

# Pontius Pilate

## Prefect of Judea

26 AD to 36 AD

Pilate: The fifth governor of the Roman province of Judea. He was educated, wealthy and well-connected politically and socially. He served the emperor Tiberius. He married Procula (Claudia), the granddaughter of Caesar Augustus, who was raised in the house of Tiberius. Because of this union, Tiberius granted Caesar the post of governor of Judea, a posting of relatively low prestige, but important to Pilate's career.

Pilate first offended the Jews early in his tenure by moving imperial standards with the image of Caesar into Jerusalem. This resulted in a noisy mob of Jews surrounding Pilate's house in Caesarea for five days. Pilate then summoned them to the arena, where the Roman soldiers drew their swords. The Jews would not back down. They did not fear death. Pilate gave in. He removed the standards.

Next, Pilate offended the Jews by using silver from the temple treasury to pay for a new aqueduct into Jerusalem. Another Jewish mob formed and confronted Pilate in Jerusalem. Pilate ordered his troops to beat them with clubs. This time many Jews were killed. Some died by blows from the soldiers, many were trampled by horses. After much blood was shed, the mob dispersed.

Having won that skirmish, Pilate brought golden shields into Jerusalem inscribed with an inscription referring to Tiberius as *divi Augusti filius* (son of divine Augustus). He brought them in by night and set the shields up in the Temple. Pilate said he would kill the Jews with swords if they protested. The Jews bared their necks to Pilate and said, "Then kill us! We will die before we allow this blasphemy!" They threatened to go to Rome and petition Tiberius. Pilate removed the shields from the Temple and moved them to Herod's Palace. Herod Antipas, not wanting to arouse the ire of the Jews against himself, told Pilate to remove the shields, but Pilate refused. Herod also threatened to petition Tiberius. This action would expose other crimes Pilate had committed while Prefect, but he assumed Herod was bluffing. Why Should Herod care about the sensibilities of the Jews? So Pilate left the shields in place. In due course, Tiberius got the petition, and he was angry. He severely reprimanded Pilate and ordered him to remove the shields. This is the reason for the enmity that existed between Pilate and Herod. This occurred in 31 AD. A significant date, because this is the year that Pilate's protector and political mentor in Rome, Sejanus, died. And his death by execution is ordered by Tiberius.

Sejanus is very important to Pilate. He was an ambitious soldier, friend and confidant of Emperor Tiberius. Sejanus rose to power as Prefect of the Roman Imperial Guard—the Praetorian Guard—in 14 AD under Emperor Augustus. Sejanus turned the Praetorian Guard into a powerful and influential branch of the government. He was in charge of public security, civil administration and ultimately political intercession between the Emperor and the Senate of Rome.

Tiberius withdrew to Capri in AD 26, and left Sejanus in control of the entire Empire. He became the most influential and feared citizen of Rome. Then suddenly, due to jealousy and political intrigue, Sejanus fell from grace. In AD 31, amidst suspicions of a conspiracy against

Tiberius, Sejanus was arrested and executed, along with all of his followers. Pilate survived his close ties to Sejanus for one reason: He was far off in the ill-favored outpost of Judea where the people of Jerusalem despise him. He represented everything they hated about the Roman Emperor and Roman Rule. Pilate is in this far off place and he is vulnerable. He has lost his "political cover".

Now comes 33 AD. Pilate has been rebuked by Tiberius. He has offended the Jews many times, and he has lost Sejanus. Pilate was in no position to risk another confrontation with Tiberius. He must avoid this at all costs.

Pilate was a typical Roman; pragmatic, had contempt for superstitions and religion of all types, and, above all, had typical Roman hatred of the Jews, "the horde of the circumcised". In any other province, he may have been a beloved and successful ruler. He was not suited to rule over a people who clung so tenaciously to its cherished traditions. Ruling over the Jews required a man of tact and diplomacy. Pilate was a man of quick temper, a high hand and a demand for obedience. He hated the Jews and would have gladly crushed them, but he also feared them. He was at their mercy, and they knew it.

Pilate did attempt to save Jesus from the cross. He declared Him innocent six times. He offered to chastise and scourge Him. He offered to release Him according to the custom of Passover. He exhausted every means for saving Him. None of his attempts to free Jesus worked. The leaders and the crowds could not be appeased. Once the Jews cried out, "We have no King but Caesar! You are no friend of Caesar!" Pilate sent Jesus to the cross. Sejanus was gone. He could not afford another riot instigated by these cantankerous Jews.

In strict legal terms, Pilate should have declined to even hear this case. The charges were vague and spurious. Even when the Jews brought the indictment for sedition against Jesus, Pilate questioned Him privately, and decided He was innocent. He had the legal *authority* to release Jesus, but he was not legally *obligated* to free Him. Jesus was not a citizen of Rome. If Jesus had been a Roman citizen, Pilate would have let Him go free, and would be legally obligated to do so. Pilate's decision to go back to the Jewish leaders and appeal to them again was unethical, perhaps immoral, but not illegal.

Why did Pilate send Jesus to Herod? He saw an opportunity to get himself back into "good graces" with Herod. And, more importantly, he could let Herod decide the case, and Pilate is "off the hook." It did not work.

What happened to Pilate? His problems and conflicts with the Jewish people continued until 36 AD, when Tiberius recalled him to Rome. His life hung in the balance. As fortune would have it, however, Tiberius died in 37 AD and was replaced by Caligula. Caligula seemed to not be interested in the "crimes" of Pilate in a far off outpost called Judea. Paul Maier, who wrote an excellent historical novel called "Pontius Pilate", says Pilate likely lived the life of a retired government official, living on the pension due an ex-magistrate.

The reports by some of his death by suicide are greatly exaggerated.