In Defence of Pontius Pilate

Pontius Pilate was not a good man. The accounts given by Philo and Josephus establish that. And Jesus’ questioners told him of the occasion when he mixed the blood of Galileans with their sacrifices (St Luke 13:1). And it was Pontius Pilate who finally gave the order for Jesus to be crucified. But if we read the accounts carefully, we can see that he was not all bad, but a flawed but a flawed character failing to live up to standards he himself recognised.

The accounts given in the four gospels show that Pilate realised that Jesus was innocent, and wanted to release him. In the end he gave way to the Jewish authorities, and crucified him. But they do not give a coherent picture of the questions facing the Roman Governor, or his responses to them. Early on Good Friday his morning leisure was interrupted by a delegation from the Sanhedrin and finally he gave orders for Jesus to be crucified by Roman soldiers. I try to reconstruct what happened in between.

Pilate was not best pleased at being interrupted at an early hour by a bunch of ecclesiastics wanting him to kill someone, and was unready to accede to their demand. On discovering that the man was from Galilee, and so under Herod’s jurisdiction, he packed him off to Herod to deal with him (St Luke 23:7). And again when Herod returned Jesus to Pilate, Pilate called together the ecclesiastical and secular authorities, and insisted that he had found no fault in Jesus, and would release him after disciplining him for being a nuisance Whenceupon they demanded, according to all four gospels, the release of Barabbas in accordance with an established custom.

But there is no other evidence of such a custom. It runs counter to Roman practice; Festus (Acts 25:16) says that it is not the Roman custom to give up as a favour (charizesthai) anyone to be killed, and the tone suggests an equal reluctance to curry favour the other way. Moreover, if there were custom 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?

Yesterday (April 13, 2014) the gospel read here (St Peter and St Paul, South Petherton) was from the New English Bible, which reads (St Matthew 27:17) “Which would you like me to release to you—Jesus Barabbas or Jesus said to be the Messiah?” The words ‘Jesus Barabbas’ jar, but they are well attested (Codex Bezae Cantabrigensis) 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 all had simply read ‘Barabbas’. It was incongruous, he thought, for the sacred name of ‘Jesus’ to be given to a 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; and so texts of St Matthew circulating in Palestine have preserved an original reading that Gentiles found incongruous. ‘Jesus Barabbas’ is generally accepted now as the correct reading of St Matthew 27:17.

But ‘said to be the Messiah’? Clearly ton legomenon Barraban would nicely balance ton legomenon Christon. There is, however, a floating ho legomenos adrift in St Mark’s account. St Mark 15:7 reads en de ho legomenos Barabba... dedomenos. ho legomenos has usually the sense of ‘so called’ rather than simply ‘named’ (Authorised Version) or ‘known as’ (New English Bible). (I owe these references to My former colleague, Dr N.J.Richardson, who points to St Matthew 10:2 and St John 20:24 as supporting evidence.) It is tempting to conclude that St Mark’s source, like St Matthew’s, spoke of a Jesus ton legomenon Barraban
Who, then, was ‘Jesus said to be Barabbas’? In Aramaic ‘Bar’ means ‘son of’: ‘Barabbas’ would mean, 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. ‘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 people regarded as one of Jesus’ 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?

In the preliminary hearing before the Sanhedrin, Jesus had at first kept silent, but eventually had said that he was the Christ, the son of God. This was, in the view of the Sanhedrin, blasphemy, and deserved the penalty of death. But though the Romans allowed the Jewish authorities some jurisdiction, it did not extend to the death penalty, which only the Roman Governor could impose. So they had to send a delegation to Pilate, handing over Jesus for punishment, simply saying he was a criminal who deserved to die (St John 18:29). Pilate naturally did not accept that, and asked for definite charges. They then had to make definite accusations: Jesus had committed blasphemy and had claimed to be King of the Jews. Pilate was not interested in Jewish squabbles and was unimpressed with the charge of blasphemy; which certainly was no justification for disturbing the Governor out of hours: but he could not ignore the charge that Jesus had seditiously declared himself King of the Jews in opposition to Rome. This was a charge the Roman Governor should take cognizance of, and one that might merit the death penalty. But it was unsupported by any evidence—contrary to what the Sanhedrin’s delegation had alleged, that Jesus had told the Jews not to pay taxes to Caesar (St Luke, 23:2), he had a few days earlier specifically refused to do so (St Luke 20:21-26). Pilate questioned him about his being King of the Jews, and again came to the conclusion that he had done nothing worthy of death. There was no substantial evidence against the man on either charge; case dismissed—but give the Sanhedrin’s delegation the choice of on which charge. “Shall I disclaim jurisdiction on the blasphemy charge, which will leave you free to proceed against him, and punish him, though not by death, according to your own laws? or shall acquit him on the insurrection charge, which will bring the whole business to a conclusive end?” Pilate questioned him about his being King of the Jews, and came to the conclusion that he had done nothing worthy of death. Pilate questioned Jesus—in private according to St John, (18:33), in the face of his accusers according to St Matthew (27:11-12) and St Mark (15:2-3); either way, Pilate asked him whether he was the king of the Jews (St Matthew 27:11, St Mark 15:2, St Luke 23:3, St John, 18:34). To this charge Jesus initially made no definite plea: according to St Matthew (27:12), St Mark (15:2), St Luke 23:3) He simply said “You say that I am,”; in St John’s account of the private interview, Jesus asked Pilate whether he was making the accusation himself, or had based it on hear-say (St John 18:34), and then explains the nature of his kingship. St Matthew (27:12-14) and St Mark (15:4-5) report him as, to the surprise of Pilate, keeping silent in the face of the allegations made against him. The accounts read awkwardly, but if we view them in a formal legal context they make sense. Jesus was accused before Pilate of claiming to be King of the Jews. He could not enter a plea of Not Guilty without denying his mission; but not could he simply plead Guilty without thereby conceding the Jewish authorities’ case against him. He needed to clarify the question, which, according to St John (18:36-37); he did. But Pilate did not need to have a formal plea entered. It was evident that Jesus, even if he had claimed to be the Christos, The King of the Jews, posed no threat to Roman rule.
The trumped up charges against him did not hold water. There was no substantial
evidence against the man: case dismissed.

What happened next? The accounts differ. St Luke (23:8-12) says that in the
uproar, the Jewish authorities said that Jesus had started his mischief-making in
Galilee, whereupon Pilate remitted the case to Herod. This may not have been
meant kindly. It may have been just a way of getting quit of a troublesome business
by passing it on to another authority. But there is no reason to suppose that
Herod did not take it well, as a recognition of his status as well as giving him the
opportunity to satisfy his curiosity. The fact that the other evangelists make no
mention of it does not show that St Luke was wrong. It provides the most plausible
setting for Jesus being arrayed in purple, and struck by soldiers. St Luke then
has Pilate summoning the Jewish authorities again, and proposes to release Jesus
with a beating, whereupon the Jewish authorities demand the release of Barabbas
instead. The other evangelists recount the Barabbas incident immediately after
Pilate dismisses the case.

The Barabbas story, as recounted, make no sense. There is no other evidence
for there being a custom or releasing a prisoner at the time of the Passover, and it
runs counter to Roman practice to allow such a custom. If there were such a custom,
it would naturally be for the Governor to decide whom to release, in which case
Pilate could simply have exercised the customary prerogative in favour of Jesus:
there would be no point, if he wanted to release Jesus, in asking those clamour-
ning for Jesus’ crucifixion, whom he should release; and similarly if the custom was
that the Jewish authorities could say who was to be released. Some early texts of
St Matthew, however, provide a clue to the puzzle. They record Pilate as saying
"Whom do you want me to release to you? Jesus Barabbas? or Jesus, said-to-be (legomenon) Christ?" (St Matthew 27:17). St Mark’ (15:7) prefixes ‘Barabbas’ with
the same word legomenon, which gives some support to the suggestion that Pilate’s
original question was “Whom do you want me to release to you? Jesus said-to-be (legomenon) Barabbas? or Jesus, said-to-be (legomenon) Christ? ” ‘Barabbas’ is
normally taken to be a simple proper name, but most names in Aramaic beginning
with ‘Bar’ were compounds, like ‘Bar-Jonas’, son of Jonas. ‘Bar-Abbas’ could mean
’son of Rahab’ or ‘son of Rabbi’, but could mean ‘son of Father’, except that every-
one is his father’s son, so that such a name would be totally unspecific. But Jesus
did claim to be Son of the Father. This in the eyes of the Jewish authorities was
blasphemy, and the real charge they had against him, the one that deserved the
penalty of death. Pilate could have been offering them a Hobson’s choice. “There
are two charges against this man: blasphemy and insurrection. Blasphemy is not a
crime under Roman law, though it may be under yours, and I cannot try him on
that charge. Insurrection is a crime, and I have heard your case against him, and
it just does not stand up. Shall I release Jesus, said-to-be Christ? If so, that is
the end of the matter. He has been tried, and found Not Guilty. Or shall I release
said-to-be (legomenon) Barabbas? So far as I am concerned you may then try him
under your law and punish him, though not with death.” Pilate’s pronunciation
of Aramaic may have been poor, or the bystanders may have been unable to hear,
or may have missed the point. All that they could make out was that Pilate had
offered a choice, and the Jewish authorities were bent on having Jesus crucified,
must have opted for the alternative.

But how did Pilate know of the blasphemy charge? St Matthew St Mark and
St Luke do not mention it; St Luke (23:14), indeed, quotes Pilate as saying that
the Jewish authorities’ had brought Jesus before him on the single charge of having
stirred up the people. Only St John (19:7-12) tells of the matter having been raised,
and that at a late stage: “We have a law, and according to that law, he ought to die,
because he made himself the son of God.” Pilate, he says, was terrified, and from then on tried to release Jesus. But according to the other evangelists and by St John’s own account of the Barabbas incident, Pilate had been trying much earlier to release Jesus. St Matthew (27:18) and St Mark (15:10) say that he already knew that the Jewish authorities had handed up Jesus through jealousy. He may have had independent information from the outset, or the Jewish authorities may well have included it in their tirade against Jesus when they first went to Pilate. But if St Luke is correct, and Pilate at some stage remitted the case to Herod, it would have been most naturally his first move, and he would have offered the Barabbas choice only after Herod had returned Jesus to him, and he was having to deal with the matter. That is St Luke’s order of events: he only mentions Barabbas after Pilate called together the Chief Priests and rulers of the people, and tells them that neither he nor Pilate has found Jesus guilty of any of the offences they had charged him with (St Luke 23:13-16). Pilate then, in St Luke’s account, goes on to say that he will give Jesus a beating, whereupon they all shout “Away with him,” and demand the release of Barabbas. If the exegesis of the Barabbas incident given here is correct, the order should be reversed. Pilate tried first to off-load the business onto Herod. When that did not work, he went into the matter properly, possibly having interviewed Jesus in private (St John 18:33ff. and 19:9-11) and aware of the blasphemy charge (St Matthew 27:18, St Mark 15:10 and St John 19:7-8). This was the moment of truth, when he realised for himself, as well as heeding his wife’s warning (St Matthew 27:19), that Jesus was innocent. But he got nowhere with the Barabbas choice. He made several attempts to out-face the Jewish authorities, and finally said he would have Jesus flogged and then let him go.

St Matthew (27:26), St Mark (15:15) and St John (19:1) all say that Jesus was actually flogged. It could be so, but it fits awkwardly into the natural sequence of events. It could be that the soldiers acted on their own initiative, and having been given orders to crucify, thought to have some fun first (St Matthew 27:27-31 and St Mark 15:16-20). But Roman soldiers were disciplined, and accustomed to doing exactly what they were told. And both St Matthew (27:26 and St Mark (15:15), say that it was Pilate who ordered the flogging. Pilate in the end had yielded to the Jewish authorities, and reluctantly ordered Jesus to be crucified. But there was no reason then to add a flogging to the horrible death that was going to be imposed. Less implausible is St John’s account (19:1-5) that in the face of the uproar after he had offered the Barabbas choice, Pilate decided to have Jesus flogged, as St Luke (23:16) testifies, in the hope that that will be enough to pacify the Jewish authorities. But St Luke’s account is more plausible. Pilate said to the Jewish authorities “I will let him go, having disciplined him”, but failed to pacify them with that offer. If he actually given the order and it had been carried out, he would have been not easily pushed to increasing the sentence. He gave short shrift to the demand that he amend the title on the cross to read “He said I am the King of the Jews”. If he had already sentenced Jesus to be chastised, a demand that the sentence be added to would have invited the response he geographa, geographa “what I have written, I have written”. The threat to tell Caesar would be empty if Jesus had in fact been punished. St Luke’s account is easier to accept. The soldiers who mocked and ill-used Jesus were Herod’s. Herod, perhaps disappointed at not being granted a miracle, could safely send back to Pilate Jesus dressed up as a King. Pilate’s later suggestion, as he parleyed with the Jewish authorities of flogging Jesus became an accomplished fact in the accounts of the other evangelists. Jesus had been mocked and buffeted, and Pilate had said he would have him chastised, but the mocking and buffeting was done by Herod’s soldiers, and Pilate’s tentative order was not carried into effect.
In the end Pilate buckled. St John (19:12) says that the Jews shouted "If you let this man go, you are not Caesar’s friend: everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar". St John may be right: he often had inside information about the Jewish authorities. And since the threat was singularly inane—it was standard Roman practice to make use of client kings, Herod being an obvious example—it may well reflect what was actually said, rather than be an intelligent reconstruction. Although the actual words missed the mark, the substance was all too credible: “We shall tell on you.” Modern readers easily convict Pilate of failing to do his duty and govern justly. But Judea was not a British colony under British principles of administration. A much closer parallel would be the Soviet Union in Stalin’s last days. Tiberius was going mad, and very ready to execute any public servant he suspected of disloyalty. Delation, however baseless, could prove fatal. And delation of Pilate would not be entirely unfounded. Pilate had been a bad governor. Having let Jesus go scot-free would not be the only charge. Together with evidence of previous savagery it could be made into a faceable case. If Pilate had already punished Jesus, he could stand by and defend his decision, but if in a negotiation he was proposing to do so, the Jewish authorities could focus on the proposed release, and construe it as a letting off. Once he had offered the Barabbas choice, Pilate had weakened his position by attempting to placate.

It is difficult to be fair to Pilate. He failed the final test. But it was a test that only heroes could come through unscathed. How many of us would have risked Stalin’s displeasure by insisting on justice for a trouble-maker from Estonia or Uzbekistan? Pilate did at least try. But he could have tried more effectively. A stronger Governor would have had no truck with Jesus’ accusers. “I find no fault in him. Case dismissed.” It was because he was weak that the Jewish authorities felt able to push him. And it was because he was bad that they had more ammunition than the single case in issue. Tiberius might be mad, but every governor would on occasion have had some single decision questioned. Pilate tried, but did not try effectively, through his own weakness and own bad character. But his his situation was dire, and deserves our sympathy, and he did try and is entitled to some measure of exculpation.

What if Pilate had risen to the occasion, and refused to order Jesus’ crucifixion? For the New Testament writers, writing after the event, the Crucifixion was an unalterable datum, which could not have been otherwise. Jesus is portrayed as going up to Jerusalem to meet an inevitable end, with Judas Iscariot and Pilate cast in supporting roles for the Great Drama. But Judas and Pilate were not automatons programmed simply to do what they in fact did: they could have done otherwise. Judas could have stayed with the disciples, and gone to Gethsemane with them. Pilate could have heard the charge and dismissed it case summarily. What then? If Judas had not told the Jewish authorities where Jesus was to be found, they could still have arrested him in the next few days. The could have arrested him in the Temple—there might have been a minor uproar, but the Temple Police could have bundled him out of the public area before his supporters could stop him; or their spies could have followed him and reported where he was staying. Judas was a dispensable actor in the Drama of our Salvation. So too was Pilate. If he had not ordered it, Jesus would not have been crucified. But he would have died all the same. The Jewish authorities would have got him, as they got Stephen a few weeks later. Instead of the Cross, the symbol of Christ’s religion would have been a stone. Jesus had to have it out with the Jewish authorities. He was the Messiah, and had to stand by that claim, and set it against the worldly ideal of a temporal king that contemporary Judaism had espoused. The two ideals had to come into the open, and were not compatible. If the worldly one used force to down the heavenly one, so be it. Jesus was ready to suffer in his own person the worst the world could devise. Only so, could he fully identify with all the human beings who live in the world and suffer the grievous afflictions inflicted on them by the world