

Jesus Barabbas

by

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I was in church. As all too often, my mind was wandering. It was Palm Sunday, and the Gospel was St Matthew's Passion. Suddenly I stiffened. The words still echoing in my ears were 'Jesus Barabbas'—'Which would you like me to release to you—Jesus Barabbas or Jesus called Messiah?' The name 'Jesus Barabbas' grated on my ears, as it had, I subsequently discovered, grated on Origen's some seventeen centuries earlier.¹ At the name of Jesus every knee should bow: it was quite incongruous that Barabbas, who was a robber, should have borne the same name as the Saviour of Mankind.

But still, I had heard it. It must have been in the *New English Bible* and the *New English Bible* is sound on scholarship, so there must be good manuscript authority for Ἰησοῦν Βαραββᾶν (*Iesoun Barabban*). Of course, even if there was, it would be natural to omit it, which would be why the familiar renderings called him simply 'Barabbas'. But the translators of the *New English Bible* would have been guided by the principle *difficilior lectio potior*, and would have preferred the manuscript of St Matthew, which called him incongruously Jesus Barabbas to those that called him unobjectionably just Barabbas.

I wondered about the other Gospels. Did they all call him just 'Barabbas'? It was likely. St Mark was writing for the Romans, St Luke for educated Greeks, St John for the Greeks of Ephesus, all of them deeply in the Gentile world, who had never heard of any Jesus, save Our Lord who died on the Cross and rose from the dead. For them the name of Jesus had always been hallowed, and would have been too sacred to apply to any other man, let alone a robber and a murderer. St Matthew was different. Although he wrote in Greek, he wrote for very Jewish Christians, perhaps at Antioch, who were steeped in Jewish traditions and culture. Some of them may still have known Aramaic. Even those who had lost their Aramaic would still have been familiar with Aramaic names—there are many Welshmen who speak only English, but are called, Jones, Powell, or Prichard. Ἰησοῦς Βαραββᾶς (*Iesous Barabbas*) would not have grated on the ears of an Antiochene Christian who often visited Uncle Yehoshua and for whom it was not the name of Jesus that had special significance, but the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth that had unique authority.

So perhaps the *New English Bible* was right, and it was Yehoshua Barabbas whom Pilate released in place of Our Lord. But who was this Yehoshua Barabbas? I could not remember any mention of him—no learned citations from Josephus in commentaries or from funerary inscriptions. But then the New Testament is full of tantalising references to Simon and Rufus, or to St Peter's mother-in-law, or St Paul's nephew, which we should love to take up, but which force us to remember that the Bible was not written to gratify our curiosity. Barabbas was obviously a local. I know no Semitic languages, but Bar, as in Simon Bar Jonas, or Bartholemew, means son of. He was Yehoshua Somethingson, Abbas-son. Abbas-son? But Abbas-son, Father's-son is not a possible name. Peter Bar Jonas, Peter Johnson, makes sense—it distinguishes Peter the son of John from Peter the son of Tholemew or Peter the son or Timeus: but to say of anyone that he was the son of his father would not distinguish him from anybody else. We are all our father's sons.

But there was one person present before Pilate who might be described as Son of the Father in a special sense. Jesus addressed God as Daddy. The word *Abba* was constantly on his lips, so much so that it was used by St Paul². and was one of the few Aramaic words to have been transliterated by the Evangelists and preserved in its original tongue.³ Except perhaps for *amen* (truly), it is the most common. Not only was it Our Lord's mode of address, but it was peculiarly his. Although some modern theologians deny the authenticity of any of Jesus' sayings which fit the subsequent thinking of the church, it requires greater powers of doubt than I can muster to escape the conclusions that Jesus, and Jesus alone, addressed God as Daddy, and that his so doing, and the special relationship it implied, impressed itself on his contemporaries as one of the most characteristic features of his teaching and his claim. And some did not like it. The Sanhedrin condemned Jesus for blasphemy, because he said he was the Son of God,⁴ but could not carry out the death penalty, and so brought him before Pilate. Jesus, and Jesus alone, could be called Son of the Father in a way that picked

¹ J-P. Migne, *Patrologae Graecae*, Paris, 1864, 1772-1773.

² Gal. 4:4-6, Rom. 8:15

³ J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology, I, The Proclamation of Jesus*, London, 1971, ch.II, §7, pp.61-68.

⁴ See especially, Lk. 22:70-71, and compare with Mt 26:63-66. and Mk. 14:61b-64.

him out from others and was relevant to his being before Pilate. Jesus Bar Abbas and Jesus called Messiah—Χριστός (*Christos*)—were one and the same man.

The Gospel ended, and I tried to rejoin the Liturgy, but further questions kept pressing on me. After church I tried it out on the family during our journey out to lunch. The textual argument sounded good, as also the interpretation of Bar Abbas. But what did Pilate mean? How did the story get into its present form? Well, Pilate clearly wanted to let Jesus off. And Jesus was before him because the Sanhedrin had found him guilty of claiming to be the Son of God. But Pilate, like Gallio, could reasonably say that he cared for none of these things.⁵ Officially, therefore, Jesus was up before Pilate on the very different charge of making himself king. That was a charge of which Pilate had to be cognisant. Although it was far from the case that whosoever made himself a king spoke against Caesar, claiming to be a king was a political act, and if Pilate refused to look into the matter of Jesus' claim to be the successor of David, he could be in trouble with Tiberius. Pilate was faced with a man whose real offence and formal accusation did not tally. There was not any doubt that Jesus had outraged the religious susceptibilities of his compatriots by claiming to be the Son of God: there was no evidence that he had raised an insurrection or engaged in any anti-Roman activity. On neither charge could Pilate convict. He could not convict on the first, because although the facts were reasonably clear, they did not constitute an offence in Roman law; he could not convict on the second, because although it would have been an offence in Roman law if he had committed it, he had not done anything of the sort. He must acquit Jesus charged with claiming to be *Bar Abba*, and must acquit Jesus charged with being the Political Messiah. Perhaps he made a joke. Evidence about Pilate's sense of humour is literary rather than historical, and it is unwise to rely on any Roman, let alone a Roman Governor, having a sense of humour. But still, if he had had one, it is quite certain that it would be lost on the leaders of the Jews. Or perhaps, he was anticipating Hobson, the Mayor of Cambridge, and giving the priests an unchoice of the facts, but a choice of the grounds, of Jesus' acquittal, "I am going to acquit this man", he might have said; "I can either acquit him on the Son-of-God charge, in which case I shall just disclaim jurisdiction, or I can acquit him on the Political-Messiah charge, in which case I shall be obliged to say that your accusation is just a trumped-up tissue of falsehood". If there had been some such attempt at plea bargaining, it would have been a bit *sub rosa* and *sotto voce*, and easily misheard and misunderstood. The subsequent outcry which was ultimately successful in intimidating Pilate, could have been construed, especially by a non-Aramaic-speaker, as a plea for the Jesus who was not Jesus Christ, rather than a straight demand for the condemnation of the Jesus who was Jesus Christ.

There were objections. It was a lot to build on one textual variant. It was a highly hypothetical reconstruction of Pilate's state of mind. Would Pilate have known Aramaic or Hebrew? What about Pearson? Didn't that mean son of a *père*? These were objections that might be met, but not by me in a car. And so we reached our destination.

The question would not leave me. When we got back to Oxford, I started to ask around, catching hold of unwilling listeners in the Meadows, at Gaudies, and elsewhere. I read a paper to the Theological Wine entitled "The Non-Existent Jesus". But the response was disappointing. I had imagined that the theory must have been canvassed long ago, and that the philological arguments would be clear cut. But to most people it was a new, and not very good, theory. Although there were other unsatisfactory features of the Barabbas story—the custom of releasing a prisoner at the feast is supported by no other evidence, and runs counter to what little we know of Roman practice—my account smelt wrong. Besides the final sibilant, there was a glottal stop in *Barabbas* which there was not in *Abba*. And the name *Barabbas* had turned up in an inscription on the wall of the North Gate of the temple of the gods of the Palmyrenians in Syria.

About a year later I was in Durham, giving a Cathedral Lecture and staying in the Deanery; I seized the opportunity of picking Eric Heaton's brain. Two hours and ten reference books later, the picture was entirely different. The theory was neither as bad nor as original as I had come to believe. I had been scooped. H.A. Rigg, Jnr., had propounded the same theory in a long article in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* in 1945. In fact I had been scooped twice, because H.Z Maccoby had, quite independently, published a similar suggestion in *New Testament Studies* in 1970. In the January issue of *New Testament Studies* this year (1981) there was a further article by Stevan L. Davies, citing both the others—a former pupil, whom I had barabbed in Christ Church Meadows, wrote to tell me about it. I tried to follow up references I had been given, and then turned to other pressing matters.

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⁵ *Acts* 18:15.

Recently I have returned to the topic, spurred by a fresh look at the texts and the unsatisfactory account given by New Testament scholars. A closer examination of the papers by Rigg, Maccoby and Davies shows that they had, indeed, taken ‘Barabbas’ to mean ‘Son of the Father’, their reconstruction of the incident was markedly different. The textual evidence for ‘Barabbas’ being the ‘Son of God’ is stronger than I had previously realised.

The key word is *λεγόμενος* (*legomenos*), said to be. In St Matthew’s account of the incident, Pilate each time refers to Jesus as Ἰησοῦν τὸν λεγόμενον Χριστόν·, (*Iesoun ton legomenon Christon*) and at the outset we are told (Mt 27:16) εἶχον δὲ τοτὲ δέσμιον ἐπίσημον, λεγόμενον Βαρραβᾶν. (*eichen de tote desmion episemon, legomenon Barraban*) St Mark says (Mk. 15:7) ἦν δὲ ὁ λεγόμενος Βαραββᾶς . . . (*en de ho Barabbas . . .*). ‘Jesus said to be the Messiah’ reads naturally, but ‘a notable prisoner said to be Barabbas’ does not; nor ‘a said to be Barabbas’. The word *λεγόμενος* (*legomenos*) does not fit naturally before a proper name, but would fit after a proper name and before a title or description;⁶ ‘Jesus said to be the Son of God’ would balance ‘Jesus said to be the Messiah’ appropriately. And, indeed, one text, **D**, has τὸν λεγόμενον Βαρραβᾶν (*ton legomenon Barabban*). Admittedly **D** is not thought well of by some textual critics;⁷ but there are other texts juxtaposing Ἰησοῦν and τὸν λεγόμενον with Βαρραβᾶν, and in view of Origen’s influential opinion that texts reporting the Barabbas story should be amended to avoid inappropriate readings, we ought not to regard the text adopted by the translators of *The New English Bible* as decisive.⁸

If this construal of *λεγόμενος* (*legomenos*) is correct,⁹ Pilate’s question was: *Τίνα θέλετε ἀπολύσω ὑμῖν· Ἰησοῦν τὸν λεγόμενον Βαρραβᾶν· ἢ Ἰησοῦν τὸν λεγόμενον Χριστόν·*, (*Tina thelete apoluso humin? Iesoun ton legomenon Barraban? e Iesoun ton legomenon Christon?*). He was telling the High Priests, Elders and Scribes that he was not going to condemn Jesus to death. Essentially, they had laid two charges against him, one of blasphemy and one of insurrection. Pilate accepted that Jesus had, according to Jewish law, blasphemed in claiming to be the Son of God. But blasphemy was not an offence under Roman law. Insurrection was, and if Jesus had been inciting insurrection, he should be sentenced to death; but there was no credible evidence. The Scribes and High Priests alleged that he had forbidden the payment of taxes to Caesar, but had in fact failed to trap him into advocating non-payment of Roman taxes (Lk. 23:2, 20:20-26), and could only produce false witnesses against him. He had claimed, they said, to be the Messianic King of the Jews, but it was a poor sort of king by Roman standards that let himself be arrested in a garden. So Pilate was going to acquit him, but thought to give his accusers a choice of which charge he should dismiss—the blasphemy one on which he would disclaim jurisdiction, but leave it open to the Jewish authorities to proceed, and impose some lesser penalty than death, or the insurrection charge, where his finding would preclude any further action on the part of the Jews. Instead of accepting the offer, and making a choice, the Chief Priests and Elders vociferously demanded that Jesus be crucified. Pilate continued to protest that Jesus had done nothing worthy of death; perhaps he had been responsible for some public disorder on his entry into Jerusalem, and in ridding the Temple of money-changers, for which a beating would be appropriate, but this so-called King of the Jews had done nothing worthy of death. In the end, however, Pilate buckled when threatened with delation to Tiberius.

Such an account is plausible, but critics may object that too much weight is being put upon the interpretation of Barabbas as Son of the Father: Barabbas might have been a common name in the first century AD. It might not be Bar Abbas but Bar Rabbi, son of a teacher, or even Bar Rahab. Anthony Harvey’s commentary on *The New English Bible* says that it was not an uncommon name,

⁶ Robert L. Merritt, “Jesus Barabbas and the Paschal Pardon”, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, **104/1**, 1985, p.57 n.1, quotes P.W.Schmiedel, who points out that some support for Mt.27.16-17 having originally read ‘Jesus’ before ‘Barabbas’ “might perhaps be found in the fact the first mention of the name Barabbas in Mk. is preceded by *ho legomenos* The meaning would then be ‘He, who for distinction’s sake (though it was not his proper name) was called Barabbas’ ” See also D.E.Nineham, *Saint Mark* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 416. A.H.M’Neile . . . and E.Klostermann . . . also suggest that Mk. 15:7 originally may have read it *en de Iesous ho legomenos Barabbas*

⁷ A.C.Clark, *Acts of the Apostles*, London, 1933.

⁸ The manuscript evidence for the reading Jesus Barabbas is listed in H.A.Rigg, Jr, “Barabbas”, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, **64**, 1945, pp. 428-432, to which I am much indebted; and R.V.G.Tasker, *The Greek New Testament: being the Text Translated in The New English Bible*, London: Oxford University Press, 1964, p.413.

⁹ As argued by H.A.Rigg, Jr, “Barabbas”, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, **64**, 1945, p.431, n.53.

but does mean father's son.¹⁰ Certainly, the name turns up in Syria at a later date, though to the best of our present knowledge, not in funerary and other inscriptions in First-Century Palestine.

We cannot rule out the possibility of a real person being called Barabbas, but other difficulties give further grounds for suspicion. There is no independent evidence for a custom of releasing a prisoner at the festival. St John says it was a Jewish custom (John 18:39), and some scholars have attempted to find a parallel in M. Pesahim 8.6a, but that applies to a very different situation. St Matthew and St Mark refer to a Roman custom, and some scholars cite Papyrus Florentinus 61, but that mentions a one-off amnesty not a custom. St Luke says that it was not the sort of thing the Romans did (Acts 25:16), a view endorsed by almost all contemporary historians: "Scholars have searched in vain to find evidence for any kind of Passover amnesty in Judaea at this time."¹¹ Not only does it run counter to normal Roman practice, but it does not fit with what else we know of Pilate's dealings with the Jews. Still, the argument from silence is not conclusive; Pilate might have decided to establish a Passover amnesty. But what was the custom? Who made the choice? If it was the Governor, as would be most natural, Pilate could simply announce that he was releasing Jesus under the Passover amnesty, with his decision being final. If it was the Jews, as the gospels suggest, why did Pilate broach the matter? Jesus had been handed over to him by the Sanhedrin, and it was hardly likely that the delegation from the Sanhedrin would ask for clemency for Jesus. Moreover, if it was for the Jews to choose, why were they limited to only two candidates (Mt 27:21)? Three people were crucified on Good Friday; the Jews could have chosen the penitent, or if they preferred, the impenitent, thief. Furthermore, what had Barabbas done? Perhaps St Mark was being careless, but he seems to be saying that Barabbas was imprisoned *along with* terrorists who had committed murder (15:7), implying that Barabbas was not one of them, whereas St Luke (27:19) says he was, and St John (18:40) describes him as a bandit, *ληστής* (*leistes*). St Matthew, as we should expect, refers to him simply as Barabbas, and ascribes no insurrection or murder to him. If Barabbas really existed, he was a shadowy figure, imprisoned for an uncertain offence, and let out only because he was not Jesus Christ.

H.A. Rigg, Jr., argues that he *was* Jesus Christ, but that it was not Pilate who first called him Jesus the Son of God. Jesus had acquired that sobriquet in Galilee, and was up before Pilate under that name charged by the Sanhedrin of having caused a riot.¹² and the crowds shouting for the release of Barabbas were Jesus' supporters. Pilate acquits Jesus, Son of God, of having caused a riot, but then there is another charge and another trial, which results in the conviction of Jesus the Messianic King of the Jews, and his consequent execution. But this seems needlessly complicated. There is no evidence that Jesus was known as Jesus Bar Abbas in Galilee, or that Pilate held two separate trials. And if he did, why did he link the charges in his question "Whom shall I release?" It seems to me that the "alternative acquittal account" is better supported by the other evidence. There was one meeting of the Sanhedrin at which evidence was sought for putting Jesus to death. Evidence of treasonable activity was unreliable, but Jesus did claim to be, in a manner of speaking, the Messianic King of the Jews, and to be the Son of God. The high priests, with the elders, the scribes and the whole of the Sanhedrin, laid two charges against Jesus before Pilate, saying that they had found him *διαστρέφοντα τὸ ἔθνος ἡμῶν, καὶ κωλύοντα Καίσαρι φόρους δίδοναι, καὶ λέγοντα ἑαυτὸν Χριστὸν βασιλέα εἶναι* (*diastrephonta to ethnos hemon, kai koluonta Kaisari phorous didonai, kai legonta heauton Christon basilea einai*) (Lk. 23:2) and that Jesus *ὀφείλε ἀποθανεῖν, ὅτι ἑαυτὸν υἱὸν Θεοῦ ἐποίησεν* (*opheile apothanein, hoti heauton huion Theou epoiesen*) (Joh. 19:7b). Pilate interrogated Jesus on his claim to be the Messianic King of the Jews, but discovering that his kingship was not of this world, and that there was nothing Jesus had actually done that could be construed as rebellion against Caesar, decided that there was no case to answer, but offered the delegation from the Sanhedrin a choice of how he would frame his decision. His attempt to soften his dismissal of both their charges was misconstrued. A bystander heard the names *Ἰησοῦν τὸν λεγόμενον Βαρραβᾶν* (*Iesoun ton legomenon Barraban*) and *Ἰησοῦν τὸν λεγόμενον Χριστόν* (*Iesoun ton legomenon Christon*), and misconstrued the subsequent uproar as a demand for the release of Barabbas, and not just for the crucifixion of Christ.

New Testament critics see, in the way the Barabbas story is told in the gospels, signs of the Evangelists' shaping their narrative in view of their intended readers. Pilate, the representative of

¹⁰ A.E. Harvey, *Companion to the New Testament*, Oxford and Cambridge, 1970, p.105n.

¹¹ H.K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation* Cambridge, 1998, pbk. 2004; to whom I am much indebted for other points.

¹² H.A. Rigg, Jr., *Journal of Biblical Literature*, **64**, 1945, pp.435-453

Rome, is portrayed as wanting to release Jesus, and responsibility for his crucifixion is pinned onto the Jews. There is force in this contention, but care is needed in determining how far it extends. There may have been other factors in the minds of the Evangelists as they wrote their accounts of the incident. A recent article by Jennifer Berenson Maclean,¹³ suggests that the choice between Barabbas and Christ echoed the ritual of the scapegoat being released to bear the burden of guilt, and symbolized the early church's understanding of Christ's crucifixion being his self-sacrifice for the sins of the world. The dative plurals ὑμῖν, αὐτοῖς, ἡμῖν (*humin, autois, hemin*), to you, to them, to us, (Mt 27:17, 27:21, 27:26, Mk. 15:9, 15:11, 15:15, Lk. 23:18, Joh. 18:39) fit the sense of 'releasing to': if Pilate's original question really was *Τίνα θέλετε ἀπολύσω ὑμῶν* (*Tina thelete apoluso humin?*), the dative was 'for you' rather than 'to you', indicating that he was making a concession in offering them a choice.

The Barabbas story may have been used by the Evangelists, but too much weight should not be put on their use of it. Even without it, the prime responsibility for bringing about Jesus' death lay with the high priests, the elders, the scribes and the whole Sanhedrin. They brought charges against Jesus, and when Pilate was minded to acquit Jesus, exerted pressure on him to condemn him to death. Pilate was responsible, too, but less so. He tried to let Jesus off, and then tried to mollify the delegation from the Sanhedrin by giving Jesus a beating for having infringed Jewish customs and upset the Jewish authorities, while still insisting that Jesus had done nothing worthy of death. In the end, according to St John, who had some access to the circles around the High Priest (Joh. 18:15), the delegation from the Sanhedrin threatened to report to Tiberius that he was being soft on attempted insurrection. Tiberius was going mad, and Pilate was in a position similar to that of officials in Soviet Russia under Stalin or Brezhnev. If it came to a choice between his own life and that of an itinerant Jewish healer and teacher, his was the one that must be saved. Many modern Englishmen might have done the same.

The Barabbas story does not alter this picture. What it does do is to reflect a blurring of focus with the passage of time. The burden of responsibility is widened from being on the shoulders of just the high priests and the Sanhedrin, to the whole Jewish people. At the time of Jesus' trial it was clearly not the case that the Jews as a whole were against him. There were many who had welcomed him into Jerusalem, some who dissociated themselves from the action of the high priests (Lk.24:21), even one member of the Sanhedrin who remained a disciple (Mt. 27:57, Mk. 15:42, Lk. 23:50-53), and in the years immediately after the Resurrection, most Christians were Jews, and the distinction between the high priests and the people as a whole was natural to keep in mind. But with time, the Jewish Church faded away. Distance lends enhancement. The confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish authorities became a confrontation between Jesus and the Jews generally. In the telling and re-telling of the Barabbas story St Mark has the high priests move, ἀνέσεισαν, (*aneseisan*), and St Matthew has them persuade, ἐπεισαν, (*epeisan*) the crowd(s)—or rabble—, τὸν ὄχλον, τοὺς ὄχλους (*ton ochlon, tous ochlous*), to demand Barabbas' release. (Mk. 15:11, Mt. 27:20) St Luke brackets them together (Lk. 23:4) and has Pilate address the high priests, the rulers and the people, τὸν λαόν (*ton laon*) (Lk. 23:13), and for St John they are simply 'the Jews' (Joh. 18:38b). This much can be attributed to the changing temporal perspective of the Evangelists. But St Matthew goes further, and ends his version with the terrible words: πᾶς ὁ λαὸς εἶπε Τὸ αἷμα αὐτοῦ ἐφ' ἡμᾶς καὶ ἐπὶ τὰ τέχνα ἡμῶν (*pas ho laos eipe To haima autou eph'hemas kai epi ta techna hemwn*) "and the whole people said His blood be upon us and upon our children".

When I was first chasing references to the Barabbas story, I was saddened to find that this verse had led Bede, who is one of my heroes, to launch a savage denunciation of the Jews. And not only Bede.

¹³ Jennifer K. Berenson Maclean, "Barabbas, the Scapegoat Ritual, and the development of the Passion Narrative", *Harvard Theological Review*, **100**, 2007, pp.309-334.