

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Pontus Pilate's Letter to Noble Tiberius Cæsar, Emperor of Rome

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Be a Berean!

Editor: Did Pontius Pilate actually write a letter to Caesar Tiberius concerning the public events of the life of Jesus of Nazareth.¹ It is almost certain that such a letter was composed, considering the fact that Tiberius had warned Pilate concerning his handling of numerous problems within the province of Judea under his leadership. Thus, Tiberius had Pilate on a very short leash and any new rebellion from the Jews would almost certainly caused his dismissal as Procurator of Judea. So, is this document that letter? Probably not, due to the lack of documentation on the part of W.D. Mahan.

Noble Sovereign, Greeting: The events of the last few days in my province, have been of such a character that I will give the details in full as they have occurred; as I should not be surprised if, in the course of time, they may change the destiny of our nation, for it seems of late that all the gods have ceased to be propitious. I am almost ready to say, Cursed be the day that I succeeded Vallerius Flaceus in the government of Judea; for since then my life has been one of continual uneasiness and distress. On my arrival at Jerusalem. I took possession of the praetorium, and ordered a splendid feast to be prepared, to which I invited the tetrarch of Galilee, with the high priest and his officers. At the appointed hour no guests appeared. This I considered an insult offered to my dignity, and to the whole government to which I belong. A few days after the high priest deigned

¹ The *Anaphora Pilati* or **Report of Pontius Pilate** is a report purportedly written by Pilate to Emperor Tiberius describing Jesus's execution and its aftermath. Its date of authorship is unknown. Tertullian references a report Pilate wrote to Emperor Tiberius in his *Apology*, written around AD 197; however he provides no details, so he may well have been referring to a different text. The text is estimated to more likely originate from the late 4th century or the 5th century. The oldest versions that survive are Greek versions from the 6th century, and Arabic and Karshuni versions from the 10th and 13th century.

The *Anaphora Pilati* is largely an anti-Jewish work. The miracles of Jesus are plain and obvious to Pilate as more powerful than any the Roman gods provide, yet the Jews blindly reject Jesus and demand his punishment, despite being unable to convict him of a single crime. Pilate only allows the execution to proceed to prevent a rebellion. After Jesus's death, a supernatural light comes down on Jerusalem at the third hour of the night. An earthquake opens the mountains, and the dead pour out from Hades. Jews who had dared speak against Jesus are swallowed by chasms from the earthquake, not even leaving bodies. All of the synagogues in Jerusalem are destroyed except one.

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to pay me a visit. His deportment was grave and deceitful. He pretended that his religion forbade him and his attendants to sit down at the table of the Romans, and eat and offer libations with them, but this was only a sanctimonious seeming, for his very countenance betrayed his hypocrisy. But I thought it expedient to accept his excuse, but from that moment I was convinced that the conquered had declared themselves the enemy of the conquerors ; and I would warn the Romans to beware of the high priests of this country. They would betray their own mother to. gain an office and procure a luxurious living. It seemed to me, of conquered cities, Jerusalem was the most difficult to govern. So turbulent were the people that I lived in momentary dread of an insurrection. I had not soldiers sufficient to suppress it. I only had one centurion and a hundred men at my command. I requested a reinforcement from the prefect of Syria, who informed me that he had scarcely troops sufficient to defend his own province. An insatiate thirst for conquest to extend our empire beyond the means of defending it, I fear, will be the cause of final overthrow of our whole government. I lived in obscurity from the masses, for I did not know what those priests might influence the rabble to do; yet I endeavored to ascertain as much as I could the mind and standing of the people.

Among the various rumors that came to my hearing, there was one that attracted my attention in particular. A young man, it was said, had appeared in Galilee, preaching with a noble unction, a new law in the name of the God that had sent him. At first I was apprehensive that his design was to stir up the people against the Romans; but my fears were soon dispelled. Jesus of Nazareth spake rather as a friend of the Romans than the Jews. One day in passing by the place of Siloe, where there was a great concourse of people, I observed in the midst of the group a young man who was leaning against a tree, calmly addressing the multitude. I was told it was Jesus. This I could easily have suspected, so great was the difference between him and those who were listening to him. His golden colored hair and beard gave to his appearance a celestial aspect. He appeared to be about thirty years of age. Never have I seen a sweeter or more serene countenance. What a contrast between him and his hearers, with their black beards and tawny complexions. Unwilling to interrupt him by my presence, I continued my walk, but signified to my secretary to join the group and listen. My secretary's name was Manlius. He was the grand-son of the chief of the conspirators who encamped in Etruria waiting for Cataline. Manlius was an ancient inhabitant of Judea, and well-acquainted with the Hebrew language. He was devoted to me, and worthy of my confidence.

On entering the praetorium I found Manlius, who related to me the words Jesus had pronounced, at Siloe. Never have I read in the works of the philosophers anything that can compare to the maxims of Jesus. One of the rebellions Jews, so numerous in Jerusalem, having asked him if it was lawful to give tribute to Cæsar, Jesus replied:

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"Render unto Cæsar the things that belong to Cæsar, and unto God the things that are his."

It was on account of the wisdom of his sayings that I granted so much liberty to the Nazarene; for it was in my power to have had him arrested, and exiled to Pontus; but this would have been contrary to the justice which has always characterized the Roman government in all her dealings with men ; this man was neither seditious nor rebellious; I extended to him my protection, unknown perhaps to himself. He was at liberty to act, to speak, to assemble, and address the people to choose disciples, unrestrained by any pretorian mandate. Should it ever happen (may the gods ever avert the omen!), should it ever happen, I say, that the religion of our forefathers should be supplemented by the religion of Jesus, it will be to this noble toleration that Rome shall owe her premature death, while I, miserable wretch, shall have been the instrument of what the Jews call Providence, and we call destiny.

This unlimited freedom granted to Jesus provoked the Jews, not the poor, but the rich and powerful. It is true, Jesus was severe on the latter, and this was a political reason, in my opinion, for not restraining the liberty of the Nazarene—"Scribes and Pharisees," he would say to them, "you are a race of vipers; you resemble painted sepulchres; you appear well unto men, but you have death within you." At other times he would sneer at the alms of the rich and proud, telling them that the mite of the poor was more precious in the sight of God. New complaints were daily made at the praetorium against the insolence of Jesus. I was even informed that some misfortune would befall him; that it would not be the first time that Jerusalem had stoned those that called themselves prophets; and, if the praetorium refused justice, an appeal would be made to Cæsar. However, my conduct was approved by the Senate, and I was promised a reinforcement after the termination of the Parthean war.

Being too weak to suppress a sedition, I resolved upon adopting a measure that promised to establish the tranquility of the city, without subjecting the praetorium to humiliating concession. I wrote to Jesus, requesting an interview with him at the praetorium. He came. You know that in my veins flows the Spanish mixed with Roman blood—as incapable of fear as it is of puerile emotion. When the Nazarene made his appearance, I was walking in my Basilic, and my feet seemed fastened with an iron hand to the marble pavements, and I trembled in every limb as a guilty culprit, though the Nazarene was as calm as innocence itself. When he came up to me, he stopped, and by a signal sign he seemed to say to me, "I am here," though he spoke not a word. For some time I contemplated with admiration and awe this extraordinary type of man—a type of man unknown to our numerous painters who have given form and figure to all the gods and

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the heroes. There was nothing about him that was repelling in its character, yet I felt awed and tremulous to approach him.

“Jesus,” said I unto him at last—and my tongue faltered—“Jesus of Nazareth, I have granted you for the last three years ample freedom of speech; nor do I regret it. Your words are those of a sage. I know not whether you have read Socrates or Plato, but this I know, there is in your discourses a majestic simplicity, that elevates you far above these philosophers. The Emperor is informed of it, and I, his humble representative in this country, am glad of having allowed you that liberty of which you are so worthy. However, I must not conceal from you that your discourses have raised up against you powerful and inveterate enemies. Neither is this surprising. Socrates had his enemies, and he fell a victim to their hatred. Yours are doubly incensed against you, on account of your discourses being so severe against their conduct; against me, on account of the liberty I have afforded you. They even accuse me of being indirectly leagued with you for the purpose of depriving the Hebrews of the little civil power which Rome has left them. My request—I do not say my order—is, that you be more circumspect and moderate in your discourses in the future, and more tender toward them, lest you arouse the pride of your enemies, and they raise against you the stupid populace, and compel me to employ the instruments of law.”

The Nazarene calmly replied: “Prince of the earth, your words proceed not from true wisdom. Say to the torrent to stop in the midst of the mountain gorge: it will uproot the trees of the valley. The torrent will answer you that it obeys the laws of nature and the creator God alone knows whither flow the waters of the torrent. Verily I say unto you, before the rose of Sharon blossoms the blood of the just shall be spilt.”

“Your blood shall not be spilt,” said I, with deep emotion; “you are more precious in my estimation on account of your wisdom than all the turbulent and proud Pharisees, who abuse the freedom granted them by the Romans. They conspire against Cæsar, and convert his bounty into fear, impressing the unlearned that Cæsar is a tyrant and seeks their ruin. Insolent wretches, they are not aware that the wolf of the Tiber sometimes clothes himself with the skin of the sheep to accomplish his wicked ends. I will protect you against them. My praetorium shall be an asylum, sacred both day and night.”

Jesus carelessly shook his head and said with a grave and divine smile: “When the day shall have come, there will be no asylums for the son of man, neither in the earth nor under the earth. The asylum of the just is there,” pointing to the heavens. “That which is written in the books of the prophets must be accomplished.”

“Young man,” answered I mildly, “you oblige me to convert my request into an order. The safety of the province, which has been confided to my care, requires it. You must

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observe more moderation in your discourses. Do not infringe my order. You know the consequences. May happiness attend you; farewell.”

“Prince of the earth,” replied Jesus, “I come not to bring war into the world, but peace, love and charity. I was born the same day on which Augustus Cæsar gave peace to the Roman world. Persecutions proceed not from me. I expect it from others, and will meet it in obedience to the will of my Father who has shown me the way. Restrain, therefore, your worldly prudence. It is not in your power to arrest the victim at the foot of the tabernacle of expiation.”

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So saying, he disappeared like a bright shadow behind the curtain of the Basilic to my great relief, for I felt a heavy burden on me, from which I could not extricate myself while in his presence. To Herod, who then reigned in Galilee, the enemies of Jesus addressed themselves, to wreak their vengeance on the Nazarene. Had Herod consulted his own inclinations, he would have ordered Jesus immediately to be put to death; but though proud of his royal dignity, yet he was afraid of committing an act that might diminish his influence with the Senate, or, like me, was afraid of Jesus himself. But it would never do for a Roman officer to be scared by a Jew. Previous to this, Herod called on me at the praetorium, and, on rising to take leave, after some insignificant conversation, asked me what was my opinion concerning the Nazarene. I replied that Jesus appeared to me to be one of those great philosophers that great nations sometimes produced; that his doctrines are by no means sacrilegious, and that the intentions of Rome were to leave him to that freedom of speech which was justified by his actions. Herod smiled maliciously, and, saluting me with an ironical respect, departed.

The great feast of the Jews was approaching, and the intention was to avail themselves of the popular exultation which always manifests itself at the solemnities of a Passover. The city was overflowing with a tumultuous populace, clamoring for the death of the Nazarene. My emissaries informed me that the treasurer of the temple had been employed in bribing the people. The danger was pressing. A Roman Centurion had been insulted. I wrote to the Prefect of Syria for a hundred-foot soldiers, and as many cavalry. He declined. I saw myself alone with a handful of veterans in the midst of a rebellious city, too weak to suppress a disorder, and having no other choice left but to tolerate it. They had seized upon Jesus, and the seditious rabble, although they had nothing to fear from the praetorium, believing, as their leaders had told them, that I winked at their sedition—continued vociferating: “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

Three powerful parties had combined together at that time against Jesus: First, the Herodians and the Sadducees, whose seditious conduct seemed to have proceeded from double motives: they hated the Nazarene, and were impatient of the Roman yoke. They could never forgive me for having entered the holy city with banners that bore the image

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of the Roman Emperor; and although in this instance I had committed a fatal error, yet the sacrilege did not appear less heinous in their eyes. Another grievance also rankled in their bosoms. I had proposed to employ a part of the treasure of the Temple in erecting edifices for public utility. My proposal was scorned. The Pharisees were the avowed enemies of Jesus. They cared not for the government. They bore with bitterness the severe reprimands which the Nazarene for three years had been continually throwing out against them where ever he went. Too weak and pusillanimous to act by themselves, they had embraced the quarrels of the Herodians and the Sadducees. Besides these three parties, I had to contend against the reckless and profligate populace, always ready to join a sedition, and to profit by the disorder and confusions that resulted therefrom.



Jesus was dragged before the High Priest, and condemned to death. It was then that the High Priest, Caiaphas, performed a divisory act of submission. He sent his prisoner to me to pronounce his condemnation and secure his execution. I answered him that, as Jesus was a Galilean, the affair came in Herod's jurisdiction, and ordered him to be sent thither. The wily Tetrarch professed humility, and, protesting his preference to the lieutenant of Cæsar, he committed the fate of the man to my hands. Soon my palace assumed the aspect of a besieged citadel. Every moment increased the number of the seditionists. Jerusalem was inundated with crowds from the mountains of Nazareth. All Judea appeared to be pouring into the devoted city. I had taken a wife from among the Gauls, who pretended to see into futurity. Weeping and throwing herself at my feet, "Beware," said she to me, "beware, and touch not that man; for he is holy. Last night I saw him in a vision. He was walking on the waters; he was flying on the wings of the wind. He spoke to the tempest, and to the fishes of the lake; all were obedient to him. Behold, the torrent in Mount Kedron flows with blood, the statues of Cæsar are filled with gemonide; the columns of the interior have given away, and the sun is veiled in mourning like a vestal in the tomb. Ah! Pilate, evil awaits thee. If thou wilt not listen to the vows of thy wife, dread the curse of a Roman Senate; dread the frowns of Cæsar."

By this time the marble stairs groaned under the weight of the multitude. The Nazarene was brought back to me. I proceeded to the halls of justice, followed by my guard, and asked the people in a severe tone what they demanded.

"The death of the Nazarene," was their reply. "For what crime?"

"He has blasphemed; he has prophesied the ruin of the temple; he calls himself the Son of God, the Messiah, the King of the Jews."

"Roman justice," said I, "punishes not such offences with death."

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“Crucify him! Crucify him!” belched forth the relentless rabble. The vociferations of the infuriated mob shook the palace to its foundations.

There was but one who appeared to be calm in the midst of the vast multitude; it was the Nazarene. After many fruitless attempts to protect him from the fury of his merciless persecutors, I adopted a measure which at the moment appeared to me to be the only one that could save his life. I proposed, as it was their custom to deliver a “prisoner on such occasions, to release Jesus and let him go free, that he might be the scapegoat, as they called it; but they said; Jesus must be crucified. I then appealed to them as to the inconsistency of their course as being incompatible with their laws, showing that no criminal judge could pass sentence on a criminal unless he had fasted one whole day; and that sentence must have the consent of the Sanhedrin, and the signature of the president of that court; that no criminal could be executed on the same day his sentence was fixed, and the next day, on the day of his execution, the Sanhedrin was required to review the whole proceeding; also, according to their law, a man was stationed at the door of the court with a flag, and another a piece off on horseback to cry the name of the criminal and his crime, and the name of his witnesses, and to know if any one can testify anything in his favor; and the prisoner on his way to execution had the right to turn back three times, and to plead any new thing in his favor. I urged all these pleas, hoping they might awe them into subjection; but they still cried, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

I then ordered him to be scourged, hoping this might satisfy them; but it only increased their fury. I then called for a basin, and washed my hands in the presence of the clamorous multitude, thus, testifying that in my judgment Jesus of Nazareth had done nothing worthy of death; but in vain. It was his life these wretches thirsted for.

Often in our civil commotions have I witnessed the furious animosity of the multitude, but nothing could be compared to what I witnessed on this occasion. It might have been truly said that on this occasion all the phantoms of the infernal regions had assembled at Jerusalem. The crowd appeared not to walk, but to be borne off and whirled as a vortex, rolling along in living waves from the portals of the praetorium even unto: Mount Zion, with howling screams, shrieks and vociferations such as were never heard in the seditions of the Pannonia or in the tumult of the forum.

By degrees the day darkened like a winter’s twilight, such as had been at the death of the great Julius Cæsar. It was likewise the Ides of March. I, the continued governor of a rebellious province, was leaning against a column of my Basilic, contemplating athwart the dreary gloom these fiends of Tartarus dragging to execution the innocent Nazarene. All around me was deserted. Jerusalem had vomited forth her indwellers through the funeral gate that leads to Gemonica. An air of desolation and sadness enveloped me. My guards had joined the cavalry, and the centurion, to display a shadow of power, was

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endeavoring to keep order. I was left alone, and my breaking heart admonished me that what was passing at that moment appertained rather to the history of the gods than that of men. A loud clamor was heard proceeding from Golgotha, which, borne on the winds, seemed to announce an agony such as was never heard by mortal ears. Dark clouds lowered over the pinnacle of the temple, and setting over the city covered it as with a veil. So dreadful were the signs that men saw both in the heavens and on the earth, that Dionysius the Areopagite is reported to have exclaimed, "Either the author of nature is suffering, or the universe is falling apart."



Whilst these appalling scenes of nature were transpiring, there was a dreadful earthquake in lower Egypt, which filled everybody with fear, and scared the superstitious Jews almost to death. It is said Balthasar, an aged and learned Jew of Antioch, was found dead after the excitement was over. Whether he died from alarm or grief is not known. He was a strong friend of the Nazarene.

Towards the first hour of the night I threw my mantle around me, and went down into the city towards the gates of Golgotha. The sacrifice was consummated. The crowd was returning home, still agitated, it is true, but gloomy, taciturn and desperate. What they had witnessed had stricken them with terror and remorse. I also saw my little Roman cohort pass by mournfully, the standard bearer having veiled his eagle in token of grief; and I overheard some of the Jewish soldiers murmuring strange words which I did not understand. Others were recounting prodigies almost similar to those which had so often smitten the Romans by the will of the gods. Sometimes groups of men and women would halt, then, looking back towards Mount Calvary, would remain motionless in expectation of witnessing some new prodigy.

I returned to the praetorium sad and pensive. On ascending the stairs, the steps of which were still stained with the blood of the Nazarene, I perceived an old man in a suppliant posture, and behind him several Romans in tears. He threw himself at my feet and wept most bitterly. It is painful to see an old man weep, and my heart already overcharged with grief, we, though strangers, mutually wept together. And in truth it seemed that the tears lay very shallow that day with very many whom I perceived out of the vast concourse of people. I never saw such a complete division of feeling, both on the extreme. Those that betrayed and sold him, those that testified against him, those that said, "Crucify him, we will have his blood," all slunk off like cowardly curs, and washed their teeth with vinegar. As I am told that Jesus taught a resurrection and a separation after death, if such should be the fact I am sure it commenced in this vast crowd.

"Father," said I to him, after gaining control of my feelings, "who are you, and what is your request?"

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"I am Joseph of Arimathea," replied he, "and am come to beg of you upon my knees the permission to bury Jesus of Nazareth."

"Your prayer is granted," said I to him and at the same time ordered Manlius to take some soldiers with him to superintend the interment lest it should be profaned.

A few days after the sepulcher was found empty. His disciples published all over the country that Jesus had risen from the dead, as he had foretold. This last report created more excitement than the first. As to its truth I cannot say for certain, but I have made some investigation in the matter; so you can examine for yourself, and see if I am in fault, as Herod represents me. Joseph buried Jesus in his own tomb. Whether he contemplates his resurrection or calculated to cut him another I cannot tell. The next day after he was buried one of the priests came to the praetorium and said they were apprehensive that his disciples intended to steal the body of Jesus and hide it, and then make it appear that he had risen from the dead, as he had foretold, and of which they were perfectly convinced. I sent him to the captain of the royal guard (Malcus) to tell him to take the Jewish soldiers, place as many around the sepulcher as were needed; then if anything should happen they would blame themselves, and not the Romans.

When the great excitement arose about the sepulcher being found empty, I felt a deeper solicitude than ever. I sent for Maicus, who told me he had placed his lieutenant, Ben Isham, with one hundred soldiers around the sepulcher. He told me that Isham and the soldiers were very much alarmed at what had occurred there that morning. I sent for this man Isham, who related to me as near as I can remember the following circumstances: He said at about the beginning of the fourth watch, they saw a soft and beautiful light over the sepulcher. He at first thought that the women had come to embalm the body of Jesus, as was their custom, but he could not see how they had got through the guards. Whilst these reflections were passing through his mind, behold, the whole place was lighted up, and there seemed to be crowds of the dead in their grave clothes. All seemed to be shouting and filled with ecstasy, while all around and above was the most beautiful music he had ever heard ; and the whole air seemed to be full of voices praising God. At this time there seemed to be a reeling and swimming of the earth, so that he turned so sick and faint that he could not stand on his feet. He said the earth seemed to swim from under him, and his senses left him, so that he knew not what did occur. I asked him in what condition he was when he came to himself. He said he was lying on the ground with his face down. I asked him if he could not have been mistaken as to the light. Was it not day that was coming in the east? He said at first he thought of that, but at a stone's cast it was exceedingly dark; and then he remembered it was too early for day. I asked him if his dizziness might not have come from being wakened up and getting up too suddenly, as it sometimes had that effect. He said he was not, and had not been asleep all

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night, as the penalty was death for him to sleep on duty. He said he had let some of the soldiers sleep at a time. Some were asleep then. I asked him how long the scene lasted. He said he did not know but he thought nearly one hour. He said it was hid by the light of day. I asked him if he went to the sepulcher after he had come to himself. He said not, because he was afraid; that just as soon as relief came they all went to their quarters. I asked him if he had been interrogated by the priests. He said he had. They wanted him to say it was an earthquake, and to say they were asleep, and offered him money to tell that the disciples came and stole him; but he saw no disciples; he did not know that the body was gone until he was told so. I asked him what was the private opinion of those priests he had conversed with. He said some of them thought that Jesus was no man; that he was not a human being; that he was not the son of Mary; that he was not the same that was said to be born of the virgin in Bethlehem; that the same person had been on the earth before with Abraham and Lot, and at many times and places.

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It seems to me if the Jewish theory be true, these conclusions would be correct, for, to sum up his life, it would be in accord with this man's life, as is known and testified by both friends and foes; for the elements were no more in his hands than the clay in the hands of the potter. He could convert water into wine; he could change death into life, disease into health; he could calm the seas, still the storms, call up fish with a silver coin in his mouth. Now, I say if he could do all these things—which he did, and many more as the Jews all testify; and it was doing these things that created this enmity against him; he was not charged with criminal offenses, nor was he charged with violating any law, nor of wronging any individual in person: all those facts are known to thousands, as well by his foes as by his friends; so I am almost ready to say, as did Manlius at the cross, "Truly this was the Son of God."

Now, noble Sovereign, this is as near the facts in the case as I can arrive at them, and I have taken this pains to make the statement more full so that you may judge of my conduct upon the whole, as I hear that Antipater has said many hard things of me in this matter. With the promise of faithfulness and good wishes to my noble Sovereign,

I am your most obedient servant,
PONTIUS PILATE²

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² Mahan, W.D. (1884). *Archæological Writings of the Sanhedrin and Talmuds of the Jews*. St. Louis: Perrin & Smith, 208-230. Public domain.

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