One of the familiar stories from the end of the Gospels — it’s in all the Jesus movies! — comes at Jesus’ trial. Pontius Pilate is trying to avoid executing Jesus. As it turns out, he has an custom during the annual Passover feast (when the crowds of pilgrims in Jerusalem were enormous) of releasing one Jewish prisoner as a way to appease the crowds and keep himself in their good graces.

And so when the Jewish leaders insist on Jesus’ death, Pilate makes a last ditch effort, offering Jesus up as the one who could possibly be released. The crowd is given the choice: either Jesus or an insurrectionist who has committed murder, named Barabbas (why these are the only two choices is not clear: there were two others crucified with Jesus, so presumably they could have been on offer as well?). The crowd chooses Barabbas, and Jesus is then taken off to be crucified.

Did this happen? Or was Barabbas “made up”? Could he be some kind of symbolic figure? I get the question on occasion here on the blog. Here is how one reader asked it recently, followed by my response.

**QUESTION:**

Is it true that “Barabbas” is a title which means son of God and the name of Barabbas in some of the ancient manuscripts of Mathew, was Jesus Barabbas (Jesus son of God)? Can you please elaborate on this issue?

**RESPONSE:**

This was an issue I worked on while writing my book *Jesus Before the Gospels*. After doing my research I came to a definite conclusion, that I state rather strongly in the book. Here is what I say there (modified a bit for the blog):

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Mark’s Gospel indicates that it was Pilate’s custom to release a prisoner guilty of a capital crime to the Jewish crowd in honor of the Passover festival. He asks if they would like him to release Jesus, but they urge him to release for them Barabbas instead, a man in prison for committing murder during an insurrection. Pilate appears to feel that his hand is forced, and so he sets Barabbas free but orders Jesus to be crucified (Mark 15:6-15).

This Barabbas episode was firmly set in the early Christian memory of Jesus’ trial – it is found, with variations, in all four of the Gospels (Matthew 27:15-23; Luke 23:17-23; John 18:39-40). I do not see how it can be historically right, however; it appears to be a distorted memory.

For starters, what evidence is there that ...

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