

Mark

Lesson #17

The Trial

(Mark 15: 1-20)

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Review

As Judas betrayed Jesus in Lesson #15, so Peter denied Jesus in Lesson #16. In both lessons we explored the actions and possible motives of each character. Concerning Judas, we learned that he is a much more complex character than he is typically portrayed. A disciple of Jesus from the start and an eye-witness to Jesus' entire public ministry, Judas was also an outsider from Kerioth (in Judea), the only one of Jesus' disciples not from Galilee. Judas may also have been stung by Jesus' rebuke at the dinner party in Bethany when Mary anoints Jesus with a very expensive oil.

We cannot view Judas simply as a malignant personality, however, a vicious man who willfully betrays his Lord. Judas' character and motives are far more complex, for after learning that his actions result in Jesus' crucifixion, Judas rushes back in horror to the religious leaders saying, "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood" (Matthew 27: 4). Judas then hangs himself. These are not the actions of a malignant man whose plan worked; rather, they are the actions of a man whose plan went horribly awry.

Review

As we explored Judas in Lesson #15, so we explored Peter in Lesson #16. Unlike Judas, Peter stood at the very center of Jesus' disciples, one of three in Jesus' innermost circle: Peter, James and John. Jesus lived at Peter's home in Capernaum for his entire 3-year public ministry; Peter spoke on behalf of the disciples at Caesarea Philippi when he confessed, "You are the Messiah"; Peter was present (along with James and John) at the Transfiguration when God the Father validated Peter's confession of faith before two credible witnesses, Moses and Elijah; after the "Last Supper" Peter vowed that even if everyone else deserted Jesus, he never would; and at Gethsemane Peter proved he would die for Jesus when he drew his sword and charged the temple guards with it, cutting off the ear of the High Priest's servant. Only Jesus' intervention saved him.

And yet, in the courtyard of the High Priest, Peter denied the Lord, not once, but three times.

After a close examination of Peter, we concluded that he was certainly not malignant, nor did his faith fail; rather, Peter's courage failed. Trapped in the courtyard for well over an hour, Peter was simply afraid.

Preview

Mark gives us an abbreviated, terse version of Jesus' trial before Pilate. In Lesson #17 we fill in the blanks, examining the issues involved in Jesus' arrest and trial, as well as the possible motives of the principal characters in the story. Once again, we find that the issues are much more complex and layered than we typically recognize.



Mihály Munkácsy. *Christ in Front of Pilate* (oil on canvas), 1881.

Déri Museum, Debrecan, Hungary.

[One of a trilogy painted by Munkácsy. The others are *Golgotha* (1884) and *Ecce Homo* (1896).]

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Once again, in portraying Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate, Mark offers a lean narrative, stripped of detail, terse in the telling.

The Trial

As soon as morning came, the chief priests with the elders and the scribes, that is, the whole Sanhedrin, held a council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate.

(15: 1)



The Sanhedrin found Jesus guilty of blasphemy in Mark 14: 64, and it is quite clear in the Mosaic Law that the punishment for blasphemy is death:

“Take the blasphemer outside the camp, and when all who heard him have their hands on his head, let the whole community stone him. Tell the Israelites: Anyone who blasphemes God shall bear the penalty.”

(Leviticus 24: 14-15)

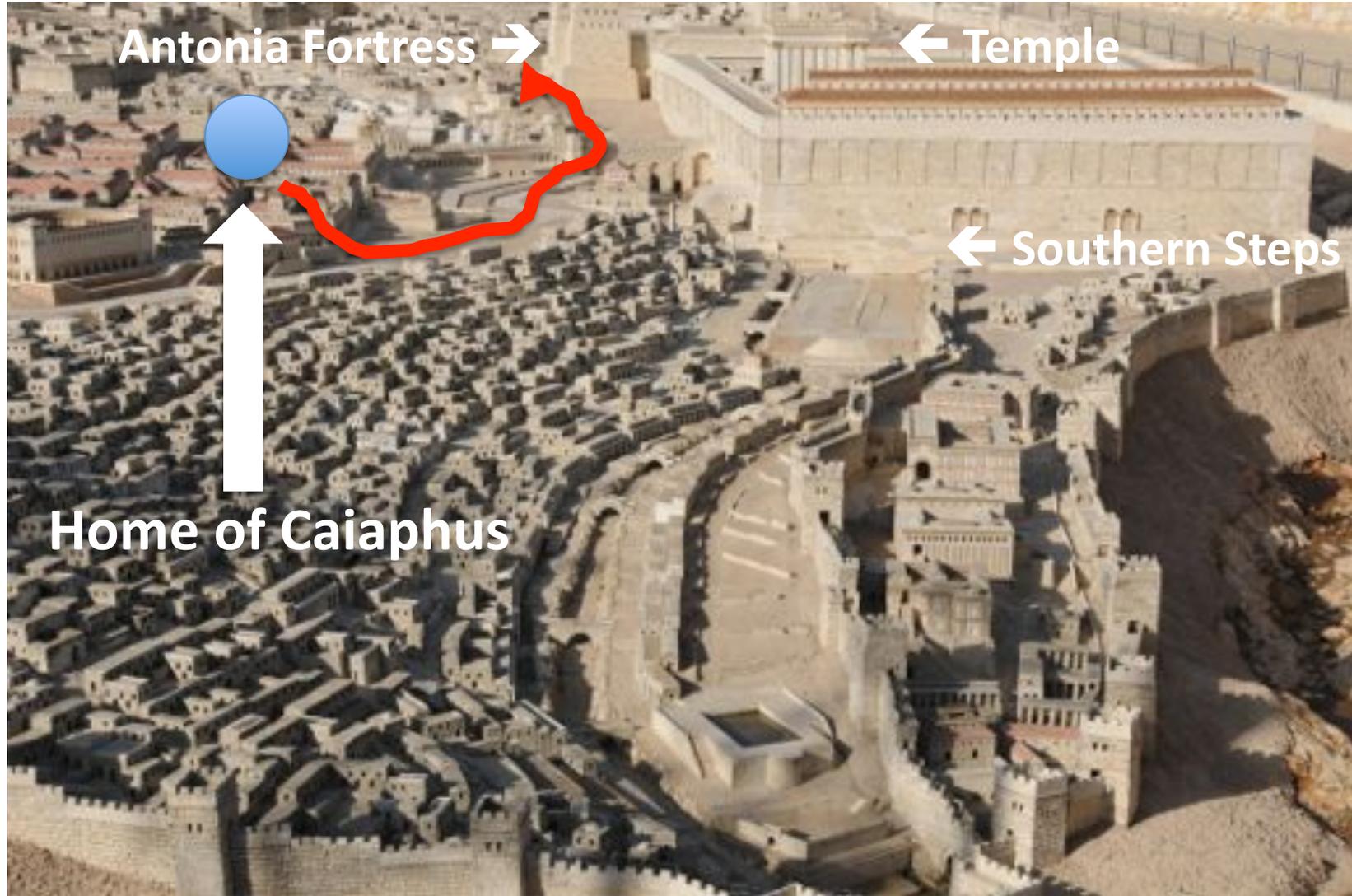
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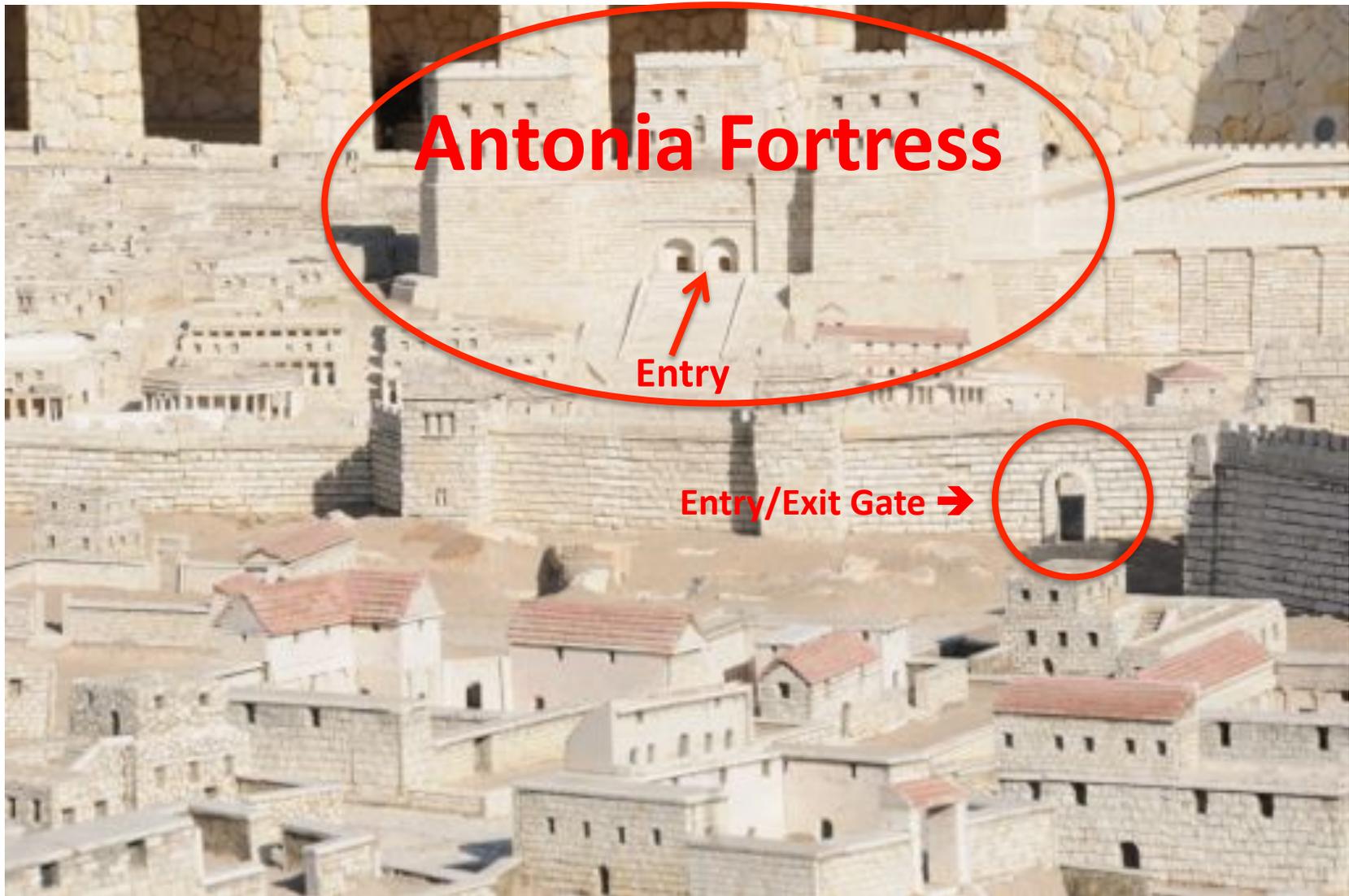


But living under Roman law, the Jewish authorities were not permitted to administer capital punishment (e.g., “*The Jews answered [Pilate], ‘We do not have the right to execute anyone’*”—John 18: 31).

Consequently, the Jewish authorities take Jesus to the Roman Procurator, Pontius Pilate, who is in residence at the Antonia Fortress in Jerusalem, along with a portion of the 10th Roman Legion. They had moved up to Jerusalem from Caesarea Maritima at the start of Passover to provide security in the city.

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Who Is Pontius Pilate?



Giotto. "Pontius Pilate," detail from *Mocking Christ* (fresco), 1305.
Arena Chapel (south wall), Padua, Italy.



Here's What We Know about Pontius Pilate.

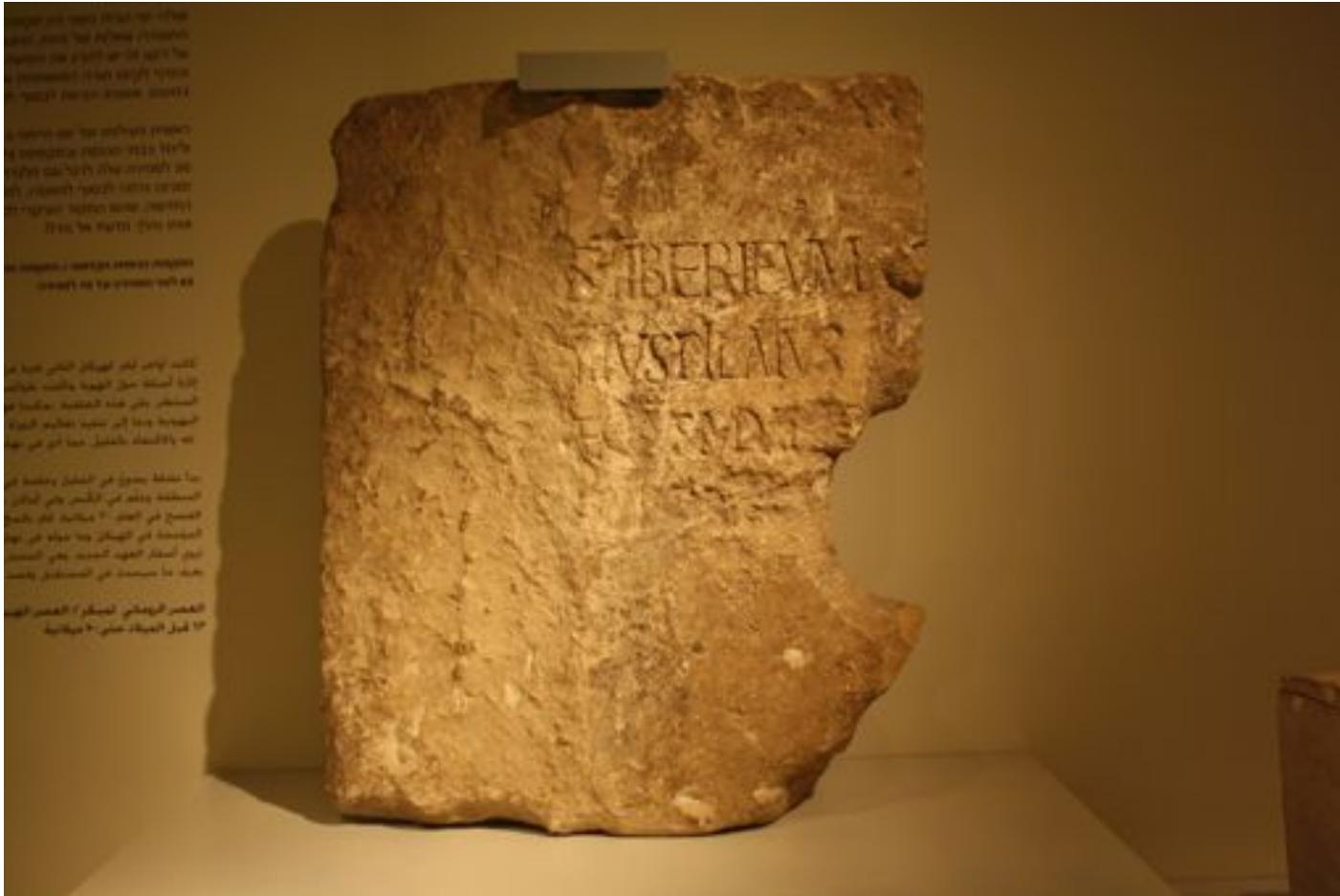
- ✓ Pontius Pilate was the 5th Prefect of Judea, serving under the Emperor Tiberias from A.D. 26-36.
- ✓ Pilate was an equestrian of the Pontii family and succeeded Valerius Gratus as Prefect.
- ✓ The inscription on the "Pilate Stone" discovered at Caesarea Maritima in 1961 validates his historicity.



“Pilate Stone” discovered in 1961 during excavations of the theater at Caesarea Maritima. The inscription reads: *“To the Divine Augusti [this] Tiberieum . . . Pontius Pilate . . . prefect of Judea . . . has dedicated . . .”* [This is a replica of the stone on site.](#)

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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This is the *authentic* “Pilate Stone” displayed in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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- ✓ In all four Gospels Pilate defends Jesus, acquiescing to Jesus' execution only when a riot is imminent, washing his hands of any responsibility.
- ✓ According to Josephus, Pilate was ordered back to Rome after using excessive force in quelling a Samaritan uprising, arriving in Rome shortly after Tiberius' death on 16 March A.D. 37.



- ✓ According to the Church historian Eusebius (c. 260-340), Pilate was exiled to Gaul by Caligula (A.D. 37-41) where he later committed suicide.

The Trial

Pilate questioned him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He said to him in reply, "You say so." The chief priests accused him of many things. Again Pilate questioned him, "Have you no answer? See how many things they accuse you of." Jesus gave him no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed."

(15:2-5)

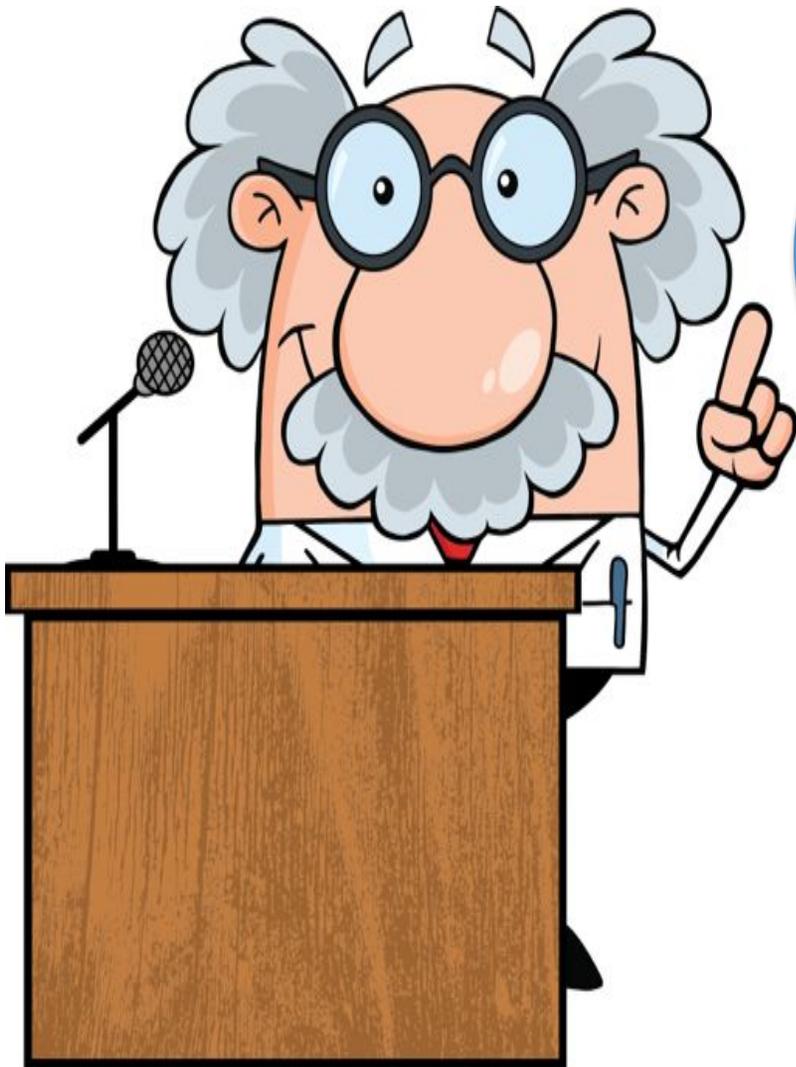


Notice two things: First, when Pilate asks, “Are you the king of the Jews?” his tone is one of *incredulity*, if not *scorn*. Obviously, Jesus is not a king of anything, as far as Pilate can see.



**Nickolai Ge. *Quod Est Veritas* (oil on canvas), 1890.
Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.**

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And then notice Jesus' reply to Pilate's question: "You say so." The Greek is $\Sigma\upsilon$ λέγεις "You say so [yourself]." This is not an affirmative answer; at best it is ambiguous. Jesus is playing a very subtle game here!



The Sanhedrin found Jesus guilty of blasphemy, a capital offence under Mosaic Law—and they want Jesus dead. But blasphemy is not a capital offence under Roman law, so the accusation they bring before Pilate is treason, claiming to be a king, which is a capital offence under Roman Law.



But Jesus won't take the bait. By answering "You say so," Jesus neither affirms nor denies the charge. And then, as any good criminal lawyer would advise, "Jesus gave no further answer" (15: 5).

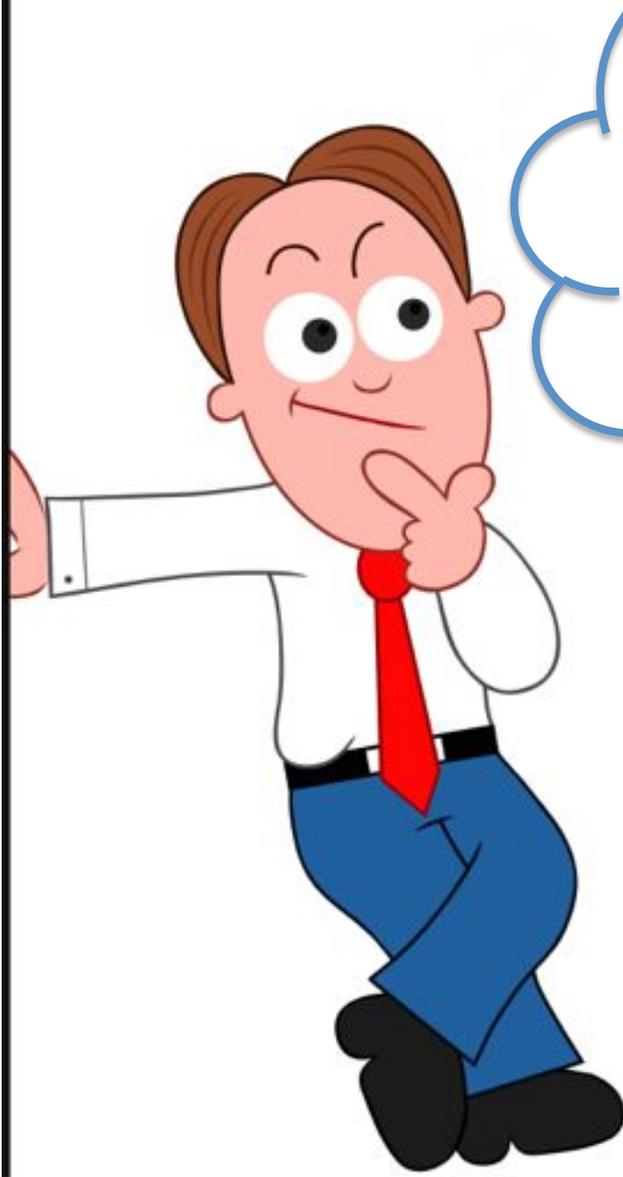


When Jesus refuses to answer, the religious leaders redouble their efforts, accusing him of “many things.” The use of the Greek double negative in verse 4 (Οὐκ . . . Οὐδέν, “not . . . neither”) and again in verse 5 (οὐκετι . . . οὐδέν) emphasizes the intensity with which Pilate questions Jesus, astonished that he does not reply when his life is clearly on the line.

The Trial

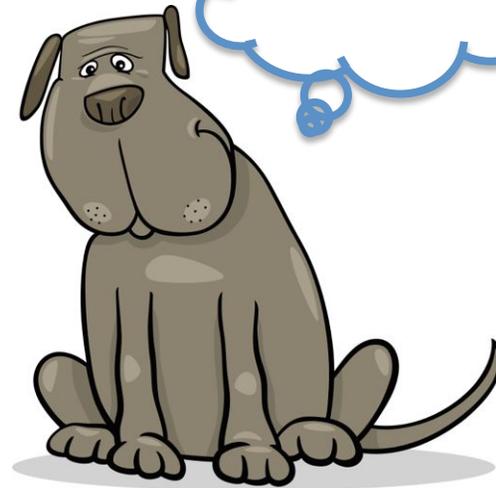
Now on the occasion of the feast he used to release to them one prisoner whom they requested. A man called Barabbas was then in prison along with the rebels who had committed murder in a rebellion. The crowd came forward and began to ask him to do for them as he was accustomed.

(15:6-8)



Clearly, Pilate doesn't think Jesus is guilty, and this will give him a graceful way to resolve the problem. They couldn't possibly want Barabbas. Very clever!

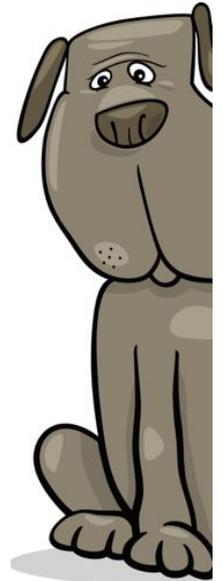
Don't bet on it!



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Barabbas and his two companions committed murder during a failed insurrection. They are not “thieves.” The Greek term in Matthew 27: 44 and John 18: 40 is λησταί, “thieves” only in the sense of those who usurp or “steal” authority. It is the word Josephus habitually uses when referring to revolutionaries.





Although all four Gospels mention the custom of Pilate releasing a prisoner during Passover, there are no extra-biblical references to others doing so. Issuing a pardon to a condemned criminal would certainly defuse tensions between Jews and the Roman authorities, however, showing good will and magnanimity on Pilate's part.



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Antonio Ciseri. *Ecco Homo* ["Behold the Man"] (oil on canvas), 1871.
Gallery of Modern Art, Florence.

The Trial

Pilate answered, "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" For he knew that it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed him over. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. Pilate again said to them in reply, "Then what [do you want] me to do with [the man you call] the king of the Jews?" They shouted again, "Crucify him." Pilate said to them, "Why? What evil has he done?" They only shouted the louder, "Crucify him." So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas to them and, after he had Jesus scourged, handed him over to be crucified.

(15:9-15)



When the crowd shouts “Give us Barabbas,” it is a chilling moment of irony: *Barabbas* [*Bar* = “Son”; *abba* = “Father”] . . . they are saying, “*Give us the Son of the Father!*”

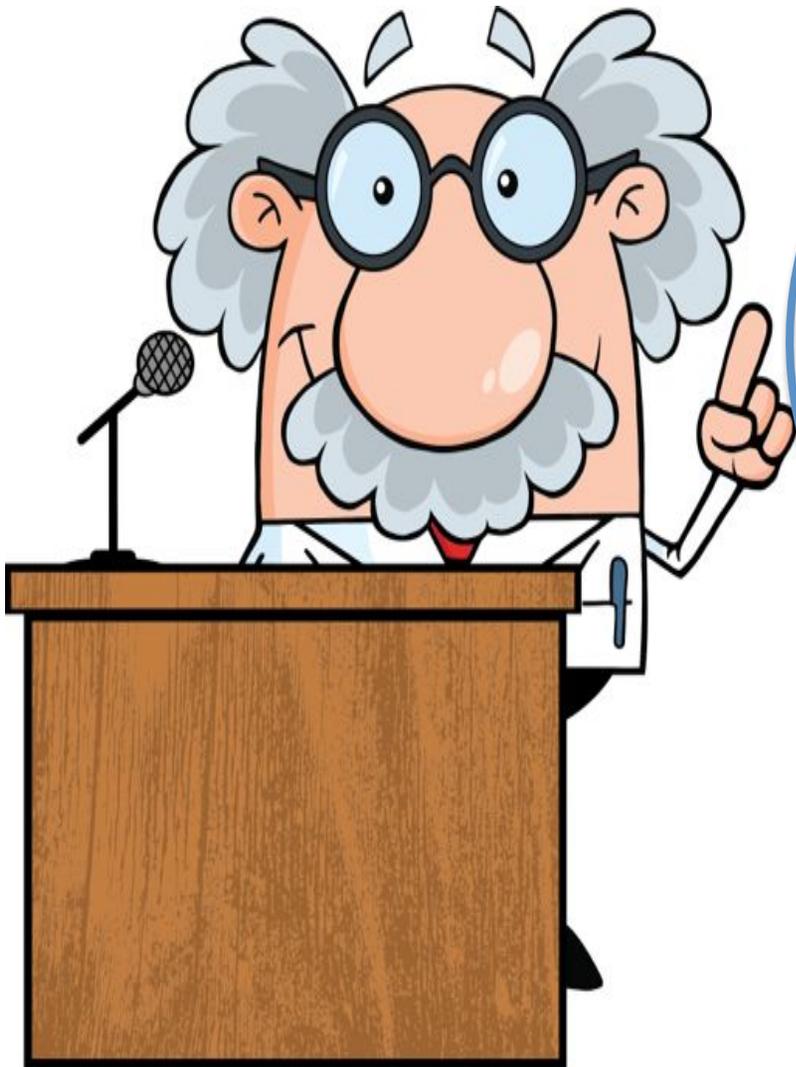


Notice that Pilate is doing everything possible to have Jesus released. Jesus has not broken any Roman law. Nevertheless, the crowd is extremely volatile, growing more and more agitated, and a riot is imminent. Thus, Pilate acquiesces to the crowd.





But that's not right! Pilate is weak and corrupt, caving in to the crowd, taking the easy way out and condemning an innocent man to death.



We read in 14: 2 that the religious leaders wanted to arrest Jesus and put him to death, but *“not during the festival, for fear that there may be a riot among the people.”* In John 11: 50 Caiaphas proclaims in no uncertain terms that it is more *“expedient”* that one man die than the whole nation perish. That is what’s at stake. And Pilate knows it. A riot would be a blood bath and the end of any religious freedom the Jews may have had.



A Roman *flagrum* was a whip with several leather thongs, embedded with lead shot and bone.

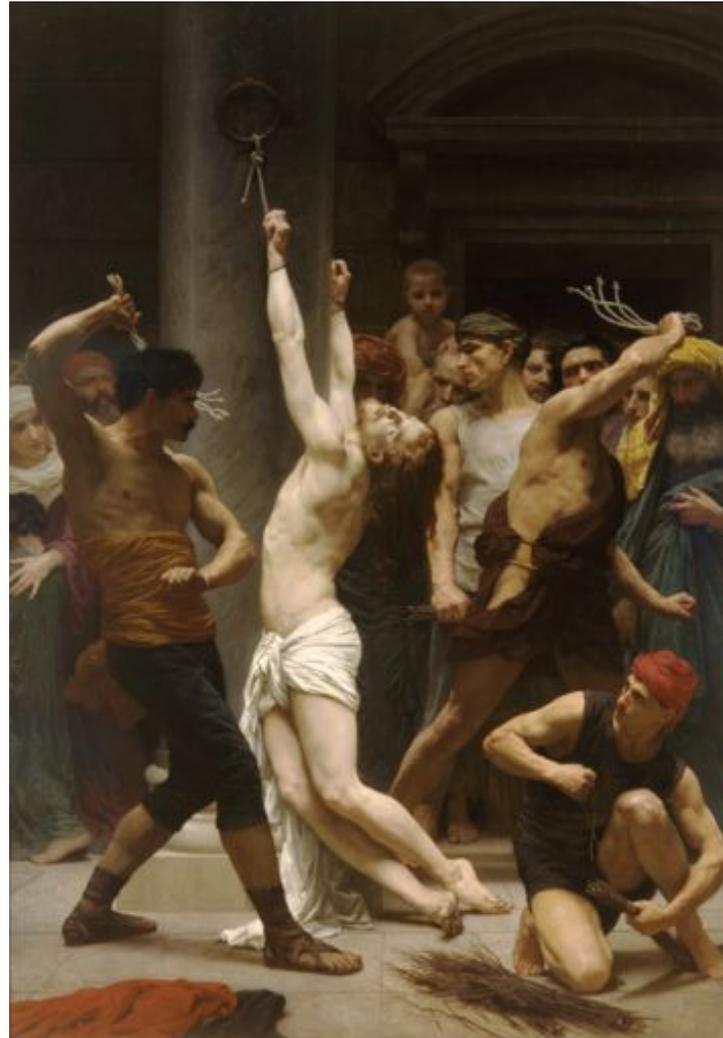
Jewish law limited a flogging to 39 lashes; Roman law did not.

Jesus was beaten

nearly to death, which accounts for his expiring rather quickly on the cross. Evidence of over 100 lashes can be seen on the Shroud of Turin.



Roman Flagrum



**William-Adolphe Bouguereau. *Flagellation of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (oil on canvas), 1880.
Cathedral of La Rochelle, La Rochelle, France.**

The Trial

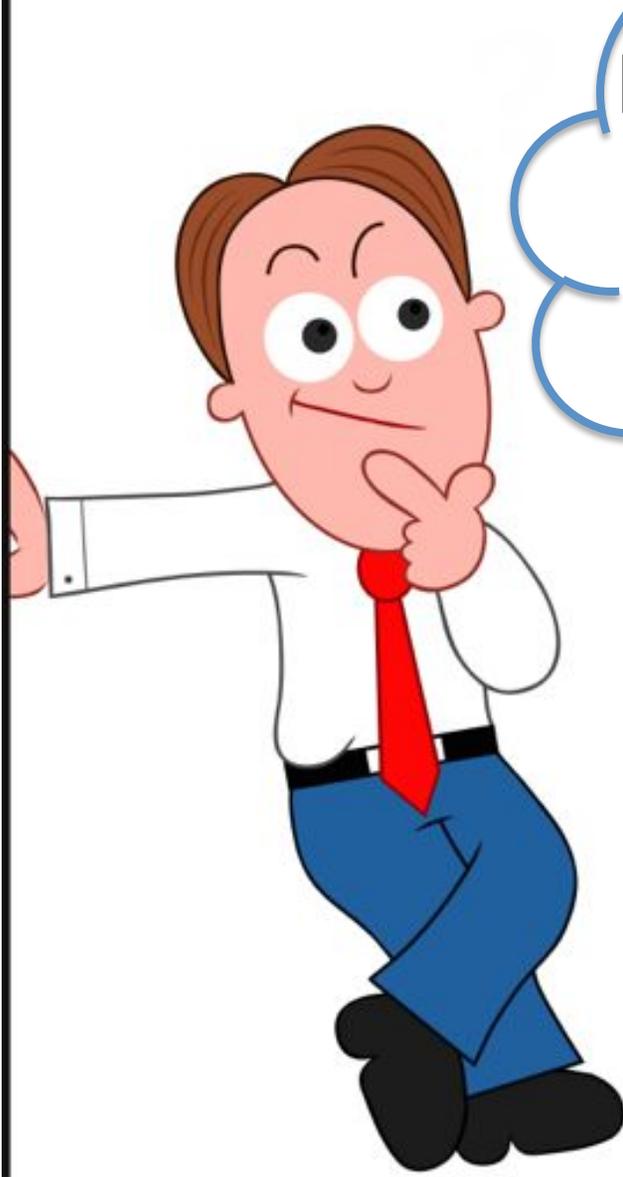
The soldiers led him away inside the palace, that is, the Praetorium, and the assembled cohort. They clothed him in purple and, weaving a crown of thorns, placed it on him. They began to salute him with, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and kept striking his head with a reed and spitting upon him. They knelt before him in homage. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloth, dressed him in his own clothes, and led him out to crucify him. (15:16-20)



Matthias Grünewald. *Mocking of Christ* (oil on panel), c. 1503-1505.
Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Germany.



**Lovis Corinth. *Ecce Homo* (oil on canvas), 1925.
Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland.**

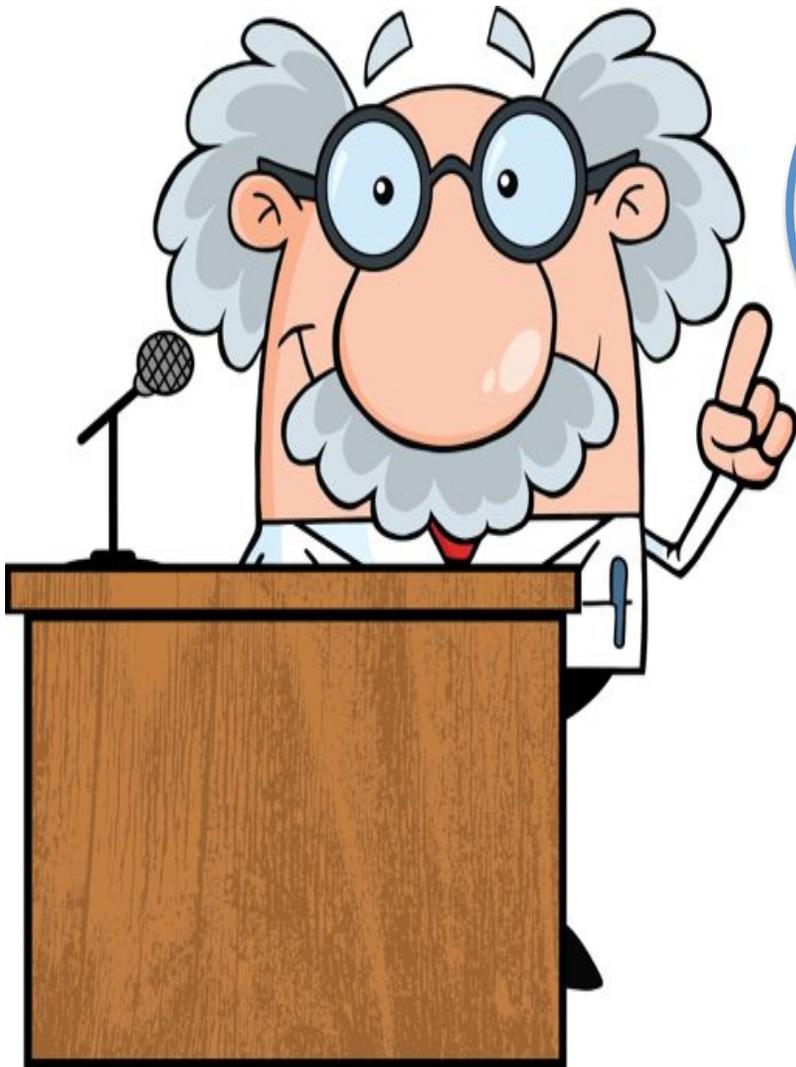


**I wonder, whatever
happened to
Pontius Pilate?**

**I've wondered
that myself.**



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In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante places Pontius Pilate not in Hell proper, but in the vestibule of Hell. Rejected by God and not accepted by Satan, he is among those who are “nowhere,” those cowardly souls who refused to make a choice in life.





Botticelli. *Dante Alighieri* (tempera on canvas),
1495. Private Collection, Geneva.

**The world will not record their having been there;
Heaven's mercy and its justice turn from them.
Let's not discuss them; look and pass them by.**

**And so I looked and saw a kind of banner
rushing ahead, whirling with aimless speed
as though it would not ever take a stand;**

**Behind it an interminable train
of souls pressed on, so many that I wondered
how death could have undone so great a number.**

**When I had recognized a few of them,
I saw the shade of the one who must have been
the coward who had made the great refusal.**

*Divine Comedy, "Inferno,"
Canto 3: 49-60.*

Questions for discussion and thought

1. Blasphemy is a capital offense under Mosaic Law, but the Jews are not permitted to carry out capital punishment, so they take Jesus to the Roman Prefect, Pontius Pilate, who can put Jesus to death. Of what crime do they accuse Jesus?
2. Why does Jesus remain silent before Pilate?
3. Although Pontius Pilate knows that Jesus has done nothing deserving of death, Pilate acquiesces to the demands of the crowd. Why?
4. Why does the crowd rally so quickly around Barabbas, rather than Jesus?
5. Ultimately, who is responsible for Jesus' crucifixion and death?

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