

Lucius Aelius Sejanus

A Silent Influence at the Trial of Jesus



Tiberius Caesar

“From then on 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)

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Introduction

- I. The stories of the Bible all have a historical context—a context that we can overlook if we are not careful.
 - A. Sometimes the Bible mentions historical events that are otherwise unknown to us.
 - B. On other occasions, the stories involve historical events that, with a little digging, we can uncover the truth and gain great insight.
- II. Luke records two disasters about which we have no definite information and can only speculate (Luke 13:1–5).
 - A. Some individuals told Jesus about “the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices” (Luke 13:1).
 1. Nothing more is known about this incident, but Pilate had apparently put some Galileans to death when they were trying to offer sacrifices.
 2. As best we can reconstruct this story, it took place in the temple at Passover because that was the only time ordinary men, Galilean or otherwise, were involved in the slaughter of animal sacrifices.
 3. Even if the New Testament had never been written, ancient historians would tell you that Pontius Pilate was an anti-Semite.
 4. Josephus recounts several times when Pilate faced protests from the Jews and sometimes resorted to bloody oppression (Josephus, *Ant.* 18:60–62).
 5. We know nothing more about the incident in Luke 13, but it is in harmony with what we know about Pilate, and it was still fresh in the memory of religious Jews.
 - B. “Those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them” (Luke 13:4).
 1. Jesus introduces another case of what appears to be a senseless loss of life.
 2. The pool of Siloam was a reservoir in the southeastern corner of Jerusalem.
 3. The tower Jesus mentions *may* have been part of the fortifications of Jerusalem’s southern or eastern walls or a portion of an aqueduct—we just don’t know.
- III. In this lesson, we want to examine a “background story” related to the trial and crucifixion of Christ.

Discussion

I. Jesus Before Pontius Pilate

- A. Based upon the best information we have available, our Lord was crucified on Friday, April 3, AD 33 (on the 14th day of the Jewish month Nisan, Exod 12:6).
 1. The most firmly established date given in the Bible is when Luke tells us that John the Baptist began his ministry “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests” (Luke 3:1–2).
 2. John the Baptist began his ministry “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar” (Luke 3:1), which would be around AD 29.

3. A few months later, when He was “*about* thirty years of age” (Luke 3:23), Jesus began His public ministry.
 4. “The statement that Jesus was ‘about thirty years of age’ surely is not violated by his being almost thirty-three in fact, and that round numbers expressing someone’s age in the New Testament must always be interpreted with a good deal of latitude is demonstrated by the fourth reference above in John 8:57. Here, three years later, Jesus would have been no older than thirty-six, and yet the people say to him, ‘You are not yet fifty,’ when certainly ‘forty’ would have been the nearest, most appropriate round number.” (Maier, “Sejanus, Pilate and the Date of the Crucifixion,” 5)
 5. “Since the ministry of Jesus started after that of John the Baptist, the earliest possible date for the commencement of the ministry of Jesus is autumn AD 28, and John’s Gospel records three different Passovers occurring during his ministry (including the one at the Crucifixion). Hence, if this evidence is accepted, AD 30 cannot be the Crucifixion year, leaving AD 33 as the only possibility, which year is also consistent with the ‘temple reference’. At the first Passover of Jesus’ ministry, John 2:20 records that the Jews said to Jesus ‘It has taken 46 years to build this temple’. Assuming this refers to the inner temple, the forty-six years leads to the first Passover of Jesus’ ministry being in the spring of AD 30 or 31, depending upon how much preparation time was involved before building commenced.” (Humphreys, “The Jewish Calendar, A Lunar Eclipse And The Date Of Christ’s Crucifixion,” 340)
 6. “Astronomically calculated, therefore, the likely dates for the crucifixion of Jesus appear to be either Friday, Apr 7, A.D. 30, or Friday, Apr 3, A.D. 33. Therewith, in terms of the standard Jewish calendar, the representation of the day in the Fourth Gospel appears to be confirmed. Along with this confirmation of the Fourth Gospel, a historical consideration also weighs in favor of the date of A.D. 33.” (Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 362)
 7. “The A.D. 33 crucifixion date best fits the evidence of astronomy and the chronological aspects of the life of Christ ... (and) is the best date for the crucifixion of Christ. Interestingly enough, secular history not only agrees with this conclusion, but confirms it as the most well-grounded date.” (Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, 105)
- B. After the Jewish leaders “plotted against Jesus to put Him to death” and had condemned Him in the Great Sanhedrin (Luke 22:66–71), they took Him to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor (Matt 27:1–2).
1. According to tradition, Pilate was born at Seville in Spain, a member of the equestrian class (ranked just below senators on the social ladder), and served under Germanicus in Germany.
 2. While in Rome, he fell in love with and married Claudia Procula, Augustus Caesar’s grand-daughter.
 3. In AD 26, Pilate succeeded Valerius Gratus (r. AD 15–26) to become the sixth Procurator of Judea and was granted the rare privilege of taking his wife with him.

4. The first-century Jewish writer, Philo of Alexandria, said Pilate was “a man of a very inflexible disposition, and very merciless as well as very obstinate” and “at all times a man of most ferocious passions.” (Philo, *Embassy to Gaius* 301, 303)
 5. Pilate sought to rule the Jews by brute force.
 6. He may have been encouraged in his hatred towards the Jews because Tiberius, under the influence of the Praetorian Guard commander, disliked the Jews.
- C. Pilate, in his first encounter with Jesus, marveled that “He answered nothing” as He was “being accused by the chief priests and elders” (Matt 27:11-14).
1. In John’s account of this meeting, Pilate told the Jews, “I find no fault in Him at all” (John 18:38).
 2. While Pilate found no fault in Jesus, the Jewish leaders were still clamoring for His death.
 3. Pilate sent Jesus to Herod Antipas to solve this dilemma, but Herod also found Jesus innocent of any crime (Luke 23:6-12; cf. Acts 4:27-28).
- D. Pilate, knowing that Jesus was innocent, in Christ’s second appearance before him tried to arrange for Jesus to be released by offering the crowd a choice of releasing either Barabbas or Jesus (Matt 27:15-18; Mark 15:6-16; Luke 23:13-25; John 18:39-19:16).
1. In the meantime, Pilate’s wife told him that he should release Jesus because of a dream she had concerning Him (Matt 27:19).
 2. However, the Jewish leaders “persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus” (Matt 27:20-21).
- E. When the crowds asked for Barabbas to be released, Pilate ordered that Jesus be scourged—thinking that would quell the angry mob (John 19:1; Luke 23:13-16).
1. After the scourging, Pilate brought Him out to the crowd and announced, “I find no fault in Him” (John 19:4-5).
 2. Seeing Jesus, the chief priests still called out for His crucifixion, and Pilate once again said he found “no fault in Him” (John 19:6).
 3. When the Jewish leaders inform Pilate that Jesus “made Himself the Son of God” (John 19:7), Pilate became even more afraid and again “sought to release Him” (John 19:12).
- F. Although Pilate knew Jesus was innocent, he yielded to the demands of the Jews and ordered Jesus to be crucified (John 19:14-16; Matt 27:22-26; Luke 23:20-22).
- G. Consider Pilate’s frame of mind as he pondered about what to do with Jesus.
1. Pilate knew the Jewish leaders were envious of Jesus (Matt 27:18).
 2. Pilate found “no fault” in Jesus at all (John 18:38).
 3. Pilate also knew that Herod thought Jesus was innocent (Luke 23:15).
 4. Pilate’s wife said Jesus was a “just” or “righteous” man (Matt 27:19).
 5. In a public demonstration to show that he found no grounds for giving Jesus the death penalty, Pilate washed his hands of the matter and said, “I am innocent of the blood of this just Person” (Matt 27:24).

- H. People often wonder *why* Pilate gave in and had Jesus crucified.
1. The New Testament portrays Pilate as vacillating and willing to yield to a Jewish mob's pressures by executing Jesus.
 2. However, numerous contemporary historians, both Jewish and Roman, picture him as being obstinate and inflexible.
 3. Is this a contradiction between the Bible and secular history, or are we missing something?
 4. John gives us a valuable clue as to his motivation (John 19:12).
 5. Keep this passage in mind as we look at...

II. Lucius Aelius Sejanus

- A. In AD 14, when Augustus Caesar died, Tiberius, one of Rome's greatest generals, became Emperor at the age of 55.
1. The following year, Lucius Aelius Sejanus (20 BC–AD 31) became the Prefect of the Praetorian Guard and a trusted advisor to Emperor Tiberius.
 2. Sejanus took over from his father, Lucius Seius Strabo., a Roman knight.
 3. Praetorian Guard was an elite corps of 9,000 highly trained soldiers—and Sejanus turned them into a powerful political and influential force with the Roman Senate (Tacitus, *Annals of Imperial Rome*, 4.1–3).
 4. Sejanus despised the Jews and wanted to exterminate their race (Philo, *Embassy to Gaius* 159–161).
 5. The third-century author, Eusebius of Caesarea, the “Father of Church History,” says that “in the reign of Tiberius, Sejanus, who at that time enjoyed great influence with the emperor, made every effort to destroy the Jewish nation utterly...” (2*Euseb* 6:1)
- B. Even though he was the Emperor, Tiberius did not like reigning or any aspect of administration, and he sought to withdraw from Rome altogether.
1. Having gained Tiberius's trust over time, Sejanus was given increasing responsibility for overseeing the Empire.
 2. Tiberius had statues of Sejanus erected throughout Rome (Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, 4.73).
 3. “Sejanus had reached such heights that he seemed to share the emperor's power: receiving his own ambassadors, becoming the object of prayers and sacrifices. At the shows, he even had his own gold chair beside the emperor's.” (Wroe, *Pontius Pilate*, 110)
 4. In AD 26, Tiberius retreated to the island of Capri, just off the coast of Campania, leaving Sejanus as the *de facto* head of the Empire.
 5. “Tiberius was not well liked by either the Senate or the Roman populace. He avoided Rome and eventually established his residence on the Island of Capri, where he indulged his passion for astrology. Tiberius entrusted the administration of his government to Sejanus, prefect of the Praetorian Guard, a cruel, oppressive despot who abused his power.” (Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, 207)

6. “Sejanus was rising to even greater heights, and in A.D. 29 the Senate voted that his birthday should be publicly observed. By A.D. 30 he was so influential that senators and other high officials looked upon him as if he were actually the emperor.” (Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, 108)
 7. In Rome, public prayers and sacrifices were offered “in behalf of Tiberius and Sejanus,” while oaths were sworn “by the Fortunes of Tiberius and Sejanus.”
 8. The second-century Roman historian, Cassius Dio, said, “By this time Sejanus was so imposing both in his haughtiness of mind and in his immensity of power that, to make a long matter short, he seemed to be the emperor and Tiberius a kind of island potentate, because the latter spent all his days in the island called Capreae.” (Dio, *Annals of Rome*, 58.5)
 9. “It was Sejanus who, evidently aware of Tiberius’ increasing melancholy and instability, persuaded the emperor to withdraw his seat of residence to the island of Capri, while he himself would oversee affairs in Rome—a division of actual and seeming power that led to the tragic dissolution of Tiberius’ once-promising reign.” (Payne, *Ancient Rome*, 162)
- C. In AD 31, history suggests that Tiberius’ sister-in-law sent a letter to Tiberius informing him of an impending coup by Sejanus to make himself emperor.
1. Tiberius lured Sejanus into a trap where he was summarily executed for treason on October 18, AD 31.
 2. Tiberius then sent out a proclamation that the threat of any seditious activity in the Empire was to be crushed immediately.
 3. Speeches were made in the Senate condemning Sejanus, and it seems like everyone who knew him suspected of treason as well.
 4. Even the children of Sejanus were put to death due to the crimes of their father.
 5. “The general rage against Sejanus was now subsiding, appeased by the executions already carried out. Yet retribution was now decreed against his remaining children. They were taken to prison. The boy understood what lay ahead of him. But the girl uncomprehendingly repeated: ‘What have I done? Where are you taking me? I will not do it again!’ She could be punished with a beating, she said, like other children. Contemporary writers report that, because capital punishment of a virgin was unprecedented, she was violated by the executioner, with the noose beside her. Then both were strangled, and their young bodies thrown on to the Gemonian Steps.” (Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, 199)
 6. Tiberius quickly shifted from an anti-Jewish to a pro-Jewish attitude, or at least a principle of toleration, which Philo, the first century Jewish philosopher, records.

7. “Therefore, all people in every country, even if they were not naturally well inclined towards the Jewish nation, took great care not to violate or attack any of the Jewish customs of laws. And in the reign of Tiberius things went on in the same manner, although at that time things in Italy were thrown into a great deal of confusion when Sejanus was preparing to make his attempt against our nation; for he knew immediately after his death that the accusations which had been brought against the Jews who were dwelling in Rome were false calumnies, inventions of Sejanus, who was desirous to destroy our nation, which he knew alone, or above all others, was likely to oppose his unholy counsels and actions in defense of the emperor, who was in great danger of being attacked, in violation of all treaties and of all honesty. And he sent commands to all the governors of provinces in every country to comfort those of our nation in their respective cities, as the punishment intended to be inflicted was not meant to be inflicted upon all, but only on the guilty; and they were but few. And he ordered them to change none of the existing customs, but to look upon them as pledges, since the men were peaceful in their dispositions and natural characters, and their laws trained them and disposed them to quiet and stability.” (Philo, *Embassy to Gaius* 159–161)

D. The treason of Sejanus caused his memory to be condemned.

1. In ancient Rome, the practice of *damnatio memoriae* (“condemnation of memory”) was the condemnation of Roman elites and Emperors after their deaths.
2. If the Senate or Emperor did not like an individual’s acts, they could have his property seized, his name erased, and his statues reworked or destroyed.
3. It was an attempt to erase every trace of the person from the life of Rome as if they had never existed.
4. Among those few who suffered *damnatio memoriae* was Sejanus.
5. His statues were destroyed, and his name obliterated from all public records.
6. The coins that bore his name were defaced to erase his name.
7. The *damnatio memoriae* took place about eighteen months before the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

III. The Rest Of The Story

A. The connection between Sejanus and Pontius Pilate is hard to ignore!

1. Lucius Aelius Sejanus was the protector or patron of Pilate.
2. “Many scholars suppose that Pilate was taken under the wing of Lucius Aelius Sejanus, the brutal commander of the Praetorian Guard who, from A.D. 23 to 31, held sway over the emperor’s affections.” (Wroe, *Pontius Pilate*, 23)
3. “It seems more than probable that in 26 A.D., Pontius Pilate was nominated to succeed Valerius Gratus as *praefectus Iudaeae* by L. Aelius Sejanus, Tiberius’ notorious prefect of the Praetorian Guard, whose conspiracy would be exposed five years later.” (Maier, “Sejanus, Pilate and the Date of the Crucifixion,” 8–9)
4. Pontius Pilate “in A.D. 26, on the recommendation of Sejanus, he was appointed Procurator of Judea” (Morrison, *Who Moved The Stone*, 44)

5. “It must be understood that Pilate probably was appointed by Sejanus, a trusted friend of Tiberius as well as the prefect of the Praetorian Guard. A dedicated anti-Semite, Sejanus wanted to exterminate the Jewish race (Philo, *Flacc.* 1; *Legat.* 159–61). When Pilate made trouble for the Jews in Palestine, Sejanus accepted his actions and did not report it to Tiberius. However, when Sejanus was deposed and executed by Tiberius on October 18, A.D. 31, Pilate no longer had protection in Rome. In fact, it is most likely that Herod Antipas reported his causing a riot, probably at the Feast of Tabernacles in A.D. 32 (Philo, *Legat.* 299–305). In light of this precedent, we can understand why, when in the midst of a trial it was witnessed that Jesus stirred up trouble in Judea and Galilee (Lk 23:5), Pilate was eager to allow Herod Antipas to try Jesus (Lk 23:6–12).” (Brown and Hoehner, “Chronology,” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 137)
- B. When Sejanus fell from power in AD 31, it left Pilate in a very weak position.
1. When their attempts to have Jesus condemned were failing, the Jewish leaders played their trump card by saying, “If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar’s friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar.” (John 19:12)
 2. “‘Friend of Caesar’ was an official title (Lat., *amicus Caesaris*) bestowed on select persons such as senators who showed marked loyalty and service to the emperor. If Pilate is not a friend, he is an enemy of Caesar, and Emperor Tiberius had a firm reputation for eliminating his enemies swiftly. Suetonius tells of Roman leaders killed for simply removing statues of Augustus or for criticizing him (*Lives of the Caesars*, 3.58).” (Burge, *John*, NIVAC, 506)
 3. After the death of Sejanus, Tiberius switched to a pro-Jewish policy—and Jewish leaders were, in essence, ready to accuse Pilate of not being “Caesar’s friend.”
 4. Before the fall of Sejanus, this threat would have been laughed at, but now Pilate could not ignore it!
 5. “The highest Roman official in Judea has to endure being accused of lack of loyalty to the emperor by the representatives of a nation more passionately seething with hatred for the Roman yoke than almost any other in the empire.” (Blinzler, *The Trial of Jesus*, 236)
 6. “The fall and execution of Sejanus put Pilate’s political career in danger. If the trial of Jesus is to be placed in the period following the fall of Sejanus, the year 32 or 33, one understands why Pilate appeared to be weak, yielding to the pressure against Jesus.” (Trevijano, “Pilate,” 3.194)
 7. “Now the vulnerable and defensive posture of Pontius Pilate on Good Friday makes immediate sense. Obviously, he was one of the provincial governors who received the communication from Tiberius cited by Philo. Moreover, ever since late in 31, when news reached Palestine of the fall of his patron, Sejanus, Pilate had doubtless been living under his political sword of Damocles, wondering if the ‘Tiberian terror’ in uprooting supporters of the fallen minister and murderer of the princeps’ son Drusus would extend to the provinces. The fact that Pilate had probably not been in personal contact with Sejanus for the last six years likely saved him at the time, though he realized his now-vulnerable position and undoubtedly strove to show his loyalty to Tiberius while also adjusting to the new directives concerning the Jews.” (Maier, “Sejanus, Pilate and the Date of the Crucifixion,” 11)

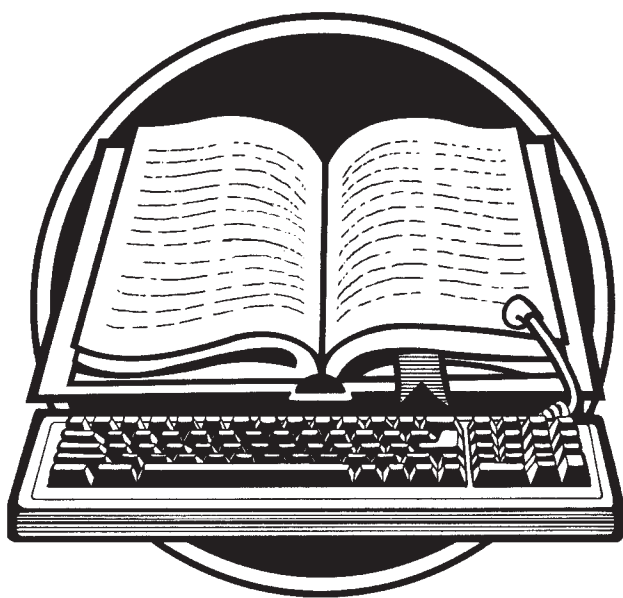
8. "Panic-stricken, the unjust judge, in obedience to his own terrors, consciously betrayed the innocent victim to the anguish of death. He who had so often prostituted justice, was now unable to achieve the one act of justice which he desired. He who had so often murdered pity, was now forbidden to taste the sweetness of a pity for which he longed. He who had so often abused authority, was now rendered impotent to exercise it, for once, on the side of right."
(Farrar, *The Life of Christ*, 434)
9. "Hence only the A.D. 33 date for the crucifixion makes sense. Pilate was an inflexible and ruthless character as long as his mentor Sejanus was in power. But with Christ's trial in A.D. 33 he appears submissive. Although he realized that Jesus was innocent and ought to be released, the Jews cried out that if he released Jesus he was not a friend of Caesar (John 19:12). The reverse implication is that he was still a friend of Sejanus and/ or friendly toward his policies. The phrase 'friend of Caesar' is a technical phrase which meant that such a one was among the elite in the Roman government who were loyal to the emperor. To lose the status of *amici Caesaris* meant political doom."
(Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, 111)

Invitation

- I. Lucius Aelius Sejanus was executed for treason on October 18, AD 31, and just a year and a half later, on April 3, AD 33, our Lord stood before Pontius Pilate.
- II. Sejanus is not mentioned in any of the four gospels, but his shadow is seen in Pilate's judgment hall.

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