

Luke 23:3-7

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Pilate's First Interview with Jesus and his First Declaration of Innocence

Pilate follows up on the charge of insurrection and interviews Jesus, asking Him if He is the King of the Jews. Jesus replies, "It is as you say." Pilate finds nothing in Jesus's answer to convict Him, so declares His innocence. The chief priests are adamant that Jesus must die. As they protest, Pilate hears that Jesus is from Galilee, and decides to send Jesus to Herod, the ruler of that district, and let him deal with the trial.

This event is part of the first phase of Jesus's Civil Trial. It is known as Jesus's Arraignment before Pilate.

The parallel Gospel accounts of this event are found in Matthew 27:11-14; Mark 15:2-5; and John 18:33-38.

These events are the continuation of the first phase of Jesus's civil trial. The first phase of Jesus's civil trial is called "Jesus's Arraignment before Pilate." This scripture details *Pilate's* interview with Jesus as recorded by Luke. The happenings of this account took place mostly inside the Praetorium (likely Herod's Palace which was built on the western side of the upper city along the city wall). This event happened while it was early in the morning (likely before 7:00am). According to the Jewish calendar, the date was probably Nisan 15—the first day of Unleavened Bread. By Roman reckoning, the day was probably a Friday.

To learn more about the timing and sequencing of these events, see the Bible Says,

["Timeline: Jesus's Final 24 Hours."](#)

Jesus's Civil Trial occurred over the course of three phases.

1. Jesus's Arraignment before Pilate
(Matthew 27:1-2, 11-14; Mark 15:1-5; Luke 23:1-7; John 18:28-38)
2. Jesus's Audience before Herod Antipas
(Luke 23:8-12)
3. Pilate's Judgment
(Matthew 27:15-26; Mark 15:6-15; Luke 23:13-25; John 18:38-19:16)

The Jews Accused Jesus Before Pilate

Jesus's Civil Trial began with the Jews bringing Jesus from His sunrise trial under the supervision of Caiaphas at the temple where *He* was condemned to death on the religious charge

of blasphemy to *Pilate at the Praetorium* (Matthew 27:1-2; Mark 1:15; Luke 22:66-23:1; John 18:28).

Pilate opened the trial asking for the Jewish leaders to state their accusation and evidence against Jesus (John 18:29). The Jews gave an unacceptable answer (John 18:30) possibly because their star witness (Judas) had recently hanged himself (Matthew 27:3-5). At that point *Pilate* seemed to toss the case telling them to “judge Him according to your own laws” (John 18:31a). *The chief priests* explained that they were unable to judge *Him* because Rome did not permit them to put anyone to death (John 18:32b). *Pilate* seems to have then allowed them to resubmit their case. At this point, the religious leaders accused Jesus of three things:

1. “We found this man misleading our nation...” (Luke 23:2a)
2. “and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar...” (Luke 23:2b)
3. “and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King” (Luke 23:2c).

The first charge was that Jesus was a public nuisance because His teachings upset the status quo and threatened the fragile stability and order Rome desired. Depending on the severity of this crime, the penalty under Roman law could be death. The second charge claimed that Jesus was instructing *the people* to rebel against Roman authority by not paying their taxes. (This charge was a total lie—See Matthew 22:15-22) It was a charge of sedition and likely carried the death penalty under Roman law. The third charge was that Jesus was challenging Caesar’s political authority as the sovereign ruler of Judea. It was the charge of insurrection; and it was most serious. Under Roman law the penalty for insurrection was death.

Pilate Interviews Jesus

Such charges, especially the third one, required the Roman governor to take them seriously. But without a witness (like Jesus’s disciple Judas) to testify, *Pilate* would have to interview Jesus personally. All four Gospels record that this is precisely what *he* did next (Matthew 27:11; Mark 14:2; Luke 23:3; John 18:33-38).

Luke’s summary of this interview consists of a single verse:

So Pilate asked Him, saying, “Are You the King of the Jews?” And He answered him and said, “It is as you say” (v 3).

Of the four Gospel accounts of *Pilate*’s first interview of Jesus, John’s is the most extensive.

The first thing *Pilate* did was to enter the Praetorium and summon Jesus so *he* could interview *Him* away from His accusers who waited outside (John 18:28b; 33). Once there it appears that the conversation focused on the most serious of the three charges—the charge of insurrection.

Luke, like Matthew and Mark, appears to summarize this interview by stating *Pilate*’s main question and Jesus’s main answer (Matthew 27:11; Mark 15:2). Matthew explicitly states that this exchange took place as “Jesus stood before the governor” (Matthew 27:11).

So Pilate asked Him, saying, “Are You the King of the Jews?” (v 3a).

As the judge of this case, *Pilate* was interested in whether or not Jesus was guilty of claiming to be a *king* and therefore was attempting to usurp Caesar’s political authority in Judea.

Jesus answered *Pilate*’s question and said, “It is as you say” (v 3b).

From John’s much fuller account we see that *Pilate* basically asked Jesus a version of the question—*Are You the King of the Jews?* at least twice.

The first time Pilate asks this question is at the beginning of John’s account of this interview.

“Are You the King of the Jews?”
(John 18:33)

Jesus replied to this first question by asking a probing question to ascertain where *Pilate* was coming from: “Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?” (John 18:34). This could be a version of Jesus’s response recorded in the synoptic Gospels: *It is as you say*.

Pilate was asking Jesus this as a Roman governor presiding over a trial: “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have You done?” (John 18:35).

Jesus then responded accordingly that *He* was not a threat to Rome or guilty of insurrection because: His kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36a). The proof Jesus offered to support His claim that His kingdom was not of this world was that neither Jesus nor His followers were resisting the Jewish authorities or the Romans (John 18:36b).

Pilate then asked his question a second time,

“So You are a king?”
(John 18:37a)

Jesus appeared to answer in the affirmative, but *He* did so ambiguously, “You say correctly that I am a king” (John 18:37b). Note the NASB 95 inserts the word “correctly” in Jesus’s reply. This is added to the Greek text of this answer. The NASB’s translation is therefore interpretative concerning Jesus’s response. The interpretation is reasonable because Jesus likely intended to signal an affirmative response to *Pilate*, but the interpretive translation masks the brilliant shrewdness of Jesus to both signal to *Pilate* that *He* is a *king*, but to do so without saying anything that would constitute self-incrimination and make *Him* guilty of the charges against *Him*.

Again, Jesus’s literal response to *Pilate* here as recorded by John: “You say that I am a king” (John 18:37b) is very similar to the responses in Luke, Matthew, and Mark: *It is as you say* (Matthew 27:11; Mark 15:2).

In John's Gospel Jesus elaborates upon His answer: "For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice" (John 18:37b). *Pilate* retorts: "What is truth?" as *he* ends the interview and exits the Praetorium to announce his not-guilty verdict to *the chief priests and the crowds* (v 4) waiting outside (John 18:38).

Pilate Announces his Initial Verdict

Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no guilt in this man" (v 4).

This was not the verdict or outcome *the chief priests* and *the crowds* of *Christ's* accusers had come for.

A not-guilty verdict was unacceptable to *the chief priests* who brought Jesus *before Pilate*. *They* hated Jesus. *They* were not seeking justice, *they* were seeking Jesus's death. *The people* believed *He* was the Messiah, but *the priests* could not control *Him*. *He* had outraged them when *He* cleared out their money changers in the Temple (Luke 19:45-46). *He* had humiliated them as *He* answered their questions while teaching publicly in the temple (Luke 20:1-47).

Even before those events *the chief priests* had conspired to murder *Him* because *they* feared if *they* let Jesus go on, *He* would turn the nation against them, and Rome would strip away their power (John 11:47-57). Now they knew *He* was aware of their conspiracy (Matthew 26:23-25). Further, *they* had illegally arrested (Luke 22:51-53) and condemned *Him* (Luke 22:66-71) and much abused *Him* (Luke 22:63-65). If *Pilate* were to release Jesus now, *they* would likely be ruined once their crimes and abuse against the Man many *people* regarded as the Messiah came to light. *They* were desperate for Jesus to die.

The crowds with *the chief priests* erupted in angry protest at this verdict of innocence pronounced by *Pilate*. An avalanche of harsh accusations broke down upon Jesus as they furiously demanded that *Pilate* reconsider.

Matthew observes how Jesus remained silent as they shouted their accusations against *Him* (Matthew 27:12). Jesus's silence was in fulfillment of a Messianic prophecy within the fourth servant song of Isaiah (Isaiah 52:13-53:12):

"He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth."
(Isaiah 53:7)

This prophecy foretells how the Messiah would be silent before His oppressors as a lamb is in front of *the priests* who slaughter and sacrifice it.

Pilate also noticed Jesus's silence while *the chief priests* accused *Him* harshly (Mark 15:3-4):

“The chief priests began to accuse Him harshly. Then Pilate questioned Him again, saying, ‘Do You not answer? See how many charges they bring against You!’”
(Mark 15:3-4)

But Jesus “did not answer him with regard to even a single charge, so the governor was quite amazed” (Matthew 27:14; see also Mark 15:5).

Pilate was amazed at Jesus’s remarkable composure and silence during the slanders being made against *Him* as His life was on the line. Jesus was putting into practice His teaching: “do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also” (Matthew 5:39).

Perhaps *Pilate* was trying to get Jesus to say something that would either cause *Pilate* to change his mind and see *Him* as guilty so the governor could appease *the angry crowds of priests and elders*; or to say something that would shame His accusers and thus give *Pilate* an opportunity to finalize his verdict of innocence and pin the decision on the religious leaders’ failure to win their case.

As the Roman governor of Judea, the final verdict was vested in *Pilate*. But tensions were high. It was clear that the leading *Jews, the chief priests*, hated *Jesus* and desperately wanted *Him* executed. And it was becoming apparent that *they* were determined to accept nothing other than this deadly outcome and were willing to precipitate civil unrest in order to secure it.

The chief priests “kept on insisting” that Jesus be killed (Luke 23:5a).

Pilate’s Dilemma and his Solution

As Jesus’s trial progressed, *Pilate’s* responsibilities to uphold Rome’s laws and to maintain good order were proving to be at odds. *He* believed Jesus to be innocent (Luke 23:4; John 18:38). But *he* needed *the chief priests’* help in maintaining control over the masses of *people* who had crowded the city of *Jerusalem* for the Passover.

If the province turned against *Pilate*, *he* would lose his honor, his job, and possibly his life. Fear and indecision seemed to fester within *Pilate’s* heart as *he* tried to balance the law which favored Jesus’s innocence against keeping good order, while the Jewish *priests* obsessed over one goal—kill Jesus.

The chief priests were relentless. In their accusations *they* said: *He stirs up the people, teaching all over Judea, starting from Galilee even as far as this place* (Luke 23:5).

Something in the remark that Jesus started *from Galilee* apparently gave *Pilate* an idea—an idea that could absolve *him* from having to make a decision that was becoming harder and harder to make. With the trial dragging on, and the people protesting his verdict of not-guilty, *Pilate* was looking for a way out.

Judea was the entire Roman province that *Pilate* was governor over. *Galilee* was a district within that province. The district of *Galilee* was administered by *Herod Antipas*.

When Pilate heard it—that Jesus stirs up people, teaching all of Judea, starting from Galilee—he asked whether the man was a Galilean (v 6).

Although born in Bethlehem, Jesus was raised in *Galilee* (Nazareth) and began and headquartered His public ministry in and around the town of Capernaum of Galilee (Matthew 4:12-13).

And when he (Pilate) learned that He (Jesus) belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who himself also was in Jerusalem at that time (Luke 23:7).

This *Herod* was *Herod Antipas*, son of King Herod the Great (builder). *Herod Antipas* was the Roman magistrate of *Galilee*, Jesus’s home district. This is why Luke describes *Pilate*’s thought process as Jesus *belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction*. *Pilate* sent Jesus to *Herod* to let him deal with this matter.

Sending Jesus *to Herod* conveniently shifted unwelcome blame and unwanted responsibility away from the governor from having to decide between the law (under which Jesus was innocent) and peaceful order (the unrest threatened by Jewish leaders if *Pilate* found Jesus innocent).

Roman law demanded the release of Jesus because *no guilt* was found *in this man*. (But such a verdict enraged *the chief priests* who now threatened maintaining good order). *The chief priests* demanded that Jesus be put to death. (But such a verdict broke the law and condemned an innocent *man* to death).

Pilate was now having to choose between following the law and appeasing *the priests*. *He* had to cross one for the sake of the other. *He* would be criticized for whichever side *he* chose. By sending Jesus *to Herod*, *Pilate* had (at least for the moment) seemed to extricate himself from having to make a decision that would incur criticism upon *him*.

Herod Antipas was the son of the ruler who had tried to execute Jesus when Christ was first born (Matthew 2:16); and he was the same ruler who beheaded John the Baptizer, *Jesus*’s cousin (Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 9:9).

This ended the first phase of Jesus’s civil trial. It was: “Jesus’s Arraignment before Pilate” (Matthew 27:1-2, 11-14; Mark 15:1-5; Luke 23:1-7; John 18:28-38).

The second phase of Jesus’s trial takes place in the court of *Herod Antipas*. It is called, “Jesus’s Audience before Herod Antipas” (Luke 23:8-12). And it is to this trial that we now turn.

Biblical Text

3 So Pilate asked Him, saying, “Are You the King of the Jews?” And He answered him and said, “It is as you say.” 4 Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, “I find no guilt in this man.” 5 But they kept on insisting, saying, “He stirs up the people, teaching all over Judea, starting from Galilee even as far as this place.” 6 When Pilate heard it, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. 7 And when he learned that He belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who himself also was in Jerusalem at that time.