

# *"Hail, King of the Jews"*

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1<sup>st</sup> in a three-part series

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*Mark 15:1–20 (NIV)*

[After Jesus is tried by the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, he is taken to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor and representative of Caesar.]

Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, made their plans. So they bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.

<sup>2</sup>“Are you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate.

“You have said so,” Jesus replied.

<sup>3</sup>The chief priests accused him of many things. <sup>4</sup>So again Pilate asked him, “Aren’t you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.”

<sup>5</sup>But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.

<sup>6</sup>Now it was the custom at the festival to release a prisoner whom the people requested. <sup>7</sup>A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. <sup>8</sup>The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.

<sup>9</sup>“Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate, <sup>10</sup>knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. <sup>11</sup>But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.

<sup>12</sup>“What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?” Pilate asked them.

<sup>13</sup>“Crucify him!” they shouted.

<sup>14</sup>“Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

<sup>15</sup>Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

<sup>16</sup>The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. <sup>17</sup>They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. <sup>18</sup>And they began to call out to him, “Hail, king of the Jews!” <sup>19</sup>Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. <sup>20</sup>And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

*“ . . . and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”*

Sometimes there is just nothing to say. No explanations, no defense, no words at all. That’s how it was for Jesus as he stood in front of his accusers. There was nothing new to say. For a couple of years, Jesus had tried to help people see, to help them grasp the truth – that God’s righteousness was being revealed in and through himself. Did he expect them to understand and to embrace him? I doubt it. We humans can be so blind even to what is plainly in front of us. And Jesus’ claims were anything but “plain.”

“He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth,  
he was like a lamb led to slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is  
silent, so he did not open his mouth.” (Isaiah 53:7)

When, in his exasperation, the chief priest had asked Jesus, “Are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed One?” he had probably expected more silence. There could be no more highly charged question. One did not speak lightly of “kings” in Caesar’s empire<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> “Messiah” means “the anointed one.” The kings of Israel were anointed and “Messiah” was a royal term.

But Jesus had answered, straightforwardly with no equivocation. Just a simple declarative, “I am,” followed by a weaving together of phrases from Daniel and the Psalms. The chief priest grasped Jesus’ blasphemy in his use of both passages, as if Jesus was even taking some notion of divine privileges and prerogatives upon himself.

There was nothing to be done but have Jesus taken over to Pilate. Jesus’ direct claim to Messiahship would get Pilate’s attention. The violent and intemperate governor would take care of their problem.<sup>2</sup>

#### Rome in Palestine

With the help of Herod the Great, Rome had secured its control of Palestine about 30 years before Jesus birth. Though Herod was allowed to sit on a puppet throne, Rome wielded its power through governors and procurators such Pontius Pilate. In Jesus’ day, Rome controlled a vast empire spanning the Mediterranean and reaching up into Britain.

Rome wanted two things from its governors. They had to keep the peace and collect the taxes. There was constant strife between the Jews of Palestine and their Romans lords. Rome wasn’t troubled by the Jews’ peculiar belief in one God (who had chosen the Jews, no less!). Instead, Rome was constantly confronted by Jewish efforts to throw off Roman rule and establish God’s kingdom on earth. Indeed, Galilee was a hotbed of this revolutionary activity. In about 4BC, Judas ben Hezekiah led a Jewish revolt which the Romans ended by crucifying thousands of Jews. In 6AD, Judas the Galilean gathered some followers, declared himself the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, and sought, through force, to overthrow Roman rule. Of course, it was a doomed-from-the-start effort, and Judas ended up dead at the hands of the Roman executioners just like every other would-be Messiah – and there were more than a few! The Romans were heavy-handed in their rule of Palestine and often provoked incidents with their ignorant and heavy-handed style. For example, early in his procuratorship, Pontius Pilate used money from the Jewish Temple treasury to build an aqueduct and then had to crush the resistance to his theft from the Jewish treasury.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wright, N.T. 1992. *The New Testament and the People of God*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p. 172-174

It was the morning now. Pilate was up and about; his working day usually began at sunrise. Jerusalem was packed as it always during Passover.

As this Jew from Nazareth stood before him, Pilate asked him the question straight, with no adornment: “Are you the king of the Jews?”

When Jesus gave an answer that was no answer at all, those in the room were astonished. If a person didn’t defend themselves before the imperial magistrate (Pilate’s function here), then Roman law stipulated that the judge had to rule against you.

Even now, before the representative of Pilate, would Jesus really refuse to defend himself?

Pilate knew from experience that Jerusalem was a powder keg at Passover. It wouldn’t take much to set off a riot, which would certainly displease Rome when word got back. Pilate was on dangerous ground.

So, Pilate set about to defuse things by allowing the crowd to demand the release of Jesus. But when the crowd demanded the release of Barabbas, Pilate knew that only one course lay ahead. Jesus would have to be crucified as a rebel against the rule of Caesar. “King of the Jews” indeed. Pilate’s relationship with the Jewish leaders had been difficult from the beginning. He was loathe to do their bidding. But it had to be. Pilate could never let Rome hear that he had released a “rebel King” even over the objections of the Jewish crowds.

So Pilate ordered Jesus flogged and crucified. Like crucifixion, flogging was accomplished in a variety of horrifying ways. Often, it was done with an instrument made of strips of leather with pieces of bone or sharp rocks tied into the ends of each strip. Flesh was laid bare easily. Looking ahead, because Jesus dies so quickly on the cross, it would seem that Jesus was flogged was the fullest severity. Such

<sup>2</sup> The Jewish leaders did not have the authority to impose capital punishment.

punishments were generally reserved for those who stood up to the power of Rome. Caesar would demonstrate what happens to would-be “kings” – of the Jews or otherwise.

Jesus was taken to the beating by a group of Roman soldiers. Given that they served in Palestine, they would be well practiced at such things. First, they clothed him in a robe of royal purple. Second, the soldiers fashioned a crown made of thorny bristles – all designed to add mocking and humiliation to Jesus’ punishment. They beat him. They spit on him. Then they stripped off the robe, put Jesus’ clothes back on him, and led him to Golgotha to be crucified.

Could no one see what has happening? Could no one grasp that their mocking and scorn would turn back on themselves. But considering the betrayals of Judas and Peter, we shouldn’t be surprised in the least. In his commentary on Mark, Alan Culpepper reflects on the soldiers and their “sport.”<sup>3</sup>

Irony and pathos require that the reader or observer know more than the characters or participants. Mark’s account of the mockery of Jesus has a profound effect because we know that Jesus really was “the King of the Jews,” and not just an earthly king but the divine Son of God. What might have passed as typical soldiers’ sport, therefore, becomes a parable of the failure of humanity to recognize God’s grace, even when it has come in human form among us. The mockery of Jesus, which adds insult to the brutality of the beating and crucifixion, is a mirror reflecting the blindness and degradation of human sinfulness. Yet, Jesus endures it without uttering a single recorded word.

Could the soldiers not see that he was no ordinary criminal? What caused their blindness, insensitivity, and appetite for cruelty? What are we not seeing? Perhaps the pathos of the mockery should call each of us to examine all the ways we relate insensitively to others, and ask where we are as blind as the soldiers to the work of God around us.

#### The Provocations of Pilate<sup>1</sup>

Often, Jewish resistance to Roman rule was provoked by some thoughtless action of the Roman governor. Sometimes the provocation was bad enough to incite outright revolt. The revolt led by Judas the Galilean in 6AD was provoked by a Roman census. To a Jew, a census implied admitting that the land and the people belonged to Rome, not the LORD God. As further examples, we know of at least seven provocations by Pontius Pilate:

- Pilate tried to bring Roman flags and emblems into Jerusalem, but backed down after a mass protest.
- He used money from the Temple treasury to build an aqueduct and crushed the resistance that this action provoked.
- He sent troops to kill some Galileans while they were offering sacrifices in the Temple, presumably because he feared a riot.
- He captured and condemned to death the leader of an uprising that had taken place in Jerusalem involving murder; he then released the man [Barabbas] as a gesture of goodwill during the Passover feast.
- At the same Passover, he faced a quasi-messianic movement, having some association with resistance movements; he crucified its leader [Jesus] along with two ordinary revolutionaries.
- He provoked public opinion by placing Roman votive shields, albeit without images, in the palace at Jerusalem, which according to Philo annoyed Tiberius almost as much as it did the Jews.
- Finally, he suppressed with particular brutality a popular (and apparently non-revolutionary) prophetic movement in Samaria. For this he was accused before the Roman legate in Syria, who had him sent back to Rome.

<sup>1</sup> This material on Jewish revolutions was taken and adapted from the study guide to a series by N.T. Wright, *Jesus: The New Way*. The guide was prepared by Denise George and is copyrighted by the Christian History Institute.

<sup>3</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary*, Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2007, p. 573

## A gallery of Jewish revolutionaries – a century of violence

Emperor Gaius (Caligula) ruled from 37-41AD. Incensed by an anti-Roman incident at Jamnia, he tried to insist on a huge statue of himself being placed in the Temple in Jerusalem in deliberate contravention of Jewish law and scruple. Only his early death forestalled the blasphemous act and its horrendous possible consequences.

Tholomaeus, a “brigand chief,” was executed by Cuspius Fadus in the mid-40s, during the course of a large operation against brigandage in general. Around the same time a leader named Theudas, claiming to be a prophet, led a movement which aroused enough popular support to gain mention in Acts as well as Josephus. It too was put down by the Romans, and Theudas himself was executed.

We then hear of the two sons of Judas the Galilean, Jacob and Simon, being crucified under the governor Tiberius Alexander (46-48AD), and of subsequent revolts under his successor Cumanus (48-52), including a riot at Passover in which perhaps 20,000 Jews were killed. Cumanus overreacted to a subsequent incident, whose complexity nicely illustrates the problems of the time. Some Galileans were murdered on their way through Samaria to Jerusalem for a festival. The Jews took violent revenge on Samaria. Cumanus responded with even more violence, out of all proportion to the original incidents. The Jews then successfully accused Cumanus before Claudius the emperor of having favored the Samaritans. The ringleaders of the Jewish fighters, Eleazar ben Deinaeus and Alexander, were finally captured by Cumanus' successor Felix (52-60), who proceeded, as Fadus had done in 44-46, to purge the country of *Istai* (rebels), crucifying a considerable number.

There was plenty more, but this brief list gives you a sense of the strife that plagued first-century Judea. In the late 60's, things came to a full head. A large-scale Jewish revolt was decisively crushed by the Roman legions, under the leadership of Vespasian and his son, Titus. The temple was destroyed, as Jesus warned it would be unless the Jews gave up the sword. Vespasian carried the temple loot to Rome. Later, Rome built a large arch to commemorate this victory and you see this arch today, with a relief of a menorah, if you visit the Roman Forum. Finally, in 135AD, Rome ended the strife for all time. The Romans smashed a revolt led by Simon-bar-Kochba (son of the star) and displaced the Jews from all Judea.

<sup>1</sup> This material on Jewish revolutions was taken and adapted from the study guide to a series by N.T. Wright, *Jesus: The New Way*. The guide was prepared by Denise George and is copyrighted by the Christian History Institute.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. People read the story of Pilate differently. Some see a sympathetic figure who doesn't want to end the life of an innocent man. Others, knowing a bit more about Pilate and the times, see a man who couldn't care less about the life of a Jew, any Jew, but doesn't want to do the bidding of the chief priests and scribes. How do you see Pilate? You might read the accounts in the other gospels and the background material in this study. What does this story tell us about Jesus and the powers of this world?
2. One of the most striking things about the gospel accounts of Jesus various “trials” is that he remains silent. Any answers he does give seem obtuse and unclear. Why do you think Jesus remained so guarded in his answers? What did he have to lose by speaking clearly, holding nothing back?
3. The soldiers mock Jesus, even hailing him as the Romans hailed Caesar. All of it was meant to humiliate and belittle Jesus for the soldiers' amusement. We live in a time when Jesus is mocked without end, as are those who have placed their trust in him. You might share some examples of occasions when you've seen Jesus and his followers mocked? Why does it seem to be an increasingly popular sport?

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Mark 15:1-20</b> Jesus stands before Pilate and is mocked by the soldiers.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Mark 15:21-47</b> Jesus is crucified and buried</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Mark 16:1-8</b> The resurrection of Jesus. If Mark's gospel went past verse 8, the original ending has been lost.</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Mark 16:9-20</b> An ending for Mark that was written later and is not original.</p>
<p><b>Friday, Luke 22:66 – 23:25</b> Luke's account of Jesus before Pilate and Herod. Mark doesn't tell the story of Jesus before Herod.</p>	<p><b>Weekly Joys and Concerns</b></p>

