

## Jesus Barabbas

by

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‘Whom do you want me to let off: Jesus-said-to-be Barabbas, or Jesus said-to-be the Messiah?’ So reads the *Codex Bezae* in Cambridge. The *Bezae Cantabrigiensis* is not well thought of by New Testament scholars, but here it gives the clue to understanding the story reported in all four gospels.

As reported the Barabbas story makes no sense. Matthew, Mark and John say there was a custom of releasing a prisoner at the Passover. But there is no other evidence of such a custom, which runs counter to Roman practice, as Luke elsewhere admits (Acts 18:15) If there were such a custom, it would be, most naturally, for Pilate to decide who should be released. And if the custom was to accede to popular demand, why did Pilate, who wanted to release Jesus, raise the matter then, when the Sanhedrin was wanting him to crucify him? And why only two prisoners, when there were also two robbers due to be crucified the next day?

Origen, in the early Third Century AD, noticed after he had moved to Palestine, that the local copies of the Gospel read ‘Jesus Barabbas’ whereas in Alexandria they had all simply read ‘Barabbas’. It was incongruous, he thought, for the sacred name of ‘Jesus’ to be given to criminal, and concluded that the correct reading was just ‘Barabbas’. Christians throughout the Gentile world would have thought the same, but the first readers of St Matthew’s gospel were Jewish Christians, who would have known of others called ‘Jesus’ besides Jesus of Nazareth. Texts of St Matthew circulating in Palestine have preserved an original reading that Gentiles found incongruous.

But who was ‘Jesus said to be Barabbas’? ‘Barabbas’ could be a proper name—it turns up in Syria later in the First Century. But in Aramaic ‘Bar’ means ‘son of’: ‘Barabbas’ could mean ‘son of Rabbi’, or perhaps ‘son of Rahab’, but, most naturally, ‘Son of the Father’ Ordinarily, that would be an impossible designation—everyone is his father’s son; but in the context of Pilate’s question, there was a Jesus said to be the Father’s son. Along with ‘Amen’, ‘Abbas’ is one of the few Aramaic words that survives in the Greek-language writings of the Evangelists and St Paul. Addressing God as ‘Father’ was clearly something that people regarded as one of Jesus’s most characteristic utterances. But if ‘Jesus said-to-be the Bar Abbas’ and ‘Jesus said-to-be the Messiah’ were one and the same man, what did Pilate mean?

The Sanhedrin had found Jesus guilty of blasphemy, claiming to be the Messiah, the Son of God. Their delegation told Pilate he had been stirring up the people, telling them not to pay taxes, and claiming to be the Messiah, the King of the Jews. Pilate was not interested in Jewish squabbles and was unimpressed with the charge of blasphemy; but he could not ignore the charge Jesus had seditiously declared himself King of the Jews in opposition to Rome. But it was unsupported by any evidence—Jesus had actually told people to pay taxes. Pilate questioned him about his being King of the Jews, and came to the conclusion that he had done nothing worthy of death, and was minded to give him a beating and let him go. So he asks ‘Shall I acquit this man Jesus on the Son-of-God charge, or Shall I acquit him on the Messiah charge?’ In short, Pilate was asking the accusers which charge to dismiss. If they chose the blasphemy one, he would disclaim jurisdiction, but leave it open to the Jewish authorities to impose some lesser penalty than death; if they chose the insurrection charge, his finding would be conclusive and preclude any further action by them.

Faced with that, the delegation from the Sanhedrin chose neither. Instead, they vociferously demanded that Jesus be crucified. Pilate continued to protest that Jesus had done nothing worthy of death; at most he had been responsible for some public disorder on his entry into Jerusalem, and in ridding the Temple of money-changers. A beating might be appropriate for that. But not death. But the uproar, misheard and misreported, seemed to have been effective. Pilate caved in. According to St John, who had some access to the circles around the High Priest (John 18:15), the delegation from the Sanhedrin threatened to report to Tiberius that Pilate was being soft on attempted insurrection. Tiberius was going mad, and Pilate was in a position similar to that of Soviet officials under Stalin. If it came to a choice between his own fate and that of an itinerant Jewish healer and teacher, his came first. Most of us might do the same.

In the uproar the alternatives ‘Barabbas’ and ‘Messiah’ led a bystander to the misunderstanding that they were demanding the release of Barabbas and the crucifixion of Christ. It proved disastrous mistake. With the passage of time, the Barabbas story engendered a blurring of focus, which widened the burden of responsibility from those high priests and elders who constituted the Sanhedrin, to the whole Jewish people, whose shouts of ‘crucify him’ echo at Good Friday liturgies in every Christian church. But at the time of Jesus’s trial it was clearly not the case that the Jews as a whole were against him. Many had welcomed him into Jerusalem; there were others who dissociated themselves from the high priests’ actions; one member of the Sanhedrin even remained a disciple. But with

time, the church became less Jewish. The confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish authorities became understood as a confrontation between Jesus and the Jews generally. Mark has the high priests 'move' the crowd to demand Barabbas's release. Matthew has them 'persuade' the crowd. Luke brackets Jews and their leaders together. John writes simply of 'the Jews'. St Matthew ends his account with the terrible words 'and the whole people said His blood be upon us and upon our children'.

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