

# Bible Studies

## The Gospel According to Barabbas



### Read Mark 15v1-15

Looking back from the distance of 2000 years, it is not easy to understand all the circumstances surrounding the crucifixion. It looks very much like the crucifixion of three men, on the eve of the Passover, had been planned for some time. The timing and the method of crucifixion used suggest the Romans wished to make a point. Crucifixion was used for its deterrent value, it was not a practical method of execution. This crucifixion was going to get a message across.

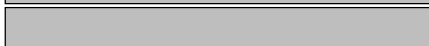
One of these three men was to be a prisoner called Barabbas, but at the end of the day through a bizarre twist of fate, he found himself a free man. And another prisoner named Jesus took his place. Only two of the original three were executed that day.

### Who were these two?

Matthew 27v38, Mark 15v27



Luke 23v32



Traditionally they are called thieves, but this is misleading. The word used by Matthew and Mark is, *lestai*, it implies theft with violence, it is the word used in the account of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10v30 and in John 10v10 of the one who comes to kill and destroy. Bandit is a possible translation. Whatever they had done these men were not petty criminals.

### How did they assess the kind of punishment they were receiving? Luke 23v40-41

They obviously felt their punishment fitted their crime. The word *Lestai* is used in another sense. It is said that one mans terrorist is another's freedom fighter. At the time of Christ, there was a small group of people who were actively seeking to overthrow the Romans. They were known as zealots. One of Jesus disciples was numbered among them, Mat 10v4. This is not surprising, the zealots saw what they were doing in light of the coming of the Messiah.

Josephus a pro-Roman historian, who accompanied Titus' troops when they destroyed the temple in 70AD, wanted the actions of the Jews and Judaism to be acceptable to the Roman authorities. So where he records the actions of the anti-Roman zealots, he calls them *Lestai*, *bandits*. It is likely that the offenses of the two crucified with Jesus, were political not criminal.



### Who Was Barabbas

When it comes to Barabbas we can be more definite.

What was Barabbas' crime? Mark 15v7, John 18v40

The fact that '*insurrectionists*' is plural, suggests Barabbas was part of the same group as the other two '*criminals*'.

### Who were they rebelling against?

Two possibilities have been put forward regarding the identity of these three



#### Read Acts 5v35-37

It is possible that Barabbas was a part of one of these rebellions

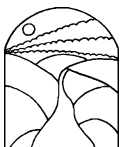


It is more likely that they were involved with the Sicarii, a group of zealots who assassinated Roman collaborators during the festival times. Chief among their targets were the Sadducees and the chief priests. The Sicarii got their name from the short swords they hid under their clothes and used for the assassinations. Ananias, was himself killed by a Sicarii in 66AD, Acts 23v2. Josephus Antiquities 20.8.1. (We do not know for sure the Sicarii were active this early)

During the three main Jewish festivals, the population of Jerusalem swelled 10 fold (according to Josephus, who is noted for exaggerating numbers, to 3 million). There was always a danger of rioting during this time. Cf Mat 26v5. It was for this reason that Pilate had come down from his seat of government in Caesura to be present in Jerusalem. It was also during the festivals that the Sicarii were active.

This explains the reason for this crucifixion and why it is scheduled for the Eve of Passover. Pilate is going to crucify three insurrectionist, right next to the city, right before the feast, as a gentle reminder. It was his way of warning against the danger of causing trouble. Passover is a celebration of freedom. Pilate is pointing to three dying men saying "this is how free you are, you rebel, I will crush you."

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**What kind of a person was Barabbas? Matthew 27v16**  
**What does this mean?**

In modern day language we would call Barabbas a terrorist. Or perhaps a freedom fighter.



**Barabbas**

The name Barabbas has two possible meanings.

**Bar = Son, Abbas = Father.** Lit 'son of father'. This is not as redundant as it sounds, it meant the bearer had a famous father. As such it could have been a nickname.

**Bar = Son, Rabbas = Rabbi.** Son of the Rabbi. Again it could be a nickname. An abiding tradition and some early manuscripts call him; Jesus Bar Abbas, Jesus was a very common name. It is interesting how their names link them together. Jesus, son of father and Jesus, Son of man.



**Releasing a prisoner**

**Read Matthew 27v15-18**

**What was the tradition that Pilate do during the feast?**

We have no knowledge of this from other sources. It is fitting because Passover is, *'the season of our freedom'*. There is also a comment in the Mishna about *'eating Passover along with the freed prisoner'*.

**Who does Matthew imply made the choice of who to offer?** cf Mark 15v6

**If you were Pilate what kind of a prisoner would you suggest be released?**

**Do you think Pilate's motives were genuine when he offered Jesus for release?**

If they were he seriously misinterpreted the mood of the crowd and determination of the Priests.

There has been much debate about who the crowd that called for Jesus to be crucified consisted of.



**Who was in the crowd?** Mark 15v8

**Who was in the crowd?** Mark 15v11

**Who was in the crowd?** Luke 23v1-2

Part of the crowd was there to witness the release of the prisoner, maybe the name Barabbas had already been suggested, maybe a part of the crowd were Barabbas' supporters. We do not know whether Pilate offered Barabbas or the people had previously chosen him. The people were keen to see that Pilate did not pull a fast one and did not want to create the precedent of letting Pilate make this choice. If I were Pilate I would need to have a good reason to release a man like Barabbas, He would not be my first choice. Part of this crowd was the Sanhedrin, the priests and all their cohorts. Others appear to be a crowd drawn together by them and amenable to their influence.

What is clear is that it was not the crowd that accompanied Jesus over the Mount of Olives the previous Sunday, nor was it Jerusalem's rank and file. Jesus was arrested at around 10pm on Thursday, it is now early morning Friday, on one of the busiest days of the year. Neither of these groups knew Jesus had been arrested! The ordinary Jerusalemite does not catch on to what is happening until about midday and the tune they sing is very different from this crowd. Luke 23v27-31

**How did they respond then?**

Luke and John have the chief priests shouting, not the crowd. Luke 23v13-21, John 19v6. It is very clear that Pilate did not like the Chief Priest and the Sadducees and did not appreciate the pressure they were putting on him. This is one of three or four places where he gets his own back.

**What were the others?**

Washing his hands (a Jewish tradition not a Roman one), the sign above Jesus head and releasing Jesus body to Joseph and Nicodemus. (Which put the Sanhedrin in a very difficult position.)



**What kind of people had Barabbas been trying to assassinate?**

**If you were a Sadducee would you want Barabbas released?**

Pilate offers the Sadducees their natural enemy, the very person who is trying to kill them. The Sadducees end up pleading for this release. Effectively Pilate is saying "I am going to release someone who wants to kill you and when he does don't come running to me for troops." The comedy is brutal.

# Bible Studies

## The Gospel According to Barabbas

Last week we looked at the historical setting in which Barabbas found his place. This week we are looking at his spiritual significance.



### Read Luke 23v13-25

It has always been stated that the crowd made a choice between a plain criminal and Jesus. This was not the case, Barabbas was no plain criminal, he was a 'freedom fighter,' from the Jewish point of view and a *'terrorist'* from the Roman one. And so Barabbas, who was to be one of three men crucified on the Eve of the Passover, suddenly finds himself a free man. Instead of him, Jesus will be the third man crucified that day.

Barabbas is released, he is free to go. **What do you think he did next?**

He could have gone out and partied big time. He could have fled into the desert or he could have stayed and watched.

There are many events in Jesus life that the Gospels do not record, reading the passion narratives, you become aware that there is much that must have taken place, that is not recorded or barely hinted at. (eg the Sadducees collusion with Pilate prior to Jesus trial before him) So why is this incident with Barabbas recorded? We have to ask, *how would the account be different if this incident was left out?*



### What is the doctrine of Vicarious Atonement?

Someone once called Barabbas, 'God's gift to people trying to explain the vicarious atonement'.

Barabbas was a murderer. All be it in a good cause - freedom for his people. As a terrorist you know the risks, you have to be ready to die.

Imagine for a moment that Barabbas took the least likely option available to him and stayed to watch what happened to Jesus.



When Jesus is scourged and brought back half dead, Barabbas is watching. **What does he think? How does he feel?**

When Pilate signs the order to crucify Jesus, Barabbas is standing there in the crowd.

**What does he think? How does he feel?**

When Jesus is carrying his cross through the streets, struggling under it's load, Barabbas is walking in the crowd behind him.

**What does he think? How does he feel?**

When Jesus is hanging on the cross slowly dying, Barabbas is somewhere there hiding in the crowd, witnessing the spectacle.

**What does he think? How does he feel?**

I imagine many things went through his mind, chief among the a sense of relief and joy, maybe even pity for the man taking his place. I imagine as he watched the one thought he would not have been able to escape was, *"that was going to be me."*

Judas and Barabbas, the terrible twins of the crucifixion are both there for a reason , they both tell us something about Jesus death.



### Judas has a message to tell us.

**How would Jesus death have been different if there had been no betrayer, no Judas?**

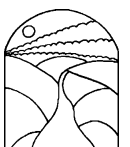
**Read John 10v18, 1 Corinthians 15v3, Isaiah 53v10**

**Who was responsible for Jesus death?**

With or without Judas, Jesus would have still been crucified. It was God's will. Judas is there to remind us that our sin betrayed the Lord.

*But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. Isaiah 53v5*

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Because I sinned, Jesus had to die, my sin caused his death. Judas is me. I am responsible.



### **Barabbas has a message to tell us.**

**How would Jesus death have been different if Barabbas was never mentioned?**

#### **Did Barabbas deserve to be set free?**

Barabbas is there to remind us, that Jesus took our place.

That day, Barabbas was scheduled to die. He was guilty, it was he due. He was going to die for his sins and Jesus took his place, even though He was innocent, He received Barabbas' punishment. Barabbas though as guilty as sin, received a pardon and went free.

#### **What did Barabbas do to receive his freedom?**

Barabbas received his freedom through no merit of his own.

One of the basic messages of the Bible is that sin brings death. .

*Genesis 2v17*

*Romans 6v23*

*Ezekiel 18v20*

This is the reason an animal had to be sacrificed under the Old Covenant. Sin brings death. Your death. The animal died instead of you. The animal was a substitute death.

*1 Peter 3v18*

*Isaiah 53v12b*

Just as Jesus took Barabbas place, He took your place. He bore your sins and received your punishment. He died when you should have died, You were set free, even though you did not deserve it. You received a royal pardon, from God the only one qualified to give it to you. This is what vicarious atonement means. This is the Gospel according to Barabbas.

Like Barabbas, watching the crucifixion, I look at Jesus dying on the cross and say, "*It should have been me.*"



### **The two criminals have a message to tell us.**

This is not the end of the story. There are Barabbas' two buddies to consider. They have a message to tell us as well.

You are Judas; the first time you sinned, you betrayed the Lord to death and there is nothing you can do about it.

You are Barabbas; Jesus died in your place setting you free and there was nothing you did to deserve it, it is already done. Christ died for the sins of the whole world. 1 John 2v2



### **Read Luke 23v39-43**

Two insurrectionists in their dying moments respond to Christ.

#### **What were their responses to Christ?**

If these men were Zealots as we have speculated, then their cause, as they understood it, was directly tied to the coming of the messiah. One of them in his last hours found the very person he had been hoping for all his life.

These criminals remind us of one last all important truth. We have to respond to Christ.

You are Judas, you are Barabbas, but you choose which of these criminals you will be. Only one of them received eternal life.

In the last hour of his life the penitent thief did all the things needed to receive salvation.

**He confessed his sin**

1 John 1v9

**He called on Jesus for help**

Acts 2v21

**He demonstrated faith**

Ephesians 2v8

**He made a confession of faith**

Romans 10v9

#### **In what the penitent thief said, how do we know he did all these things?**

*Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." Luke 23v43*

At this time of Passion and Passover these things are all you need to do to be save. Your eternal destiny depends on it.

Between Judas, Barabbas and this thief, the Gospel has been proclaimed to us.