

# Did Pontius Pilate Actually Convert to Christianity?

Candida Moss [The Daily Beast](#) April 5, 2020

It's the beginning of Holy Week for Christians around the world. Death and its aftermath are already on the minds of people whose lives are deeply affected by coronavirus (and whose isn't?), but the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus take on a particular significance at this time of year. Whatever one might think about the theological importance of the crucifixion, it was Pontius Pilate, the prefect of Judea, who sentenced Jesus to die. But who was the man who killed Jesus? Was he a reluctant participant in a miscarriage of justice or a hardened military man? Did the trial of Jesus leave any impression on Pilate or, as some sources tell us, did he eventually convert to Christianity? One thing is for sure: Without Jesus almost no one would know Pilate's name and without Pilate there would be no Christianity.

Pontius Pilate was the fifth prefect of the Roman province of Judea from roughly 26-37 A.D. Of this much we can be sure. In 1961, archaeologists unearthed a limestone block with an inscription referring to "Pontius Pilate" as the "prefect of Judea" at Caesarea Maritima, a Roman port on the coast of the Mediterranean in Israel. The discovery provided tangible first-century evidence of the existence and career of this particular Roman official. Unlike so many biblical characters, there's no doubting his existence; in addition to this "Pilate stone," we know about him from Jewish historians and philosophers, bronze coins, a ring that [may](#) have belonged to him, and the four gospels. But as certain as we are that he existed, our sources disagree about the kind of man and administrator that he was.

The Jewish historian Josephus paints Pilate as stubborn and insensitive, especially when compared to other Roman officials. He tells one story in which Pilate allowed his soldiers to march their standards into the city at night. Other Roman prefects had simply removed anything that might cause offense to Jews. The incident caused uproar and Pilate was faced with demonstrators who volunteered to die for their beliefs. Eventually he had to back down. [Helen Bond](#), professor of Christian Origins at the University of Edinburgh and author of [Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation](#), told [The Daily Beast](#): "Pilate does seem to have realized that he'd totally underestimated public opinion and he does back down. Some have seen this as a sign of weakness, but to me it suggests a shrewd operator who wasn't ready to spill blood unnecessarily."

This wasn't the only occasion on which Pilate insulted Jewish sensibilities. At one point the Emperor Tiberius had to berate Pilate for putting gold-coated shields on display in Herod's palace. The first-century philosopher Philo describes him as vindictive, having a temper, and inflexible. He was removed from his position after 10 years as governor after a massacre at Mount Gerizim. According to Josephus, Jewish and Samaritan delegates complained to Vitellius, the governor of Syria (the neighboring Roman province), who sent Pilate to Rome to explain his actions.

As negative as these sources are about Pilate, said Bond, it's important to remember that when he arrived in Judea it had only been under Roman control for two decades, "his role was very much subjugation and 'educating' the local population in the ways of Rome... he must have been reasonably skilled in negotiation and diplomacy, otherwise it's hard to see how he could have lasted for a decade."

By comparison the Gospels portray Pilate in a relatively sympathetic way. In the Gospel of Matthew, Pilate is reluctant to accept responsibility for the death of Jesus. He literally washes his hands of the blame. In John, Pilate is more philosophical and discusses the nature of truth with Jesus at the trial. In Luke, Pilate appears weak but outright declares Jesus to be innocent while in Mark, Pilate plays a more domineering forceful role. Bond argues that each of these different portraits of Pilate reflects the historical and political circumstances of their authors. We aren't learning about the character of

the historical Pilate so much as we are the agenda of the authors of the four Gospels. That said, Pilate's choice to execute Jesus doesn't demand much explanation. As Bond told me, "Any prophetic figure who talked of an alternative Kingdom and brought a following to the holy city at Passover was likely to be on Pilate's watch list." If anything, the fact that Pilate executed only Jesus and made no efforts to round up and condemn his followers shows a measure of restraint.

Non-Christian records for Pilate end with his removal by Vitellius. We know nothing about the rest of his career or death. There is a brief reference to him in the writings of Celsus, a second-century critic of Christianity, in which we are told that "the one who killed Jesus" (i.e. Pilate) was not punished by God for killing Jesus. But by the fourth century two diametrically opposed stories about his fate were circulating. In the first Pilate was punished for killing Jesus either by being exiled/executed by the emperor or by taking his own life. In one variant on this tradition, in the *Mors Pilati*, Pilate was sentenced to die by impalement. Wanting to avoid this humiliating death he took a knife that was smuggled to him by a friend and "opened his guts with a single cut." Roman soldiers took his body, placed it in a weighted sack, and threw it into the Tiber. Unfortunately for them demons that surrounded him stirred up storms and hail in the river with the result that the body had to be removed. They subsequently tried throwing his body into the Rhône but when the same tempest-like storms appeared they were forced to [bury](#) him deep in a pit in mountains near Lausanne, Switzerland. According to some ancient sources, "certain diabolic machinations" still "bubble up" there. In other stories Pilate moved even further afield; one 16th-century legend states that Pilate was sent into exile in Andalusia and there's even an improbable [tradition](#) that claims that he originally came from Scotland.

The alternative narrative of Pilate's fate goes in a completely different direction and claims that he converted to Christianity and, ultimately, became a martyr. By the end of the second century the North African writer Tertullian [claimed](#) that when Pilate arrived in Rome he told Tiberius the miracles that accompanied the death of Jesus because he was "already a Christian in his conscience." A fifth-century Syriac version of the *Acts of Pilate* recounts how when Pilate was beheaded his head was "received by an angel." Another version, the *Martyrium Pilati*, which was popular among Coptic, Arabic, and Ethiopic Christians, claims that Pilate was crucified twice—once by the Jews and once by Tiberius. His body and those of his wife and children were then buried near the sepulcher of Jesus in Jerusalem. In Coptic and Ethiopic Christianity, Pilate and his wife were canonized as saints. Coptic Christians named their children Pilate after him and it remained a popular boys name all the way into the 18th century.

In an [article](#) drawing together most of the legendary material, Professor Tibor Grüll of the University of Pécs argues that traditions about Pilate's fate circulated in different geographical regions. The Western tradition demonizes Pilate as the 'Devil's man' while the Eastern ones turn him into a martyr and saint. What these reflect, he suggests, are different attitudes towards Pilate's role in the crucifixion. In the texts that describe Pilate as a saint "the Jews" are painted as those ultimately responsible for the death of Jesus. Bond agrees: "The idea that Pilate converted is a testament to how well the gospel writers manage to shift responsibility for Jesus' death away from Rome and onto Jews." She also observes that all of these traditions about the death of Pilate reflect the Christian assumption that anyone who encountered Jesus would have been profoundly affected by the experience. In all probability, however, Pilate's interactions with Jesus would have been brief and—to Pilate—unmemorable. All the same it was this routine day at the office that secured his place in history.