



[Luke 23:1-7](#)

Jesus before Pilate

Date: 1st CE

Language: Greek

Category: New Testament

Title of work: The Gospel According to Luke

Reference:

23:1-7

Commentary:

After being questioned in front of the Jewish council (Luke 22:66-71), Jesus is brought by the Jewish authorities to the Roman governor, Pilate, with the hope that he will find Jesus guilty of insurrection. Ultimately, this attempt is unsuccessful, and Pilate sends Jesus to the tetrarch Herod Antipas ([Luke 23:8-12](#)) after learning that he falls under his jurisdiction, because Jesus is a Galilean. The implication made by the Lukan author is that Pilate would rather not have to deal with Jesus's case, and takes the first opportunity to pass him back to the Jewish authorities. For Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey, the accusations made here against Jesus (which are comparable to those made against Stephen, Paul, and other followers of Jesus in Acts 6:13-15; 16:20; 17:6-7; 21:28; 24:5-6) essentially characterise him as a deviant. Malina and Neyrey argue that the functions of both positive and negative labels in Luke-Acts as a whole are significant for identifying where Luke's characters see those whom they label in one way or another positioned in the social realm. Such labels are used as "powerful social weapons," which when coming from the lips of influential people can cause social damage to the recipient and define them as socially 'out of place.' Indeed, Jesus is identified by some as demon possessed (Luke 11:15) and as being an "inciter" (23:5) (see Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey, "Conflict in Luke-Acts," p. 99). The process of name-calling can be understood, according to Malina and Neyrey, as a process of conflict. In this passage, Jesus is accused by the Jewish authorities of misleading the Jewish people, telling them not to pay tax to the emperor, and calling himself the Christ, a future king. Jesus has been tried already by the Jewish council (Luke 22:66-71), and from a Jewish point of view, his most serious crime is that he is misleading, or "perverting" God's people (Luke 23:2). In the LXX, the term ????????? is used both in relation to leading people into idolatry (see Exodus 32:7, for example) or uncleanness (see Deuteronomy 32:5, for example), so it is a label carrying seriously negative connotations. Moreover, as far as the Jewish authorities are concerned, Jesus is not the Christ that they say he claims to be, and so is dangerous in that he pretends publically to be someone of huge religious significance (Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey, "Conflict in Luke-Acts," p. 110-111).

The accusation that he incites people not to pay their taxes to Caesar is of course a tactic that Luke has the Jewish authorities employ in an attempt to make Jesus seem more of a threat to the Roman authorities. Pilate, the Roman governor, is not interested in any Jewish laws that Jesus might be breaking, and so if his support is to be enlisted by the Jewish authorities, they need to portray Jesus as a political threat. Hence, Pilate's question to Jesus centres in on the label which presents a potential subversion of political authority – "King of the Jews" (Luke 23:3) (see Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, p. 740). Jesus's response does not worry Pilate and so he is happy to state at this point that Jesus is innocent. However, seeing that their initial set of accusations has not had the required effect, the Jewish authorities step things up, and accuse Jesus of having revolutionary intentions (Luke 23:5). The hope is that this will get the attention of the Roman governor trying to maintain social order and stop any potential insurrections against the imperial system at their root. The Jewish authorities are here shown by Luke to be aligning themselves with the Roman authorities, presenting themselves as friends of the empire, who rather than allow a rebellion amongst the Jews to manifest, have given up its leader to be dealt with by the relevant government official. Pilate's lack of concern over what the Jewish authorities are billing as a political insurgent, is something that Helen Bond, *Pontius Pilate*, p. 153, finds rather puzzling, and indeed, the fact that his quick dismissal of Jesus is strange supports the notion that Luke has played with and added to his source material in a bid to reduce Roman responsibility in Jesus's death. For scholars such as Jay Harrington, *The Lukan Passion Narrative*, p. 710, the episode which this passage leads into (Pilate sending Jesus to Herod Antipas) is Luke's own redaction, as it is found only in his account of Jesus's trial, and fits well within Luke's wider context (see also Gerhard Schneider, "Das Verfahren gegen Jesus," p. 127).



The Lukan author's villainising of the Jewish authorities over and against the Roman official, upon whose lips Jesus's innocence is even proclaimed (Luke 23:4), is consistent with the wider outlook of the Gospel as a whole, which frequently emphasises Jewish sin, often in conjunction with an avoidance of criticism of the Roman imperial system, or even a positive portrayal of its representatives. For example, earlier in Luke's Gospel Jesus chastises a group of Jews who complain to him about violence done to a group of Galilean Jewish pilgrims by Pilate, the Roman governor (see Luke 13:1-3); rather than condemning the act of the Roman official, Jesus tells the complainers that they must repent or else also perish. It has often been stated, for example by Philip Esler, *Community and Gospel*, p. 203, that Luke is more concerned with highlighting Jewish misguidedness than making specific anti-imperial statements.

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