

The Passion of the Christ according to the Gospel of Mark

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Introduction

Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, has created quite a stir (to say the least!). It is the eighth highest grossing domestic film of all time. The movie was seen by thirty-one percent of adults in the United States.¹ Regardless of one's take on the movie, there can be no doubt that it turned the nation's attention (for at least a few weeks) to the final hours of the life of Jesus Christ. As powerful as the visual presentation of Christ's passion is in the movie, the biblical portrayal is every bit as stirring, if not more so. For in the passion narrative, Mark portrays the culmination of Jesus' earthly ministry and his final hours leading up to his death.

Mark's Gospel has been described as a passion narrative with an extended introduction. While such a description is slightly exaggerated, the passion narrative plays a crucial role in Mark's Gospel. This is seen in the amount of space Mark devotes to Jesus' final days. Approximately forty-percent of the book (chapters 11-15) details Jesus' passion week. In chapters 14 and 15, Jesus' final hours, beginning with preparation for the Last Supper and culminating with his death on the cross, are depicted. One way ancient writers emphasized an event was by devoting a significant amount of space to it. Mark devotes ten chapters to a ministry that lasted about three years. As mentioned above, he devotes six chapters to the final week, beginning with Jesus' triumphal entry and concluding with the empty tomb. Mark "slows down"

his narrative to describe, in what is truly remarkable detail, what happened to Jesus from his entry into Gethsemane until his burial in the tomb.

The purpose of this article is to give a brief exposition of the passion story in Mark's Gospel, with a particular focus on matters of historicity. In chapters 14 and 15, Mark answers two questions for his readers: why Jesus had to die and how he died. Jesus died as a part of God's plan. This is seen in Mark's repeated references and allusions to the Old Testament scriptures and the fulfillment of Jesus' prophetic pronouncements concerning his death. The second question is answered by his depiction of Jesus' dying completely alone, abandoned by all supporters, surrounded by his enemies, but having drunk the cup given him by the Father.

Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane: Prayer and Arrest (14:32-52)

This is truly an incredible scene. Jesus Christ, God's Son, is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Before the betrayal takes place he pours out his heart to his heavenly Father. The historicity of the event has seldom been challenged. It is incomprehensible to think that the early church would have made up a story about Jesus asking the Father to let the cup pass from him, or to describe him in such anguish, if it did not happen.

Jesus knew that this evening was imminent. He made numerous predic-

tions of his approaching death on his final journey to Jerusalem. Why does he now struggle and ask his Father to remove the cup if possible? Numerous suggestions have been made and some of them will be discussed below.

Jesus' Prayer in Gethsemane (14:32-42)

This event takes place on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives at a location known as Gethsemane. The site was likely the location of an olive orchard, for the word means "oil press." John calls it a garden, and Luke notes that it was one of Jesus' favorite places to go when he was in Jerusalem (John 18:2; Luke 22:39).

Many understand the importance of the event to be an exhortation to vigilance and prayer. However, the major import of the passage is to give us a window into the heart of Jesus as he confronts the cross. This is not to minimize the importance of prayer and vigilance, but only that they are secondary in importance in this passage. The magnitude of the moment can be seen in the fact that Jesus takes the inner circle with him as he prays (cf. Mark 5:37; 9:2; 13:3), while the other disciples are instructed to sit and wait.

Mark's portrayal of Jesus' agony is presented with a stunning boldness (14:33b-34). The terms Mark uses depict a deep sense of struggle: "and [he] began to be very distressed and troubled. And He said to them, 'my soul is deeply grieved to the point of death; remain here and keep watch.'"² Mark goes on to describe Jesus falling to the ground as he begins to pray (14:35a).

As mentioned earlier, few challenge the historicity of this event. A more common question is why Jesus responded in this way. On numerous occasions he predicted

he would die. Jesus clearly was no coward as seen in his frequent confrontations with the religious establishment. Jewish martyrs throughout the ages went to their deaths without expressing the agony depicted here of Jesus. Oscar Cullman makes the interesting comparison between Jesus and Socrates. Jesus, the Jew, recoils from death as an enemy while Socrates, the Greek, longs for immortality and thus welcomes death as a friend.³ Surely it was not his approaching death that caused him such distress, but what would be involved in his death, not the physical suffering, but rather the spiritual punishment he would bear for the sins of the world (Mark 10:45).

Mark summarizes the main point of Jesus' prayer in verse 35 and sets forth the content of his prayer in verse 36. Earlier in Mark's narrative, we read of Jesus being alone in prayer (1:35 and 6:46), but only now do we actually "hear" his words. He addresses God as "Abba," a loving and respectful address by a Jewish child to a father. Jesus was conscious that he was God's Son and Mark has made it an important aspect of his Gospel (1:10-11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7).

Mark preserves the Aramaic term *Abba*. This is how Jesus addresses his Father, not on the Mount of Transfiguration, but in the darkness of Gethsemane, with his soul overwhelmed with what lay before him. In this "dark" setting he testifies of his trust in his heavenly Father.

His prayers in the garden are not the words of a cold-hearted theologian but rather are prayed with the profound conviction that God controls all things. As one who knows this to be true experientially, he confesses that all things are possible for God (14:36a). He then makes his request while in the same moment

embracing his Father's will (14:36b). His request, that God "remove this cup from me," is shocking to one who has read the Gospel up to this point; for from the events at Caesarea Philippi through the Last Supper, it has been clear that Jesus is destined to drink the cup of God's wrath (cf. Mark 10:38).⁴ The raw honesty of the prayer is stunning and humbling.

But Jesus immediately adds, "yet not what I will, but what Thou wilt." With these words we have tapped into the deepest current of his life. Jesus' commitment to the Father's will has been clear throughout Mark's Gospel. The evangelist has not left his readers with any doubt about Jesus' love, devotion, and commitment to his heavenly Father's will.

The disciples' obtuseness to the moment is not surprising and Mark has prepared his audience for this moment by describing the disciples' frequent "failures." Therefore the reader is not shocked for Jesus to find them asleep on three separate occasions.

Jesus' words give further insight into the meaning of the scene (14:38a). In light of his reference to temptation the reader learns that what was transpiring in the garden was not merely a battle for one's physical life, but a battle with Satan himself.

Mark brings the passage to a climax by describing three fateful forces coming together (14:41-42). He notes that in the quietness of the garden, one of mankind's darkest moments transpired: "the hour has come," "behold, the Son of Man is being betrayed," and "behold, the one who betrays me is at hand." Jesus' resolve, steeled by his time of prayer, is seen in his response, "*Arise*, let us be going . . ." Jesus is not surprised, caught off guard, or unprepared by the arrival of his enemy.

The time for prayer is over and the time of testing has begun.

Jesus' Arrest in Gethsemane (14:43-52)

Mark's description of Jesus' arrest is brief as he allows the horror of the event to speak for itself. He provides a bare minimum of theological elaboration. The event fulfills Jesus' prophetic words in 14:27, "And Jesus said to them, 'You will all fall away, because it is written, I will strike the shepherd and the sheep shall be scattered.'" Mark's words, "and immediately," tie together the prayer in the garden with the arrest.

Judas is noticeably identified as "one of the twelve" (14:43b; cf. 14:20; 14:10; 3:19) making the betrayal that much more diabolical.⁵ One of his own followers has "handed him over." The religious establishment accompanied Judas (14:43c), having opposed Jesus from early in his ministry (3:6). Mark's description of the crowd bringing swords and clubs heightens the violent atmosphere. John indicates that at least some of the group consisted of Roman soldiers (John 18:1-3), while Luke mentions the presence of the temple police (Luke 22:52).

The sign of betrayal is a kiss. Mark is terse in his description of this event (14:44-45). A sign of love and friendship is transformed into something perfidious. The use of a kiss as a means of betrayal is also found in the Bible in the story of Absalom ingratiating himself to those coming to see David (2 Sam 15:5) and with Joab's killing of Amasa (2 Sam 20:8-10). The author of Proverbs 27:6 notes, "deceitful (or excessive) are the kisses of an enemy." With a conciseness of words, which is nothing short of astonishing, Mark leaves us desiring to know more (14:46). The

need for identifying Jesus was especially essential, not only because of the darkness of the night, but because of the fact that many of those in the mob might not have ever seen Jesus before, or had only seen him on a couple of occasions.

Due to Mark's brevity, the reader is left with some uncertainty as to what took place in the next few moments. From Mark's account it is unclear if the culprit who inadvertently cut off the slave's ear is a disciple or merely one of the mob (note the difference in wording from Matt 26:51 and Luke 22:49). However, the four Gospels help us to more fully piece together what took place. Peter, in a moment of simultaneous bravery and stupidity, strikes with the sword and cuts off the ear of the high priest's slave (14:47). Mark focuses more on the confusion of the moment, Jesus' rebuke of those arresting him, and the desertion by the disciples. He does not describe Jesus healing the servant's ear or his rebuke of Peter.

Some question the authenticity of this event, finding it not in keeping with the restrained nature of the passage. The response by Peter, however, is not totally unexpected. Earlier in the evening (Mark 14:31) Peter confessed his willingness to die with Jesus. It must be noted also that the restraint belongs to Jesus and not to the pericope.⁶

Jesus' words to the arresting company focus attention on the stark difference in his integrity and their lack of it. They have come out on Passover evening to arrest him as if he were a common thief. While they work under cover of darkness, he taught openly in the temple courts (14:48-49a).

In another astonishing comment, Jesus tells his enemies that this horrible moment is the fulfillment of Scripture (14:49b). We

cannot be certain if Jesus is referring to a particular passage, or to the Old Testament idea that the Messiah would suffer. If he is referring to a particular passage he might have in mind Isaiah 52:13-53:12 (cf. Mark 14:46-49) or possibly Zechariah 13:7.

As mentioned earlier, the disciples' abandonment fulfills Jesus' words in 14:27-31. A more literal rendering of the original emphasizes the moment even more—"and leaving him they fled, all of them." This tragic scene of mob violence, betrayal, and desertion by friends ends with a bizarre epilogue—a "naked" young man fleeing from the garden (14:51-52). This event has been interpreted in various ways.

Some consider this a symbolic incident.⁷ The term used to describe the young man is identical with that used in 16:5 to describe the figure that greets the women at the empty tomb. The "linen cloth" is the word used to describe Jesus' burial cloth in 15:46. Therefore some suggest that this strange incident in the garden is a symbolic prelude to the resurrection story: as Jesus is arrested the narrative flashes ahead to the empty tomb story. Jesus will ultimately escape the clutches of death in resurrection, shedding his burial garments as the young man does in the garden. More likely, it is intended to communicate the terrible confusion that took place at Jesus' arrest. Although the young man is not identified, the anonymity may suggest that this is John Mark.

The passage compels the reader to examine the tenacity of his or her own commitment to follow Jesus. The evangelist has described the abandonment of the Son of Man by all his followers.

The Trial before the Sanhedrin (14:53-72)

The passion story now moves to a major change of setting. Mark takes the reader from the garden, where Jesus was arrested, to the court of the high priest, where Jesus will be tried. Mark sets forth the scene with great literary skill. Once again the evangelist uses an intercalation to tie together two events. Here Mark links the trial of Jesus and the denials of Peter. Jesus is now face to face with his enemies. Jesus' prophetic words in 8:31 are being fulfilled. Mark keeps both Jesus and Peter in focus in this section, presenting the trial before the religious leadership in three scenes. First, he describes Jesus and Peter as they go to the high priest's residence (14:53-54). Second, he focuses the readers' attention on Jesus' questioning and "blasphemy" (14:55-65). Finally, he returns to Peter's most vehement denials (14:66-72). Jesus' "faithful confession" is bracketed on each side by Peter's failures.

Jesus and Peter (14:53-54)

The Sanhedrin was a council with ruling power over religious and civil matters. Its membership consisted of the ranking leaders of the Jewish community, most of whom were drawn from the aristocratic Sadducee party, as well as the educated scribes and Pharisees.

Mark's twin concerns, discipleship and Christology, are seen by his keeping Peter in view. The fact that Peter is reported as following at a distance and then found sitting with Jesus enemies warming himself by the fire alerts the reader to how this scenario will end. Peter's cowardice in his denial is read against the backdrop of Jesus' brave stand for truth. Faithfulness to Christ requires a disciple to be willing

to suffer for Christ. The highpoint of the passage is a christological confession by Jesus himself. He is indeed the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One, and one day he will return as the Son of Man to judge his enemies.

Jesus before the Sanhedrin (14:55-65)

The importance of this passage raises a number of historical and theological questions. Mark presents the scene as a trial. Jesus is brought before the Sanhedrin. Testimony is directed against him, and the high priest interrogates him.⁸ On the basis of his answer, he is condemned for blasphemy.

However, many scholars argue that this could not have been a trial and is evidence of anti-Semitism in the early church.⁹ They suggest that the event may have been nothing more than a simple interrogation or a strategy session before bringing him to Pilate. They admit that some limited involvement by a small number of Jewish leaders may have taken place but not by the entire Sanhedrin.

Later Jewish texts in the Mishna strictly forbid many of the procedures used in the process described by Mark:¹⁰ The following are a representative list of the most serious illegalities:

1. It was held on the Passover, and trials were forbidden on feast days and the Sabbath.¹¹
2. It was held at night (which was forbidden on capital crimes) and in the home of the high priest (rather than in the official court of the Sanhedrin)¹²
3. The sentence of death followed immediately after the proceeding, whereas later law demanded that a period of time must intervene.¹³
4. The testimony of the witnesses did not agree, whereas the Law demanded scrupulous agreement among witnesses, especially in matters related to the death penalty.¹⁴

5. Jesus was condemned for blasphemy (14:64-65), but blasphemy involved mispronouncing the divine name.¹⁵ However, the New Testament evidence seems to indicate that blasphemy was interpreted much more broadly in the first century than in the third (cf. Mark 2:7; 3:28).

Scholars have offered several ways to handle these irregularities. Some have questioned whether these later stipulations were practiced in the first third of the first century. A very different atmosphere may have prevailed prior to A.D. 70. It can also be debated if our strict canons of judicial procedures match the concerns of the first century. Therefore, the best explanation for the “apparent” discrepancies with the Mishna, which was not completed until early in the third century, is that these aspects of Jesus’ trial may not have been illegal then. It should be noted as well that these are Phariscal “rules,” and it seems unlikely that a Sanhedrin dominated by the Sadducees would have allowed itself to be governed by legislation written by the Pharisees. Another point is that throughout history desperate men have taken desperate measures, even if it contradicted their religious convictions. It is entirely possible that a small group of religious leaders took matters into their own hands “for the common good,” even if this meant setting aside common legal procedures.¹⁶

The Temple (14:55-59)

Mark presents the proceeding initially as attempting to secure false witnesses against Jesus (14:55-56). Jewish law stated that at least two witnesses had to agree before imposing the death penalty (cf. Num 35:30; Deut 17:6; 19:15; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 4.8.15).

One of the major accusations against Jesus was his alleged threat against the temple (14:57-59). A similar accusation will be made against him as he hangs on the cross (15:30). Mark does not record Jesus making a public statement like this; however, John records one in 2:19. The irony of the moment was that Jesus would become the new temple.

Christ, Son of God, Son of Man (14:60-65)

Jesus did not respond to their accusations or the testimony of false witnesses (Mark 14:60-61a; cf. Isa 53:7; Ps 38:13-14). His silence ushers the readers into the climactic moment of the trial in 14:61b. The high priest asks Him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?”¹⁷

Jesus immediately responds with an affirmative answer and then expands on the thought bringing together imagery from Daniel 7:13 and Psalm 110:1 (Mark 14:62).¹⁸ This is perhaps the most condensed and powerful christological statement in Mark’s Gospel and represents the culmination of motifs that run throughout the Gospel. Mark has made careful preparation for this moment where Jesus confesses that he is the Messiah (1:1; 8:29; 9:41; 13:21, 22; 15:32).¹⁹ A similar case can be made for the title “Son of God” (1:1; 11; 9:7; 15:39). Therefore both of these titles applied by the high priest to Jesus have appeared elsewhere in the Gospel and are apparent to the reader but seem hidden or misunderstood by most of the characters of the Gospel. Only God and the demons seem to recognize Jesus as the Son of God during his public ministry.

Jesus’ words to the high priest are a prediction of ultimate victory. His passion predictions to his disciples on the journey to Jerusalem spoke not only of the

Son of Man's suffering but of his victory in resurrection also (8:31; 9:31; 10:34; cf. 9:9).²⁰ Jesus' words, "you will see," remind the reader of what Jesus promised on the Mount of Olives, that after the time of travail, the world would see the Son of Man come to gather his redeemed (13:26-27). However, before triumph comes the agony of the cross.

The high priest and the council responded to Jesus' words as blasphemy (14:63-64). The high priest's tearing of his garments was a sign of shock and indignation (cf. Gen 37:29; 2 Kings 18:37; 19:11; 1 Macc 11:71; Acts 14:14).²¹ In this instance it represented a form of judicial act expressing the fact that he regarded Jesus' answer as blasphemous.²²

It is not clear why Jesus' answer is termed blasphemy (14:64). Historically, blasphemy referred to the sacrilegious uttering of the divine name (cf. Lev 24:10-16). The main thought in Mark's account is that Jesus' claim to messianic authority and ultimate triumph is rejected in the strongest possible way. It could be that Jesus' words were interpreted as an affront to God's majesty and glory (cf. Mark 2:7; John 5:18; 10:33).

Mark concludes Jesus' trial scene with mockery (14:65). Mark's description shakes the reader back to the reality of the moment—the sinless Son of God is on trial for his life before those committed to killing him. His suffering is reminiscent of Isaiah 50:6, "I gave my back to those who strike me, and my cheeks to those who pluck out my beard; I did not cover my face from humiliation and spitting." Again the actions of wicked men fulfill Jesus' prophetic words (10:34).

Peter's Denials (14:66-72)

Mark's presentation of Peter's denials

is masterful. His intercalation does not merely indicate that Jesus' confession and Peter's denials took place at the same time, but serve as a stark contrast between the two of them. While Jesus was being beaten in the home of Caiaphas, Peter was below in the courtyard with Jesus' enemies. As Jesus confesses his identity to his enemies, although it will cost him his life, Peter denies his true identity in order to save his own life. Jesus' words, "whoever wishes to save his life will lose it" might very well have come to the mind of Mark's readers.

The passage concludes with Peter's collapse in tears. Mark does not elaborate on the moment or the events following as they relate to Peter; however, in light of what Jesus said earlier (14:28), the reader can surmise that these tears will lead to repentance.

The Trial before Pilate: Jesus the King (15:1-20a)

The formal decision to condemn Jesus and send him to Pilate, reached in the middle of the night was finalized at an early morning session mentioned by Mark (15:1a) and Matthew (27:1a) and expanded by Luke (22:66-71). The change in setting and the coming of dawn signals another major change of scene in the story. After the transfer to Pilate (15:1b), the narrative is composed of three brief episodes: An initial interrogation by Pilate (15:2-5), the choice between Jesus and Barabbas (15:6-15), and the mockery of Jesus (15:16-20a). In each scene the issue of Jesus' messianic identity is central.

Pilate's Interrogation: "Are You the King of the Jews?" (15:1-5)

The pace of events quickens noticeably as Mark turns from the Jewish to the

Roman trial. The events of the preceding night are briefly summarized (15:1). Mark here likely parallels Luke's expansion of the early morning meeting of the Sanhedrin.²³

The working day of Roman officials began very early. The "handing over of him" (14:10-11; 14:18, 21, 42, 44) to Pilate fulfilled Jesus' third passion prediction (10:32). The day is now Friday. Mark will divide the day of Jesus' death into four periods of roughly three hours each: "very early in the morning" (15:1); "the third hour" (15:15); "the sixth hour . . . the ninth hour" (15:33); and "evening" (15:42). Mark may have intended the reader to understand that these events happened according to God's providential plan.²⁴

Pilate is presented without introduction and therefore must have been known to Mark's readers. He was the fifth Roman procurator of Judea and held office from A.D. 26-36. Josephus described Pilate as cruel and oppressive toward the Jewish people.²⁵

The messianic motif will play a major role in the Roman trial before Pilate. Pilate asks Jesus in verse 2, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He asks the crowds in verse 9, "Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?" Pilate asks the crowd the same question in verse 12, "What shall I do with him whom you call the King of the Jews?" Later the soldiers will mock Jesus saying, "Hail, King of the Jews." The placard that will hang above his head on the cross will read, "The King of the Jews." Jesus' kingship permeates the entire episode.

Mark's account of the interrogation is brief, to say the least (15:2). Pilate asks Jesus if he is the "King of the Jews." Jesus' response, "you say so," is somewhat ambiguous. It is clearly less straightfor-

ward than his resounding, "I am," to the Sanhedrin in 14:62. It must be kept in mind, however, that it is not a negative answer, and Matthew and Luke seem to have understood it as an affirmative statement (cf. Matt 27:11; Luke 23:3).

Pilate was amazed at Jesus' refusal to speak to the charges brought against him by the religious leadership (15:5). In fact, in Mark's Gospel Jesus does not speak again after 15:2 until his cry from the cross.

Jesus or Barabbas? (15:6-15)

In this scene the religious leaders' resolve to have Jesus executed comes even more clearly into focus; however, so does the nature of Jesus' royal identity. Mark barely informs the reader on the custom that the Romans granted freedom to one prisoner at the Passover (15:6). There is no historical documentation outside the Gospels for this particular type of event; however, it is unlikely that the evangelist would fabricate this story, and it fits in perfectly well with the Passover event as the kind of gesture that an occupying power might permit.

Now the crowds begin to turn against Jesus (15:8). Up to this point Jesus' primary foes were the religious leaders and Judas. Now Jesus is being stripped of all support. The crowd enters into direct dialogue with Pilate shouting for Jesus to be crucified. Pilate's feeble attempts to release Jesus fail. He is aware that they are motivated by envy (Mark 15:10). But in the end Pilate's desire to satisfy the crowds for political expediency wins out (15:15; cf. John 19:12-16).

The words "crucify him" are spoken by the crowds for the first time in 13:13 and repeated in verse 14b. In verse 15 Mark describes Pilate releasing Barab-

bas and having Jesus flogged and then “handed over” to be crucified. Barabbas, who sought to establish a worldly kingdom by violence, is released, while the “prince of peace,” who was establishing a spiritual kingdom, is sentenced to death. The flogging Jesus received was not the Jewish scourging limited to forty lashes. The Roman flogging was not restricted to a certain number of lashes. The whip was the dreadful *flagellum*. It consisted of pieces of bone and metal plaited into straps of leather. The victim would be beaten after having been tied to a post.²⁶

Mockery of the King (15:16-20)

The last episode before the crucifixion brings the motif of Jesus’ messianic identity to a profound conclusion. Jesus is led into the Praetorium where he is beaten and abused, the whole time being mocked as a “king.” The term *praetorium* was used originally of a general’s tent or of the headquarters in a military camp. Mark uses the term to refer to the magnificent palace constructed by Herod the Great, located west and a little south of the temple area. Pilate resided there when he went to Jerusalem. The Roman cohort consisted of soldiers quartered in Jerusalem at the Praetorium and recruited from non-Jewish inhabitants of the Holy Land and assigned to the military governor.

This scene fulfills Jesus’ words spoken earlier just outside Jericho (10:44-45). Their treatment, while intending to make “sport” of Jesus, ironically continues to emphasize a kingly motif. They mocked him by dressing him in purple, putting a “crown of thorns” on him, spitting on him (cf. 14:65), and taunting him by false homage (15:17-19). After finishing, they lead him away to crucifixion (15:20). The passage presents the stark contrast

between Rome’s approach to power and Jesus’ approach to power.

Crucifixion and Death (15:21-41)

Mark portrays Jesus’ crucifixion and death in three scenes, each marked by the passage of time: Jesus is taken to Golgotha (15:21-24); from the third hour to the sixth hour Jesus was mocked as he hung on the cross (15:25-32); and from the sixth to the ninth hour Jesus’ final hours are described leading up to his death (15:33-41).

The evangelist continues to emphasize God’s control of these events as various aspects related to Jesus’ crucifixion are presented as the fulfillment of Scripture. A second Markan emphasis is the total abandonment of Jesus by his followers and, for a moment of time, even his heavenly Father. A final emphasis in Mark’s crucifixion scene is Jesus’ self-control. As Peter put it, “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered he uttered no threats. Instead he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (1 Pet 2:23).

At Golgotha (15:21-24)

Mark’s portrayal of Jesus’ journey to Golgotha is brief and simple and his description of the physical torments of the Savior is restrained.

Simon of Cyrene is best known as the man that carried Jesus’ cross. Men condemned to death were usually forced to carry the cross beam, often weighing 30 or 40 pounds, to the place of execution.²⁷ Simon was probably a Diaspora Jew in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Cyrene was an important city of Libya in North Africa with a large Jewish population. Of the Gospel writers, only Mark mentions Alexander and Rufus, Simon’s sons, and this may suggest that they were known to

Mark's readers (Mark 15:21). Rufus may be the same person referred to by Paul in Romans 16:13.

The site of the execution is called Golgotha, an Aramaic word that Mark translated for his Greek-speaking readers. It is not known why the site was called "The Place of the Skull." It may have been named for its appearance or because of the many executions that took place there.

Mark adds none of the gruesome details that one would have seen at a crucifixion (Mark 15:24). There are a couple of possible reasons for the evangelist's reserve in describing the crucifixion itself. First, the readers of the Gospels would have been familiar with the gruesome details associated with crucifixion, and therefore there was no need to describe it. A second and possibly more important reason is that he did not want to detract from the significance of the event by focusing on the gruesome details of crucifixion. Mark adds a note about the division of Jesus' garments, which seems to be an allusion to Psalm 22:18,²⁸ and will use this Psalm again at the moment of Jesus' death. Mark's theological emphasis in the crucifixion scene is set forth in what is said at the cross by those around it as well as in Jesus' words on the cross.

Final Mockery: From the Third Hour until the Sixth Hour (15:23-32)

The brief description of the crucifixion gives way to a cascade of abuse as Jesus is mounted on the cross before his enemies. This is one of Mark's most skillfully crafted narratives bringing together the motifs of Christology and discipleship.

The third hour would have been 9:00 a.m. The irony of kingship so prominent in the trial scene reappears on the placard placed above Jesus (15:26). From the

vantage point of the reader the kingly announcement has found its proper place—hung on the cross.

The Greek term translated "robbers" can be translated either "thieves" or "insurrectionists" (15:27). Mark's description of one on Jesus' right and one on his left is reminiscent of Jesus' words to James and John (cf. 10:40). This could very well be Mark's way of reminding his readers that the place of privilege in the kingdom is quite different than the place of power in the world.²⁹

Mark stresses the repeated abuse hurled at Jesus: "hurling insults" (15:29), "mocked him" (15:31), and "heaped insults" on him (15:32). The shaking (wagging) of the head was intended as a taunting gesture (Ps 22:7). Mark, unlike Luke and John, highlights Jesus' total abandonment by men as he hung on the cross.

Jesus is repeatedly challenged to come down from the cross (15:30, 32). The irony is that the only way he can "save to the uttermost" is to give his life "as a ransom" (10:45). He cannot save himself if he is to save others. The verb translated "to save" is used in the Gospel in healing miracles, (5:23, 28; 6:56; 10:52) and in a debate over the Sabbath (3:4). Thus the taunt that he saved others is ironically true in the eyes of Mark's readers. In fact it is a distillation of Jesus' entire life and ministry (cf. 8:35; 10:45; 14:22-25).

The religious leaders' words put the Gospel issue clearly into focus (15:32a). The Jewish leaders unwittingly use the full designation—"Christ, the King of Israel." They were of the same mindset as the disciples—only a messiah without a cross is believable. The scene closes with the thieves joining the bystanders and chief priests in mocking Jesus (15:32).

In these verses Mark has contrasted the

thoughts of the world and the truth of the kingdom. While those around the cross mock Jesus as a pretend king, they are in reality speaking the truth. The power of the kingdom is demonstrated in that the one with the power to save himself, instead chooses suffering and death, in order that he might offer salvation to the world. The world cannot understand this type of sacrifice. One with power must use it for himself. Jesus rebuked this same mindset in his disciples (Mark 8:32ff).

Jesus' Death (15:33-41)

This scene culminates Mark's passion narrative, which began with Jesus' prayer in the garden. His description of Jesus' death is the boldest and most challenging of the four evangelists. Before Gibson's movie, contemporary American Christianity had largely domesticated the cross, and most could never have imagined the utter brutality associated with a crucifixion. It was the most painful and humiliating form of execution in the ancient world. Roman law reserved it for the worst criminals and the lowest classes of society. The cross was an even greater place of horror for the Jews because of Deuteronomy 21:23: "for he who is hanged is accursed of God." This is why Jesus' enemies insisted that he be crucified (Mark 15:13-14).³⁰

Mark supplies another time indicator (12:00 noon until 3:00 p.m.). The scene begins with the darkening of the sky. Mark may be alluding to Amos 8:9-10:

"It will come about in that day," declares the Lord God, "that I shall make the sun go down at noon and make the earth dark in broad daylight. Then I shall turn your festivals into mourning and all your songs into lamentations; and I will bring sackcloth on everyone's loins and baldness on every head. And I will

make it like a time of mourning for an only son. And the end of it will be like a bitter day."

It seems clear from Mark's portrayal that he understood Jesus' death to have cosmic consequences.

Mark has not recorded any of Jesus' words since 15:2. He quotes Jesus and translates them into Greek for his readers. Jesus' words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" are the opening line of Psalm 22. The Psalm is a lament Psalm, portraying first the suffering of the righteous one (Ps 22:1-21) and then the triumphant vindication of this one by God (Ps 22:22-31). These are Jesus' final words in this Gospel, abandoned by friends, mocked and tormented by his own religious leaders, surrounded by thieves, he cries out to God.

Scholars debate whether these words are an expression of real abandonment or an expression of faith—either anguish and bitterness or hope and confidence. There is no reason both cannot be true. The Psalm begins with despair but ends with victory. Surely Jesus felt the isolation of the moment but at the same time in his heart—"not my will but your will be done." On the other hand, we should not downplay the lament. Mark presents Jesus' death in much darker terms than Luke (23:46) and John (19:30). His account of Jesus' death is a wordless scream (15:37). When Jesus expressed his sense of abandonment he may have been bearing the punishment for the sins of the world, but that would not be the end of the story.

Jesus' enemies even misunderstand his final words and continued to mock him (15:35). The drink they offered him was likely the drink for the soldiers (15:36). The reference to Elijah is ironic. Elijah

has already come in the person of John the Baptist, Jesus' forerunner, and he did not come to rescue Jesus, but rather as a prophetic sign of Jesus' death (9:12-13).

Mark's description of Jesus' death is remarkably raw and stunning. The moment of Jesus' death is portrayed as harsh with an unadorned brutality. The other evangelists describe the final moments of Jesus' life in softer tones. They depict Jesus more in control of these final moments; however, Mark describes Jesus' unarticulated scream as he dies (15:37; cf. Matt 27:50; Luke 23:46; John 19:30).

The Events Following Jesus' Death

Mark describes a number of supernatural events immediately following Jesus' death on the cross.

The Temple Curtain Is Torn (15:38)

It is impossible to know with certainty which curtain Mark meant. If it was the veil that separated the inner sanctuary and the "Holy of Holies," a place of absolute sacredness, which could not be entered except once a year by the high priest on the Day of Atonement, then Mark may have understood the tearing of the veil to represent the openness of believers to enter God's presence. The author of Hebrews interprets it in this manner (9:1-14; 10:14-22). Another possible understanding has more to do with the idea of divine judgment on the temple. Mark has already informed his readers of the fate of the temple (11:12-25; 13:2). Twice during Jesus' passion he is accused of saying that he would tear down the temple (14:58; 15:29). The idea of judgment seems to be the more prominent idea in Mark's mind here. In one sense it is not "opened" but "torn."³¹

The Roman Centurion's Confession

The Roman centurion pronounces an unqualified confession of Jesus' identity. In Mark, the confession is not triggered by a series of awesome events like Matthew, but by Jesus' death itself (15:39). He is the first human being in Mark's Gospel to confess Jesus as the Son of God (1:11; 5:7; 9:7; 14:61). Neither his power over nature, sickness, demons, or death had penetrated the blindness of those around him. But now, in the ultimate weakness of a dying scream, Jesus is recognized as God's Son (cf. 1 Cor 1:18-25; 2 Cor 13:4). Mark here reaches back to the opening words of his Gospel. What he announced at the beginning about Jesus as the Son of God (1:1), spoken by God the Father at Jesus' baptism and transfiguration (1:11; 9:7), and known by demons (3:11; 5:7), is confirmed at the cross. Not at a moment of "power," as the world understands power. But in this moment of "apparent" weakness his deity shines forth. While we do not know if the centurion understood the import of his words, Mark's readers certainly do.

A Gentile soldier and a group of women, both outsiders, are mentioned as watching Jesus die (15:39-40). The conspicuous absence of the names of any disciples is a reminder of their flight. The naming of the women prepares the way for their discovery of the empty tomb.

The Burial of Jesus (15:42-47)

The breathtaking events of Golgotha are followed by a scene that is somewhat subdued and sober, an almost anticlimactic finale to the passion story. Yet the burial account serves an important role in the passion narrative; it confirms the reality of the crucifixion scene—Jesus is dead. It also prepares the reader for the empty tomb story that will bring the

Gospel to a close.

Mark again notes the time: it is now Friday evening, the day of preparation for the Sabbath (15:42). Mark introduces Joseph of Arimathea into the story (15:43). He is described as a prominent member of the counsel who was waiting for the kingdom of God. The counsel is likely a reference to the Sanhedrin (at least that seems to be the way Luke interpreted it). Matthew (27:57) and John (19:38) identify him as a disciple (some scholars use this to show how they believe the Gospel stories developed from an original historical core to greater degrees of elaboration). Crossan understands “Joseph of Arimathea to be a total Markan creation in name, in place, and in function.”³² Joseph was “created” to offset the ignominy of Jesus’ hasty burial at the hands of strangers and opponents rather than his own disciples. It must be seriously questioned as to why the author would make up the figure of Joseph of Arimathea. Why this name? Why this particular insignificant village? Why fabricate such an overtly public figure as one of the leaders of the Sanhedrin? This kind of information would not have been that difficult for someone to disprove if Mark fabricated him.

Mark notes that Joseph took courage before asking for the body. Public association with executed criminals involved a genuine risk. Pilate is briefly reintroduced into the story merely to confirm that Jesus is actually dead. The word translated “dead” is used twice in verse 44. The centurion confirms that Jesus is truly dead (15:44-45). This emphasis on Jesus’ death probably indicates one of the purposes of the traditional burial story (as well as preparing for the empty tomb).

Mark does not specifically mention the anointing of Jesus’ body (15:46a). It could

be that he assumed the reader would know his body was anointed or he wanted to help the reader understand why the women went to the tomb on Sunday. Mark describes the tomb as hewn out of rock (15:46b), while Matthew adds that that the tomb belonged to Joseph and it had not been used before (Matt 27:60). John (19:41) mentions that the tomb was in a garden near the site of the crucifixion. Archaeological evidence favors the traditional site of Jesus’ crucifixion and burial at what is now the church of the Holy Sepulcher.

Two of the Galilean women from the cross watch the burial. The long twenty-four hours of agony has ended just as Jesus in the upper room predicted it would end—denial, desertion, betrayal, and death. A person relatively unknown to the readers lays Jesus’ cold lifeless body in a tomb. But that was not the end of the story!

ENDNOTES

¹Erin Curry, “Cultural Digest” (Baptist Press, July 14, 2004).

²All Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible* unless otherwise noted.

³Oscar Cullman, *Immortality of the Soul; or Resurrection of the Dead? The Witness of the New Testament* (London: Epworth, 1958), 207-217.

⁴C. E. B. Cranfield, “The Cup Metaphor in Mark xiv.36 and Parallels,” *Expository Times* 59 (1947-48): 137-138.

⁵While Crossan acknowledges the historical probability of a man named Judas betraying Jesus, he doubts that Judas would have been one of the twelve. He understands the “Twelve” to be created after Jesus’ death as a symbol for a new set of Christian patriarchs to replace the Twelve ancient Jewish patriarchs (John

Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* [San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996] 75).

⁶D. A. Carson, *Matthew* (The Expositor's Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 547.

⁷For a complete discussion of various approaches to these verses see Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1:297-304.

⁸Mark does not record the name of the high priest; however, we know from John's Gospel that the high priest was Caiaphas. He served from A.D. 18 until A.D. 37.

⁹The thinking among many liberal scholars is that the trial scene in the Synoptic Gospels is evidence of anti-Semitism and that the Fourth Gospel's account is more historically reliable. John's Gospel describes a preliminary hearing before the Jews but focuses the majority of the detail on the events before Pilate. The interesting thing is that most liberal scholars understand the Fourth Gospel to be the most anti-Semitic of the four.

¹⁰For a full discussion of the issues see Brown, 1:358-397.

¹¹m. *Sanh.* 4.1.

¹²m. *Sanh.* 4.1; 11.2.

¹³m. *Sanh.* 4.1; 11.2.

¹⁴m. *Sanh.* 4.5-5.2.

¹⁵m. *Sanh.* 7.5.

¹⁶For an excellent summary of the issues from an evangelical perspective see Carson, 549-552.

¹⁷See Darrell Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism and the Final Examination of Jesus*, (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2.106; Tübingen: Mohr, 1998), 184-237 on this entire scene and a defense of its authenticity

¹⁸Some manuscripts read, "You say that I am." If this is the original reading it would still be an affirmative answer but

less forceful. The textual evidence favors "I am," and "You say that I am" probably is the result of a scribal assimilation to Matt 26:64 and Luke 22:70.

¹⁹Mark has proclaimed Jesus' messiahship in other ways (1:11, 14-15; 5:7; 10:47-48; 11:10).

²⁰Norman Perrin understands this to be an example of a Christian *peshet*, similar to the interpretation process at Qumran, in which Old Testament texts were blended and adapted to express the community's theological perspective (*A Modern Pilgrimage in New Testament Christology* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974], 11-40).

²¹m. *Sanh.* 7.5.

²²Hezekiah and his ministers tore their garments in reaction to an Assyrian official's blasphemous challenge to the power of the God of Israel (2 Kings 18:37-19:4).

²³John's gospel makes only a brief comment about Jesus being taken to Caiaphas and describes none of the activity that took place before him. Instead, John focuses his attention on the trial before Pilate.

²⁴James Brooks, *Mark* (New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman and Homan, 1991), 248.

²⁵Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVIII, 35 [ii.2], 55-62 [iii. 1-2], 177-78 [vi. 5]; *War*, II, 169-77 [ix. 2-4].

²⁶C. Schneider, "*mastigoō*, et. al.," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 4:515-518; Josephus, *War*, II, 612 (xxi.5); VI. 304 [v. 3].

²⁷The Fourth gospel does not mention Simon helping Jesus by carrying the cross.

²⁸John makes a specific reference to Ps

22:18 (19:24).

²⁹In verse 28, some manuscripts have “and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘He was counted (reckoned) with transgressors’ (Isa 52:13). However, evidence for this reading is not persuasive.

³⁰For complete discussions on the topic of crucifixion see M. Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); J. A. Fitzmyer, “Crucifixion in Ancient Palestine, Qumran Literature, and the New Testament,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40 (1978): 493-513; J. Schneider, “*stauros*,” in *TDNT*, 7:572-584; and Brown, 2:945-952.

³¹Brooks, 262.

³²Crossan, 172.