

The Cell: A Dialogue Between Jesus and Barabbas

by Bertie Brits

Prologue: Jerusalem Under Occupation

Jerusalem strained under Passover crowds in 33 CE, its narrow streets overflowing with pilgrims. Beneath the celebration, Roman occupation cast a heavy shadow, imperial banners above the Antonia Fortress, legionnaires patrolling the streets, tax collectors at every gate.

Two responses had emerged among the Jews. Some, like the Zealots, advocated armed resistance. Others followed teachers who offered different paths, spiritual renewal or new visions of God's Kingdom.

Two men embodied these approaches: Barabbas, a revolutionary captured after a failed uprising, and Jesus of Nazareth, a teacher whose talk of a Kingdom had drawn both followers and suspicious authorities. By providence, they now shared adjacent cells in Pilate's dungeon on the night before Passover.

The Encounter

Moonlight fell through a barred window, barely illuminating the damp cells. Both men bore the marks of Roman "questioning", bruised faces, split lips, bloodied backs.

Barabbas spat blood onto the floor. "So they caught the famous teacher from Galilee." He studied Jesus through swollen eyes. "Your words didn't save you from their fists, did they?"

Jesus shifted, wincing as he leaned against the cold wall. "No man escapes his appointed hour. Not even you, Barabbas, despite your sword and mountain hideaways."

"I've heard of you," Barabbas said. "Your followers think you're the Messiah." He scoffed, touching his jaw. "Yet here you sit, beaten like a common criminal. What kind of messiah bleeds?"

"What kind of freedom fighter allows himself to be caught?" Jesus countered. "We are both here, are we not?"

Barabbas grimaced. "I was betrayed. By my lieutenant, the man I trusted most."

"As was I," Jesus nodded. "Thirty pieces of silver."

A silence stretched between them, broken only by the distant call of a night watchman.

The Root of Fear

Barabbas leaned forward, his chains rattling. "They say you heal the sick, even raise the dead," he said finally. "If that's true, why not use that power now? Break these chains, destroy these walls." His voice lowered to an urgent whisper. "Lead the people against Rome. If you can raise the dead and multiply food, my soldiers cannot lose. We will never be hungry, and the wounds of Rome you can heal. With your prophetic sight, you could foresee every Roman move before they make it, they could never surprise us. You would direct our forces with divine knowledge. We will win."

Jesus studied him thoughtfully. "Tell me, Barabbas, what drives your revolution? What fuels your hatred of Rome?"

"Justice," Barabbas answered quickly. "Freedom."

"Beneath that," Jesus pressed. "What do you fear most?"

Barabbas stared at him, taken aback by the question. "Fear? I fear nothing. That's why I fight when others submit."

"All men fear," Jesus said quietly. "Even the bravest."

Barabbas shifted uncomfortably. After a long moment, he spoke, his voice lower. "I fear seeing more of our people crushed. My father worked to death in Roman fields. My sister taken by a centurion when she was sixteen." His voice broke slightly. "We never saw her again."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Jesus said genuinely. "But tell me, what did our father Adam hear from God about death?"

Barabbas frowned at the unexpected question. "That he would return to dust, dwelling in death."

"Yes," Jesus nodded. "For dust you are, and to dust you shall return."

Jesus leaned forward. "This is the terror at the heart of all human striving, Barabbas. Rome's terror. And yours."

"I don't fear death," Barabbas insisted, but his eyes flickered away. "When the Greeks ruled our lands, we learned from their philosophers like Socrates that we continue beyond the body. That our spirits live on after death. Many of our people now believe this."

Jesus raised an eyebrow. "You now sound like someone who once whispered to Adam, 'You will not surely die.' That same ancient lie still echoes through the centuries. It soothes the fear, but does not remove it."

He gestured to the prison walls around them. "All of this, Rome's empire, your revolution, is built on the same foundation: the terror of returning to dust. Look at Rome's monuments rising across the empire, carved in stone to outlast the flesh that commissioned them. The emperors know they will die, yet they cannot bear to be forgotten. They erect statues, build temples, stamp their faces on coins, all desperate attempts to extend their existence beyond the grave, to be remembered as gods when they have long since returned to dust."

Jesus's voice softened. "The love of money, the thirst for control, the hunger for glory, these are merely masks for the fear that haunts every human heart. People will sacrifice anything, their integrity, their compassion, even the lives of others, to prolong their own lives, if only for a moment. Or to ensure that when they do return to the earth, some part of them remains in the memory of the living. This fear of death is what keeps all people in bondage, Barabbas. Romans and Jews alike."

Jesus paused, his eyes meeting Barabbas's with quiet intensity. "In the face of death, all people must choose how to respond. Some, like Rome, build empires to deny it. Others, like you, fight against those empires. But both paths spring from the same root."

The Two Responses to Death

Barabbas stood abruptly, chains rattling. "Even if what you say is true, what choice do we have? Submit to Rome until they work us all to death? Watch our children starve to pay their taxes? This," he gestured to his bloodied face, "is the reality we face. Tomorrow, as I am crucified and die, I will at least start to live on in the memories of my people."

"I don't deny the suffering of humanity," Jesus said. "I've walked among our people, held the hungry, wept with the bereaved. I've seen Rome's cruelty and yes, you will live in their memories for a while and then die the death of forgetfulness."

"Then you understand why we must fight, even if life is as fleeting as a memory, at least it is an attempt at eternal life," Barabbas insisted.

"I understand why you think you must," Jesus corrected. "But your revolution offers only a different version of the same system. You fight Rome because you fear death, and in doing so, you spread more death. The cycle continues."

Barabbas paced his small cell, thinking deeply. "The Greeks have their philosophies to comfort them. Socrates drank his hemlock believing his soul would escape to some better place. But we know better. We are dust, as the scriptures say. Death is real. We need a real saviour that can save us from death"

"Yes," Jesus agreed. "And that is precisely why I have come."

Barabbas stopped pacing. "What do you mean? Tomorrow you and I will die!"

Jesus held his gaze steadily. "I have come not to offer comforting lies about souls escaping bodies. Not to teach better ways to live under death's shadow. But to solve the problem that began with Adam."

"And how does one man solve death?" Barabbas asked skeptically.

"By defeating it," Jesus said simply. "In three days, this body they destroy will live again. Not as a ghost or spirit, but flesh and bone. This is the Father keeping His promise, His covenant of eternal life. When the Father raises me, He demonstrates His faithfulness to His word—the same faithfulness He extends to all who believe."

Barabbas frowned. "But even if you could rise, why remain in flesh? Isn't flesh the problem—weak, vulnerable to Roman spears and crucifixion? Why not escape it?"

"Because creation itself is good," Jesus replied. "The Father doesn't abandon what He made. My resurrection will be the confirmation that His creation project continues forever. He's not starting over; He's making everything new."

"But this world is broken," Barabbas argued. "Filled with suffering and death."

"Yes," Jesus nodded. "That's why renewal, not abandonment, is the Father's way. He doesn't discard what He loves—He redeems it. My body, raised immortal yet still bearing the marks of nails, will be the firstfruits of this new creation growing within the old. The Father doesn't surrender His creation to dust and decay. He reclaims it, transforms it, perfects it."

"Madness," Barabbas muttered, but something in Jesus's calm certainty unsettled him.

The Kingdom Without Fear

"Is it madness to believe the God who formed Adam from dust could remake what was broken?" Jesus asked. "When this happens, everything changes. The grave will be defeated not by escaping the body, but by the body's resurrection."

Barabbas shook his head. "Even if what you say were possible, how does one man's resurrection change anything for the rest of us? Rome will still rule."

"Because those who truly believe will themselves be transformed," Jesus explained. "Think of how men live when driven by death terror, Barabbas. They accumulate what they cannot keep. They harm others to protect themselves. They grasp for power believing it might save them."

"And you do the same," Jesus added gently. "Your revolution is also born of this fear."

"I fight for justice!" Barabbas protested.

"Do you?" Jesus asked. "Or do you fight because fighting gives you the illusion of control over what you truly fear, returning to dust?"

Barabbas fell silent, struck by the question.

"My Kingdom is not of this world," Jesus continued. "If it were, my followers would fight to prevent my arrest. But my Kingdom comes from elsewhere and operates by entirely different principles."

"What principles?" Barabbas asked, genuine curiosity in his voice.

"Freedom from the fear that creates empires," Jesus replied. "When people truly believe in resurrection, when they know in their bones that God's faithfulness extends to raising

the dead, they are freed from the terror that drives men to grasp power, to harm others, to build monuments and empires."

The Political Temptation

"But our priests work with Rome to preserve our traditions," Barabbas argued. "They seek political influence to protect our people."

"And look what that pursuit has done to them," Jesus observed. "They began seeking political power to protect our traditions, but now they collaborate with oppressors and plot to kill those who challenge their authority."

Jesus shifted closer to the bars. "When religious leaders pursue political power, their hunger for earthly influence eventually overshadows their hunger for righteousness."

"So what is your solution?" Barabbas demanded. "Simply submit while Rome crushes us?"

"My solution is transformation," Jesus said. "Not through political victory, but through defeating death itself. Those who truly believe the grave is empty will live differently. They become a new creation in the midst of the old, not because they follow better rules, but because they are no longer enslaved to the terror of nothingness."

"My followers won't try to change the world through Caesar's methods of force and control. They themselves will be the changed world, living proof that death's reign has ended."

"And while your perfect community flourishes," Barabbas said sarcastically, "Rome continues to crucify, to tax us into starvation."

"For a time," Jesus acknowledged. "But ask yourself: What has your revolution accomplished? Has it lessened Rome's cruelty? Or increased it?"

Barabbas turned away, unable to answer.

The True Revolution

"You think you fight Rome, but your true enemy is death itself," Jesus said. "And death cannot be defeated by the sword."

He reached through the bars separating them. "The Kingdom I proclaim is not about seizing political power. It's about being freed from the fear that makes political power seem necessary."

Barabbas struggled with these words. "How can I believe this? That death itself can be defeated?"

"You will see it," Jesus answered. "First in an empty tomb. Then in communities of people who no longer organize their lives around death avoidance. They'll face persecution with joy because they know the grave cannot hold them. They'll share possessions freely because they aren't desperately grasping for security. They'll love enemies because they're no longer driven by the fear that creates enemies in the first place."

"This is why my Kingdom cannot come through political conquest," Jesus continued. "Politics always operates within death's shadow, using control to manage terror. But my Kingdom comes through death's complete defeat in bodily resurrection."

Redemption's Choice

"I've killed men. Many men," Barabbas said quietly, staring at his bloodied hands. "Not just Romans. Collaborators. Informants." He hesitated. "One boy, he couldn't have been more than sixteen. He begged for his life. I didn't believe him."

A tear rolled down his cheek. "His mother found me later. Said he'd been in love with a Roman girl. That was his only crime. Does your Kingdom have room for men like me?"

Jesus moved closer despite his pain. "I once told of a father whose younger son demanded his inheritance early, as if wishing his father dead. This son then squandered everything on wild living in a distant land. When famine came, he found himself feeding pigs, longing to eat their slop."

Jesus's voice softened. "Finally broken, this son decided to return home, hoping merely to be hired as a servant. But while he was still far off, his father saw him coming. And what did this father do? He ran, abandoning all dignity, hiking up his robes, and embraced his filthy son. He placed his best robe on those pig stained shoulders, his ring on those wasteful fingers, and killed the fattened calf in celebration. That is the Father's heart, Barabbas. Not just forgiveness, but lavish, undignified love that restores what was lost."

"And what of justice?" Barabbas struggled with emotion. "The blood on my hands?"

"Justice and mercy meet in God's heart. What has been broken will be restored. The Father's grace transforms what we cannot undo."

Jesus's voice grew stronger. "This is the difference between Empire and Kingdom. Empire demands payment from the poor. Kingdom pays the debt itself. Empire maintains order through fear. Kingdom creates harmony through love."

He reached through the bars, touching Barabbas's hand. "The grave will not claim us forever. This is the Kingdom, God's rule manifesting on earth, making everything new not through the sword, or a helping hand from us, but through the power that defeats sin and death itself. It is the Father's own life poured out, a power no emperor could match, made available to all who receive it. This power transforms what no political revolution ever could."

The Crowd's Choice

At dawn, guards came for both men. As they were led through corridors, Barabbas felt a strange mix of hope and confusion. He knew it was Passover—the greatest feast of their people. He also knew of Pilate's custom to release a prisoner during the feast as a calculated gesture of Roman "mercy."

"Why are they taking us both?" Barabbas whispered to Jesus, his mind racing. "Could they actually—" He hesitated, afraid to voice the possibility of his own release.

"Pilate will offer the crowd a choice," Jesus replied quietly. "Between us."

They stood side by side before Pilate, representing two very different visions for Israel's future, one of violent resistance, one of transformation through resurrection.

"Which do you want me to release: Barabbas, or Jesus called the Messiah?" Pilate asked the crowd.

The chief priests moved through the gathering, organizing the response. When Pilate asked again, the crowd, directed by the priests, shouted: "Barabbas!"

"What shall I do with Jesus called the Messiah?" Pilate asked.

"Crucify him!" they shouted.

Barabbas watched in disbelief as the crowd, his people, those he had fought for, chose him over this teacher whose words had begun to penetrate his heart. As guards removed his chains, he looked into Jesus's eyes.

Jesus smiled through swollen lips. "Go, Barabbas. Live. Remember our conversation. The grave will not hold me."

Confirmation in Emmaus

Three days later, Barabbas heard rumors racing through Jerusalem, Roman patrols searching for Jesus's missing body, strange accounts from women claiming the tomb was empty. Most disturbing were the whispered stories of sightings, the teacher, alive again, appearing to his followers.

On the road to Emmaus, Barabbas observed two of Jesus's followers deep in conversation with a stranger whose voice made him draw closer. At an inn, the stranger broke bread, and Barabbas saw wounds in his hands. Their eyes met across the room, the same eyes from the prison. Then the stranger vanished.

It was true. All of it.

The True Kingdom

Fifty days after Passover, during Shavuot, Barabbas stood near the upper room where Jesus's disciples gathered. A sound like rushing wind filled the house, and he saw tongues of fire rest on each person inside. A disciple named John spotted him and called, "Barabbas! The one they released instead of Jesus! Come! This is for you too!"

As Barabbas entered, the Holy Spirit fell upon him. The burning rage that had fueled him for decades began to dissolve. He found himself proclaiming God's glory in a language he had never learned.

In the following days, Barabbas witnessed how this new community lived out Kingdom principles distinct from imperial logic. They shared possessions so none went hungry. They honored those the empire deemed worthless. They cared for widows and orphans. They practiced forgiveness instead of vengeance, generosity instead of accumulation, service instead of domination.

Most striking was how this community maintained separation from political power. When authorities attempted to co opt the movement for political ends, the apostles firmly declined. "We must obey God rather than human authorities," Peter declared.

Barabbas marveled at this radical separation from political power yet highly effective in having a strong transformative social impact. These followers weren't trying to reform Rome from within or overthrow it from without, they were demonstrating an entirely different way of being truly human. They did not try to change the world; they were the change. Here, within this present reality, they existed as something transformed. They were a new creation.

Facing Death Without Fear

Years later, as an old man, Barabbas faced his own arrest for proclaiming Jesus as Lord. The revolutionary who once fought desperately against death now walked calmly toward it.

The night before his execution, a young believer visited his cell, asking how he could face death so peacefully.

Barabbas smiled. "I once feared returning to dust, as all men do. That fear drove me to violence, to revolution. But now I know that dust is not my end. The Father who raised Jesus will raise me too. This body they will destroy tomorrow is not lost forever, it will be restored, transformed, raised to endless life."

He touched the young man's shoulder. "This is the true revolution Jesus brought, not freedom from Rome, but freedom from the fear that gives Rome its power. When you no longer fear death, no emperor can truly rule you."

"But don't you want to live?" the young man asked.

"I do live," Barabbas replied. "And will continue to live. Not as a ghost or disembodied soul, but as a resurrected person. The Father who breathed life into Adam's dust will breathe new life into mine. This is his faithfulness."

The young man asked, "What about those still trying to change Rome through political means?"

Barabbas shook his head sadly. "The moment we believe God's purposes require political victory, we have already abandoned the way of Jesus. Our Lord refused every opportunity to claim earthly authority, choosing instead the path of the cross."

"When my people seek Caesar's power, they begin thinking with Caesar's mind. They become what they claim to fight. But those who truly believe in resurrection don't need political power. They already have a greater power, life that conquers death."

The next morning, as he was led to execution, Barabbas walked not with the desperate courage of a revolutionary, but with the peaceful confidence of one who knew death had already been defeated. The imperial officials expected defiance or fear; instead, they saw a man at rest in the certainty of the Father's faithfulness.

His final words were not of resistance or revolution, but of faith: "Into your hands I commit my spirit, Lord Jesus. I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in my flesh I will see God."

As the sentence was carried out, those watching whispered to one another in amazement. The Romans had seen this before, first in Jesus himself, then in Stephen, James, and countless other believers they had executed. Each faced death without fear, not because they denied its reality like the philosophers, but because they trusted in resurrection.

An officer nearby muttered, "We cannot truly kill these Christians. Even in death, they look as if they are living." He shifted uncomfortably, adding, "What happens if they all rise from the dead as they claim their Jesus did? Our swords become useless."

His companion nodded grimly. "It makes all our power feel hollow. How do you defeat people who do not fear what you can do to them?"

And they were right. In that peaceful surrender, Barabbas joined a growing witness that demonstrated a power that is victorious over the empire itself, not through political victory in transforming it, but through the defeat of the fear that created the empire in the first place, in establishing the kingdom of God.