

# Who was Pontius Pilate?

Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea from A.D. 26-36, serving under Emperor Tiberius. He is most known for his involvement in condemning Jesus to death on a cross.

Outside of the four Gospels, Pontius Pilate is mentioned by Tacitus, Philo, and Josephus. In addition, the “Pilate Stone,” discovered in 1961 and dated c. A.D. 30, includes a description of Pontius Pilate and mentions him as “prefect” of Judea. Pilate is also mentioned in the apocryphal writings, but these were all written at much later dates.

In the Bible, Pontius Pilate is mentioned solely in connection with the trials and crucifixion of Jesus. The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) portray Pilate as reluctant to crucify Jesus. Pilate calls the charges against Jesus “baseless” (Luke 23:14) and several times declares Jesus to be not guilty: “What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty” (Luke 23:22).

Pilate’s conscience was already bothering him when his wife sent him an urgent message concerning Jesus. The note begged him, “Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him” (Matthew 27:19).

John’s Gospel offers some more detail of the trial, including an additional conversation between Pilate and Jesus. Jesus acknowledges Himself as a king and claims to speak directly for the truth. Pilate responds with the famous question, “What is truth?” (John 18:38). The question intentionally communicated multiple meanings. Here was a situation in which truth was compromised in order to condemn an innocent man. Pilate, who is supposedly seeking the truth, asks the question of the One who is Himself “the way, the

truth, and the life” (John 14:6). A human judge, confused about the truth, was about to condemn the Righteous Judge of the world.

In the end, Pilate sought a compromise. Knowing Jesus had been handed over by the religious leaders out of envy, he appealed to the crowds at the Passover, asking which “criminal” should be set free, Jesus or Barabbas? The leaders convinced the crowd to cry out for Barabbas (Matthew 27:20-21). Giving in to political pressure, Pilate authorized both the flogging and crucifixion of Jesus: “Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified” (Mark 15:15).

Pilate had the charge against Jesus posted on the cross above Jesus’ head: “THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS” (Matthew 27:37). As soon as Jesus died, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus in order to bury Him, and Pilate granted the request (John 19:38). The last glimpse we have of Pontius Pilate is when he assigns guards for Jesus’ tomb (Matthew 27:64-66).

Pontius Pilate’s brief appearance in Scripture is full of tragedy. He ignored his conscience, he disregarded the good advice of his wife, he chose political expediency over public rectitude, and he failed to recognize the truth even when Truth was standing right in front of him. When given an opportunity to evaluate the claims of Jesus, what will we decide? Will we accept His claim to be the King, or will we follow the voice of the crowd?