

HEROD, PILATE, AND CAIAPHAS

Herod the Great

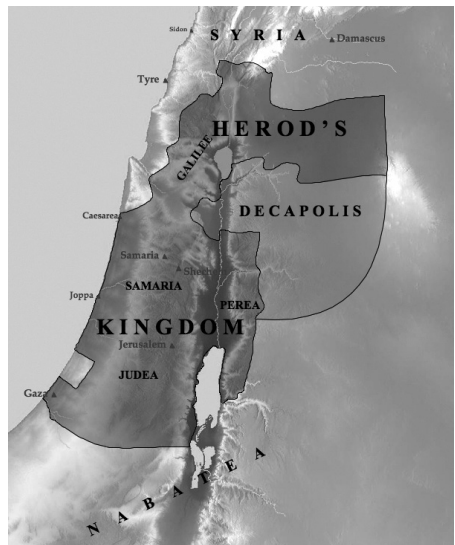
Most Christians are familiar with Herod the Great because he tried to put the child Jesus to death when He was in Bethlehem.* Certainly the attempt to kill the future king of Israel was a vicious act, and Herod was guilty of many other atrocities. As significant as this episode and Herod's bloodthirstiness are, there are a variety of reasons why he is important to secular and biblical history. He is known as a cunning politician, a successful military campaigner, but most of all a master builder.¹

Herod was born in the late 70s BC of a wealthy Idumean father by the name of Antipater. His father was a favorite with the Romans and became *epistropos*, or overseer, of Judea in 47 BC. In time, Herod, with the assistance of his father, was appointed governor of Galilee and gained recognition for the subjugation of bandits there. This effectively gained him the attention of Rome, so that after the murder of his father, Herod was made king of Judea, a position that he held for 33 years, reigning from 37 to 4 BC.²

He was known as a ruthless ruler, but he was able to maintain his power



One of Herod's hilltop palaces overlooks the Dead Sea at Masada.

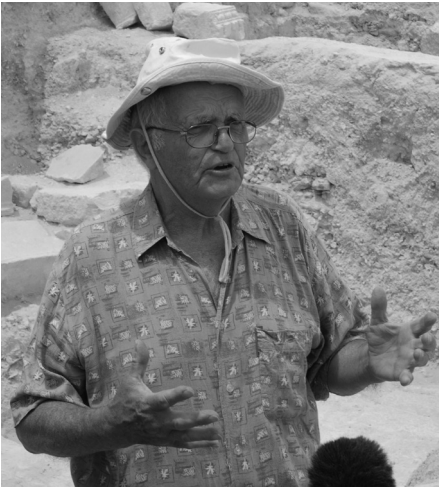


Herod's kingdom.

* The following discussions of Herod the Great, Pontius Pilate, and Caiaphas are adapted from material provided by Dr. H. Wayne House and are used by permission.

because of his effectiveness and the manner in which he ingratiated himself with various Roman rulers. In the changes within the Roman government, he seemed to know intuitively to whom to give allegiance. He also knew how to effectively use an army that he had trained to retain his power.*

The primary reason that Herod has gained the appellation “the Great” relates to his skill as a master builder. He built cities and temples in honor of Roman emperors and Roman gods. For example, Caesarea Maritima (on the Mediterranean Sea) was named after emperor Claudius, and Samaria was called Sebaste, the Greek name for Augustus. Herod



Professor Ehud Netzer. In addition to the location of Herod’s tomb, the late Dr. Netzer, one of the leading Herodian archaeologists of our time, found a pottery shard at Masada with a Latin inscription that identified “Herod, King of Judea” and the date and type of wine he imported from Europe. These and other discoveries have removed all doubt about the historicity of Herod. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)



Herod’s city known as the Herodium was a cone-shaped man-made fortress that featured internal tunnels to access the inner city structures. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)



These ruins of the Herodium are located in the cone atop Herod’s fortress.



The Latin Herod inscription discovered at Masada. This sherd is part of a wine jug. (Photo courtesy of Randall Price.)

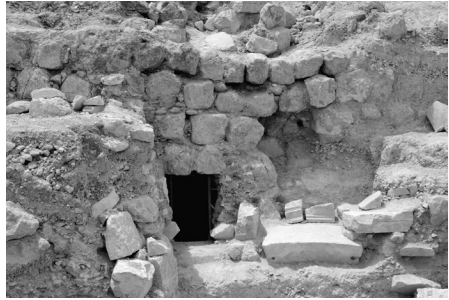
* “He was such a warrior as could not be withstood. . . fortune was also very favourable to him” (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, I, xxi, 13). See “Herod,” newadvent.org (last visited November 18, 2011).

built an important harbor at Caesarea Maritima, including hippodromes and theaters³; he also built several fortresses (such as Masada, the Herodium, and Machaerus) to which he could flee in case of revolt.

In order to solicit the support of the Jewish people (he being despised by them as an Idumean, or Arab, ruler), he constructed the massive Temple foundation and retaining walls and rebuilt the Temple itself.

Death and Burial of Herod

The end of Herod's life reveals the essence of the character manifested throughout his life, in things such as the execution of his wives and sons, not to mention the killing of the infants in search of the Messiah in Bethlehem. Levine reports, "Realizing his end was imminent, Herod ordered that upon his death the men whom he had locked up in the Jericho hippodrome should be executed, thus ensuring general mourning at the time of his death (Ant 17 §173–75)."⁴



Herod's tomb located at the Herodium, prior to its excavation.

The existence and achievements of Herod the Great are not really challenged today, but there have been some questions surrounding his death and burial.⁵ The question of where he was buried has now been answered to a large extent by the discovery in 2007 of his tomb at the Herodium,⁶ one of his fortresses, by the recently deceased professor Ehud Netzer of Hebrew University.⁷

Pontius Pilate

Pontius Pilate (Greek Πόντιος Πίλατος) is one of the most well-known figures of ancient history, based almost entirely on his judgment of Jesus the Messiah as recorded in the New Testament. Jesus' appearance before Pontius Pilate is recorded by all four Gospels (Matthew 27:2; Mark 15:1-15; Luke 23:1-5; John 18:28–19:16), but information about him also occurs in the writings of Josephus, Tertullian, Eusebius, Philo, Tacitus, and Agapius of Hierapolis. For example, Tacitus says regarding Pilate,

Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular.⁸

Pilate has been vilified by some and canonized by others*—considered as evil since

* A.N. Sherwin-White, "Pontius Pilate," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, revised, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley

he sentenced Jesus to death, and viewed by others as a Christian who influenced Tiberius to be favorable to Christianity.* As the fifth Roman governor of Judea, he had a troubled and less than lustrous (actually, undistinguished) career in that capacity. The date of his appointment and dismissal is subject to debate, but he is commonly thought to have been appointed governor in AD 26 or 27 and removed from office in AD 36. He is reported to have died by suicide.

Pilate had a rugged rule in Judea. Previous rulers there had respected Jewish customs and sensitivities, but he seems to have had little regard for them. He covertly brought in images of the imperial ensigns into Jerusalem at night, which he finally removed due to the protests of the Jews. He, first, threatened them with death, but afterward relented. At another time, he received a rebuke from Emperor Tiberius after he had irritated the Jews to insurrection when he set up gold-coated shields in Herod's palace; Tiberius had Pilate remove the shields to Caesarea and place them in the temple of Augustus.⁹

In another episode, Pilate was not so pliable. He had appropriated funds from the Temple treasury to pay for the construction of an aqueduct to carry water to Jerusalem. Josephus does not say that this action violated Jewish law, but he does say that the indignant Jerusalemites surrounded Pilate as he heard cases and protested angrily. Pilate, however, had taken the precaution of planting "plainclothes" soldiers among the crowd. At the appropriate moment he signaled for them to draw out clubs and beat the protesters. Josephus says that many Jews perished, either from the blows or from being trampled in the escape. Thus, under Pilate, the Jews were reduced to fearful silence.¹⁰

His last vicious act was to have his cavalry and infantry kill a number of Samaritans who went for religious purposes to Mount Gerizim.¹¹ After the Samaritans complained, the Roman governor of Syria, Vitellius, sent Pilate to Rome to explain himself to Tiberius, but before Pilate arrived, Tiberius had died.¹² The successor to Tiberius, Gaius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (Caligula), removed Pilate from his position and exiled him to Vienna-on-Rhone. He is believed to have committed suicide while in exile during the reign of Caligula.[†]

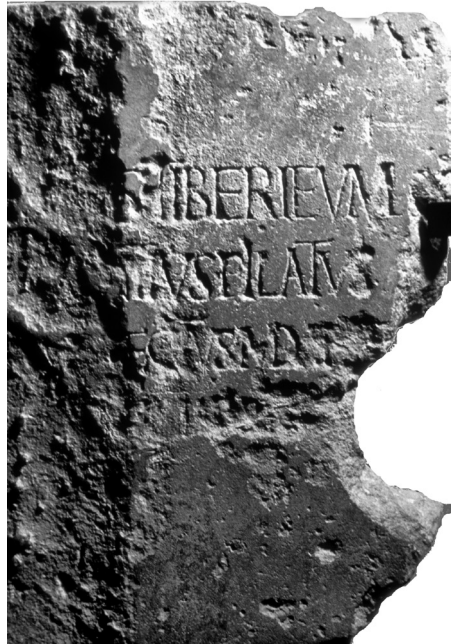
(Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988; 2002): "Origen described Pilate's wife as a convert, and the Coptic Church ultimately canonized Pilate himself." Coptic should probably be understood as Ethiopic. "The Coptic Church or the Abyssinian Coptic Orthodox Church referred to in this article is the Ethiopian church, but they are sometimes confused because of their origins in Egypt. The fourth or fifth century Gospel of Nicodemus (which contains the Acts of Pilate), does not make Pilate a Christian, but depicts him as more friendly toward Jesus than any of the canonical Gospels. Pilate was soon canonized by the Ethiopic churches." See "Questions and Answers," Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States website, www.suscopts.org/q&a/index.php?qid=766&catid=446 (last visited November 8, 2011).

* See discussion in Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, vol. I (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 105-106. Numerous stories arose regarding Pilate seeking to exonerate him or recognize him as a Christian. "For instance, the apocryphal Acts of Pilate recounts the trial showing that Pilate's decision was forced upon him. Colorful embellishments bring home the point: when Jesus enters Pilate's praetorium, the imperial standards miraculously bow down. Tertullian even speaks of Pilate as a 'Christian at heart' and contributes to the legendary conversion of both Pilate and his wife (who later gains the name Procula)" (Gary M. Burge, "Pilate, Pontius," in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, eds. Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988], 1694-1695).

† The suicide is described by Eusebius (HE 2.7) as precipitated by his actions against the Samaritans, discussed by Arthur Cushman McGiffert, "The Church History of Eusebius," in Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 110 n13. According to Eusebius, "Pilate's downfall occurred in the following manner. A leader of the Samaritans had promised to disclose the sacred treasures which Moses was reported to

The Pontius Pilate Inscription

Though we have literary evidence for Pontius Pilate, no physical evidence existed until 1961, when archaeologist Antonio Frova and a team of other archaeologists discovered an inscription on a stone dated to the period from AD 26 to 37.¹³ It was in secondary use as part of a stairway in the theater at Caesarea Maritima¹⁴ on the coast of Israel, though “undoubtedly, the stone was first used as part of some important building called a Tiberium, possibly a temple, which was dedicated in honor of the emperor Tiberius.”¹⁵ Even though the stone is in poor condition, three of the four lines of the text may be partially reconstructed.



The inscription reads as follows:

[]S TIBERIEUM
[PO]NTIUS PILATUS
[PRAEF]ECTUS IUDA[EA]E
[]

Pontius Pilate Dedication inscription discovered at Caesarea Maritima. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

(Tiberieum)
(Pontius Pilate)
(Prefect of Judea)

Historians have often referred to Pilate as a procurator, but later governors after Emperor Claudius were so known; earlier governors like Pilate were known as prefects, as found in the inscription.*

have concealed upon Mount Gerizim, and the Samaritans came together in great numbers from all quarters. Pilate, supposing the gathering to be with rebellious purpose, sent troops against them and defeated them with great slaughter. The Samaritans complained to Vitellius, governor of Syria, who sent Pilate to Rome (36 A.D.) to answer the charges brought against him. Upon reaching Rome he found Tiberius dead and Caius upon the throne. He was unsuccessful in his attempt to defend himself, and, according to tradition, was banished to Vienne in Gaul, where a monument is still shown as Pilate's tomb. According to another tradition he committed suicide upon the mountain near Lake Lucerne, which bears his name" (McGiffert). Also see Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, revised (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988; 2002). Eusebius, in *Ecclesiastical History*, 2.7, also comments, "It is worthy of note that Pilate himself, who was governor in the time of our Saviour, is reported to have fallen into such misfortunes under Caius, whose times we are recording, that he was forced to become his own murderer and executioner; and thus divine vengeance, as it seems, was not long in overtaking him. This is stated by those Greek historians who have recorded the Olympiads, together with the respective events which have taken place in each period" (Schaff, 110).

* For example, Pilate lived in Herod's palace, described by Philo as "the residence of the prefects" (see Philo, *Delegation to Gaius*, 38).

The life and career of Pontius Pilate has been known in literary sources since the days of the first century, but the inscription further substantiates the existence and position of this Roman who played a pivotal, though unfortunate, role in the plan of God for the Messiah Jesus.

Caiaphas

The Gospel accounts (Matthew 26:3,57; Luke 3:2; John 11:49; 18:13-14,24,28; Acts 4:6) indicate that Caiaphas (Greek, Καϊάφας) was the high priest in Jerusalem the year that Jesus died, serving between AD 18 and 36 (though his father-in-law, Annas,* retained the title).† The Gospel accounts refer to him only as Caiaphas, but his full title was Joseph, son of Caiaphas (Hebrew, יוסף בן קאיפא, *Yosef Bar Kayafa*). He was son-in-law of Annas in the apostolic records, and was high priest by the appointment of Rome.‡ In AD 36, the Syrian governor Vitellius removed the prefect Pilate as well as Caiaphas.§

The Gospel writers view Caiaphas as the primary priestly opponent of Jesus, and he is especially known for his willingness to sacrifice Jesus for tranquility in Israel:¶

* "This Ananias was not the son of Nebedeus, as I take it, but he who was called Annas or Annanus the Elder, the 9th in the catalogue, and who had been esteemed high priest for a long time; and besides, Caiaphas his son-in-law had five of his own sons high priests after him, who were those of numbers 11, 14, 15, 17, 24, in the foregoing catalogue. Nor ought we to pass slightly over what Josephus here says of this Annas or Ananias, that he was high priest a long time before his children were so, he was the son of Seth, and is set down first for high priest in the foregoing catalogue, under number 9. He was made by Quirinus, and continued till Ismael, the tenth in number, for about twenty-three years; which long duration of his high priesthood, joined to the successions of his son-in-law, and five children of his own, made him a sort of perpetual high priest, and was perhaps the occasion that former high priests kept their titles ever afterwards; for I believe it is hardly met with before him" (*Antiquities*, 20.206).

† "Josephus often confuses the reader by speaking of various individuals as 'high priest' at the same time, or by calling someone high priest when he was no longer in office (for example, *Wars of the Jews* 2.441; *Antiquities of the Jews*, 20.205; *Life of Josephus*, 193). Yet the Bible and Josephus both insist that only one person can serve as high priest at one time. On closer examination, we realize that Josephus allows former high priests to retain the title and prestige of the office as long as they live. Perhaps this usage reflects his assumption that high priests ought to serve for life.

"In any case, we have a similar confusion in the Gospels and Acts. Luke 3:2 and Acts 4:6 mention several high priests (especially Annas and Caiaphas) as though they were current. More baffling yet, John 18:12-26 has Jesus interrogated by Annas (=Ananus I), who is first called "the father-in-law of the high priest" (18:13) but is then addressed as 'high priest' (18:15,19,22). And when Jesus' interview with the high priest is finished, He is sent in chains to 'Caiaphas the high priest' (18:24). If the authors of Luke and John made the same assumptions as Josephus, and expected their readers to do so, then their accounts become somewhat less puzzling. Ananus I was an extremely distinguished high priest in Josephus's view, for five of his sons followed him in office (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 20.197-198). So it makes sense that the Gospel authors would remember his name in conjunction with Caiaphas, the serving high priest at the time of Jesus' trial" (Steve Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* [Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992]).

‡ Josephus says, "He [Nero] was now the third emperor; and he sent Valerius Gratus to be procurator of Judea, and to succeed Annus Rufus. (34) This man deprived Ananus of the high priesthood, and appointed Ismael, the son of Phabi, to be high priest. He also deprived him in a little time, and ordained Eleazar, the son of Ananus, who had been high priest before, to be high priest: which office, when he had held for a year, Gratus deprived him of it, and gave the high priesthood to Simon, the son of Camithus; (35) and when he had possessed that dignity no longer than a year, Joseph Caiaphas was made his successor" (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.31).

§ "Vitellius...deprived Joseph, who was called Caiaphas, of the high priesthood, and appointed Jonathan, the son of Ananus, the former high priest, to succeed him" (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XVIII, iv, 3).

¶ Mason adds, "Josephus describes a coincidence of interest between Jewish chief-priestly circles and the Roman government. He presents the chief priests by and large as favoring cooperation with Rome, even in the face of severe provocation. Not only do these eminent citizens support the governors' harsh treatment of political terrorists and religious fanatics, they

“If we let Him *go on* like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all, nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish” (John 11:48-50).



Among 12 ossuaries found in the Caiaphas family tomb in southern Jerusalem, this ossuary contains an inscription that bears Caiaphas's name. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

The Caiaphas Ossuary

Not only do the canonical Gospels and the *Antiquities of the Jews* of Josephus provide evidence regarding the existence and position of Joseph, son of Caiaphas; contemporary archaeology also supports his existence. In November of 1990, while a work crew was building a road south of Abu Tor in southeast Jerusalem in what is called the Peace

also cooperate in removing such troublesome individuals. A particularly interesting case concerns one Jesus son of Ananias, a common peasant who predicted the fall of the temple four years before the outbreak of the revolt. For more than seven years, especially at festivals, he would cry, 'Woe to Jerusalem!' and 'A voice against Jerusalem and the sanctuary, a voice against the bridegroom and the bride, a voice against all the people.' The exasperated temple leaders punished him without success, and eventually passed him over to the Roman governor. As he would not answer any questions, he was flayed to the bone and released on grounds of insanity (*Wars of the Jews*, 6.300-309). This cooperation of the leading citizens with the Romans, when it came to a person who had disrupted the already tense festival periods in Jerusalem, fits with the general picture of political relations painted by Josephus. This picture in turn helps one to imagine some cooperation between the Jewish leadership and the Roman governor in the trial of Jesus" (Mason).

Forest, but on a hill traditionally called the Mount of Evil Counsel, the family tomb of Caiaphas was uncovered.

In the tomb archaeologists found an ornate ossuary with the inscription “Joseph, son of Caiaphas” in Aramaic. A few scholars question whether the inscription truly refers to Caiaphas the high priest, who condemned Jesus, especially since it does not mention his title, yet the ornate nature of the ossuary would indicate that the bones of the person placed inside are those of someone of considerable rank and wealth. One cannot argue with 100 percent certainty that the ossuary is that of the Caiaphas mentioned in the Gospels, but we know of no other Joseph, son of Caiaphas, in the first century who would be so identified and buried in an ossuary such as this.¹⁶



This ornate ossuary is believed to have belonged to the son of Caiaphas.