

# Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem

All four gospels place Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem. After questioning Jesus themselves, the Chief Priest and other Jewish leaders were easily able to go to him and demand that he pass the sentence of death. And of course the sense that Jerusalem was the great city of Judaea is strongly present throughout the gospels. So naturally, we might think, that's where Pontius Pilate would be, as the Roman governor of Judaea. Not so. He was there only because it was the Passover, and his purpose in being present was to enforce order. It's perhaps not surprising, then, that he comes across as rather suspicious of what the Jewish religious leaders might be up to, and anxious not to take the risk of refusing outright what they and the clamouring crowd were demanding. Passover was the major Jewish festival and pilgrims travelled to Jerusalem for it from all over Judaea. From the point of view of the occupying power, this was threatening enough in itself: crowds are difficult to manage, particularly when assembling to celebrate a defining aspect of their religious and national identity. But more especially, from the Roman perspective, Passover — originally a festival of thanksgiving for the spring's 'first fruits' — was supremely a celebration of the Israelites' divine release from slavery in Egypt. It was this historical association that made the annual Passover a really serious threat from the Roman point of view: crowds, yes, always potentially dangerous, but on this occasion crowds religiously inflamed by the story of release from oppression. What if this crystallised into an uprising against the oppression of the Romans who, furthermore, held religious views that were anathema to the Jews? Mostly, the Romans kept the Jews somewhat at arms-length. They put in a non-Jewish puppet dynasty (the Herodians); and they controlled the appointment of the Chief Priest (Pontius Pilate retained Caiaphas as the High Priest for the whole of his approximately ten years as governor, suggesting that this was another puppet figure). But otherwise, as long as they did not cause trouble, the Jews were allowed to get on with their own religious business, and the governor, by and large, left Jerusalem to them.

Jerusalem was not the capital of the Roman province. From the time of the conquest of Judaea their capital had been established at the port of Caesarea Maritima, about 60 miles north-west of Jerusalem. This was where the governor usually carried out his judicial and financial duties and had the headquarters of his detachment of soldiers, who could be deployed as a kind of armed police. It was only at times of high risk that the governor would be present in Jerusalem, probably accompanied by a small force to provide personal protection and to augment the garrison normally held there in the Fortress of Antonia, beside the Temple Mount. Probably this is the location of the 'common hall' (Matthew 27 v. 27, Mark 15 v. 16), 'called the Praetorium' (Mark 15 v. 16). But Roman records indicate that governors visiting Jerusalem normally stayed in Herod's palace, the site of which has been confirmed by recent excavation as lying beneath a corner of the Tower of David on the opposite side of the city from the Temple, although this was no distance in absolute terms: the old city was not large. Undoubtedly, though, wherever he stayed in Jerusalem at this sensitive time, Pilate would have felt vulnerable, and that fed into the dynamics of his encounter with the Jews and his consequent decisions.

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