On waking the following morning she found that the trial was already proceeding, hence the urgent message to Pilate, "Have thou nothing to do with that just man" (Mt. 27:19).

prisoner, but Pilate's motive appears to have been different. After the scourging and mocking and crowning with thorns, Pilate brought Jesus out before the Jews, with the declaration, "Behold the man!" (v. 5). This action was consistent with Pilate's continued efforts to release Jesus. The pitiful sight of the lacerated, bleeding body of Jesus might cause the Jews to relent. He was, in effect, saying to the Jews, "Have you no pity? Is not *this* enough punishment?"

This stratagem failed, and now, for one moment, Pilate lost his temper and expressed his anger and frustration by telling the Jews to crucify Jesus themselves (v. 6). This was an absurd suggestion, because both Pilate and the Jews knew that it was illegal. The Jews returned to the attack with a new and more subtle accusation: Jesus, they said, claimed to be the Son of God. Pilate, being imbued with Roman superstition, was disturbed by this claim. Was Jesus really claiming the divine status accorded to deceased Caesars? He must find out more about Jesus's origins. When Jesus failed to answer him, Pilate implored him to cooperate by reminding him that he had the power to release him. Jesus told Pilate that that power belong to God, and that, since his accusers knew the purpose of God, they were the more guilty.⁷ As a Roman, Pilate would have understood the concept of a god in control of events, and so he ended the discussion and once more sought to release Jesus (v. 12).

But the Jews would not yield, and they again pressed their charges in terms most likely to frighten Pilate: "If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend". Pilate now decided on a new tactic: he would try ridicule. He ordered the judgement seat to be brought out of the Praetorium, and confronted the Jews in the presence of Jesus with the words, "Behold your King!" (vv. 12-14. In other words, "You stupid people. Is this pathetic man a threat to Rome? Why must he be crucified?"). But the Jews were deaf to reason, to pity and to ridicule, and they continued to threaten Pilate in terms of the dreaded *majestas* (high treason): "We have no king but Caesar"—implying: "If you support this man we will report you to our king, Caesar" (v. 15).

So these were the stark alternatives: either Jesus had to be crucified, or Pilate faced the prospect of execution. The crucifixion of Jesus was a gross violation of justice, but only those faced with Pilate's choice could know the mental torment that would have afflicted him. Moreover, if we had Pilate's upbringing and his limited

knowledge of Jesus, and were faced with the same threats, how many of us would have acted differently?

Pilate's defence

This question prompts us to consider Pilate's four possible pleas in defence of his part in the greatest miscarriage of justice the world has ever known.

- 1 How was I to know that Jesus was the Son of God?
- 2 How could I acquit a man who refused to defend himself against a capital charge?
- 3 I strove desperately to rescue Jesus from the Jews, and washed my hands of the whole affair.
- 4 And please bear in mind that *my* life also was in mortal danger.

We shall now consider these pleadings.

- 1 To Pilate, Jesus (though not clearly seditious) was one of a succession of Jewish messiahs that governors of Judea had to deal with. His predecessor Gratus crucified 200 after one messianic uprising. Paul wrote that, "had they known it, [the princes of this world] would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8). These words would certainly apply to Pilate and his soldiers, so the common charge that Pilate was guilty of deicide is grossly unfair.
- 2 Pilate must have been surprised that Jesus made no attempt to rebut the false charges brought against him, nor called any witnesses for his defence. Pilate was certainly frustrated by Christ's submissiveness, and, as we have seen, he urged him to defend himself (Jno. 19:10). Jesus's refusal to defend himself, and the apparent absence of any supporters, would have made it easier for Pilate to crucify Jesus, because he would be unlikely to be reported for this miscarriage of justice.
- 3 Pilate was so convinced that Jesus was not guilty of the charges that he washed his hands and declared himself innocent. But washing

7. Jesus said, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore he who delivered me to you has the greater sin" (Jno. 19:11, RSV). The suggestion that "from above" referred to the Sanhedrin is very unlikely; it would have been manifestly untrue, and if Pilate had inferred that meaning he would have angrily denied that he was subject to the authority of the Jewish rulers.

hands was no part of Roman jurisprudence.⁸ Contrary to Pilate's intention, this act did nothing to wash away Pilate's guilt; on the contrary, it highlighted the fact that he was committing an act of gross injustice. By washing his hands, declaring Jesus innocent and giving way to the Jews, Pilate was effectively abandoning his role of judge and handing Jesus over to mob rule.

In his efforts to release Jesus, Pilate was guilty of two further violations of judicial procedure. His offer to release Jesus as a Passover 'gift' pre-empted the guilt of Jesus. If Jesus were innocent then Pilate should not have offered Jesus as an alternative to Barabbas. And, having declared Jesus innocent, he should not have ordered him to be flogged. Under Roman law, flogging was either a punishment for the guilty or a means of extracting a confession, but there was no provision for a judge to become an advocate and use flogging to placate hostile witnesses.

It is a reasonable assumption that these judicial blunders were not due to Pilate's ignorance, but rather to his increasing frustration in the face of Jewish intransigence. It is one of the supreme ironies of the trial that Pilate's protracted efforts to release Jesus resulted in an exacerbation of his sufferings.

- 4 Matthew tells us that Pilate finally gave way when he "saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning" (27:24, RSV). The prospect of another serious riot was what Pilate dreaded most, and about three years after the crucifixion his fears were realised. Once again trouble arose in Samaria, where an impostor had gathered together an armed multitude to view sacred vessels that he claimed Moses had deposited on Mount Gerizim. Pilate led a band of horsemen and footmen, who slew some of the Samaritans and took many prisoners. As a result, the Samaritans complained to Vitellius, the more senior governor of Syria, who ordered Pilate to go to Rome to answer for his actions before the emperor. Tiberius died before Pilate reached Rome, and there are no contemporary records regarding his fate, but Eusebius, the fourth-century Bishop of Caesarea, tells us that Pilate was forced to commit suicide in the third year of Tiberius's successor, Gaius Caligula. Thus Pilate's fears appear to have been confirmed, although, as a member of the equestrian order, he would have been

spared crucifixion and offered 'honourable' Roman suicide.

So what is our conclusion regarding this enigmatic man? Surely he is everyman facing the choice between good and evil, between God and Mammon, and between courage and cowardice. He was tempted as we are and fell as we fall, and who knows whether Jesus, whom he tried so hard to save, plucked him from the fire?

A repentant Pilate?

If Pilate was afraid when he learnt that Jesus had claimed to be the Son of God, he would surely have been even more afraid when he received the report of the watch he had allocated to guard the tomb of Jesus.⁹ And what would Pilate have made of the report of the centurion in charge of the crucifixion, who had declared, "Truly this was the Son of God" (Mt. 27:54)? Furthermore, if Pilate's wife felt so passionately about Jesus that she had the temerity to interrupt the trial, she would surely have kept Pilate informed of the amazing conversions that were occurring among the Jews, including some of their leaders. Finally, can we imagine the thoughts of Pilate and his wife on their long journey to Rome as they contemplated his humiliation and possible demise, and the bitter irony that, just as Jesus had stood before him, so he would have to stand before the brutal Tiberius? The weight of the evidence and his own predicament must surely have had a profound effect on Pilate's wounded conscience.

Having escaped Tiberius's reign of terror, why was Pilate forced to commit suicide rather than suffer banishment, which was the normal punishment for failed governors? Was it because one of the complaints laid against him was that he had declared Jesus to be the King of the Jews? Or was it because Pilate's wife had persuaded him that, like the thief on another cross, it was not too late for him to seek forgiveness from the Son of God whom he had crucified? We do not know the answers, but what we do know is that,

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8. Was Pilate wittingly or unwittingly imitating the Jewish provision of hand washing for expiation of guilt for an unexplained murder (Deut. 21:1-9)?
9. Pilate's words, "Ye have a watch: go your way, make it as sure as ye can" (Mt. 27:65), are enigmatic. Was he granting the Jews a Roman guard or telling them to employ their own temple guard? Were his words, "make it as sure as ye can", to be taken literally, or was he being ironic?

contrary to human judgement, none of the inspired writers condemns Pilate; so “How shall I curse, whom God hath not cursed?” (Num. 23:8).

The author is also indebted to the biography *Pilate* by Ann Wroe (Cape, 1999) for historical background, but the book shows a deplorable lack of respect for the reliability of Scripture.

Editor’s note

In order for Pilate to have been forgiven he would either have needed to have sought it before Christ died, as did the thief, or to have subsequently embraced the gospel by belief and baptism. The former is less likely, as it is not mentioned in the crucifixion records, and in any case the thief’s words show a greater understanding of Christ’s position and work than Pilate surely had at that stage.—T.B.