

# News from Pilate in Liverpool

By Paul Winter

ACCORDING to recent newspaper reports, a letter from Pontius Pilate to the Emperor Tiberius was found in Liverpool. In this letter Pilate informs the Emperor of the circumstances of Jesus' crucifixion. He had tried hard to save Jesus' life from the fury of the Jews. He had even sent for reinforcements, some 2,000 men, to prevent the crucifixion. But the troops arrived too late.

The newspapers report that the document from Liverpool was sent to the Vatican Archives with a request that it should be examined, and that it came back from Rome with an expression of the considered opinion that the letter seemed to be a forgery, but (so the report went on) "it is quite possible that it contains historically correct facts because it was written so much closer to the time of the events described..." As a headline in *The Times* (5 February 1963) most succinctly put it: **FAKED LETTER MAY BE CORRECT.**

It is to be hoped that some future historian will succeed in clearing up the puzzle as to how Pilate's letter came to turn up in Liverpool. It may be that this will never be quite satisfactorily clarified, for the ways of the Lord are mysterious. In the meantime we must content ourselves with what the letter tells us, and try to determine what it contributes to our knowledge of historical fact.

Alas, it tells us nothing significantly new. Almost all that it contains has been known for a long time. It is known that from the 2nd century onward letters were put into circulation, purporting to have been despatched by Pilate with news of the first Good Friday and Easter events. The oldest extant specimen of this type of document comes from the last quarter of the second century. It is addressed to the Emperor Claudius, ruler of Rome in the years 41-54. Pilate's term of office as procurator of Judaea fell in the years 26-36. There is no unanimity among historians as to the exact year of Jesus'

death, but no doubt attaches to the fact that it occurred during the period of Pilate's governorship in Judaea. The Emperor in office was Tiberius (14-37). He was succeeded by Caligula, and Claudius became Emperor only a dozen or so years after the crucifixion of Jesus. And yet it is Claudius to whom Pilate's earliest letter is addressed. In all probability this was intentional. No data of Jesus' biography were then or are now available, but a belief was current in Christian circles towards the end of the 2nd century that Jesus had completed the fiftieth year of his life when he died. Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyons, gave expression to such a belief which was arrived at on purely speculative grounds. The Incarnation, the perfect union between God and man, would be complete—so Irenaeus thought—only if the Son of God had passed through the full span of a mortal's life, experiencing, in addition to the stages of childhood, youth, and early manhood, also the years of maturity. It was commonly held at the time that man reached his full stature at the age of fifty; hence the notion that Jesus must have reached that age before his human career came to its conclusion. Some such reasoning evidently lies behind the fact that Pilate's alleged report about the crucifixion was addressed to Claudius.

In Pilate's belated report to the Emperor, he is supposed to have said:

... The chief priests, moved by envy against him, delivered him to me and brought against him one false accusation after another, saying that he was a sorcerer and did things contrary to their law. But I, believing that these things were so, had him scourged and delivered him unto their will. And they crucified him. When he was buried, they set guards upon him. But while my soldiers watched him, he rose again on the third day. Yet so much was the malice of the Jews kindled that they bribed the soldiers asking them to testify that his disciples had stolen the body. The soldiers took the money, but did not keep silence about what had happened. They testified that they saw him arisen. . . . And I report these things to Your Majesty lest anyone lie otherwise and you should believe the false tales of the Jews. . . .

The document found in Liverpool, said to come from the 4th century, represents but a more elaborate and embellished version of this 2nd century letter addressed to Claudius.

DR. PAUL WINTER is the author of the scholarly work *ON THE TRIAL OF JESUS* recently published by Basil Blackwell (Oxford, 40s.).

THE QUESTION ARISES: why should people, in the 2nd century and later, disturb the ghost of Pilate and compel him to write letters to Claudius or Tiberius, setting himself forth both as a witness to the innocence of Jesus and to the reality of the resurrection? Why should they, long after the events, be anxious to stress Pilate's benevolent attitude towards Jesus and emphasise, even more vividly than the gospels do, his concern to spare his life? To understand the operative motive behind such literary endeavours one has to appreciate the historical conditions under which Christianity existed prior to the reign of Constantine. It was a proscribed religion. Although persecutions were intermittent, the profession of "the Christian name" was an indictable offence. In this situation Christians spared no effort to convince the pagan authorities of the innocence of their beliefs and religious practices. They therefore were prompted to use the device of making Pilate (who, after all, must have had knowledge of the affair) proclaim the innocence of Jesus. The Romans knew little of Christianity, but they knew that Jesus, the presumed founder of that religion, had been sentenced to death by an imperial officer and crucified at his direction. Tacitus reported as much in his *Annals*. Crucifixion, the most shameful of all penalties, was reserved in Roman law for offences against the state. In their pleadings with Roman authorities, Christian apologues resorted to the expedient of representing Pilate not only as acknowledging the innocence of Jesus, but also as doing his best to save him; he failed only because of the strength of external pressure. . . .

The various "letters of Pilate", calculated to impress pagan Roman magistrates, are a relatively late development in the whole process. Long before any such letter had been heard of, the tendency to describe Pilate as Jesus' friend manifested itself increasingly in the gospel descriptions of Jesus' trial. It is instructive in this connection to observe the ways in which the gospels refer to Pilate's final decision. All the evangelists are reluctant to state plainly that Pilate pronounced the death sentence. Their apologetic motive emerges when we notice how laboriously the evangelists seek to overcome this difficulty. In *Mark* and *Matthew* we read that "Pilate delivered Jesus to be crucified". In *Luke* we find that the governor decided to grant the demand of the Jewish crowd. In *John*, Pilate

hands Jesus over physically to the Jews who take him away and crucify him. . . . All the evangelists are at pains to avoid putting on record the passing of a death sentence by the Roman procurator—but it remains that crucifixion was a Roman punishment, not a Jewish one.

It would be a mistake to assume that the evangelists were guided, primarily, by anti-Jewish animus. In *John* and *Matthew* anti-Jewish, or anti-Judaistic, bias does come in, but as far as *Mark* and *Luke* are concerned—it is these two gospels which contain the oldest and least embellished traditions about Jesus' life—the evangelists' tendency was defensive rather than aggressive. Christianity was considered by the Romans to be a disruptive, politically subversive movement. As Tacitus records, Christians were charged with "hating all mankind". To appease hostility and allay suspicions, apologues of the new faith employed the technique of portraying the very official who had sentenced Jesus as an authentic witness to the justness of their cause. Tertullian, who not only was a Church Father but a lawyer, assures his readers that Pilate was by his conviction a Christian (*Apologeticus* XXI 24).

OF THE PERSONS whose names appear in the pages of the gospels, Pontius Pilate is one of the few about whom we are relatively well informed from independent sources. One of these sources comes from Pilate's own time: a letter written by Agrippa I, giving a fairly detailed description of Pilate's rule in Judaea and of his personal character. Philo of Alexandria incorporated Agrippa's letter in his *Legatio ad Caium*, and thus we have a sketch of Pilate's character from the hand of one of his contemporaries. Agrippa describes Pilate as "a man of inflexible disposition, ruthless and obstinate" (*Legatio ad Caium* 301); he writes of the governor's corruption, his acts of insolence, his rapine, his inveterate habit of insulting people, his cruelty which resulted in numerous murders of persons who had neither been tried nor legally condemned, and of his inhumanity to those whom he governed. Agrippa concludes his description of Pilate by calling him "a man who at all times displayed ferocious passions". (*Legatio* 302.)\*

Of the authenticity of this letter there can be no doubt. It is the earliest extant document to mention Pilate by name, and the only document that comes from one of the procurator's contemporaries. There are writers who, without suggesting that Agrippa's letter is spurious, impute to its author bias against Pilate. This cannot be substantiated; there was no reason for any personal enmity between the two, and in all likelihood they never met. While Pilate was in office in Judaea, Agrippa stayed in

\* Lord Altrincham (no historian, he) in *The Guardian* (11 April): ". . . Even after he (Jesus) had been arrested, he could have been let off if he had given Pilate half a chance. Pilate is one of the most sympathetic minor characters in history: a civilised man of affairs caught between the brute force of bigotry and the blazing fanaticism of genius. . . ."

Damascus, in Alexandria, and later lived in Rome. Pilate was recalled in the year 36. Only afterwards, in the year 38, did Agrippa return to Palestine. While he may never have met Pilate in person, he certainly had an excellent opportunity for obtaining information concerning the procurator's activities and character. He met people whom Pilate had governed, people who had observed Pilate from close quarters and were able, from experience, to give first-hand reports. Moreover, what Agrippa wrote about Pilate's character is not the only source of our information. Josephus tells us of many of the procurator's actions which bear out Agrippa's picture of an overbearing, headstrong, resolute, and brutally determined military official. Even in the New Testament—in a passage that escaped later revision since it has no connection with the Passion Story—in the thirteenth chapter of *Luke* there is a report of Pilate's butchery among pilgrims, a report which contrasts forcefully with the feeble figure who plays such a meekly vacillating part in the drama of Jesus' trial and death.

The Liverpool document asserts that Pilate had called for "reinforcements." Why should this need have arisen? Even taking the gospel report of the crowd's clamouring for the death of Jesus at its face value, the fore-court of Pilate's palace scarcely had room for more than a few dozen people. To deal with such a number, however recalcitrant, a platoon or two of soldiers would have been ample. We know from Josephus how Pilate was wont to deal with situations of this sort. On one occasion, when a Jewish crowd presented him with a demand he was unwilling to meet, Pilate ordered his soldiers, disguised as civilians, to mingle with the people. When the crowd refused to disperse peacefully, Pilate signalled to his troops to use their cudgels on the demonstrators. Some died from the soldiers' blows, others were trodden to death. The historian Josephus drily comments: "Thus the multitude was reduced to silence" (*The Jewish War*, Book II 175-177; *Jewish Antiquities*, Book XVIII 60-62). It is clear from this report that Pilate had a way of dealing with an unruly crowd that proved unamenable to gentle persuasion.

There was a permanent Roman garrison stationed in Jerusalem of perhaps 600 men. At each Passover, the procurator (who normally resided in Caesarea) came to Jerusalem accompanied by military reinforcements. We have no exact data of the strength of Roman troops in Palestine in the time of Jesus, but it is hardly credible that at a Passover season, when both the garrisons of Jerusalem and Caesarea were on hand, there were anywhere in Palestine a further 2000 Roman soldiers to call upon.

The fictitious Pilate of the Liverpool document is in line with the fictitious character of the Pilate whom the gospels describe as being anxious to placate the Jews and save Jesus from their blood-thirsty vendetta. Yet it would be an error to explain the progressive white-washing of Pilate as a pious fraud. Suggestive imagination had its part in the process. This can be seen from the description of the Barabbas episode in the gospels. What in *Mark* 15, 6 is said to have been Pilate's habit, namely the releasing of a prisoner on the feast-day, has in *John* 18, 39 become a Jewish custom which Pilate was compelled to observe. A late interpolator of *Luke* made it a necessity for Pilate, whatever his habits might have been, to comply with a law which never existed (*Luke* 23, 17). The Christians as a body strove hard to convince the Romans—and in the end, they convinced themselves. . . .

More sensational than the find in Liverpool is the report from the Vatican that the document "though faked, may be historically correct". To substantiate this curious assessment, it is said that even if forged in the 4th century, the fake was "much closer to the time of the event described". To the unthinking, this may sound plausible; but surely it is fallacious. The main criterion for assessing the trustworthiness of any evidence—apart from the question of good or bad faith, and accurate memory—is that it should be founded on immediate observation. But it seems that when the reckoning is in centuries rather than in days and years, people are apt to be more credulous. Is it not irrelevant whether a report of the circumstances of Jesus' crucifixion, written by somebody who was not there, comes from the twentieth, the fourth, or even the first century? Isn't the decisive question whether it is an accurate eye-witness account or not?

On the evangelists' own admission, none of the followers of Jesus witnessed the course of their Master's trial: "... and they all left him, and fled".

Where to? Liverpool?

## Peter Wiles and "Convergence"

THE NICE THING about bowling is that you can aim at one pin and knock over nine others as well. The nice thing about analytical writing is that on occasion somebody does it without making believe it is bowling. Peter Wiles' article on the probable convergence of capitalism and communism was not such an occasion.

The subjects of Mr. Wiles' article, as best I can determine, are variously a charming fantasy of