

The Lord's Adversaries; Zealots & Assassins; Pilate's Passover Pardon: Matt 27:15-26; Mk 15:6-15; Lk 23:13-25; Jn 18:39-40; Flogging Described

Barabbas's Cross

Easter Special

April 8, 2007

The events leading to the crucifixion of Jesus the Christ began with His entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Crowds clamored in the streets of the city to welcome His arrival. Many laid palm branches in His path, an indication they believed Him to be the victorious Messiah. But others, especially the spiritual leaders of Judaea, were not so pleased especially members of the Sanhedrin. This contingent was made up of Annas, the high priest emeritus, Caiaphas, the current high priest, the captain of the Temple who was the assistant high priest, Pharisees, and a number of other leaders who held duties associated with the offerings and the treasury.

Joining these in opposition to the Messianic claims of Jesus were the scribes, or expert theologians who were specialists in interpreting the Mosaic Law, a cross between seminary professors and lawyers.

Throughout the next three days pressure from these men brought Jesus before both the Jewish and Roman legal systems in a series of trials, the sixth and final one before Pontius Pilate, the procurator of the province of Judaea over which he had civil, military, and criminal jurisdiction.

The majority of those who welcomed Jesus did so from a political rather than a spiritual motivation. For them the Messiah would provide immediate deliverance from the yoke of Rome ignoring the fact that removal of the yoke of sin must come first—that the cross must come before the crown. Yet within hours most would be convinced by the Jewish authorities that He should to be executed.

The Lord's first trial was before Annas, the retired high priest of the Sanhedrin but who still held supreme power among the Jewish hierarchy. It was mandatory that he sign-off on any actions taken by the Sanhedrin and he have his stamp of approval to prosecute Jesus in John 18:24.

The second trial was at the Sanhedrin where under cross examination by Caiaphas it was decided incorrectly that Jesus was guilty of blasphemy and condemned to death:

Matthew 26:63 - The high priest [**Caiaphas**] said to Him [**Jesus**], "I charge you under oath by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ [**Messiah**], the Son of God."

v. 64 - Jesus said to him, "You have said it yourself. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power [**See Psalm 110:1**] and coming on the clouds of heaven [**See Daniel 7:13**. **These are two prophecies by which Jesus identified Himself as the Messiah**]."

v. 65 - Then Caiaphas tore his clothes and declared, "He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? Now you have heard the blasphemy!"

v. 66 - "What is your verdict?" They answered, "He is guilty and deserves death."

That evening and the following morning, three more trials brought Jesus before Pontius Pilate for a second and final time. The Jewish authorities again presented their captive for judgment and execution. Because it was a holy week, Passover followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Jews could not carry out a sentence of any kind until it was over. But the desire for the immediate execution of Jesus motivated them to pressure Pilate to do their dirty work. Since the Jews were not allowed to perform capital punishment they conspired to force Pilate to do so under Roman law.

John 18:31 - Pilate told them, "Take Him yourselves and pass judgment on Him according to your own law!" The Jewish religious leaders replied, "We cannot legally put anyone to death."

There are several reasons why the Jewish authorities wanted to eliminate Jesus from their midst. First of all Jesus claimed to be Messiah which implied He was the King of the Jews. Such a claim jeopardized the Sanhedrin's relationship with Rome which would look on it as an act of treason and hold the council responsible for not controlling its people.

Further, the religious leaders of Judaea were well entrenched in their positions and out of envy and a desire to retain their power and influence over the people they wanted to remove Jesus from the scene.

Complicating these issues was the presence of the Zealots. Josephus provides a description of who these men were in:

Josephus, Flavius. "Wars of the Jews." In *The Life and Works of Flavius Josephus*. Translated by William Whiston. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, nd), 683 (II, xiii, 3):

There sprang up robbers in Jerusalem, which were called Sicarii [σικάρριοι, *sikarioi*: assassins, from the Latin *sica*, "a dagger," denoting one who carries a dagger under his clothing. Used as a proper name of the *Sicarii*, Assassins, the fanatical Jewish faction which arose in Judaea. (Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, 74)], who slew men in the day time, and in the midst of the city; this they did chiefly at the festivals, when they mingled themselves among the multitude, and concealed daggers under their garments, with which they stabbed those that were their enemies; and when any fell down dead, the murderers became part of those that had indignation against them; by which means they appeared persons of such reputation, that they could by no means be discovered.

More information about this band of murderers is provided by:

Orr, James (gen. ed.). *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), 1:288:

Assassins. The *sicarioi* were implacable in their hatred of Rome and to those Jews who were suspected of leaning toward Rome. They took a leading part in the Jewish rebellion and in the disturbances previous to it and also in the faction quarrels during the war.

Orr, *The International Standard Encyclopaedia*, 4:3133:

Zealots. From the time of the Maccabees there existed among the Jews a party who professed great zeal for the observance of the "law." It is not improbable that the "Assassins" of Acts 21:38 were identical, or at least closely associated, with this body of "Zealots," to which we must conclude that Simon had belonged before he became one of the Twelve.

Just prior to the crucifixion there had apparently occurred an insurrection in Jerusalem. Both the high priest as well as Pilate were concerned that Rome might learn of this and choose to intervene, a circumstance that would threaten the power base of both men.

Neither the Jewish establishment nor Pontius Pilate wanted Tiberius to get wind that things were not peaceful in Judaea. The Jews knew that Pilate had to keep a lid on things, especially during times of the major religious holidays that saw an influx of thousands of worshippers into Jerusalem. Annas and Caiaphas conspired with members of the Sanhedrin to offer up Jesus as a scapegoat. They assumed Pilate would want a reason to insure the maintenance of order in Jerusalem while they needed a way to rid themselves of Jesus and quite his followers.

Another thing the Sanhedrin feared was that followers of Jesus might cause disturbances to such a degree that Rome would intervene, discover that one of their own was claiming to be their "King," dissolve their positions of leadership, and disperse the people out from Judaea. Without meaning to be a prophet, Caiaphas predicted the death of Jesus for these reasons in:

John 11:48 - "If we [the chief priests and Pharisees] let Him go on like this [performing miracles], all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place [their positions of power and authority] and our nation [Judaea]."

v. 49 - But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You don't know nothing [a double negative for emphasis: σὺ οὐκ ὀράω οὐδείς, *su ouk horaō oudeis*]!

v. 50 - "Think in terms of your own interests; it is more expedient to have one man die on behalf of the people that the whole nation should not be destroyed" ["Let's do it for Tha Pepul"].

v. 51 - (Now Caiaphas did not say this on his own initiative, but because he was high priest, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation,

John 11:52 - and not for the nation only, but in order that he might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad [**John notes retrospectively that Caiaphas without realizing it correctly prophesied future events**]).

v. 53 - So from that day they planned together to annihilate Him [conspiracy to murder].

The predictions by Caiaphas were partially fulfilled when Pilate decided to offer to the Jewish leaders a long-standing tradition he had afforded them at Passover: the release of a Jewish prisoner held in Judaea by the Romans.

This practice was not unknown in the ancient world, a fact confirmed from discoveries made from ancient manuscripts by:

Deissmann, Adolf. *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World.* Translated by Lionel R. M. Strachan. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, nd. Reprint, New York: George H. Doran Co., 1927), 269:

A Florentine papyrus of the year 85 A.D. supplies a very noteworthy parallel to Mark 15:15. In the words of the evangelist,

"And so Pilate, willing to content the people, released Barabbas unto them, and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged Him, to be crucified."

The papyrus, containing a report of judicial proceedings, quotes these words of the governor of Egypt, G. Septimius Vegetus, before whom the case was tried, to a certain Phibion:—

"Thou hadst been worthy of scourging ... but I will give thee to the people."

Pilate had come to the conclusion that Jesus was innocent of charges brought against him and thought he could dispense with the case by offering Jesus as that year's manumitted prisoner. His offer and the Jew's rejection and counter proposal are found in all four of the Gospels.

Matthew's Report of Jesus Taking the Place of Barabbas:



Matthew 27:15 - During the Passover feast the procurator was accustomed to release one prisoner to the crowd—whomever they wanted.

Matthew 27:16 - At that time they had in custody a notorious prisoner called Barabbas [Βαραββᾶς, **Barabbas**: Chaldean name meaning “son of the father or teacher”].

v. 17 - So after they had assembled, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want [θέλω, **thelō**: to desire something and actively pursue it] me to release for you, Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Christ?”

v. 18 - (For Pilate knew that they had handed Him over because of envy.)

v. 19 - As he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent a message to him, “Do not condemn that innocent Man, because I have suffered greatly as a result of a dream because of Him today.”

v. 20 - But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the mob for the purpose that they should ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed.

v. 21 - The procurator asked them, “Which of the two do you desire me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas!”

v. 22 - Pilate said to them, “Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?” They all kept chanting over and over, “Crucify Him!”

v. 23 - And Pilate asked, “Why what wrong has He done?” But they shouted more intensely [περισσῶς, **perissōs**: to intensify above and beyond; ἔκραζον, **ekrazon**: the imperfect of duration indicating a continuous action of crying out], “Crucify Him! Crucify Him! Crucify Him!”

v. 24 - When Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but instead an uproar was starting, he took some water, washed his hands before the crowd and said, “I am innocent of this just Man’s blood. Observe this!”

v. 25 - In reply all the people said, “His blood be on us and on our children!” [This vow was fulfilled by Titus in A.D. 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem, the death of over a million Jews, and the dispersion of all survivors.]

v. 26 - Then Pilate released Barabbas unto them. And after he had Jesus flogged [φραγελλῶ, **phragelloō**], he handed Him over to receive crucifixion.

Mark’s Report of Jesus Taking the Place of Barabbas:

Mark 15:6 - Now at the feast it was his custom to release to them one prisoner when they desired.

v. 7 - There was one commonly known as Barabbas who was in chains with the rebels who had participated in an insurrection during which they had committed murder.

v. 8 - And having gone up to Pilate the crowd began asking Pilate to do just as he had always customarily done for them.

v. 9 - But Pilate answered saying, “Are you desiring that I release to you the King of the Jews?”

v. 10 - (For Pilate knew that because of envy the chief priests had delivered Him over.)

v. 11 - But the chief priests stirred up the crowd that he should rather release Barabbas to them.

v. 12 - But Pilate again gave a discerning answer saying, “What then shall I do to Him whom you are calling the King of the Jews?”

v. 13 - But they again cried out, "Crucify Him!"

v. 14 - Then Pilate said to them, "Why? What evil has he done?" But they cried out more intensely, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

v. 15 - Then Pilate, desiring to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas. And having flogged Jesus, delivered Him to be crucified.

Luke's Report of Jesus Taking the Place of Barabbas:

Luke 23:13 - Then Pilate having called together the chief priests, the rulers, and the people,

v. 14 - said to them, "You have brought this man to me as one who was misleading the people. When I examined Him before you, I did not find this man guilty of anything you accused him of doing.

v. 15 - "Neither did Herod, for he sent Him back to us. Listen, He has done nothing deserving of death.

v. 16 - "I will therefore have him flogged and release Him."

Luke 23:17 - [This verse is an explanatory gloss based on Matthew 27:15 and Mark 15:6 but is not part of Luke's autograph and is to be omitted.]

v. 18 - But they all shouted out together, "Take this man away! Release Barabbas for us!"

v. 19 - (He was a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city, and for murder.)

v. 20 - Pilate addressed them once again because he wanted to release Jesus.

v. 21 - But they kept on shouting [imperfect of duration from the verb ἐπιθωνέω, *epithōneō*], "Crucify! Crucify! Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

v. 22 - A third time he said to them, "Why? What wrong has He done? I have found Him guilty of no crime deserving death. I will therefore flog Him and release Him."

v. 23 - But they were insistent, demanding with loud shouts that he be crucified. And their shouts prevailed.

v. 24 - So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted.

v. 25 - He released the man they asked for, who had been thrown in prison for insurrection and murder [**Barabbas**]. But he handed Jesus over to their will.

In the first three Gospel's each of the exchanges between Pilate and the mob conclude with Pilate's decree to have Jesus flogged. This form of punishment was so severe that it added untold levels of physical pain upon our Lord. Details about this procedure are provided by:

The NET Bible. (Dallas: Biblical Studies Press, 2001), 1787 ftnt. 7:

7 Translator's note: The Greek term φραγελλόω (*phragelloō*) refers to flogging. BAGB 865 s.v. states, "flog, scourge, a punishment inflicted on slaves and provincials after a sentence of death had been pronounced on them. So in the case of Jesus before the crucifixion ... Mt 27:26; Mk 15:15."

Study note: A Roman flogging was an excruciating punishment. The victim was stripped of his clothes and bound to a post with his hands fastened above him. Guards standing on either side of the victim would incessantly beat him with a whip (flagellum) made out of leather with pieces of lead and bone inserted into its ends. While the Jews only allowed 39 lashes, the Romans had no such limit; many people who received such a beating died as a result.

This kind of pain and misery was inflicted on our Lord with crucifixion still yet to be endured during which time He had to maintain strict concentration while being judged for our sins.

John's Report of Jesus Taking the Place of Barabbas:

John 18:39 - "You have a traditional custom that I should release one prisoner for you at the Passover. So are you willing for me to release for you the King of the Jews?"

v. 40 - Then they all continued to cry out with a loud and raucous voice [**ingressive aorist of the verb κραυγάζω, *kraugazō***], "Not this Man, but Barabbas! Not this Man, but Barabbas!" (Now Barabbas was a career criminal [**ληστής, *lēistēs*: a thief with a history of violence**]).