

MARK 15

Mark 15:1–5. Jesus before Pilate

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

Pilate governed Judea from 26 to 36 AD. He typically lived in Caesarea Maritima but was in Jerusalem presumably for the Passover.

It is debated among scholars whether Rome would allow Jewish authorities to give a verdict and carry out a death sentence in their own domain. If they could, their choice to turn Jesus over to the state instead may have been motivated by a desire to send a clear signal of His guilt or downfall, punctuated by a death that would have been viewed as dishonorable in Jewish law (see Deuteronomy 21:23).

Pilate's question suggests he may have been informed of Jesus's declaration to the Sanhedrin that He was indeed the Messiah or "anointed one"—effectively a claim of kingship (see Mark 14:61–62). Jesus's response, "Thou sayest it," is neither an admission nor a denial. Jesus's silence later can be viewed as a reflection of Isaiah 53:7. Some scholars note that Pilate's marveling may be due to his understanding of Roman law, which assumes anyone refusing to defend themselves is guilty. In other words, by saying nothing, Jesus is effectively admitting that He is guilty of being a king. However, if this line of reasoning is correct, it conflicts with later verses in which Pilate suggests that Jesus is innocent of any crime (for example, Mark 15:14).

Mark 15:6–15. Jesus and Barabbas

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

The name Barabbas literally translates as "son of the father"; thus, Barabbas is a symbolic, albeit counterfeit, savior who has attempted to deliver the people through violence. That the chief priests "delivered

him for envy” and “moved the people” suggests that the people as a whole are not necessarily inclined to condemn Jesus but are being manipulated by the chief priests, whose motives are not pure.

Verse 14 uses the imperfect form of the verb (thus Pilate “was saying unto them”), suggesting that Pilate spent some time trying to defend Jesus to the crowd and also emphasizing Jesus’s innocence. That Pilate simply gives in to the demands of the crowd underscores the lack both of leadership and of any real justice in this moment.

Mark 15:16–32. The Mockery and Crucifixion of Jesus Christ

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

Praetorium is a Latin word typically referencing the residence of a governor. *Hall* was used to refer to some sort of courtyard. *Band* is a military term for several hundred soldiers.

New Testament scholar Sharyn Dowd suggests that the events surrounding the Crucifixion of Christ follow the pattern of a Roman triumphal procession—in other words, the sequence of actions was a prolonged crafted mockery of His being a king. It begins with a gathering of “the whole band” of soldiers typically needed for a proper processional (verse 16) then continues with clothing Jesus in purple, an expensive dye usually reserved for royalty, and crowning Him with thorns (verse 17); hailing Him as king (verse 18); smiting Him with a reed, a symbolic scepter, and bowing down before Him (verse 19); offering Him wine and myrrh, an expensive drink of kings, which He refused, echoing the cup of wine poured out to the gods near the end of a triumphal procession just prior to making sacrifice (verse 23); and placing a sign upon Jesus’s cross, echoing the signs raised up at the end of a triumphal procession indicating the victor’s triumphs (verse 26).¹

Mark indicates that when Jesus was led out to be crucified, Simon, a Cyrenian, carried the cross. Cyrene was located in present day Libya, suggesting that Simon was likely African. The Crucifixion occurred at the place called Golgatha in Aramaic and Calvary in Latin; both names mean “skull.” This hill was traditionally believed to be the place where Adam’s skull was buried. The hill also had a peculiar skull-like shape in addition to being a place for execution. Any or all of these could have given rise to the hill’s name.

Crucifixion, a brutal form of execution, was typically reserved as punishment for the most serious of crimes among those who were not Roman citizens. Jesus’s refusal to drink wine, which was believed to curb pain somewhat, stands in contrast to His willingness to drink the bitter cup in Gethsemane. It also fulfills His promise made in the Last Supper that He would not partake of wine again until He drank it with them in His Father’s kingdom. Casting lots for Jesus’s clothing echoes Psalm 22:18, which depicts garments being divided by casting lots, accompanied by torture and derision.

That Mark chooses to describe the placement of Jesus’s cross in relation with the two others as “the one on his right hand, and the other on his left” rather than simply between them, may be a purposeful

echo to James and John’s desire to have seats of honor on the left and right hand of Jesus. This connection is plausible since Jesus explained to His disciples that to receive such an honor means they must also be willing to drink His cup and experience His baptism—that is, His suffering and death as mentioned in the preceding verses (see Mark 10:32–40). Simple theft was not a capital crime; however, the word translated “thieves” has political connotations, suggesting the two were likely rebels or insurrectionists. Quite possibly, they were the companions of Barabbas and committed murder with him during an insurrection, as mentioned earlier (see Mark 15:7).

Mark indicates that while Jesus hung on the cross, many walked by and “railed on him.” Ironically, the statement “He saved others; himself he cannot save” is an inadvertent admission by the chief priests that Jesus did indeed heal and deliver others from demons and ailments.

Mark does not emphasize the physical pain or torture that Jesus endured because of His Crucifixion; rather, he focuses on the emotional suffering Jesus experienced through mocking and reviling. Even the two who were crucified and enduring extreme physical pain next to Him had no compassion and joined in the reviling. In many ways, the pain of rejection and humiliation can run deeper than physical suffering and gives the reader insight into the Savior’s ability to empathize with those who are downtrodden.

Mark 15:33–47. The Death and Burial of Jesus Christ

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

Mark notes that darkness had already covered the land at the sixth hour, which continued until the ninth hour. In the period of Jesus’s mortal ministry, night ended (and day began) at 6 a.m. The sixth hour would consequently be noon, and the ninth hour would be 3 p.m., typically the brightest time of the day. That the soldiers and bystanders did not react to the darkness suggests that it was likely some sort of natural occurrence, but those with “eyes to see” would have understood the symbolic significance. Amos 8:9–10 mentions God darkening the earth at noon and turning a feast into mourning, such a mourning as one does for an only son.

Although Jesus is feeling abandoned by God in this moment, it is instructive that He still calls out to Him and does not turn his back in despair or retribution. Those who hear Him crying out to God say He is calling Elijah and offer Him vinegar to drink. This is likely another effort to ridicule Him. The drink of vinegar appears to be given in order to prolong His life and thus His suffering in mockery of giving Elijah time to come and save Him. This interpretation is strengthened by Psalm 69:19–23, wherein the speaker seeks pity and comfort but is rather given reproach and vinegar by adversaries.

“Gave up the ghost” can also be translated “the spirit went out of him.” Mark’s mention of the temple veil rending immediately in connection with Jesus’s spirit departing His body is likely meant to spur the reader to view the event as symbolic. The use of the passive verb and the detail that it was rent from the top to

the bottom (the top being around eighty-five feet above the ground) suggests that it was a result of divine action. Mark's audience would have likely understood this to mean that any barrier that prevents access to God (such as law or justice, which the veil can symbolize) is no longer a threat. The Greek word translated as "rend" (*schizō*) is used only one other time in Mark: when he describes the opening of the heavens at the moment Jesus was baptized (His symbolic death).

Among those nearby when Jesus dies is a centurion who stood "over against him." This is an expression used in the Greek Septuagint for standing in the presence of God and supports the centurion's declaration that "truly this man was the son of God." *Centurion* at this time was a military title for those who commanded a century, or about eighty soldiers. In earlier times the number may have been closer to one hundred, which would explain the naming convention.

Several women were also nearby and are described as "looking" at Jesus. Additionally, these women "followed," "ministered unto," and "came up with" Him. "Looking" here emphasizes their role as witnesses of Jesus death, just as they will also see where He is buried and the stone rolled away from the empty tomb (Mark 15:47; 16:4). The women are the main witnesses of Christ's death and Resurrection in Mark. That they followed Him indicates their status as disciples. Throughout his Gospel, Mark uses the verb *ministered* to describe the actions of Jesus, angels, and women. It can refer to something as simple as table service, but even this has greater symbolic meaning in the writings of Mark. To "come up with" Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem can symbolize the women's own ascension as they maintain a relationship with Jesus throughout the journey. "Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses" is often viewed as the mother of Jesus Himself based on Mark 6:3. But this reading is uncertain given that Mark, in this moment, does not list her first as the only one he has already introduced and does not reference her as Jesus's mother. Moreover, Jesus's brother James was traditionally known as James the Just, not James the Less.

Sabbath officially begins at 6 p.m. (nightfall), so preparations (any work to be done, including burials) need to occur prior to that. Jesus's death occurred sometime after 3 p.m. but before 6 p.m. Jesus suffered on the cross for about six hours, which is a much shorter period than usual. Later Christians emphasize the suffering of Christ on the cross, but what is more noteworthy in this moment is its brevity. This may, in part, explain Mark's emphasis on the emotional humiliation and mocking of Jesus rather than just the physical torture He experienced.

Arimathea is about twenty miles northwest of Jerusalem, but Joseph's access to a tomb in Jerusalem suggests he is a resident there, and his title "counsellor" might indicate he is a member of the Jerusalem council or Sanhedrin. In the time of Jesus, burial was performed in two stages: (1) a body was placed into a tomb for a year or more for decomposition and (2) the bones were placed in an ossuary or box. Those who had been crucified were usually considered cursed and were not given the dignity of a burial. That Joseph of Arimathea provided such fineries for Jesus's burial suggests a deep respect and willingness to honor Jesus despite social pressures to do otherwise.

Note

¹ Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 2000), 158–159.

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