

Jesus Barabbas, a Nominal Messiah? Text and History in Matthew 27.16–17*

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This article examines the textual arguments offered for and against the reading Jesus Barabbas in Matthew 27.16–17. While siding with the position that the longer reading, Jesus Barabbas, stood in the original text of Matthew’s Gospel, this article argues against the tendency of scholars to deduce from the longer reading that a historical figure called ‘Jesus’ with the patronymic ‘Barabbas’ was released by Pilate, and that this man’s name was suppressed by Christian tradition out of reverence for the name Jesus.

Keywords: Barabbas, Matthew, Origen, Messiah, Zealot, Passion, textual criticism

Matthew’s account of Jesus’ trial before Pilate includes an intriguing textual variant that is suggestive of the notion that the prisoner standing next to Jesus, whom Pilate offers to the crowd for release, may have also been called Jesus. Matthew’s account reads thus:

εἶχον δὲ τότε δέσμιον ἐπίσημον λεγόμενον [Ἰησοῦν] Βαραββᾶν. συνηγμένων οὖν αὐτῶν εἶπεν αὐτοῖς ὁ Πιλάτος τίνα θέλετε ἀπολύσω ὑμῖν, [Ἰησοῦν τὸν] Βαραββᾶν ἢ Ἰησοῦν τὸν λεγόμενον χριστόν;

But they had then a notorious prisoner called [Jesus] Barabbas. Therefore, when they had gathered together, Pilate said to them: ‘Whom do you desire that I release to you: [Jesus the] Barabbas or Jesus who is called Christ?’ (Matt 27.16–17)¹

The brackets in the NA²⁷ and USB⁴ indicate the editors’ judgment that the word has a dubious claim to authenticity.² This judgment is based on the slim external

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¹ All translations in this paper are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

² See Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: 43

evidence for the longer reading, Ἰησοῦν Βαραββᾶν.³ Despite this setback, however, most recent English translations of the Bible have begun to include ‘Jesus Barabbas’, with a note informing readers that other ancient manuscripts lack Jesus.⁴ The longer reading is gaining wide acceptance among NT scholars.⁵ But how do we account for the fact that most manuscripts do not contain the double name? Is the addition or omission of the name ‘Jesus’ before ‘Barabbas’ a mere oversight on the part of a copyist dealing with a two-letter *nomen sacrum*? Was it Matthew or a later scribe, wanting to dramatize the choice, who added the name ‘Jesus’? Or did later scribes find the association of the name ‘Jesus’ with a notorious insurrectionist too scandalous to let it stand in the text? Finally, and most importantly, if the longer reading is original to the text of Matthew, then how do we account, *historically*, for the man Jesus Barabbas?

It is the aim of this paper to discuss in detail the textual and historical arguments regarding the name and person Jesus Barabbas. We evaluate the merits of arguments proffered for the longer and shorter readings of the text. While agreeing with the view that Jesus Barabbas stood in the original text of Matthew’s Gospel, we argue against the tendency of scholars to deduce from the longer reading that a historical figure by the name ‘Jesus’ with the patronymic ‘Barabbas’ was released by Pilate, and that this man’s name was suppressed by tradition. This tendency, we contend, fails to make an important distinction between scribal habits in later periods with respect to the name ‘Jesus’ and practices of NT authors in the first century with respect to the same name. Drawing on themes from the first Gospel, we argue that the author of Matthew is solely responsible for the name Jesus Barabbas.

1. External Evidence

The various readings of the text may be classified as follows:⁶

Eerdmans, 2nd ed. 1989) 232. But cf. Bruce Metzger on the UBS text: ‘A majority of the Committee was of the opinion that the original text of Matthew had the double name in both verses... In view of the relatively slender external support for Ἰησοῦν, however, it was deemed fitting to enclose the word within square brackets’ (*A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2nd ed. 1994] 56).

3 In this paper, I will use ‘longer reading’ to refer to the double name Jesus Barabbas, and ‘shorter reading’ for the single name Barabbas.

4 For example, NRSV, NET, REB, and TEV.

5 One only has to flip to the relevant pages of Matthew (and even Mark) commentaries written in the last few decades to get this impression. For a list of scholars who favor the longer reading, see n. 31 below.

6 See NA²⁷ and UBS⁴.

27.16

Ἰησοῦν Βαραββᾶν: Θ ^{f¹} 700* syr^s, pal mss^s arm geo²
 Βαραββᾶν: κ A B D K L W Δ 0250 ^{f¹³} 33 157 180 205 565 579 597 700^c 892
 1006 1010 1071 1241 1243 1292 1342 1424 1505 Byz [E F G H Σ] *Lect* it^a, aur, b, c, d,
 f, ff1,2, g1, h, l, q, r1 vg syr^p, h, pal ms^s cop^{sa, meg, bo} eth geo¹ slav (Diatessaron^{arm})
 Origen^{lat}, Jerome Augustine

27.17

Ἰησοῦν τὸν Βαραββᾶν: (Θ 700* *omit τὸν*) ^{f¹} syr^s, pal mss^s arm
 geo² Origen^{lat} Origen^{gr}

Βαραββᾶν: (B 1010 Origen ms^{acc. to Origen lat} *add τὸν*) κ A D K L W Δ 064 ^{f¹³} 33
 157 180 205 565 579 597 700^c 892 1006 1071 1241 1243 1292 1342 1424 1505 Byz
 [E F G H Σ] *Lect* goth cop^{sa, meg, bo} Diatessaron^{arm}; (*add or omit τὸν*) it^a, aur, b, c,
 d, f, ff1,2, g1, h, l, q, r1 vg syr^{p, h, pal ms} eth geo¹ slav

In general, the shorter reading, (τὸν) Βαραββᾶν, has strong external support, being attested by primary Alexandrian, Western, and Byzantine witnesses, and one primary Caesarean witness, ^{f¹³}. The longer reading, Ἰησοῦν (τὸν) Βαραββᾶν, however, has relatively slender external support, and is mainly attested by Caesarean witnesses and translations in Syriac, Armenian, and Georgian.⁷ The longer reading was also known to Origen. In his *Commentary on Matthew*, Origen writes about 27.17:

In multis exemplaribus non continetur quod Barabbas etiam Iesus dicebatur et forsitan recte.

In *many* copies, it is not contained that Barabbas was also called Jesus, and perhaps rightly (it is not contained).⁸

Origen’s comment could be interpreted to mean that, despite the eventual wide attestation of the shorter reading, *most* textual witnesses in Origen’s day contained the longer reading.⁹ Important for our purposes is the fact that the very manuscript which Origen himself possessed probably contained the reading ‘Jesus Barabbas’. This is because Origen’s interpretation of Matt 24.5—‘For many will come in my name, saying “I am the Christ”, and will mislead many’—assumes

7 It must be noted that the Georgian witnesses are split, with the earliest Adysh manuscript (897 CE) attesting to the omission of Ἰησοῦν, and the later two manuscripts, Opiza (913 CE) and the Tbet’ (995 CE), attesting to its inclusion.

8 In *Matthaeum* 27.16–18; GCS 38.255. W. Hersey Davis’ translation in ‘Origen’s Comment on Matthew 27.17’, *RevExp* 39 (1942) 65 (emphasis added).

9 So W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, Jr., *A Critical Commentary and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (3 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997) 3.584.

the common knowledge that Barabbas was also known as Jesus: ‘In like manner as, according to some, Barabbas was also called Jesus, and yet was a robber, having nothing of Jesus except the name, so there are in my opinion many Christs but only in name’.¹⁰ When this statement is combined with Origen’s other claim that ‘many’ MSS do not contain the reading ‘Jesus Barabbas’, it seems not only evident that Origen was aware of such a reading, but it is also quite probable that Origen may have used a manuscript himself which contained ‘Jesus Barabbas’.¹¹

Origen’s attestation almost tilts the balance of the external evidence in favor of the longer reading, since it situates the longer reading very early in the history of transmission, earlier than the reading found in any manuscript. In addition, it must be added that a tenth-century uncial manuscript (S) contains a marginal note which reads as follows:

In many ancient copies which I have met with I found Barabbas himself likewise called ‘Jesus’; that is, the question of Pilate stood there as follows, τίνα θέλετε ἀπὸ τῶν δύο ἀπολύσω ὑμῖν, Ἰησοῦν τὸν Βαραββᾶν ἢ Ἰησοῦν τὸν λεγόμενον χριστόν; for apparently the paternal name of the robber was ‘Barabbas’, which is interpreted ‘Son of the Teacher’.¹²

This scholium is often assigned in the MSS to either Anastasius—bishop of Antioch (sixth century)—Chrysostom, or Origen.¹³

In sum, the attestation of Origen constitutes strong evidence for the longer reading, ‘Jesus Barabbas’. But an assessment of the witnesses for the shorter reading—with regard to age, geographical spread, and reputation of the MSS—precludes any attempt to establish the text of Matt 27.16–17 purely on external grounds.¹⁴

¹⁰ *In Matthaeum* 24.4–5; GCS 38.63. Davis’ translation in ‘Origen’s Comment’, 65.

¹¹ B. H. Streeter’s formulation of this argument is less nuanced than our own: ‘On turning to the passage in [Origen’s] Commentary on Matthew I found to my surprise that this reading [“Jesus Barabbas”] occurs in the text recited and commented on by Origen. It is the *omission* of the name Jesus before Barabbas that should properly be described as a reading “found in MSS. known to Origen” (*The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins Treating of the Manuscript Tradition, Sources, Authorship, and Dates* [New York: Macmillan, 1925] 95; author’s emphasis).

¹² Cited in B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, *Introduction to the New Testament in the Original Greek: With Notes on Selected Readings* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988) 19.

¹³ Metzger thinks this scholium probably goes back to Origen. See *Textual Commentary*, 56.

¹⁴ Scholars who opt for the shorter reading often do so because of the external evidence. See, for example, John P. Meier, *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church and Morality in the First Gospel* (New York: Paulist, 1979) 197.

2. Transcriptional Probability

Accidental omission or addition is a clear possibility in this case, especially since the variant under consideration involves the addition or omission of a two-letter *nomen sacrum*, \overline{IN} . Westcott and Hort, who preferred the shorter reading, proposed that the cause of the longer reading in 27.17 was due to the repetition of IN after YMIN.¹⁵ A scribe, seeing YMIN, could easily have duplicated the final two letters to read YMIN \overline{IN} .¹⁶ This proposal, however, could equally account for the omission of the final two letters. Haplography was a common cause for omissions in ancient MSS.¹⁷

Furthermore, the accidental omission or addition only accounts for v. 17, but not v. 16. Neither accidental repetition of IN nor haplography could account for the presence of IHΣOYN in v. 16. Westcott and Hort proposed that after IN had found its way into the text by accidental repetition, a scribe intercalated it into v. 16 for 'clearness'.¹⁸ But *all* the MSS which add Ἰησοῦν to v. 16 do not also read Ἰησοῦν Βαραββᾶν in v. 17; some MSS which attest to Ἰησοῦν Βαραββᾶν in v. 16 also attest to the reading Ἰησοῦν τὸν Βαραββᾶν in v. 17.¹⁹ It is more likely that the MSS which omit the article in v. 17 have been assimilated to v. 16, than the reverse. On the other hand, one might equally argue that the reading τὸν Βαραββᾶν (v. 17), attested in B 1010 and Origen^{lat}, seems to presuppose the existence of Ἰησοῦν in an ancestor.²⁰

In addition to the above, we also have to ask whether a scribe would have added the name Jesus before Barabbas to heighten the drama of the choice,²¹ or whether a scribe would have found the inclusion of the name too scandalous and, thus, excise the text. The latter seems more probable. In an important essay entitled 'The Name "Jesus"', Adolf Deissmann studies the passages in Scripture where the name Jesus is applied to common or infamous people. He concludes that in all cases where the name is applied to an ordinary person there is evidence to suggest that the name may have been altered or expunged by early Christians.²² He points to the genealogy in Luke 3, where the name Ἰησοῦ in v. 29, applied to

15 Westcott and Hort, 'Notes', 20. So also Constantinus Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, (vol. 1; Lipsiae: Giesecke & Devrient, 8th ed. 1869) 195-6.

16 So also Roderic Dunkerly, 'Was Barabbas also Called Jesus?' *ExpTim* 74 (1963) 126-27.

17 Streeter favors this view (*Four Gospels*, 136).

18 Westcott and Hort, 'Notes', 20.

19 See Donald Senior, *The Passion Narrative according to Matthew: A Redactional Study* (BETL 34; Leuven: Leuven University, 1975) 241 n.1.

20 So F. Crawford Burkitt, *Evangelion Da-Mepharreshe*, (vol. 2; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1904) 278.

21 See Donald Senior, *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1990) 114.

22 Adolf Deissmann, 'The Name "Jesus"', *Mysterium Christi* (ed. G. K. A. Bell and A. Deissmann; London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1930) 17-27.

an ancestor of Jesus, engenders the following variants: Ἰησω, Ἰωση, *Iosez*, Ἰωσηχ,²³ Ἰωσηση, Ἰεση,²⁴ *Zoses*, *Iosez*, *Iessu*. In addition, the textual tradition of Pelagius' commentary on the letters of Paul, edited by Alexander Souter, reveals an excision of the name Jesus from Ἰησοῦς ὁ λεγόμενος Ἰουδης at Col 4.11: codices E and S of Pseudo-Hieronymus omit the words *et Iesus qui dicitur*.²⁵ Lastly, we must point to Acts 13.6, where the name Βαρισησοῦ, applied to a magician, reveals attempts in the textual tradition to dissociate this person from 'Jesus': D⁽²⁾ changes the genitive to Βαρισησοῦαν; P^{45vid} 36 453 and a few other MSS also change the genitive to Βαρισησοῦν²⁶; and the Syriac Peshitta reads Βαρσοῦμα. All these variants show an attempt on the part of scribes to preserve the sanctity of the name Jesus, either by making it unrecognizable or omitting it when applied to ordinary or infamous people. And to the above list must be added Matt 27.16–17.

Origen provides us with the best clue as to how associating the name Jesus with an infamous person would have been received. Origen decries the attribution of the name 'Jesus' to the sinful Barabbas. He writes: 'In the whole range of the scriptures we know that no one who is a sinner (is called) Jesus' (In tanta enim multitudine scripturarum neminem scimus Iesum peccatorem).²⁷ Origen strongly dislikes the reading 'Jesus Barabbas', because he thinks that the name Jesus is inappropriate for a sinner (ne nomen Iesu conveniat alicui iniquorum).²⁸ Thus, Origen attributes the placing of 'Jesus' before Barabbas to a heretical addition (Et puto quod in haeresibus tale aliquid superadditum est).²⁹ It is not clear how much influence Origen had on the omission of 'Jesus' from subsequent MSS.³⁰ However, it is more likely that scribes, independent of Origen, would have found the association of the revered name Jesus with a notorious insurrectionist disturbing enough to alter the text. In sum, transcriptional probability favors the originality of 'Jesus Barabbas'.

23 See Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 451.

24 See Hermann von Soden, *Die Schriften des Neuen Testaments* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913) 250.

25 Alexander Souter, *Pelagius's Exposition of Thirteen Epistles of St. Paul: Introduction* (ed. J. Armitage Robinson; Texts and Studies 9; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1922) 472.

26 See Souter, *Pelagius's Exposition*, 541.

27 *In Matthaëum* 27.16–18; GCS 38.256.

28 *In Matthaëum* 27.16–18; GCS 38.255.

29 *In Matthaëum* 27.16–18; GCS 38.256.

30 C. S. C. Williams suggests that Origen's dislike of the 'Jesus Barabbas' reading possibly led to its omission from the other Caesarean MSS, such as *f*¹³ (*Alterations to the Text of the Synoptic Gospels and Acts* [Oxford: Alden, 1951] 31–3). For a discussion of Origen's movements in the early centuries and his eventual settlement at Caesarea, see G. L. Prestige, *Fathers and Heretics: Six Studies in Dogmatic Faith with Prologue and Epilogue* (New York: Macmillan, 1940) 91–103.

3. Historical Conjectures and Intrinsic Probability

In light of the above arguments, most scholars today argue for the originality of 'Jesus Barabbas' in Matthew,³¹ Origen's hostile sentiment toward attributing a sacred name to a criminal constituting the strongest evidence for the shorter reading in most MSS. But, as we shall see below, scholars have failed to make an important distinction between tendencies in the first century and later centuries with respect to the name Jesus. This failure has engendered many, and in my view unfounded, theories about 'Jesus Barabbas'. Scholars who argue for the originality of 'Jesus Barabbas' in Matthew tend to fall into three camps: (1) those who argue that Barabbas was another aspect of Jesus' identity; (2) those who argue that there was a historical figure with the personal name Jesus who also went by the patronymic Barabbas; (3) those who argue for Matthean redaction of Mark. If the error of the first camp is to posit a historical confusion too early in the tradition and to harmonize the four Passion Narratives, the mistake of the second camp is to commit the common fallacy of applying later scribal habits to NT authors.³²

31 Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave*, (2 vols.; ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1.799 n. 22, documents an impressive list of scholars who favor the originality of the 'Jesus Barabbas' reading; the list includes: Allen, Bertram, Burkitt, Couchard, Gaechter, Goguel, Grundmann, Klostermann, Lohmeyer, MacNeile, Maccoby, Moffat, Rigg, Streeter, Trilling, Vaganay, and Zahn. To this list must be added Brown, Deissmann, Allison, W. D. Davies, R. T. France, Donald Senior, B. Metzger.

32 Another approach, which has very little bearing on the addition or omission of 'Jesus' before 'Barabbas', has been to search for evidence of the existence of customs or parallel events, either in the ancient Near East, Roman Empire, Rabbinic Sources, the OT, or early Jewish historians, similar to the Gospels' *privilegium paschale*. See Robert L. Merritt, 'Jesus Barabbas and the Paschal Pardon', *JBL* 104 (1985) 57-68; S. Langdon, 'The Release of a Prisoner at the Passover', *ExpTim* 29 (1918) 328-31; Richard Wellington Husband, 'The Pardoning of Prisoners by Pilate', *AJT* 21 (1917) 110-16; Charles B. Chavel, 'The Release of a Prisoner on the Eve of Passover in Ancient Jerusalem', *JBL* 60 (1941) 273-8; J. Blinzler, *The Trial of Jesus* (Westminster: Newman, 1959) 218-21; A. H. Wratislaw, 'The Scapegoat—Barabbas', *ExpTim* 3 (1892) 400-403; Jennifer K. Berenson Maclean, 'Barabbas, the Scapegoat Ritual, and the Development of the Passion Narrative', *HTR* 100.3 (2007) 309-34; Roger David Aus, 'The Release of Barabbas (Mark 15.6-15 par.; John 18.39-40), and Judaic Traditions on the Book of Esther', *Barabbas and Esther: And other Studies in the Judaic Illumination of Earliest Christianity* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992) 1-28; Aus, 'The Release of Barabbas Revisited', *Caught in the Act, Walking on the Sea and the Release of Barabbas Revisited* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998) 135-70. We are mainly concerned with approaches that have bearing on the text of Matt 27.16-17. But against these attempts to find parallel customs or events in ancient literature, it must be said that the Gospel writers show no dependence on such supposed parallels. See P. L. Couchard and R. Stahl, 'Jesus Barabbas', *HibJ* 25 (1926) 26-42.

3.1. *Camp 1: One Jesus, Two Names*

In a classic article published in 1945, Horace Abram Riggs argues forcefully for the originality of 'Jesus Barabbas' in Matthew 27.³³ Riggs points to Origen's rejection of the reading and maintains that the omission is easier to explain than a subsequent inclusion, and that the text without 'Jesus' leaves a contrast that needs to be explained. Riggs goes on to propose an interesting theory about the person and name Barabbas that would later prove influential. According to Riggs, there is not a separate person from Jesus of Nazareth called Barabbas. Barabbas is another title used to address Jesus by his contemporaries. Thus, at the trial scene, 'Jesus' is brought in before Pilate twice: first as 'Jesus Barabbas', and then as 'Jesus Christ'.³⁴ Jesus is fittingly called Bar Abba (בר אבא; 'son of the Father') because of his unique relationship with the Father. According to Riggs, when Pilate tries 'Jesus Barabbas', Pilate finds this case beyond his competence, and, thus, dismisses the case. In the second trial of 'Jesus Christ', impelled by the 'rabbis',³⁵ Pilate has jurisdictional competence to try this case, since by calling himself 'king', Jesus has committed 'treason'.³⁶ Under this second trial 'Jesus Christ' is convicted—though Pilate is not aware he has tried the same person twice.

In a move similar to Riggs, H. Z. Maccoby argues that the Jerusalem crowd did in fact call for the release of 'Jesus'. But because of anti-Jewish sentiment on the part of the Gospel writers, who wanted to lay blame for Jesus' death on both the Jewish leaders and the Jewish masses, the evangelists created a second Jesus—Jesus Barabbas.³⁷ Thus, the Gospel writers have altered the pre-Markan Passion Narrative in which the crowd supports Jesus of Nazareth to make the crowd support Jesus Barabbas. He goes on to further suggest that the name Barabbas derives from 'Bar-Rabba(n)' (בריבי; 'house of the teacher'), a title by which Jesus was known in his day.³⁸ According to Maccoby, Jesus may have been a Pharisee teacher.³⁹

Against these approaches which view Barabbas as another aspect of Jesus' identity, Raymond Brown has argued that there is no evidence of such a historical confusion to the point where a fictitious character is created very early in the Gospel tradition.⁴⁰ He also points to the fact that Jesus never calls himself 'the

33 Horace Abram Riggs, 'Barabbas', *JBL* 64 (1945) 417–56.

34 Riggs, 'Barabbas', 435.

35 Riggs, 'Barabbas', 452–3; an anachronistic use of the term 'rabbi'.

36 Riggs, 'Barabbas', 452.

37 H. Z. Maccoby, 'Jesus and Barabbas', *NTS* 16 (1969) 55–60.

38 Maccoby, 'Jesus and Barabbas', 58–9.

39 For another theory that Barabbas is an extension of Jesus' identity, see Stevan L. Davies, 'Who is Called Barabbas?' *NTS* 27 (1981) 260–2.

40 Brown, *Death*, 1.812: 'The proposed change from a twofold designation of one person to designations for two different people could have happened no later than Mark (late 60s) and

Son of the Father' in the Gospels. On only one occasion in Mark (14.36) does Jesus use the word *Abba*. It is, therefore, highly improbable that by the time of his death 'Barabbas' had become a title for Jesus.⁴¹ Finally, this approach drowns out the distinctive message of each Gospel's Passion narrative by harmonizing them. As we shall argue below, 'Jesus Barabbas' is Matthew's, and Matthew's alone; and we need not assume that the other Gospel authors knew of, or suppressed, a historical Jesus Barabbas.

3.2. *Camp 2: Two Jesuses*

If the first camp posits one Jesus, this second camp posits two arrestees by the name of Jesus, often pointing to the widespread use of the name among first-century Jews. Paul Winter, assuming the originality of 'Jesus Barabbas' in Matthew, reconstructs a scenario where two persons named 'Jesus' are brought before Pilate.⁴² Jesus, the son of '(R)abba(n)', is apprehended by the Romans at approximately the same time as Jesus of Nazareth has been taken into custody. Pilate is unaware of the identity of the two prisoners. Pilate, having learned that Jesus bar (R)abba(n) is not the person whose arrest has been decreed, releases him; but proceeds to try Jesus of Nazareth.⁴³ Winter affirms the historicity and innocence of Jesus Barabbas. Against Winter, the Gospel writers show no knowledge of any such confusion on the part of Pilate. Winter's conjecture goes far beyond what our available evidence would allow.

Raymond Brown, having surveyed different proposals put forth for how we understand the figure of Jesus Barabbas, argues that it is less demanding to the imagination to argue that a historical figure with the personal name Jesus and

almost surely must have gone back into preMarcan days since it appears in all the Gospels, even in John, which is probably not dependent on Mark's Barabbas account'.

41 John's independence of the Synoptics also deals a huge blow to the theory that Barabbas was another designation for Jesus of Nazareth. For arguments for John's independence of the Synoptics, see B. De Solages, *Jean et les synoptiques* (Leiden: Brill, 1979); Brown, *The Gospel according to John i-xii* (AB 29; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) xxi-li; Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 2003) 90-104. For arguments in favor of John's dependence on the Synoptics, see C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978); F. Neiryneck, *Jean et les Synoptiques. Examen critique de l'exegese de M -E Boismard* (BETL 49; Leuven: Leuven University, 1979); M. Sabbe, 'The Footwashing in Jn 13 and its Relation to the Synoptic Gospels', *ETL* 58 (1982) 279-307. For a mediating position, see D. Moody Smith, 'John and Synoptics: Some Dimensions of the Problem', *Johannine Christianity: Essays on its Setting, Sources, and Theology* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 1984), 171; Smith, *John among the Gospels* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2nd ed. 2001); Smith, *The Fourth Gospel in Four Dimensions: Judaism and Jesus, the Gospels and Scripture* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2008).

42 Paul Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1961).

43 Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus*, 98-9.

patronymic Barabbas was arrested during a riot in Jerusalem. Pilate eventually spares this Jesus Barabbas.⁴⁴ Similarly, W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, having enumerated the standard arguments in favor of the Jesus Barabbas reading (Origen's comment; Matthew's penchant for inserting names where absent in Mark⁴⁵; haplography; harmonization with parallel Gospels; Matthew's studied interest in the name Jesus [cf. Matt 27.15–23 // Mark 15.6–14]; and the popularity of the name Jesus), surmise: 'our conclusion is that "Jesus" originally stood in Matthew and that the tradition behind Mark, Luke, and John had already, out of reverence for Jesus' name, dropped it'.⁴⁶ In this second camp, the man Pilate releases to the crowd was known as Jesus Barabbas; the NT authors or the tradition behind the Gospel narratives later suppressed this man's name for pious reasons.⁴⁷

But such a conclusion goes against the evidence we have from the first century. These scholars have conflated later scribal tendencies with tendencies of the NT authors. The assumption is that because we see a general tendency of scribes to alter the name Jesus when applied to ordinary people, then NT writers (or the tradition behind these) must also have suppressed the name. Nonetheless, later century scribal practices should not be a criterion for the practices of NT authors in the first century. If there is a tendency in later centuries to obscure the name Jesus when applied to ordinary men, it has not yet proved possible to trace it clearly in the first century also. Evidence from the first century seems, rather, to point in the other direction: NT authors display a level of comfort in attributing the name Jesus to men other than the Christian Messiah. Acts 13.6 is quite revealing in this respect, for the author shows no signs of the kind of sensitivity evinced by later scribes. Having ascribed the name Βαριησοῦ (lit. 'son of Jesus') to Elymas, the author of Acts tells the reader a few verses later that this same Elymas is υἱὲ διαβόλου ('son of the devil'; Acts 13.10). Of course, later scribes would attempt to make Βαριησοῦ ('son of Jesus') less obvious, the earliest evidence being P⁴⁵. P⁴⁵ dates back to the third century,⁴⁸ and it tells us very little about what first-century authors were doing. In addition, Paul concludes his letter to the Colossians (4.11) by sending greetings from Ἰησοῦς ὁ λεγόμενος Ἰουστὸς ('Jesus who is called Justus').⁴⁹

44 Brown, *Death*, 1.814.

45 Evidence invoked for this argument is Matt 9.9 // Mark 2.14; Matt 26.3 // Mark 14.1; Matt 26.57 // Mark 14.53. See our discussion of these passages below.

46 Davies and Allison, *Gospel of Matthew*, 3.584.

47 We should include R. T. France in this camp. Cf. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 1053: 'It is even possible that [Pilate] had heard shouts in favor of Jesus (Barabbas) and assumed it was the other Jesus they were shouting for'.

48 See Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (New York: Oxford University, 4th ed. 2005 [1964]) 53–61.

49 Theodor Zahn's conjecture that Jesus Justus originally also stood in the text of Philemon but was later suppressed is unpersuasive; see Zahn, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*

Our *available evidence* from the first century shows non-hesitation on the part of NT authors to record the name Jesus for ordinary men. Thus, it seems fair to say that scholars cannot make the case, based on later scribal tendencies, that a historical figure called Jesus Barabbas had his name suppressed by Mark, Luke, and John, or the traditions behind these. In light of evidence from the first century, however, Matthew is not exceptional among NT authors in ascribing the name Jesus to an infamous person, a point we shall argue in the next section.

A possible objection to the view that Matthew expanded the name Barabbas in Mark's text is that Barabbas is a patronymic, and should therefore not stand on its own. To the question of why Barabbas would be known by a patronymic, we answer that it is not unusual for a person to be identified by a patronymic. Besides Barabbas, we already have in the Synoptics two persons who are only identified by a patronymic: Βαρθολομαῖος ('Bartholomew' [Matt 10.3; Mark 3.18; Luke 6.14]) and Βαρτιμαῖος, ὁ υἱὸς Τιμαίου ('Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus' [Mark 10.45]).

Another possible objection is the awkwardness of Mark's Greek text with the patronymic (Mark 15.7). C. E. B. Cranfield⁵⁰ and Vincent Taylor⁵¹ have argued that Ἰησοῦς ὁ λεγόμενος Βαραββᾶς originally stood in the text of Mark 15.7,⁵² because Mark's Greek is awkward without the personal name,⁵³ and ὁ λεγόμενος is often preceded by a personal name and followed by a title. Granted, Mark's syntax is awkward at this point; but awkward Greek expressions are not foreign to Mark's Gospel.⁵⁴ There are also instances where ὁ λεγόμενος is not preceded by a personal name (Matt 9.9; John 9.11, 19.17). Finally, the lack of any MS evidence for the presence of the personal name in Mark is an embarrassment to this thesis. The only evidence we have of Jesus Barabbas is Matthew; and we are better off asking the question what purpose the insertion of the name 'Jesus' before Barabbas serves for Matthew.⁵⁵ To this question we now turn.

(ET *Introduction to the New Testament*, [vol. 1; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1909] 451). So also Ernst Amling, 'Eine Konjektur im Philemonbrief', *ZNW* 10 (1909) 261-2 and Deissmann, 'The Name of Jesus'. The lack of textual evidence makes this argument dubious.

50 C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark* (CGTC; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1959) 449-50.

51 Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2nd ed. 1981) 581.

52 Deissmann, 'The Name "Jesus"', 22, affirms this position.

53 Cf. Mark 15.7: ἦν δὲ ὁ λεγόμενος Βαραββᾶς μετὰ τῶν στασιαστῶν δεδεμένος οἵτινες ἐν τῇ στάσει φόνον πεποιήκεισαν.

54 For example, see Joel Marcus' note on the awkward Greek expression of Mark 15.8 (*Mark 8-16* [AB 27A; New Haven: Yale University, 2009] 1030).

55 In other words, this essay takes the view that the tradition behind all the Gospels contained Barabbas, not Jesus Barabbas.

3.3. *Camp 3: Matthean Redaction*

Donald Senior has noted that the insertion of the name 'Jesus' before Barabbas illustrates a deeper theological point for Matthew.⁵⁶ Senior points out that the course of salvation history is at stake, since the Jews, at the trial scene, are asked to discern and confess Jesus as Messiah. Senior's view that the 'Jesus Barabbas' reading serves Matthew's purpose can be augmented by taking a closer look at Origen's comments about Matt 24.5 ('For many will come in my name, saying "I am the Christ", and will mislead many'). Origen observes: 'In like manner as, according to some, Barabbas was also called Jesus, and yet was a robber, having nothing of Jesus except the name, so there are in my opinion many Christs but only in name'.⁵⁷ Origen was on the right track in helping us detect why the author of Matthew would insert the name Jesus before Barabbas: *for Matthew, Barabbas is a nominal Messiah who deceives the many.*

In the Matthean parallel to Mark 13.6 Matthew makes it explicit that the one who will lead many astray will be thought to be the Messiah (24.5). This he does by expanding Mark's ἐγώ εἰμι ('I am he') to ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ χριστός ('I am the Messiah').⁵⁸ The attentive listener or reader who has previously heard λέγοντες ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ χριστός would be reminded of this reference when in Jesus' trial scene Matthew again connects λέγω and χριστός:

λέγοντες ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ χριστός (24.5)

τὸν λεγόμενον χριστόν (27.17).

One of the arguments often invoked in favor of the Jesus Barabbas reading is Matthew's penchant for inserting names where they are absent in Mark.⁵⁹ Proponents of this view point to Matt 9.9 // Mark 2.14; Matt 26.3 // Mark 14.1; Matt 26.57 // Mark 14.53. But this is a specious argument. The proposed passages do not bear much resemblance to Matt 27.16 // Mark 15.7. In Matt 9.9, the author of the first Gospel *substitutes* the name 'Matthew' for Mark's 'Levi'. In Matt 26.57, the author *inserts* the name Caiaphas for the unnamed high priest in Mark.⁶⁰ However, in Matt 27.16 the author *expands* the name in his Markan parallel. In this vein, Matt 24.5 // Mark 13.6 is much closer to what we have in Matt 27.16 // Mark 15.7 than any of the passages repeatedly invoked for a Matthean tendency. In both Matt 24.5 and 27.16 the author of Matthew expands Mark's text:

λέγοντες ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι // λέγοντες ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ χριστός

56 See Senior, *Passion Narrative*, 237–40.

57 In *Matthaeum* 24.4–5; GCS 38.63. Davis' translation in 'Origen's Comment', 65.

58 In Luke's Gospel also, the one who comes simply says, ἐγώ εἰμι (Luke 21.8).

59 See, for example, Davies and Allison, *Gospel of Matthew*, 3.584.

60 So also Matt 26.3 // Mark 14.1.

and

ὁ λεγόμενος Βαραββᾶς // λεγόμενον Ἰησοῦν Βαραββᾶν.

Furthermore, in Mark, Barabbas is among those being held for taking part in *the* insurrection (τῶν στασιαστών⁶¹; Mark 15.7).⁶² Matthew, on the other hand, describes Barabbas as δέσμιον ἐπίσημον. The word ἐπίσημον could mean ‘well-known, notable, or prominent’. But when used with prisoners, the word has a bad sense, meaning ‘notorious’.⁶³ As a matter of history it is plausible that Barabbas was a well-known political insurrectionist, because, as noted by Davies and Allison, tradition preserved his name but not the names of the criminals crucified with Jesus.⁶⁴ Matthew’s use of the word ἐπίσημον, then, highlights the objectionable nature of Barabbas’ revolutionary deeds, from his perspective.⁶⁵ The scene is made all the more dramatic when Pilate, seeking to free Jesus, offers the crowd the choice between a notorious prisoner and Jesus, the innocent prisoner (27.19). The crowd’s choice of Barabbas reveals that, as an insurrectionist, Barabbas may be the kind of Messiah that the people expect, for he seeks to overthrow Roman rule through a revolution. Matthew heightens the drama by transforming Barabbas into Jesus Barabbas: Barabbas is a Messianic pretender who bears the name of the true Messiah (cf. Matt 24.23–24). In their choice of Barabbas, the people fail to understand the nature of the role of the Messiah.

The attentive listener or reader also recalls that Matthew is the only Gospel to connect the logion on knowing a tree by its fruits with ravenous false prophets passing themselves off in sheep’s clothing and deceiving many (Matt 7.15–20; cf. Luke 6.43–45). The one who has sat under Jesus’ teachings knows that whether a tree is good or bad, despite all external appearances, can only be determined by its fruits: ‘A good tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit’ (7.18). In the same way, while some may masquerade as God’s messengers, ultimately their deeds will give their game away. Only two verses later after this teaching about knowing pretenders by their fruits, Jesus warns his listeners that many who profess, ‘Lord, Lord’, will not enter the kingdom of heaven (7.21). These people will point to deeds done in the name of Jesus, but will ultimately be condemned. According to Luke’s version, these people will say to Jesus, ‘We

61 See BDAG 940, στασιαστής.

62 See Helen K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1998) 111–12.

63 See BDAG 378, ἐπίσημος.

64 Davies and Allison, *Gospel of Matthew*, 3.584 n. 21. Thus, Matthew’s omission of Mark’s specific reference to *the* insurrection should not be viewed as a denial on Matthew’s part that Barabbas was an insurrectionist; Matthew and his audience may not have known which particular insurrection Mark was referring to (see *Gospel of Matthew*, 3.584 n. 21).

65 France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 1054, differentiates between two perceptions of Barabbas: to the Jewish crowd, he is a ‘patriot’; but to the Romans, he is an ‘insurrectionist’. One wonders if this distinction makes much of a difference to the author of Matthew.

ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets' (Luke 13.26). In Matthew's version of this saying, the people recall various deeds done in Jesus' *name*: 'On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?"' (Matt 7.22). Despite performing many deeds in the name of Jesus, they will be rejected. The immediate meaning of this passage suggests a context in which Jesus' name is invoked as a source of power for miraculous works. Yet one wonders whether Matthew's juxtaposing of this saying with that of false prophets does not hint at a deeper meaning, one which is made crystal clear in the life of *Jesus Barabbas*. Barabbas' deeds bear him out as a pretender to the Messiahship; he seeks to overthrow the Roman empire through violent revolution. But there seems to be another, underlying layer, for those who sought to overthrow Roman rule through violent means saw themselves as doing the work of the Lord, paving the way for God's reign on earth.

Standing next to Jesus Barabbas, however, is another *Jesus*. This other Jesus is the true Messiah. This Jesus is not what the crowd expects in a Messiah, for he has committed no revolutionary acts. Matthew, then, by adding the name 'Jesus', draws out the contrast between a Jesus 'called son of a father' (Barabbas)—presumably claiming to be the son of God (cf. Matt 27.54)—and the true son of the Father. Matthew heightens the drama and conviction of his Passion Narrative: the crowd is offered a clear choice between one who comes in the name of 'Jesus' and claims to be the 'Christ', and one whose name *is* Jesus and *is* the Christ (Matt 16.16, 20). If our sketch has any merit to it, then Matthew's presentation of Barabbas constitutes the deepest denunciation of the Zealot option yet.⁶⁶

It may be time to dispense with the idea that a historical figure by the name of Jesus Barabbas had his full name suppressed by tradition in the first century to preserve the sanctity of the name Jesus. As we hope to have shown, evidence from the first century suggests that NT writers (including the author of Matthew) show no hesitation in recording the name Jesus as a reference to men other than the Christian Messiah. Indeed, it is quite ironic that scribes from subsequent centuries excised Jesus from the name Jesus Barabbas, for as a matter of history there was no one named *Jesus Barabbas*!

66 On the subject of the Zealots, see Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching* (New York: Bloch, 1989 [1925]); O. Cullmann, *Jesus and the Revolutionaries* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970); M. Hengel, *Was Jesus a Revolutionist?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971); Hengel, *Victory over Violence: Jesus and the Revolutionists* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973); W. Klassen, 'Jesus and the Zealot Option', *CJT* 16 (1970) 12–21; A. Richardson, *The Political Christ* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973).