

Exegetical Notes, Matthew 27:11-26
“Jesus or Jesus?”

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Matthew 27:11-26

Verse 11

Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” “Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replied.

- The governor mentioned here is Pontius Pilate (see verse 2). Pilate was the fifth Roman procurator of Judea. At the time of Jesus’ trial he was the highest Roman officer in the land. As the Jews could not issue the death sentence under Roman law, the order to execute Jesus for his “crimes” had to come from Pilate. Thus, it was necessary for the chief priests to convince Pilate that Jesus was guilty of such crimes as to deserve death under Roman law.
- Pilate’s question to Jesus indicates that the charge brought against Jesus was insurrection. They apparently told Pilate that Jesus claimed to be king of the Jews and was intending to lead an insurrection to establish himself as king. This would have been a crime worthy of the death penalty under Roman law.
- Jesus does not deny the charge; He acknowledges that he is the king of the Jews.

Verse 12-14

When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate asked him, “Don’t you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?” But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge -- to the great amazement of the governor.

- Apparently, Jesus listened to the charges that were delivered against him by the chief priests, but made no defense against them.
- Jesus’ silence amazed Pilate, who could not believe that Jesus offered no defense to the charges of the chief priests.
- See Isaiah 52:14-15 & 53:7 as explanations of Jesus’ silence.

Verse 15

Now it was the governor's custom at the Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd.

- Apparently, Pilate had established a tradition during his term as governor. Each year at the Feast of the Passover, the most sacred feast of Judaism, he released some prisoner chosen by the people as a sign of good will. Scholars point out that this practice is not mentioned outside of the Bible. Therefore, it would be safe to assume that this practice lasted only during the term of Pilate

Verse 16-17

At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?"

- In Hebrew Barabbas means son (bar) of the Father (abbas). According to several ancient manuscripts of this text and many of the fathers of the Church and the traditions of the Church, this man's first name was Jesus. Thus, the criminal's name was Jesus Barabbas. Remember that Jesus means savior. Thus translated, the man's name is Savior, Son of the Father.
- Jesus who is called Christ, translated means, Savior, the Anointed One.
- Jesus Barabbas was, according to Luke 23:19 & John 18:40 involved in a rebellion against the Roman rule of Judea. He was a folk hero to the people of Judea.
- So the choice Pilate offers is between two Jesuses. One is the Messiah. The other is a folk hero who has led the rebellion against Rome.

Verse 18

For he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him.

- This choice between Jesus number one and Jesus number two is Pilate's way of mocking the chief priests. He knew that Jesus who is called Christ was not guilty as they had implied. He wants to make that clear to them.

Verse 19

While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

- In the previous verse we see that Pilate knows that Jesus is innocent of the charges that have been brought against him. This is confirmed supernaturally through his wife's dream. There is now, therefore, no doubt. Jesus is innocent of the charges.

Verse 20-21

But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed. "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor. "Barabbas," they answered.

- Pilate vastly underestimated the ability of the chief priests to influence the crowd. He believed that the crowd would see what he saw, that Jesus was innocent, and that seeing that they would pick him, over Barabbas. However, the chief priests persuaded the crowd to pick Barabbas over Jesus.

Verse 22-23

"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?" Pilate asked. They all answered, "Crucify him!" "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"

- Surprised by the reaction of the crowd and confused because of their inability to see Jesus' innocence, Pilate asked them what he should do with Jesus. He was apparently shocked by the response of the people.
- Their response was gruesome. They demand that Jesus be crucified. Matthew inserts the little word "all" to indicate that the crowd is unanimous in its decision to crucify Jesus.

Verse 24

When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"

- Pilate, at last, realized that he had been outsmarted by the chief priests and the elders. They had been successful in their attempts to get the crowd to pick Barabbas and condemn Jesus.
- So he did a very Jewish thing. The hand washing ritual was not Roman. It came from the pages of the Old Testament. See

Deuteronomy 21:1-9, Psalm 26:6-10, Psalm 73:13, Isaiah 1:15-16. It was an act of absolution. By it, Pilate wants the crowd to know that though he will go along with their will, in this matter, he disagrees with their decision. They, not he, will be guilty of killing the innocent Jesus and releasing the guilty one.

Verse 25

All the people answered, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!"

- The people, incensed by their leaders, willingly take responsibility for killing the innocent Jesus. By so doing, they accept responsibility for what was done. They have acknowledged their own guilt in condemning the innocent one.

Verse 26

Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

- Pilate was too weak to do the right thing in the face of the people.
- The people were so incensed by their leaders that they could not do the right thing.
- The chief priests and the elders had succeeded in manipulating the truth.
- Jesus was condemned to die.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *Jesus or Jesus?* They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)