

MARK 15

Mark 15:1–15. Pilate Condemns Jesus to Die

The following is adapted from Julie M. Smith, The Gospel according to Mark (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2019), 776–786.

“Held a consultation” (Greek *symbolion poiēsantes*) can also be translated as “formed a plan,” and this may have reference to the transformation of the charge against Jesus from blasphemy (an accusation in which Pilate would have had very little interest) to treason. The word for “delivered” (Greek *paradidōmi*) is the same word Jesus used to predict His arrest in Mark 9:31 and 10:33, which demonstrates that despite appearances, He was still very much in control of the situation. This was all a part of the divine plan.

Pilate’s question was incredulous and Jesus’s response was enigmatic; while “thou sayest it” was not an admission of guilt, it was not exactly a denial. After all, if Jesus had denied that He were a king in some sense, this would have been false. The sense (in Greek) of the “many things” Jesus was accused of may mean that the chief priests accused Him of many *different* things, or simply that they accused Him vehemently or repeatedly of a singular charge of treason.

We have no record of the custom mentioned in Mark 15:6, but the Gospels are united in mentioning this detail. Barabbas and Jesus, while real figures, are clearly literary foils. Each is a “son of the father” (the probable Aramaic meaning of the name Barabbas) who offers liberation from oppression, but in different ways. Matthew makes this point even more starkly by mentioning the detail (found in some manuscripts, but not those from which the King James Version was translated) that Barabbas’s first name was also Jesus. As with much of the Gospel of Mark and the Christian story in general, this is deeply ironic.

We should note that the crowd's inclination seems to have favored Jesus until "the chief priests moved the people." This should keep us from making, as others in the past have, the tragic mistake of imputing the guilt for Jesus's death upon the entire Jewish people. Rather, it was the governing party in Jerusalem, a small faction of the people, who instigated His death. Pilate also appears to have been reluctant to punish Jesus, but this impulse was not strong enough to override his sense of political expediency. Though not known in other historical sources for his weak resolve, Pilate, in a sense, had become a slave to the people that he nominally governed.

Mark 15:16–32. Mocking and Crucifixion

The following is adapted from Julie M. Smith, The Gospel according to Mark (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2019), 786–795.

All the soldiers' actions were calculated mockery, as the soldiers imitated gestures and trappings usually associated with the emperor. Though the chief priests played a role in instigating the conviction, it is clear that the brutal act was carried out by Roman muscle. The Roman soldiers had little sympathy for this would-be King of the Jews. Mark's account of the Crucifixion, in fact, appears to be an allusion to the Roman triumphal procession that accompanied great military victories. This parade would have included gathered soldiers, a monarch clothed in purple, and a great sacrifice.

Crucifixion victims were generally required to carry the crossbeam, the *patibulum*, to the execution site (the vertical portion of the cross remained in the ground). The verb "compel" (Greek *angareuō*) refers to the right of Roman military commanders to force civilians to perform petty service. Simon of Cyrene may have had no connection to Jesus other than being a passerby at this unfortunate time, but the fact that Mark mentions his sons indicates that they were known among the early Church. In keeping with Mark's theme of the disciples' failure to understand Jesus, *this* Simon was present to help Jesus in His hour of need while Simon Peter had earlier abandoned Jesus in a similarly trying situation.

Jesus's refusal to drink the wine offered to Him both recalls Jesus's saying in Mark 14:25 and contrasts the scene at Gethsemane in Mark 14:35–36. In Gethsemane, Jesus accepted the cup of suffering; here He refused a cup of primitive anesthetics that would have softened His suffering. Roman law established that executioners had the right to keep their victims' clothing, and given how expensive clothing was in the ancient world, this was not as trivial as it may seem to us. However, the casting of lots recalls Psalm 22, as do many other details recounted by Mark. We should remember that despite their agonized tone, both Psalm 22 and this story end triumphantly.

It is almost certain that the phrase "the one on his right hand and the other on his left," used instead of the simple "between," is meant to recall the request of James and John that they be granted to "sit, one on [Jesus's] right hand, and the other on [His] left hand, in [His] glory" (Mark 10:37). We now understand

what Jesus meant when He responded, “Ye know not what ye ask” (10:38). Jesus’s glory is revealed in the cross; to share in it one must also share in His suffering.

The fact that there were people passing by should not surprise us since crucifixions were generally performed along busy roads to magnify the horrific spectacle. However, these passersby did not simply “rail on” Jesus; the Greek *blasphēmō* indicates that they were blaspheming—an appropriate choice of words since the people’s senseless cries mocked Jesus’s divinity. This tragic scene is the culmination of Mark’s irony. Jesus *must* die in order to save, but His hecklers do not understand this. Indeed, He saved others by not saving Himself.

Mark 15:33–37. The Death of Jesus

The following is adapted from Julie M. Smith, The Gospel according to Mark (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2019), 795–814.

The darkness in Mark 15:33 has long intrigued commentators. It cannot have been an eclipse; solar eclipses can only occur during the new moon, and Passover is a festival that occurs at the full moon. Moreover, none of those present at the scene acknowledged the darkness, suggesting that it was not some sort of unmistakable supernatural phenomenon but rather something more localized—a sign for those prepared to receive but not especially remarkable to an uninterested bystander. At any rate, darkness was symbolically significant as a representation of God’s judgment and the withdrawal of His presence.

Jesus’s words, which Mark has quoted in Aramaic as well as in Greek, are the opening line of Psalm 22. Elements from this psalm have been a motif throughout the Crucifixion scene, and we should note that the psalm itself has a triumphal ending. Psalm 22 represents the experience of an innocent man who is suffering at the hands of his enemies. Despite feeling abandoned, he is eventually vindicated and reconciled to God. Since Mark has quoted and alluded to elements throughout the psalm, not just its opening verses, it seems likely that Jesus’s words point forward to His eventual vindication. However, this does not diminish the sense of pain and abandonment that Jesus must have felt at this most trying of moments.

Since “Elijah” (*Ēlias*) and “my God” (*elōi*) sound quite similar, it is not surprising that some present mistook Jesus’s words—it was commonly believed that Elijah served as a vindicator and rescuer of the righteous. While this represents a relatively innocent mistake, once again (as throughout the Gospel of Mark) Jesus was tragically misunderstood by those who heard Him at a moment of great importance. Jesus’s dying shout was a final sign that He was no ordinary victim of crucifixion; typically, those on the point of death from crucifixion were too exhausted and weak to cry out.

At the moment of Jesus’s death, Mark tells us that several important things happened. Since the narrator does not pause to explain theology, this is, in a sense, Mark’s interpretation of the meaning of Jesus’s death. The first and most dramatic is the rending of the temple veil. Most likely, this was

the veil that separated the Holy of Holies, the symbolic representation of God's presence, from the rest of the complex. The implication is clear: a return to God's presence is available to all through the death of Jesus.

The centurion's reaction is also significant. As the commander of a small Roman force, he was likely the overseer of the execution, so he must have recognized something unique in the death of Jesus. In a sense, he was brought into a closer relationship with God and into a position of privileged knowledge through the death of Jesus. This centurion is the first human in the Gospel of Mark to correctly identify Jesus. His recognition of Jesus as the Son of God is especially pointed given Roman imperial propaganda that claimed the same title for the emperor.

Finally, Mark mentions the presence of a group of women watching the Crucifixion scene from a distance. We learn that they had been devoted disciples and had ministered to Jesus during His own ministry. The fact that Mark chooses to mention them here and not earlier perhaps indicates another transformative effect of Jesus's death: it opens the way for the public ministry of faithful women.

Mark 15:42–47. Joseph of Arimathea Buries Jesus

The following is adapted from Julie M. Smith, The Gospel according to Mark (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2019), 814–820.

The preparation refers to the tasks that needed to be accomplished before the Sabbath began at sundown. Since Jesus died in the late afternoon, His burial needed to be performed quickly. Mark has already mentioned that Jesus was convicted by "all the council" (14:55), but we may assume that this was hyperbole, that Joseph of Arimathea was somehow not present, or that he was not yet a disciple of Jesus. His boldness in requesting Jesus's body contrasts with the disciples' failure in the moment of crisis.

Pilate's surprise can be best explained by the fact that crucifixion victims normally took a much longer time to die—often days. No individual part of the crucifixion process was fatal; rather, some combination of exposure, blood loss, asphyxiation, and dehydration was the cause of death. However, this was not the first time that Pilate had marveled at Jesus (15:5), suggesting that even in death Jesus taught an impressive lesson. The confirmation given by the centurion (presumably the same figure as in 15:39) adds a level of authenticity to the story: Jesus had actually and observably died.

Joseph's resources are on full display in this episode, reminding the reader of Isaiah 53:9: "He [was] with the rich in his death." Typically, bodies were placed in the tomb for about a year, after which the bones would be moved to a container called an ossuary. Jesus's body would have been placed in a shelf in the tomb in preparation for the first part of this process. As at Jesus's death, the group of women looking on served as important witnesses of events.

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