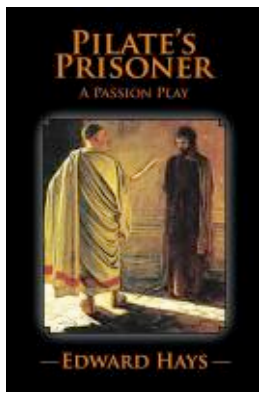


PILATE'S PRISONER

A PASSION PLAY



— EDWARD HAYS —



In this historical and theological novel, Pontius Pilate is enfleshed as a historical person, a man of contradictions, and a religious atheist who superstitiously evokes the Roman gods. Pilate ingeniously arranges to have some time alone with a wandering Galilean and illiterate religious teacher named Jesus. In their often heated verbal exchanges and arguments, Jesus finds his most deeply held religious beliefs challenged, as Pilate too wrestles with his own assumptions and prejudices.

Pilate's Prisoner

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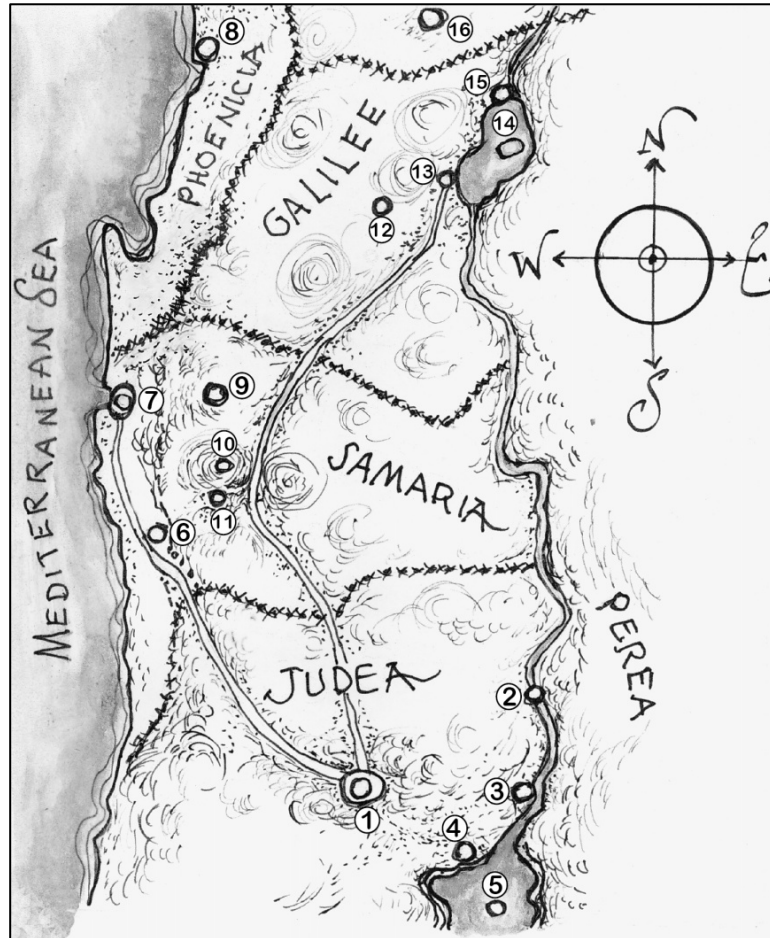


PILATE'S PRISONER

The coin is a Roman denarius bearing the image of the
Emperor Julius Caesar Tiberius.



ACT I



Map of Palestine

- | | |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Jerusalem | 9. City of Samaria |
| 2. Jordan River | 10. Mount Gerizim |
| 3. Jericho | 11. Tirathana |
| 4. Qumran | 12. Nazareth |
| 5. Dead Sea | 13. Tiberius |
| 6. Lydda | 14. Sea of Galilee |
| 7. Caesarea Maritima | 15. Capernaum |
| 8. Tyre | 16. Syria |

SCENE I

THE FORMER PALACE OF KING HEROD AGRIPPA

Jerusalem, Spring, 35 C.E.

"Ow – damn it!" swore Pilate. His hand flew to his right cheek, where he had just been nicked while being shaved by his body slave, Quintus. "The mirror...the mirror!" he barked, reaching out to Quintus, who quickly extended it to him.

"Excellency, forgive me," pleaded Quintus, drawing back at the sight of Pilate's frown and furled forehead, "I'm a clumsy ass!"

Looking into the metal mirror, Pilate used his index finger to touch the small bleeding cut on his right cheek. As he gazed in the mirror, his frown faded and was replaced with a thin smile. He was thinking to himself that he had a rather handsome Roman face and, although he was not a Roman aristocrat, he looked like one with his strong features and black hair trimmed short in the Imperial style. He was a head taller than the average Roman and, at age thirty-six, still had the broad chest and muscular body of a Roman Army officer.

"Your Excellency, pardon my clumsy mistake...I, uh..." Quintus' voice trailed off into a mumble as he reached for a swab of tallow and cobwebs to dab the bleeding cut. Quintus had been a slave in Pilate's family since birth, his parents being household slaves of the family. Now in his early forties, Quintus was bald headed, with a muscular body discernible beneath the white tunic reaching just above his knees.

With a nod of his head, Pilate wordlessly acknowledged Quintus' apology as he thought, *How could I be angry with Quintus? He's always been a trusted and dependable slave, and he's been in my household for years.* As he resumed looking at his image in the mirror, Pilate turned his shoulders slowly from the left to the right and said to himself, *I've still got a strong body, even though I've been living in comfort as a provincial*

governor. I must say I'm proud that I've maintained my military discipline and exercise regularly to preserve a soldier's physique.

Pilate said aloud, "Quintus, it's so disgusting to see former army officers who have grown fat and soft, victims to the luxurious life. I've always tried to maintain the motto instilled in me as a young army officer – *Vir fortis ac stennus* – "A sturdy man in an iron-hard body."

"Excellency, you've certainly done that! And your strong bearing serves you well as Governor of Judea and the representative of Imperial Rome." From the small, portable shaving table with its array of scissors, razors, and tweezers, Quintus picked up a white clay pot of salve and dipped his finger into it. As he gently dabbed some ointment on Pilate's cut, he was aware that if he were a slave of a Roman aristocrat he would have been severely beaten for his carelessness, and then he would have been expected to apply a small patch over the cut to conceal it. Pilate, however, being a military man, would deem that to be effeminate.

Pilate was distracted as his eye caught sight of the sun, which slowly crept up into the crimson sky over the purple hump of the Mount of Olives. He wondered if old King Herod watched the sunrise from this very window before he died and Rome requisitioned this royal palace to be the governor's residence.

Seated on a stool to Pilate's right was Lucius, Pilate's long-time slave and secretary, who had several scrolls in his lap. Prior to the shaving mishap, he had been summarizing for Pilate the various tasks awaiting him that day. Now Lucius sat patiently until he had Pilate's attention again. As Quintus prepared to continue shaving Pilate, elongated yellow bands of the rising sun flowed through the room's tall east windows, highlighting walls that were frozen rivers of colored marble. King Herod had adorned this palace and his palace in Caesarea with Italian marble imported by the shiploads to Judea. As Pilate watched the walls sparkle in the sunlight, he was thinking that, like any child, he had dreamt of impossible things, but never in his wildest fantasies had he ever pictured himself living in the magnificent palace of an Oriental king. Then, realizing he was daydreaming, he said in a crisp military voice, "Lucius, continue."

Pilate's Prisoner

"Excellency, you need to respond to your centurion commander in Samaria who wrote to request your advice on how to deal with the disturbances around the Samaritan temple at Mt. Gerizim, and...."

"That's the temple built by Alexander the Great when he was here in Palestine?"

"Yes, Sir. Your centurion reported his grave concerns about a rabble-rousing Samaritan prophet whose followers are involved in hostile anti-Roman demonstrations at the temple of the Emperor Augustus built by King Herod."

"Governor Gratus, my predecessor, warned me about the Samaritans. He said the Judean Jews have intense hatred for the Samaritan Jews, who they see as violators of the true Jewish religion."

"Sir, another important issue for today is the annual tax report to Rome. Then, there is...."

"Enough, Lucius!" Pilate raised his hand up under his nose, indicating he was about to drown. "Those and my daily report to the Emperor are more than enough to occupy me today. Let's begin by reviewing the Emperor's daily report."

"Yes, Excellency," Lucius replied, picking up an unrolled scroll. Lucius was a Greek-born slave who had been given a Roman name when he became a slave of the household of Pilate's father, Marcus Pontius. His once-dark hair was now streaked gray and white, and with his fine facial features and slightly stooping shoulders he looked like an old scholar, which in fact he was. Educated in the Roman and Greek classics, he spoke fluent Latin, and having been Pilate's private childhood tutor, he possessed insights into Pilate's character and alternating moods.

"As your Imperial representative and Governor," Lucius began reading in his precise academic voice, "I customarily come to Jerusalem, the Temple City of the Jews, for their major religious pilgrimage feasts. I write to your Imperial Excellency on the eve of Passover, a most important Jewish religious festival. I have traveled from my official residence in Caesarea here to Jerusalem...."

"Stop, Lucius." Pilate interrupted him. "In that last sentence, right after 'traveled to Jerusalem,' insert the following: 'which is a

journey of some sixty miles.' Emperor Tiberius enjoys those kinds of minor details in his reports."

After Lucius finished penning the inserted detail in the report, he continued, "...with a full detachment of our most capable troops to ensure the security of the city and to maintain crowd control...."

As Lucius continued reading the daily report, Quintus dipped his razor in the water bowl to rinse off the blood from Pilate's cut and began sharpening the razor by scraping it across a leather strap. Meanwhile, Pilate glanced down at the basin and saw in the water a small red droplet of his blood. As he watched, it began expanding outward in a crimson corkscrewing spiral, causing him to mutter under his breath, "*Absit omen*, 'an omen of the gods.'"

Although Pilate was a practical, unsentimental military man, he took omens seriously, seeing them as the way that the gods communicated with mortals. As he watched the growing bloody spiral expand, he wondered if the ominous sight of his own blood in his shaving bowl was an ill-fated omen. Was it a premonition of an approaching misfortune for him, or perhaps for a family member? As he stared intently at the expanding spiral of blood, he grew uneasy about what sort of misfortune might be awaiting him on this early spring Friday.

Previously, as a commander in the midst of battle, he had foreboding premonitions, intuitively feeling that his enemy was nearby and about to attack, but not knowing when or from where. Now once again he felt his old military sixth sense camped out in his heart.

The "scrape, scrape, scrape" of Quintus sharpening his razor on the leather strap caused Pilate to go deaf to the report Lucius was reading. This morning, for some reason, the rhythmic scraping of the razor reminded him of the time he heard that same sound at his very first ceremonial shave. Instantly, on the wings of memory he was transported from Jerusalem back to his childhood home in Rome on that morning of his seventeenth birthday. He saw himself vividly as a youth standing at his family's shrine encircled by his parents, brothers, sisters, and the family's household slaves. Among the slaves was his Greek tutor, the handsome, dark-haired Lucius. He remembered how

proud he felt as the slave ceremonially shaved off his teenage growth of beard in the ritual of manhood. Then, bowing, the slave handed his youthful facial hair to his mother, who lovingly laid it in a small ornate ivory box that she then placed on the family altar.

As Quintus continued sharpening his razor, the rising sun was awakening ancient sleeping Jerusalem like some giant Leviathan being aroused from its slumber. A short distance north of Herod's palace was the western gateway of Jerusalem leading onto a broad street that ran eastward through the city's marketplace and onward to the great Temple of Herod. The morning air was full of loud noises coming from the nearby western gateway: the neighing of heavy-burdened donkeys, the bleating of sheep being herded to market, and the voices of boisterous, psalm-singing pilgrims entering the city for the Passover Festival. Pilate didn't hear the racket—since in his reverie he wasn't in Jerusalem but in Rome—and his face betrayed his absence.

"Excellency, is that last fact correct?" asked Lucius, inventing an excuse to call Pilate back to the present moment.

"Correct?" he snapped, scowling at Lucius. "If something isn't correct, then correct it. Now continue!"

Pilate reflected he shouldn't allow himself to become distracted while listening to the reading of these daily reports. Even if they were dull and repetitive, they were important for his political future. He also regretted snapping at Lucius, who had been indispensable to him all these years, and he reminded himself to watch his temper.

As Lucius artfully pretended to pen a correction in the report, Pilate, contrary to his best intentions, was kidnapped once again by the memory of the events of his seventeenth birthday. Submerged in a sea of realistic memories, he could actually feel himself lifting the cord of his *bullā* from around his neck. He had worn that small golden pouch with its lucky charm day and night since his parents had placed it around his neck as an infant when they presented him to the gods.

Discreetly, Lucius cleared his throat, causing Pilate to return to Jerusalem instantaneously. "I'm sorry, Lucius, once again it seems I was off in another place."

"Rome?" asked Lucius, softly.

"Yes, the Rome of my youth. For some reason, I'm having vivid memories of my seventeenth birthday this morning."

Smiling as he laid the report scroll in his lap, Lucius said, "A visit by a memory is a gift from the gods, or, as the Greeks call them, 'the immortal ones.' As Plato said, 'There exists in the mind...a wax tablet that is a gift of memory, the mother of the muses.' And Pilate, I too have a permanent imprint of that wonderful day in the wax of my memory. As you recall, I, along with the other household slaves, had the honor of attending your manhood ceremony. That was...what was it...nineteen years ago, yet even today I recall the surge of pride I felt when you placed your childhood bulla on the family altar. You were then a man who had no need of a child's good luck charm."

"It was such a joyous day, Lucius!"

Lucius silently nodded his head, even though it had actually been a time of mourning for him, for this act signified the death of their previous relationship. Because Pilate was now a man, he no longer needed a childhood charm, or even his tutor. Lucius grieved, because he had grown so fond of his pupil.

"Plato was right, Lucius. That day of days is deeply imprinted in my memory. Even this morning I can almost taste the intoxicating happiness I felt as my family triumphantly escorted me through the crowded streets of Rome to the Forum, where we prayed at the Temple of Jupiter."

"Although we household slaves weren't allowed to accompany the family to the Temple, I'll never forget what happened after you returned! Your father, Marcus Pontius, his eyes glistening with pride, robed you for the first time in the white toga of an adult man, and..."

"I know what you're going to say, as it was such an auspicious day when the gods smiled down on me. After my father vested me, he ordered you to come and stand in front of me, saying, 'Since your childhood, Lucius has been your tutor. Today, Pontius, as a gift, I present to you Lucius, who will now be your personal slave!'"

"Your Excellency, that truly was a gift, for it meant I could continue to be with you. Then you gifted me again when you made me your secretary! You and I have had such remarkable adventures

together these past nineteen years, including the time the Emperor made you Governor of Judea."

"We have indeed, Lucius."

"Sir, with your permission, may I return to what happened after your father made me your personal slave?"

"You may."

"Word for word, Sir, I can repeat your very first order to me: 'I command you, Lucius, never again to address me as Pontius! From this day onward you will address me only as Pilate!' And your second order was that I instruct all the family household slaves to do likewise."

"Ah yes, Lucius, I had so yearned to be known not as Pontius, but as *Pilatus*, since it is such a strong, masculine name. True, it was also our family surname, meaning 'skilled with a javelin,' having been given long ago to my warrior ancestors. The throwing of a javelin requires great strength, and after that, expertise with a sword is the second skill required of a Roman soldier. I was only seventeen, young and inexperienced, but when people addressed me as *Pilatus* it declared that I was a man strong enough to use that warrior's weapon."

"It was fitting to address you as Pilate, for that was the kind of man you would become. Personally, I prefer 'Your Excellency,' as it fills me with pride to address you with such a distinguished title."

"Thank you, Lucius. As for you, Quintus, you have the patience of a marble statue that waits without grumbling while I reminisce with Lucius about my youth. What you are about to do for me, Quintus, is one of life's ironies. Every young boy eagerly yearns for the day when he must shave, yet when it actually arrives he finds it to be a daily, dreary chore that is a waste of time. Unless," gesturing toward Lucius, "he does what I am doing now and imitates the great Julius Caesar, who, while being shaved and having his hair trimmed, listened to reports being read. And now, Quintus, so you can safely shave me, I promise to stop talking. Lucius, continue with the report."

Lucius resumed reading the report, but Pilate listened with only one ear as he thought about Emperor Tiberius, to whom the report would be sent. He knew the emperor was notorious for being extraordinarily suspicious of omens. If this morning he saw as Pilate

did an omen written in his own blood, he was sure old Tiberius would have judged it as being ominously dangerous. Then his thoughts changed to a silent prayer: *O Powerful Mars, god of war and patron of soldiers, protect me this day from all misfortune. Assist me so the report I send to Rome today will not contain anything implying that I acted in a politically incompetent manner. O Mars, prevent me from imprudent, reckless acts that could displease or anger the Emperor Tiberius.*

As Quintus resumed shaving him, Pilate thought about just having prayed to Mars. Even if he questioned the existence of the gods, he needed their help. More than ever before in his life, since coming to Judea, he had felt a craving for divine protection. He had done his best to govern these bearded, unwashed Jews, yet his destiny had been plagued again and again by unforeseen misfortunes. He felt defenseless here before the whims of the three fickle fates, especially the fate *Lachesis*, in this barren, god-infested Judean desert outpost. She of the three held the knife with which she could arbitrarily sever the thread of one's destiny. Was it her knife that stirred the blood in his shaving bowl into a frightening, swirling bloody omen? Oh, if only he had his childhood bulla once again!

Pilate blushed, reminding himself that he was no child in need of an infantile good luck charm. He was a man! Moreover, he was a former cavalry officer upon whom the goddess Fortuna had smiled, emptying her cornucopia horn of good luck and fortune. Nine years ago, when he was only two years older than the age required for Roman procurators, goddess Lady Luck gifted him when he was made the procurator of Judea. However, though Fortuna played her part, that promotion was more than luck. Rome must have thought he possessed the qualifications of a good administrator to send him here to Judea. True, it was a second-class Roman province, but it was also a strategic land bridge between Egypt and Syria.

SCENE II

THE SAME

Early That Morning

As the morning sun rose higher over Jerusalem, so did the noise of the Jewish pilgrims pouring through the western gate. Their zealous chanting enkindled smoldering embers in Pilate, who snorted, "Damn Jews! Quintus, they're worse than an infestation of desert fleas. My predecessor, Governor Gratus, warned me they wouldn't be easy to govern. I knew I'd face challenges in ruling an occupied people, but I didn't anticipate just how scheming and rebellious they'd be."

"Yes, Excellency," replied Quintus, who was trimming Pilate's hair, "when I'm walking among them here in Jerusalem I can actually feel their loathing and hatred for me because I'm a Roman."

"It's been ninety years, Quintus, since General Pompey conquered Judea, yet to this day these Jews remain defiant of the authority of Imperial Rome. Their intense resentment of our military occupation of their so-called 'holy' land makes Judea like a simmering pot about to boil over. They relentlessly scheme to find ways to avoid paying our taxes and to obstruct my every effort at civic progress with some obscure religious law that forbids it." Raising his eyes to the heavens, he cursed, "Oh gods of disaster, rain down a plague on the Jews!"

"Excellency, when we've finished the report," said Lucius, in an attempt to rescue Pilate from the quicksand of his Jewish prejudices, "would you like to dictate your reply to the legate Vitellius?"

Pilate ignored Lucius' question and continued his diatribe. "Quintus, you said you could feel their loathing, which is very true; the abhorrence these Jews have toward us is tangible. They've shown it by not allowing me to display the image of the Imperial Emperor Tiberius. Did you know that Judea is the only province in the entire Empire where it isn't displayed? And their priests justify this affront to the Emperor by saying that their god forbids images! No images, no statues, no art—doesn't this make these Jews the most barbaric of

all peoples? And when I complain to Rome about this imperial dishonor, I get no reply!"

Lucius, knowing that Pilate needed an audience to vent his resentments, sat with his hands folded in his lap, listening and occasionally nodding sympathetically.

"Lucius, the way Rome coddles these Jews is unfathomable, and being instructed by the Emperor and Senate to capitulate to their ridiculous religious beliefs is infuriating. As any good army commander knows, if you show the slightest weakness to an enemy, he will strike back at you like a serpent when you least expect it. It's my belief that Rome's political pampering of the Jews and their primitive religion only feeds their venom against us."

Pilate's voice grew louder. "By caving in to the ridiculous religious laws of the Jews, Rome sets a bad example for the rest of the Empire! Imagine the consequences if the Emperor gave the same liberties to the barbaric tribes of Gaul, or...."

Frowning, Lucius wordlessly shook his head at Pilate.

"Yes, yes, Lucius; your caution is wise. Tiberius has spies everywhere, and I know how dangerous it is to express any negative judgment of him or the Senate. But sometimes I just have to express my frustration or I'll burst!"

"Excellency, you can trust both Quintus and me to forget whatever we've heard the moment after you've said it. Now, shall I continue with the report?"

"I appreciate your discretion. Yes, Lucius, continue. We have much to do today, and soon it will be time for our morning prayers."

As Lucius resumed reading, Pilate again found himself snagged in the delicate spider web of his thoughts. He knew that even though his problems here in Judea were great, so too were his opportunities. He was glad that before departing from Rome to come to Judea he had gone to the ancient Temple of *Fortuna Pimiigenia*, the first-born daughter of Jupiter, and made an offering to her. With Fortuna's help he would be able to use his assignment as governor of this wretched, second-class province as a springboard to catapult himself to a more important position. He imagined himself as the Roman proconsul, legate of the province of Egypt! He thought, too, of the prestige and

unlimited possibilities in Egypt for acquiring personal wealth. He knew he must never do anything to jeopardize his chances of becoming governor of Egypt or securing another advancement.

"Excellency," said Lucius, snapping Pilate's cobweb of ambitious thoughts, "is this report acceptable so far?"

"Yes, but I've heard that if the Emperor is having a bad day he can be picky about errors he finds in the reports, so when we're finished, check it again for any mistakes. Continue, Lucius."

Lucius nodded, and clearing his throat, read on: "...my personal accommodations here in Jerusalem in the former palace of King Herod Agrippa are excellent. The palace, being located on the city's western hill, provides excellent surveillance of the entire city of Jerusalem, all the way over to the massive Temple of Herod on the far eastern side of the city. Although Herod built this Temple many years ago, it continues to be enhanced by decorations, the completion of which is estimated to require another twenty or thirty years. Our Roman Fortress Antonio is located along the Temple's northern wall, and provides a good location to maintain control both of the Temple and the city. Control is essential because of the thousands of pilgrims who descend on the city at the time of the Passover, and because it commemorates their Exodus liberation...."

"Stop, Lucius! Change the word 'liberation' to...um...." A thin smile slowly formed on Pilate's lips. "Rather, say... 'their rebellious uprising as mutinous slaves and subsequent escape from Egypt.'" With a grin and a wave of his hand, he proclaimed, "Continue."

After making the addition, Lucius went on. "While the Exodus is a potentially dangerous seditious memory, the Temple priesthood and the aristocratic elites have shrewdly castrated it. Now Passover is only a non-threatening spring religious festival, and memories of the rebellious Exodus are piously slumbering. However, as your Imperial Excellency knows, even sleeping memories of revolts must be cautiously monitored because, like melons, they contain seeds! A cousin to this Jewish memory of the Exodus is our Roman memory of the great slave rebellion of Spartacus. The sleeping seeds of both these slave uprisings must never ever be allowed to sprout!"

"Lucius," said Pilate, "repeat that last sentence where I coupled the Exodus insurrection with the revolt of Spartacus. I hope the Emperor likes that comparison as much as I do."

Having reread the sentence, Lucius continued, "A single spark in the dry historical memories of this Exodus celebration could ignite an incendiary incident in the crowds that would require quenching through the intervention of our soldiers. However, any show of armed force by us during this Passover festival is fraught with dangers. Your Imperial Excellency is aware that once aroused, the massive crowds easily become a monster that is notoriously difficult to control. As I write you, Jerusalem is swollen to over three times its normal size by the great influx of Passover pilgrims. On this Friday, my military advisers have estimated that within the walls of Jerusalem, the total population could be well over a hundred thousand."

A loud knock at the door interrupted Lucius. "Not now—I'm busy!" shouted Pilate, as Quintus rubbed his hair with aromatic oil. He nodded to Lucius to continue.

"From previous religious festivals we also know that hidden among these thousands of pious pilgrims are dangerous rebels and religious insurgents eager to foment rebellion against the Roman Empire. Naturally, I have taken the necessary precautions...."

Even louder knocking at the door ensued. An annoyed Pilate called out, "Enter!" Pilate's personal slave and bodyguard Marcus entered, bowed, and closed the door behind him. Marcus was a bronze-skinned Sicilian in his late twenties with short-cropped black hair. He had the muscular body of a gladiator and the strong legs of an athletic racer.

"Marcus, what is the reason for this interruption?"

"I apologize, Your Excellency," Marcus said, bowing again. "I know you gave orders that you were not to be interrupted, but a man just arrived who says he has an urgent message for you. I told him he'd have to wait, but I thought you would want to know of his arrival."

"Well done, Marcus. What is his name?"

"Abarim, Sir. He's a servant in the house of the High Priest Caiaphas."

Pilate groaned aloud at the idea of having to add something unexpected to his already busy day, but he relented. "Send him in!"

As Marcus departed, Quintus and Lucius withdrew discreetly to the far end of the room. Marcus returned moments later, ushered Abarim Jacob into the room, closed the door, and stood guard with his powerful arms folded across his chest.

Jacob Abarim was a short, wiry man with a narrow, pockmarked face, long hair, and a scraggly beard. He wore a threadbare gray cloak and worn-out sandals. Approaching Pilate with a series of profound bows, he hunched down like a frightened dog. He was preceded by the stench of his unwashed body as he approached Pilate's chair, leading Pilate to think to himself, *These dirty barbarians! Even their secret reports stink.*

"Most noble Excellency," began Abarim nervously, "I came quickly with news of a trial last night...I was able to squeeze inside the great chamber...I saw the Galilean troublemaker." So anxious was Abarim that his words spilled out in a jumble. "I heard witnesses accuse him of terrible offenses against God. The Galilean peasant contradicts them...the high priest himself questioned him...."

"Slow down and speak clearly!" demanded Pilate. "I can't understand what you're saying."

"In a hurry, yes...I can't be found here, Excellency. I couldn't hear what the Galilean said to the high priest, but whatever it was made him very angry. The high priest and Sanhedrin elders argued over what to do with the Galilean...then the high priest stood up and in a loud voice condemned the Galilean to death—today!"

"Today? That doesn't sound like Caiaphas; he's usually more politically astute than to order such a provocative act on the eve of the Passover Festival. You must have heard wrong; surely they'll wait until after the Passover to kill this man."

"No, no, Excellency, today! This morning the high priest, elders, and priests are coming here. I came to warn you...they're bringing this Galilean outlaw to you so you can sentence him to death."

"My day's already full with important matters! Whatever this affair is, I hope it doesn't take up too much of my time." Then Pilate realized he had no reason to be anxious—simply ordering some Galilean Jew to be executed shouldn't take long. There would be no need for a formal trial. He would simply pronounce the outlaw guilty and order his execution, as he had done in the past. But while the sentencing would be easily resolved, what was unclear to Pilate was why Caiaphas and his priests were involving him in the death of this Galilean.

"Abarim," Pilate said, "why they are bringing this Galilean to me to be condemned? If they have determined that he has violated one of your thousands of religious laws, why don't the elders simply have him stoned? They've never asked Rome's permission to carry out that sentence before."

"Only you can condemn someone to be crucified, Excellency!"

"Crucified? In the name of Jupiter and all the gods, why do they want to crucify this man, especially now that Passover is here? What crime has he committed to deserve such a punishment?"

"It's a bad time, Excellency, yes...the high priest says the same thing...there are too many pilgrims in the city, and some are from Galilee. I overheard servants in the house say the Galilean is called a healer, a holy man, a teacher sent by God, even..." Abarim rolled his eyes upward, "...even a prophet!"

"A prophet?" said Pilate sharply, instantly thinking of the other alleged prophet in Samaria. "Then his death will surely arouse the rabble."

"Yes, Excellency—so say some council elders. They argued that to crucify him now could create serious trouble among the Passover crowds. Others shouted loudly and overruled them."

"Others?"

"Powerful, rich Sanhedrin elders. They claim the death of this man is required to show Rome the unquestioned loyalty of the Jewish people. They say his death is a penalty for the crime of causing a riot earlier this week in God's Holy Temple."

"Riot?" snapped Pilate so loudly that Abarim jerked backward in fear. "What riot? It was reported to me as a minor fracas by an

itinerant Galilean preacher visiting the city for the Passover. It didn't even happen inside the actual temple but in the courtyard of the Gentiles. It was a minor ruckus, so I'm told, over the exploitative exchanging of money and abuses of the selling of sacrificial animals—hardly a riot!”

Abarim replied, “Well, the High Court says it was a riot, and they're priests of God....”

“Abarim, you called this affair a ‘crime.’ In Roman law, overturning the tables of a few moneychangers and briefly interrupting the business of a handful of dove merchants’ business isn’t a crime. That’s what we call a minor disturbance, and it certainly doesn’t merit a sentence of death!”

“Yes, yes, as always, your Excellency is correct. However, I overheard a powerful group in the High Council demand that the Galilean be silenced...and the best way to seal his lips is by death! To ensure he dies, they’ve thrown a net over him like those used in the arena by gladiators—and this net is unbreakable.”

“Unbreakable?”

“Excellency, it’s a web woven with an allegation that neither the prisoner nor you can escape.”

Pilate paused, pondering the situation. He thought, *How in the name of Jupiter can it trap me? These damn Jews – they’re trying to ensnare me in an affair that can erupt into mob violence, which will have serious political consequences for my career.* He said to Abarim, “What do you mean I’m being trapped in an unbreakable net?”

“Excellency, they accuse this Galilean of claiming he’s the King of the Jews, and thus a rival to Caesar!”

“What? That’s impossible! Who in his sane mind would claim to be a rival to Caesar?”

“A Galilean named Jesus of Nazareth, Excellency. Now, I’m a simple man who knows nothing of these twisted issues, but I overheard some servants say that this Galilean peasant goes about Galilee telling people he brings a new kingdom that’s greater than the Empire of Rome.”

Silently, Pilate sat and pondered this now perilous situation. Even if this Galilean impostor was only a madman, he was guilty of high

treason against Emperor Tiberius. As the Emperor's representative here in Judea, there was no way he could not hold a trial and judge him as being guilty or innocent. He wondered to himself, *Could this be a sham charge invented by the priests to trap or embarrass me?*

Meanwhile, Abarim fidgeted as he glanced out the window at the stone platform in front of the palace. "Excellency, I must go, I must go! I can't stay any longer; the High Priest Caiaphas and the elders will come soon with the Galilean. I beg of you, let me go quickly, for if I'm found here, I'm dead!"

With a wave of his hand Pilate dismissed Abarim, who quickly began walking backward, repeatedly bowing. Pilate dipped his index finger several times as a signal to Lucius that he should reward the spy with money. As Abarim departed, Pilate mused that just as he had a spy in Caiaphas' household, Caiaphas surely had his own spy in the palace. Pilate was confident it was not one of his household slaves, but perhaps a local Judean who performed menial tasks or one of his mercenary Syrian soldiers. Regardless, Pilate was certain that Caiaphas had hidden eyes and ears about the palace, as did old Tiberius!

Lucius returned and sat on his stool next to Pilate. "Lucius, spies—like flies—are everywhere! While they're despicable, they're also indispensable to the auspicious unfolding of one's destiny."

Lucius agreed with a nod as Pilate stood and walked over to one of the eastern windows. Pointing southward toward the palace of High Priest Caiaphas, he exclaimed, "I've been betrayed!" Yesterday Caiaphas had sent him a message informing him that some Galilean troublemaker was in Jerusalem, but Caiaphas assured Pilate that he would be taken care of and that Pilate would not need to become involved. Yet now, Abarim said that the High Council would demand that this Galilean be crucified! Pilate said, "They're devious, all right! They've been scheming behind my back to make me, Pontius Pilate, their Roman scapegoat to bear the guilt of this man's death!"

"Sir, I could overhear some of what the spy said, but not why they want him to be crucified," interrupted Lucius.

"Abarim said that this Galilean claims he is the King of the Jews. If that's true, Lucius, then his fate is the cross! Yet if the priests want

to get rid of him, why do so with a public crucifixion when an assassin could easily stick a knife in his back in one of the city's crowded streets? Lucius, pray to the goddess Fortuna that the gods rule today on my behalf."

"Sir, as the poet Ovid said, 'The gods have their own rules.'"

"Ah, Lucius, ever my tutor. You're so right; the gods are fickle and have their own rules, as old Ovid himself found out when he was exiled by the Emperor Augustus." Returning from the window, Pilate leaned over and patted Lucius on his shoulder. "Your quote from Ovid makes me wonder what rules the gods have decreed for me this day."

"Sir, I know one rule for sure."

"Really? What is it?"

"That you must have today's report finished, signed, sealed, and aboard the mail ship if your report is to depart on today's tide."

"Oh," groaned Pilate, "the report! Let's finish it, so you can send it off to Rome."

A task required of all Roman governors was to send daily reports to the Emperor. The daily reports and important letters were always sent in duplicate to safeguard and ensure their delivery. A third copy was kept in the provincial archives. Pilate, like every governor, was the Emperor's eyes and ears, and those imperial ears were itchy for news of the Empire, for Tiberius believed that knowledge was power.

"Lucius, I hope this meeting with the high priest won't take too much time. It's important that I respond to my centurion delegate in Samaria about the unrest at Mt. Gerizim. It seems fate has given me not one but two thorns in my side—the Samaritan agitator Simon, and now a demented Galilean prophet who imagines he is Caesar."

"Sir, may the gods come to your aid," said Lucius, as he stood to leave.

"I pray the same," replied Pilate. "Once the report is on its way to the mail boat in the harbor, send a messenger to my military advisor Centurion Petronius asking him to see me. I need his advice about this situation in Samaria, and I'm hoping that as he spent several years in Galilee, he may have some knowledge of this Jesus. After

that, go to our archives and search through the reports for anything about the Galilean, and...."

"Sir, with your permission: I'm not as young as I once was," Lucius said, grinning. "May I have Aristocles help me search through the archived reports?"

"Aristocles?"

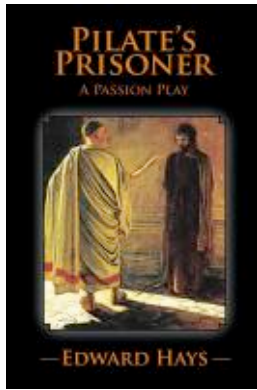
"The young Greek slave who came with us from Rome; he's very trustworthy."

"Yes, have him help you, and when the two of you have completed the search, bring me whatever reports you find. I want to review them before this Jesus arrives here this morning. I know my predecessor, Governor Gratus, kept detailed spy reports on notorious public figures, like that locust-eating hermit John, called 'the Baptizer.' Abarim told me that the Galilean peasants call this Jesus a prophet, so I am hoping Governor Gratus kept some intelligence on his activities. While searching the archives, look especially for any accounts of him proclaiming some kind of kingdom."

Lucius departed. Pilate thought, *May the goddess Fortuna shower good luck on Governor Gratus for his excellent advice when I came here.* He reflected that having been governor here for eleven years, Gratus was adamant about what he called the first rule of a good governor—to keep detailed daily records of whatever happens in your jurisdiction. That especially included gathering information on any potential troublemakers and anyone who drew large crowds. Gratus also had coached Pilate in clever ways to profit from graft, such as the lucrative practice of annually awarding the office of high priest to the highest bidder. Finally, Gratus warned Pilate about the Samaritans.

The thought of the Samaritans recalled Pilate to the work awaiting him that day. Standing, he said to Quintus and Marcus, "Come—let us go to our morning prayers. It has been said that the wise always put ritual before business."

Quintus stepped up, adjusted Pilate's official white tunic with its broad purple stripe, and placed a fresh toga over his head. Then the two slaves escorted Pilate to his morning prayers.



In this historical and theological novel, Pontius Pilate is enfleshed as a historical person, a man of contradictions, and a religious atheist who superstitiously evokes the Roman gods. Pilate ingeniously arranges to have some time alone with a wandering Galilean and illiterate religious teacher named Jesus. In their often heated verbal exchanges and arguments, Jesus finds his most deeply held religious beliefs challenged, as Pilate too wrestles with his own assumptions and prejudices.

Pilate's Prisoner

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