

ROMAN & JEWISH POLITICS DURING THE VERY EARLY NEW TESTAMENT PERIOD

“Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar [*JUL 28 – JUN 29*], when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea [*AD 26-36*], and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee [*4 BC-AD 39*], and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis [*4 BC-AD 34*], and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene [*unknown tenure*], in the high priesthood of Annas [*AD 6-15, although he still exercised authority over High Priests appointed by the Romans after him*] and Caiaphas [*AD 18-36*], the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins;”

Luke 3:1-3 (NASB95)

26 [Probably Summer] Pontius Pilate arrived at Caesarea from Rome in order to assume his role as the 5th Roman Prefect of Judea, Samaria & Idumea, replacing Valerius Gratus. More than likely, Pilate’s appointment came from Sejanus, the right hand man of Emperor Tiberius. In this very year, Tiberius had withdrawn from Rome & began living a very private life, permitting Sejanus to pretty much run the empire.

[Fall] When Pilate sent the larger part of his military forces from Caesarea up to Jerusalem (perhaps in preparation for the huge crowds that attended Tabernacles) he intentionally did something confrontational – he ordered his men to leave the unit images (such as the Roman eagle) & the medallions of Tiberius’ image on their military standards. All previous Prefects had instructed the soldiers that such items were to be removed prior to departure for the Holy City, out of respect to Jewish religious sensitivities.

On the morning after Pilate’s soldiers arrived, the city was seething with anger over this affront. A huge delegation of Jews went to Caesarea to petition the images’ removal. When Pilate refused, a “lay-in” protest began. On the sixth day of the protest, Pilate encircled the crowd with armed soldiers and threatened to kill anyone who refused to disperse. The protesters bared their necks & volunteered to die rather than permit the images to remain in violation of their religious convictions. At this point, Pilate conceded and ordered the images recalled from Jerusalem.¹

31 [18 OCT] Sejanus was very suddenly executed on charges lodged surreptitiously against him in the Senate by Tiberius. A political purge of anyone connected to Sejanus followed. Obviously Pilate survived that purge, but perhaps just barely, since he was so far removed from Rome.

32 Since the Temple was a major user of fresh water, Pilate confiscated Temple funds in order to pay for a brand new 23 (or 46) mile long aqueduct into the city.² When he visited the city, a crowd of protesters (several tens of thousands strong) gathered before his tribunal seat (probably situated on the wall of the Antonia fortress, on the NW corner of the Temple complex), demanding that he give the funds back. He refused and had his soldiers – already mingled within the crowd, dressed in civilian clothes & armed with clubs – disperse them. Some people were killed in the resulting stampede and a few from the blows given by over-zealous soldiers. This event is probably that which was referred to by Jesus in Luke 13:1-3.

“Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. And Jesus said to them, ‘Do you suppose that these Galileans were *greater* sinners than all *other* Galileans because they suffered this *fate*? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.’”

¹ Wars 2.9.2-3 & Antiquities 18.3.1.

² Josephus uses two different figures (400 & 200 stadia) as to the length of this aqueduct in Wars 2.9.4 & Antiquities 18.3.2.

33 1*14 [THU/FRI 2/3 APR] In the public trial of Jesus, Pilate offered Herod (50 yrs), the Tetrarch of Galilee (and a son of Herod “the Great”), an opportunity to render judgment upon his prisoner. This gesture ended a feud between the two, which may have been related to the deaths of Galilean worshippers back in 31.³

Pilate knew that Jesus was being railroaded and tried to avoid condemning him to death. He only agreed after his loyalty to Tiberius was questioned. Nevertheless, he did get a final bit of vengeance upon those Jewish leaders who had forced his hand in the matter in the form of the public notice of execution.⁴

34 Philip (53 yrs), the Tetrarch of Ituraea and Trachonitis (and a son of Herod “the Great”) died. Since he had no heirs, his territory was absorbed into the Roman province of Syria.

36 Aretas, King of Arabia, used a border dispute with Herod (53 yrs), Tetrarch of Galilee, to avenge himself on Herod for his divorce of his daughter several years earlier in order to marry Herodias (this was the very marriage objected to by John the Immerser).

The area in question was located east of the Sea of Galilee, around the city of Gamala. It would appear that Aretas also gained some sort of control within Damascus, which was about 50 miles NE of the disputed area. It was during this time that the newly converted Saul escaped that city by being let over the wall by his disciples in a basket (Acts 9:23-25; cf. 1 Corinthians 11:32-33).

In a major battle between the two sides of the conflict, soldiers from the former tetrarchy of Philip supported Aretas, resulting in Herod’s forces being very badly beaten. According to Josephus, it was widely believed that this crushing defeat came as divine punishment to Herod for executing John the Immerser about four years earlier.⁵ Herod wrote a letter of protest to Tiberius regarding Aretas, requesting his assistance in the matter.

[Late in the year] Pilate ended up killing a large number of Samaritan pilgrims who were gathering at Mt. Gerizim around a Messianic figure. Samaritan leaders appealed to Vitellius, the Legate of Syria, for justice against Pilate. Vitellius dispatched a friend of his, Marcellus, to Judea in order to replace Pilate, who was ordered to report back to Rome for imperial review of the charges. Tiberius died before his arrival.

37 [16 MAR] Tiberius (77 yrs) died. Gaius Caligula (24 yrs) became the new emperor.

[Passover/Unleavened Bread (APR)] Vitellius visited Jerusalem. In order to revive Jewish opinion of direct Roman rule, he declared a tax free year, released control of the High Priest’s clothing (traditionally kept in the Antonia fortress) back to the Jews & named Jonathan, son of Ananus, as the new High Priest, retiring Joseph Caiaphas. He then returned to Antioch

[Spring] Vitellius received orders from Tiberius to send either Aretas or his head to Rome. When he marched south, at the request of the Jewish leadership, he had the members of his two legions remove the images & imperial medallions from their standards as they passed through the edge of Jewish territory.

[Pentecost (SAT/SUN 8/9 JUN)] Vitellius & Herod visited Jerusalem for Pentecost. While there, the Legate decided to replace the High Priest Jonathan with his brother Theophilus. Four days after arriving at Jerusalem, he received notification of Tiberius’ death. He suspended his military operation against Aretas in order to await orders from the new emperor.

³ Luke 23:6-15.

⁴ John 19:12-22.

⁵ Antiquities 18.5.2.