

What Ever Became of Pontius Pilate?

A Mystery with Some Amazing Clues

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It is strange that we know so little about Pontius Pilate, one of the most significant people in all of human history.

With the exception of a select culture of classical scholars who are fluent readers of Latin, and who have access to the ancient Roman records of his family and early life, we ordinary people have only the brief record of Pontius Pilate's one encounter with Jesus of Nazareth, just before his crucifixion, during the crucifixion, and immediately after the burial.

Yet we must wonder about what became of Pontius Pilate--and of his godly wife--after the burial of Jesus.

Why don't we know what became of them for the rest of their lives? How could this brilliant, sensitive man, one of the most powerful and influential people in the ancient Roman world, with his life before him, just vanish?

It is as if a significant chapter of the book of human history had been ripped out of it and burned.

Could the Rest of the Story Be Found?

To my surprise the answer is "Yes."

There are ancient records and ancient Church traditions, carefully preserved for 2,000 years which, when we examine them carefully, comparing different accounts, we can build upon the scriptural record and find, in an abbreviated form, a pretty accurate story of what became of Pontius Pilate and his wife.

Ancient Sources

Among the most reliable ancient historical sources are Josephus, "Antiquities of the Jews"; Eusebius, "Ecclesiastical History"; and the Roman historians Tacitus and Seutonius.

The great Roman historian Tacitus, in "Annals," his final work, wrote of Jesus, his execution under Pontius Pilate, the existence of Christians and their persecution in 1st Century Rome¹. Tacitus's very ancient historical records (ca 116 AD) perfectly verify the gospel accounts.

And, ordinary Christians, such as you and I, can fairly easily access and read these ancient sources in English.

Archeology as a Source

Archeological research in the Middle East was begun in the 19th Century and never ceases.

¹ Tacitus: Annals, Book 15, Chapt 44.

An engraved stone called "the Pilate Stone," was discovered in 1961 in the ruins of a 1st Century monument built to honor Emperor Tiberius at Caesarea by the Sea. It identifies Pilate as "Prefect (Governor) of Judea," proving his historicity and his rank, and is in perfect harmony with the New Testament accounts.

The Setting for What We Know

In 26 AD Jesus was working as a carpenter in his Galilean village of Nazareth². It appears that by that time Joseph had died and, as first-born son, Jesus was the head of his large family.

In that same year, Pontius Pilate arrived in Jerusalem to become the 5th Roman Praefect (Governor) of Judaea.

His was a difficult and troublesome assignment, one that high-ranking Roman officials did their best to avoid. The position in Judaea was difficult at best because the Jewish leaders, no matter who was governor, were contentious and sensitive to offences against their customs and traditions. No matter how wisely the Roman governor ruled, there was ongoing, simmering resentment by the Jews which could, at any time, lead to trouble.

Pilate, like most Romans, looked upon the Jews with contempt. He was unsympathetic with their Jewish sensitivities and their readiness to take offense. Their mutual dislike made conflict an ongoing danger, never far below the tranquil surface.

Leaders of the Sanhedrin filed official complaints charging Pilate with excessive violence and brutality (in putting down tumults). Their complaints were not entirely without merit; however, wherever the Romans reigned, their cardinal rule was to maintain order. And that they did--without hesitation.

Tumults

The thing the Romans most feared, dreaded, hated and tried to avoid on a day-by-day basis, was social disorder--what they called a "tumult" (riot). A tumult out of control could lead to armed uprisings and war and such a situation could cause a governor to be recalled to Rome in disgrace. And, depending on the emperor, to possible execution.

As a result, the Roman reaction to the slightest tumult was immediate, brutal, and sometimes cruel--but always effective.

What We Know About Pilate and His Wife

Some distinguished early Christian writers presented Pilate in a positive, sympathetic way:

1. Tertullian (Ca 160-225 AD) believed that Pilate became a Christian.
2. Augustine of Hippo (St. Augustine) (354-430 AD) wrote of Pilate as a Christian, and as a prophet³.
3. The author of an ancient document known as *Didascalia* wrote that Pilate was a Christian and that he "did not consent with the wicked deeds of the Jews" (concerning the crucifixion of Jesus)⁴.

Ancient Church Tradition

² Current studies suggest that Jesus was born in 4 BC instead of 1 AD; however, here we will follow the traditional chronology and use 1 AD.

³ Augustus, Sermons, 201.

⁴ *Didascalia apostolorum* 5. 19. 4.

1. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, one of the earliest 1st Century churches, founded by new Christians returning from Pentecost (Acts 2), and the Ethiopian Coptic Church, venerate Pilate both as a saint and as a prophet. The Ethiopian Orthodox (Coptic) Church also recognizes Pilate's wife, Claudia Procula, as a saint and as a martyr.

The feast day, for both Claudia and Pilate, is 25 June.

2. The Geek Orthodox Church venerates Pilate's wife, Claudia, as a saint, but not Pilate. Her feast day is 9 November.

Pilate's Death

Pilate was summoned to Rome to answer the Sanhedrin's charges before Caesar. By the time he arrived Emperor Tiberius, his father-in-law, had just died; and insane Caligula was emperor. Trouble lay ahead.

It is highly probable that by this time, four years after the crucifixion, Pilate was Christian. It is also highly probable that Caligula exiled Christian Pilate and his Christian wife Claudia to Gaul together. And, as an insane afterthought, ordered Pilate's suicide soon after they arrived in Gaul⁵.

Some ancient sources suggest that Pilate's suicide in Gaul was brought about by guilt over the role he played in the crucifixion. The record seems clear in that Pilate struggled with guilt over the death of innocent Jesus-- apparently for all of his brief Christian life.

Multiple ancient sources, however, tell us that his suicide was not his idea--it was ordered by Caligula as an afterthought.

Summary

After a careful study of the evidence based upon the most credible of ancient sources, including Josephus, Eusebius, Tacitus, Augustine, scholars and scribes of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Coptic Orthodox Church and the Greek Orthodox Church, a structured, succinct summary of what is known, and what is probable, is as follows:

1. Pilate's wife, Claudia Procula, was of Rome's royal Flavian family. She was the granddaughter of Emperor Augustus, adopted daughter of Emperor Tiberius, and was a Roman Princess.

Having been troubled by a message from God in a dream declaring Jesus to be innocent, she urged Pilate to "have nothing to do with that just man⁶."

She probably became a Christian while Jesus was on the cross.

It appears that she, and her husband, were exiled together to Gaul. After Pilate's death she lived a long and saintly life, exiled in Gaul, and died there.

2. Pilate probably became a Christian soon after the Resurrection.

The consensus of Church traditions concerning Pilate is that his life as a Christian was troubled, painful and brief. He probably became a Christian under his wife's godly influence soon after the Resurrection.

Called back to Rome to answer to Jewish complaints that he was cruel in his control of tumults, he arrived to find that Emperor Tiberius, his father-in-law, had just died, and insane Caligula was Emperor. Caligula had become Emperor in 37 AD as Pilate traveled to Rome.

⁵ It is important to remember that Caligula was Emperor for only four years before he was murdered. So, again, large events were compressed into brief periods of time.

⁶ Matthew 27:19.

After perhaps a month of travel, Pilate arrived in Rome and was brought before Caligula. Caligula ordered Pilate exiled to Gaul, and later ordered his death. Caligula was murdered in 41 AD, so Pilate was in exile in Gaul only about 3 years before his death.

***NOTE:** There is an ancient tradition of uncertain validity describing Pilate and Claudia, soon after their conversion, coming upon a very large crowd of people in the countryside. The tradition is that they thought the crowd was of "perhaps 3,000." When they approached the crowd in their chariot they were astounded to see the risen Jesus there, teaching the multitude, and they could see the wounds in his hands and feet.*

If this tradition is valid, this would have been the occasion when the risen Lord appeared to a crowd of "above 5,000 brethren⁷." The tradition stands alone, and is of doubtful authenticity; but it is a particularly beautiful thought, and is in perfect harmony with the scriptural account.

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And this, as nearly as can be determined from the records of ancient historians, and ancient Church traditions, is an outline of what happened to Pontius Pilate, and his wife Claudia, after abruptly disappearing from the scriptural account.

Epilogue - A Summary of Facts and Credible Ancient Traditions

One amazing thing about this amazing story is that all of these hugely momentous events were compressed into a brief period of only 7 or 8 years.

Chronology

26 AD - As Jesus worked in his carpentry shop and took care of his family, Pilate arrived in Jerusalem and became the 5th Roman Governor of Judaea.

30 AD - Jesus, at age 30, was baptized by John the Baptist and began his earthly ministry.

33 AD - Jesus, at the end of his earthly ministry, is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane and his ordeal begins. Within little more than 24 hours He is arrested, questioned, scourged, crucified, dead and hastily buried in a tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathaea.

37 AD - (1) Pilate, now, I am convinced, a Christian, is ordered back to Rome to face Jewish accusations.

37 AD - (2) Tiberius dies and Caligula becomes Emperor.

37 AD - (3) Caligula sends Pilate and his wife Claudia into exile in Gaul.

38 AD? - Caligula orders Pilate to die by suicide. Claudia lives out her long, saintly life in Gaul and dies.

41 AD - Caligula is murdered.

⁷ I Corinthians 15:6.