

## BIBLICAL STUDIES

*“Men From The Past With A Message For The Present”*Title: **BARABBAS: A BAD MAN’S BIOGRAPHY**Text: **Mark 15:15*****“So Pilate, wanting to gratify the crowd, released Barabbas to them; and he delivered Jesus, after he had scourged Him, to be crucified.”***

No one wants to carry the name Barabbas or Judas because of the stigma that the names have attached to them. Although Barabbas may not have personally taken any action against Jesus, or purposefully set about to harm Jesus, nevertheless, he has been forever associated with the actions that were taken against Him.

A custom in Jerusalem at the annual Passover celebration was for the governor of Judea to commute some prisoner's death sentence. On this particular occasion, the crowd was offered a choice of whether to have Barabbas or Jesus Christ released from Roman custody. The drama built as the governor stood on the balcony and the crowd below awaited Pilate's decision. Who would be set free? A holy man or a horrible man?

**PERSONAL CONTENT**

The famous criminal Barabbas was awaiting execution. His crimes: murder, theft, and insurrection. Dragged before the Roman governor Pilate, Barabbas was outwardly defiant but inwardly terrified. What happened next? Before we answer that, let's look into Barabbas' background.

***Who Was Barabbas?***

Pilate introduces us to Barabbas in Matthew 27:17 when he asked the angry Jewish crowd if they preferred him to release Barabbas or Jesus to them? The incident is mentioned by all four of the Gospel writers.

The name “*Bar-Abbas*” indicates that he was Jewish. In the Aramaic language the word “*Bar*” usually denoted a “son.” It is used in Matthew 16:17 where it is recorded that Jesus said, “*Blessed are you Simon Bar-jona....*” i.e. Simon, son of Jona. Therefore, “*Bar-Abbas*” means that he was the son of Abbas. We do not know who his mother was, his age or from where he came. He appears suddenly and just as suddenly, after his release, disappears.

***What Had Barabbas Done?***

When we analyze all four of the Gospel writer's accounts of the confrontation of Pilate with the religious rioters, we come up with quite a crime sheet on Barabbas. Here is what we learn about him:

- Matthew records that Barabbas was “*a notorious prisoner*” (Matt. 27:16). (The Contemporary English Version calls him a “*terrorist*.”)

- Mark says that he “*was chained with his fellow rebels*” and that he “*had committed murder*” (Mark. 15:7);
- Luke also writes that he was guilty of “*rebellion in the city*” of Jerusalem and of committing “*murder*” (Luke 23:18 & 25);
- John adds that “*Barabbas was a robber.*” (John 18:40)

Here we have a man who was in prison because he had already been found guilty of leading an insurrection comprised of some radical Jews, against the Roman forces in Jerusalem, who had committed murder in the process and was a robber. Needless to say, this man would not get the “Mr. Congeniality” award from his community. We would all agree that when Matthew referred to him as “*a notorious prisoner*” he did not overstate the danger that Barabbas posed to society in general.

The New Bible Dictionary edited by Eerdmans Publishing Company has an interesting opening statement on the article about Barnabas as follows: “A bandit arrested for homicidal political terrorism.” This feared felon had been on the “Most Wanted” list, but now the religious rabble-rousers preferred to have him running loose in their society, a threat to lives, property and the peace of the land, rather than have the Healer of broken lives, the Prince of Peace, in their midst. Jesus was on their “Most Unwanted” list. Religious they were but they were not rational!

### **POLITICAL CONTEXT**

The antagonism, disagreement, hatred and resistance between Jews and the Roman occupation forces had festered for a long time. The public confrontation over the release of a prisoner was not a surprise to either party.

#### ***The Roman Occupation.***

The mighty shadow of Rome hovered over Jerusalem. The Jewish nation was under the domination of the power of Rome. Pilate was the fifth governor of Judea. The province of Judea took in the southern half of Palestine, including Samaria. Being an imperial province it was under the direct control of the emperor in Rome. Pilate was procurator of Judea and he held office for 10 years. Josephus says that Pilate was governor from 26 to 36 AD.

“The governor was the personal servant of the emperor, directly responsible to him. He possessed civil, military, and criminal jurisdiction. Under his rule, the Jews were allowed as much self-government as was consistent with the maintenance of imperial authority. The Sanhedrin was allowed to exercise judicial functions, but if they desired to inflict the penalty of death, the sentence had to be confirmed by the procurator.” (Josephus, Ant., XVIII, iv, 2).

#### ***The Religious Opposition.***

The Jews hated Rome and her occupation of their homeland. The Jewish people were proud people and prized their freedom. They had been in bondage many times in their history but now they were in their homeland and resented the occupation forces of the Romans. The Jewish populace hated the Romans. They hated the taxes imposed on them by these hedonistic Romans. They hated the arrogant soldiers who stood over them, humiliating them, and sometimes making them carry their heavy loads.

The Jews hated the Romans because these foreigners restricted their worship and the ability to carry out the law of Moses regarding their own legal system. The Jewish populace hated the Romans because they were powerless to throw the pagan Romans out of their land so they endured. They endured their situation; they endured their hatred; and, they prayed for deliverance. The mass of the Hebrew people did not think or act like Barabbas but they understood why Barabbas and his band had attempted to overthrow the Roman usurpers.

### MORAL CONFLICT

The wise Hebrew writer of the book of Proverbs, Solomon, wrote, "*Righteousness exalts a nation; but sin is reproach to any people.*" (Proverbs 14:34) The descendants of Solomon, gathered before the Palace of Pilate in Jerusalem, were acting in the most unrighteous manner in demanding the death of an innocent person. All of their religious teachings notwithstanding, they venomously and vociferously demanded that wrong should prevail.

#### ***A Conflict Between the Throne And The Throng.***

The procurator of Judea had no easy task, nor did Pilate make the task easier by his actions. He was not careful to conciliate the religious prejudices of the Jews, and at times this attitude of his led to violent collisions between Ruler and ruled.

One time he used the sacred treasure of the temple to pay for bringing water into Jerusalem by an aqueduct. A crowd came together and clamored against him; but he had caused soldiers dressed as civilians to mingle with the multitude, and at a given signal they fell upon the rioters and beat them so severely with staves that the riot was quelled (Josephus, Ant, XVIII, iii, 2; BJ, II, ix, 4).

At this Passover celebration, with Jews from many nations present, the throng of Jews clamoring long and loud for the release of Barabbas and the crucifixion of Jesus had created a stand-off between Pilate and the people. Pilate was between a rock and a hard place!

Philo speaks of Pilate in terms of the severest condemnation. According to him, "Pilate was a man of a very inflexible disposition, and very merciless as well as obstinate. There was in him, however, no deep moral basis of character, as is shown by the utter skepticism of his question, "What is truth?" He had the haughtiness of the dominant race, and a profound contempt for the people over which he ruled. He felt deeply humiliated at having to give way to those whom he utterly despised." (Legatio ad Caium, xxxviii)

#### ***A Conflict Between Right And Wrong.***

The whole affair of the discussion that evolved around Jesus and Barabbas is ludicrous. On the one hand there was the One who was perfect and even had the unofficial endorsement of Pilate that He was not worthy of death. Jesus was not on trial for harming anyone nor for causing an insurrection, yet there He stood, waiting, to hear what the rabble would say. On the other hand, there was the one who was a cut throat, a rabble rouser, an insurrectionist and one who deserved to die. Yet he too waited to hear what the crowd would say. How much more bizarre can any situation ever become?

Surprisingly, Pilate was in the right, the religious community was in the wrong. Pilate said, *"I find no fault in him"* and he verified that Herod likewise, found Him to be innocent. However, the religious leaders were not interested in what was right and what was wrong. They violated multiple holy laws in advancing their unholy agenda. Right was trampled in the street that day and wrong ruled. In releasing Barabbas, Pilate acted, and knew that he acted, against his conscience. He knew what was right, but for selfish and cowardly reasons refused to do it. He was faced by a great moral emergency, and he failed.

### ***A Conflict Between Justice And Prejudice.***

Jesus Christ and His teachings were considered a threat by the religious leaders. If any persons should have recognized the prophecies concerning the Messiah as being fulfilled in Jesus Christ, it should have been the leaders of the Jewish religion. Instead, they were blinded by their prejudices and saw Him as a threat to their status and religious system.

Consequently, they were not standing up for justice that day, but they were venting their prejudices against Jesus. The mob, being whipped into a frenzy by the religious leaders calling for the release of Barabbas, shocked Pilate and he at last saw how biased and hateful the religious authorities were and how much power they wielded over the common man on the street.

It is evident that Pilate attempted to avoid complying with the demands of the religious mob. However, the crowd made a subtle suggestion, calling into question Pilate's allegiance to Rome: *"Pilate sought to release Him, but the Jews cried out, saying, "If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar's friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar."* (John 19:12) The public pressure got to Pilate and he delivered his verdict.

## **JUDICIAL CONSENT**

Everyone knew that during the yearly Passover celebration Pilate's custom was to release a prisoner of the people's choosing. On this occasion their choice was between the Teacher or the terrorist, Jesus or Barabbas.

Jesus was never officially convicted in a Court of Law of any crime. Pilate did not enforce any law when sentencing Jesus to be crucified, except consenting to the law of mob mentality. Matthew records the following sad scene:

*"While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, "Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him." But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. The governor answered and said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" They said, "Barabbas!" Pilate said to them, "What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said to him, "Let Him be crucified!" Then the governor said, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they cried out all the more, saying, "Let Him be crucified!" When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it." And all the people answered and said, "His blood be on us*

*and on our children.” Then he released Barabbas to them; and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered Him to be crucified.” (Matthew 27:19-26)*

In spite of Pilate’s wife’s warning Pilate delivered his ultimatum. He capitulated to the Jewish demands and rendered the order that Barabbas be set free and thereby, by default, the verdict was that the crowd had the government’s consent to crucify Jesus. Barabbas could not believe his ears. Not only had the surging crowd chosen him to live, but he would be set free!

Then Pilate washed his hands as a symbol that he was not responsible for taking Jesus' innocent life. It was the crowd, or the crowd's instigators, who were to bear this liability. He ordered Barabbas released and Jesus scourged and delivered to the crazed crowd for crucifixion.

Pilate condemned an innocent man, Jesus; released a guilty man, Barabbas; made friends with a wicked man, Herod - *“That very day Pilate and Herod became friends with each other, for previously they had been at enmity with each other.” (Luke 23:12)* What a pitiful excuse for an Administrator of law and justice! Barabbas was freed and fled down the back streets of Jerusalem, and disappeared from history.

### SCRIPTURAL CONCEPT

Barabbas became an exemplification of the effects of substitutionary atonement. He was forgiven by the Roman Governor and was set free. Jesus then died the death that Barabbas should have died. Jesus was the Substitute, not only for Barabbas but for all mankind.

Why do we need a substitute to die for us? How is the death of Christ a substitute for us? The answer is in the following scriptures:

- God is holy – *“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty.” (Rev. 4:8)*
- Sin has alienated us from God – *“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom.3:23)*
- Jesus Christ’s death made peace with God possible – Christ *“made peace through the blood of His cross. And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight....” (Col. 1:21-22)*
- God imputed the guilt of our sins to Christ, and He, in our place, bore the punishment that we deserve. *“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness,” (I Peter 2:24) and “For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.” (I Peter 3:18)*
- When Jesus Christ died, he suffered as a substitute in the place of and on behalf of fallen humanity. Christ’s death made it possible for men and women to be declared righteous, based on their faith in Him – *“For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” (II Cor. 5:21)*
- God, who is rich in mercy, sent Jesus Christ to die in our place, so that He might be righteous in dealing with sin while at the same time providing His own righteousness to those who believe in Jesus Christ for salvation. (Rom. 3:23-26)

Barabbas the insurrectionist, the murderer, went free while the guiltless One took his place. Jesus died in the place of and for Barabbas. Jesus died so that Barabbas, if he believed, would be forgiven by God and set free from all his sin. If ever a man understood substitutionary death, it was Barabbas.

## **CONCLUSION**

Barabbas is representative of all of us, not that all of us have committed the crimes that he committed, but Barabbas was a sinner and so are we. I do not know if Barabbas went up to Calvary to watch Jesus die in his place. If he did not go - he should have gone. He should have stood at the foot of the cross and he should have told Jesus, "Thank you for taking my place."

I do not know what happened to Barabbas, but I do know that Jesus died in his place. Jesus also died in my place, for my forgiveness and for my freedom. By His death and resurrection all who receive Him as Savior can have their sins forgiven, regardless of how bad their past has been, and can start a new life. What an offer! What an opportunity!

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