

I received recently the following question, which deals with an issue I had long puzzled over. It involves the episode in the Gospels where Pilate offers to release a prisoner to the crowds at Passover, hoping they will choose Jesus. But instead they choose a Jewish insurrectionist and murderer, Barabbas. Could that have happened?

Here's the Question and my Response:

### **QUESTION:**

Pilate condemns Jesus to execution for treason against Rome. Pilate gives the Jewish crowds the option of releasing Jesus or a Jewish insurgent, Barabbas (15:6-15). I did a quick search to see if this was an attested practice in the Roman Empire and couldn't find any relevant information. So, I have two questions: Do you think this detail is accurate? Is there any evidence that Roman officials actually freed condemned prisoners at certain local festival times?

### **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 (!). Here is what I say about the matter there:

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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 Pilate ever released a prisoner to the Jewish crowd because they wanted him to do so, or because he wanted to behave kindly toward them during their festival? Apart from the Gospels, there is none at all. In part that is because we do not have a huge number of sources for the governorship of Pilate over Judea, just some highly negative remarks in the writings of a Jewish intellectual of his day, Philo of Alexandria, and a couple of stories in the writings of the Jewish historian, Josephus. These are enough, though, to show us the basic character of Pilate, his attitude to the Jews that he ruled, and his basic approach to Jewish sensitivities. The short story is that he was a brutal, ruthless ruler with no concerns at all for what the people he governed thought about him or his policies. He was violent, mean-spirited, and hard-headed. He used his soldiers as thugs to beat the people into submission, and he ruled Judea with an iron fist.

Is Pilate the sort of person who would kindly accede to the requests of his Jewish subjects in light of their religious sensitivities? In fact he was just the opposite kind of person. Not

only do we have no record of him releasing prisoners to them once a year, or ever. Knowing what we know about him, it seems completely implausible. I should point out that we don't have any evidence of any Roman governor, anywhere, in any of the provinces, having any such policy.

And thinking about the alleged facts of the case for a second, how could there be such a policy? Barabbas in this account is not just a murderer, he is an insurrectionist. If he was involved with an insurrection, that means he engaged in an armed attempt to overthrow Roman rule. If he murdered during the insurrection, he almost certainly would have murdered a Roman soldier or someone who collaborated with the Romans. Are we supposed to believe that the ruthless, iron-fisted Pilate would release a dangerous enemy of the state because the Jewish crowd would have liked him to do so? What did Romans do with insurrectionists? Did they set them free so they could engage in more armed guerilla warfare? Would any ruling authority do this? Of course not. Would the Romans? Actually we know what they did with insurrectionists. They crucified them.

I don't think the Barabbas episode can be a historical recollection of what really happened. It's a distorted memory. But where did such an incredible story come from?

We need to remember what I stressed earlier, that these accounts of Jesus' trial repeatedly emphasize that Pilate was the innocent party. It was those awful Jews who were responsible for Jesus' death. For the Christian storytellers, in killing Jesus, the Jews killed their own messiah. That's how wicked and foolish they were. They preferred to kill rather than revere the one God had sent to them. That is one key to understanding the Barabbas episode. The Jews preferred a violent, murdering, insurrectionist to the Son of God.

There is even more to it than that. We have no evidence outside these Gospel accounts that any such person as Barabbas existed. It is interesting to think about the name of this apparently non-existent person. In Aramaic, the language of Palestine, the name Bar-abbas literally means "son of the father." And so, in a very poignant way, the story of the release of Barabbas is a story about which kind of "son of the father" the Jewish people preferred. Do they prefer the one who is a political insurgent, who believed that the solution to Israel's problems was a violent overthrow of the ruling authorities? Or do they prefer the loving "Son of the Father" who was willing to give his life for others? In these Christian recollections, the Jewish people preferred the murdering insurrectionist to the self-sacrificing savior.

It is interesting to note that in some manuscripts of Matthew's account of the Barabbas episode there is an important addition. In these manuscripts - which may well represent what the Gospel writer originally wrote - Barabbas is actually named "Jesus Barabbas." Now the contrast is even more explicit: which kind of Jesus do the Jews want? Which Jesus, the son of the Father, is to be preferred? In this account, of course, the Jews are remembered as preferring the wrong one. But for the Gospel writers that's because the Jews are always doing the wrong thing and always opposing the true ways of God.

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