

Scripturalization in Mark's Crucifixion Narrative

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The Shame of Crucifixion

One might have thought that it was something of a scholarly cliché to stress the horror, the shame, the degradation, the suffering involved with crucifixion. Yet many of the scholarly reactions to *The Passion of the Christ* (dir. Mel Gibson, 2004), which balked at the scale of suffering endured here by Jesus, provide a timely reminder that many of us still have very little grasp of just how appalling a death crucifixion was. The remarkable thing about Mel Gibson's film was not so much the magnitude of suffering depicted but its restraint in showing many of the true horrors of crucifixion, as Gibson himself realized.¹ Consider, for example, Seneca's mockery of the view that life is worth holding on to at any price:

Can anyone be found who would prefer wasting away in pain dying limb by

¹ See further Mark Goodacre, "The Power of *The Passion of the Christ*: Reacting and Overreacting to Gibson's Artistic Vision" in Kathleen E. Corley and Robert L. Webb (eds.), *Jesus and Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ: the Film, the Gospels and the Claims of History* (London & New York: Continuum, 2004): 28-44 (35-6).

limb, or letting out his life drop by drop, rather than expiring once for all? Can any man be found willing to be fastened to the accursed tree, long sickly, already deformed, swelling with ugly weals on shoulders and chest, and drawing the breath of life amid long drawn-out agony? He would have many excuses for dying even before mounting the cross.²

But there is a problem with the iconographic focus on Jesus' suffering in *The Passion of the Christ*, for while it gives some hint of the appalling suffering involved in such a death, it masks what for the ancient mind marked the true terror of death by crucifixion. For it was not merely the excruciating physical torture that made crucifixion so unspeakable, but [34] the devastation of shame that this death, above all others, represented.³ Consider, for example, Cicero's remarks:

But the executioner, the veiling of the head and the very word 'cross' should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears. For it is not only the actual occurrence of these things or the endurance of them, but liability to them, the expectation, indeed the very mention of them, that is unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man. (*Pro Rabirio* 16).⁴

² Seneca, Epistle 101 to Lucilius; Martin Hengel's translation, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (ET; London: SCM, 1977): 31-2.

³ The honour / shame dynamic is not, however, entirely absent from *The Passion of the Christ*, and is particularly marked in the scourging scene, when Jesus raises himself up before his tormenters' initial series of scourgings, and in the repeated emphasis, carried over from the Gospels, on the mockery of Jesus. The soldiers are publicly shaming Jesus, and delighting in that act of public humiliation.

⁴ The translation used here is Martin Hengel's from *Crucifixion*: 42.

It was, as Origen describes it, *mors turpissima crucis*, the utterly vile death of the cross,⁵ something the civilised person could not even bear to talk about.⁶ If we are to have any chance of understanding Mark's crucifixion narrative, it needs to be against this background. Douglas Geyer's recent and evocative phrase *the anomalous frightful* reminds us of this proper context for reading Mark historically:

Crucifixion is an ideal expression of the anomalous frightful. In accordance with ancient evidence about types of death and the destinies of those killed violently, it is terrifying, ghastly, and laden with uncertainty. It is a violent and abrupt end of mortal life, and it remained this volatile problem for the ancient audience of the Gospels. The tenacity of this problem for early Christianity is not to be underestimated.⁷

Narrating Crucifixion

It is easy to forget that Mark's narrative of the crucifixion is not only the first extant narrative of Jesus' crucifixion, but one of the first narratives of any hero's death by crucifixion. There are, of course, references to crucifixion in many ancient writers,

⁵ Origen, *Commentary on Matthew 27.22*.

⁶ For a helpful study of the honour – shame dynamic in John's crucifixion narrative, see Jerome Neyrey, "Despising the Shame of the Cross: Honor and Shame in the Johannine Passion Narrative", *Semeia* 69 (1996): 113-37. Many of Neyrey's observations concerning the way in which the crucifixion narrative functions in John are relevant for Mark too, and provide a useful insight into the cultural context of the first crucifixion narratives.

⁷ Douglas W. Geyer, *Fear, Anomaly and Uncertainty in the Gospel of Mark* (ATLA Monograph Series, 47; Lanham, Maryland; London: Scarecrow, 2002): 10.

Cicero, Josephus, Plutarch, but it is rare to find a narrative of one man's crucifixion,⁸ a fact that is not at all [35] surprising given the horror of the spectacle.⁹ And now Mark, the first, as far as we know, to write a Gospel,¹⁰ has decided to write a narrative in which Jesus' suffering and death is placed in the foreground. In a Gospel where everything points forward to this decisive moment, in which Jesus' very predictions of it are conceived in narrative terms,¹¹ Mark's only realistic option is to provide some kind of narrative account of the crucifixion. It is the climactic moment of the story, the goal of Mark's theology of Christ crucified. To stop short of narrating the event that is at the heart of Mark's Gospel was clearly not a possibility.

But how would such an author, the first to construct a written narrative of Jesus' crucifixion, go about his task? How does one make the well known instrument of ultimate shame the occasion of the highest glory? On the whole, the very idea of any victim of crucifixion being the kind of hero who would warrant a literary narrative

⁸ The authoritative work on the topic remains Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion*, though this should be supplemented with Joe Zias, "Crucifixion in Antiquity: The Evidence", on-line article (1998) at the Century One Foundation, <http://www.centuryone.org/crucifixion2.html>, also available on Joe Zias's homepage, <http://www.joezias.com/CrucifixionAntiquity.html>. The closest one gets to the narration of a hero's death by crucifixion are Herodotus, *The Histories* 7.194.1-4, which narrates the crucifixion and subsequent freeing of Sandoces. See also the story of the Widow of Ephesus in Petronius, *The Satyricon* 110.6—113.4.

⁹ M. Tullius Cicero, *Speech before Roman Citizens on Behalf of Gaius Rabirius, Defendant Against the Charge of Treason* V[16].

¹⁰ I am assuming Marcan Priority here; for a defence see my *Case Against Q: Studies in Marcan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), Chapter 2.

¹¹ This is particularly clear in the third Passion prediction, 10.34, which has a seven point narrative sequence: (1) going to Jerusalem, (2) handing over to the religious authorities, (3) condemning to death, (4) handing over to the Gentiles, (5) mockery, (6) death, (7) resurrection.

telling the story of his misery would have been unthinkable, far less that such a narrative would be the climax of the story of Israel's Messiah.

No doubt there were precedents for what Mark was now attempting. Paul frequently points to the shame, the scandal, the foolishness of the cross and makes it the heart of his gospel, the event around which all history pivots. But in Paul's letters, and perhaps his preaching too, the very mention of crucifixion would have conjured up terrifying images to the ancient mind. There is no need for a narrative of Jesus' death. Martin Hengel's intriguing suggestion that Paul must have presented a vivid narrative of Jesus' crucifixion¹² is less likely than the alternative explanation that Paul's own flogged and persecuted body was the occasion of the "public portrayal" of Christ's crucifixion before the Galatians (Gal. 3.1).

[36] In an attempt to probe for an answer to this fascinating question about the origin of Mark's crucifixion narrative, it is worth bearing in mind how the claim that the Messiah had been crucified would have sounded to many an ancient hearer – preposterous. The point of crucifixion was to terrorise the population; it was an example; it was not an honourable death like a death on the battlefield.¹³ One of Mark's tasks, therefore, will be to demonstrate that, against every instinct of an ancient reader, this crucifixion was neither at best a tragic accident, a horrific mistake, nor at worst, the demonstration of the fate of one deserving of the *summum*

¹² Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer, *Paul Between Damascus and Antioch: The Unknown Years* (ET, London: SCM 1997): 17.

¹³ Contrast, for example, the death of Spartacus as reported by Florus (*Epitome* 2.8), an honourable death on the battlefield: "Spartacus himself fell, as became a general, fighting most bravely in the front rank."

supplicium, the most terrible of retaliatory tortures. So how could one deal with the anomalous frightful? How might one anticipate the very charges that the earliest critics of Christianity like Celsus in fact went on to make?¹⁴

Mark uses several strategies to deal with these problems. This, his biggest challenge, is his invitation to produce a raw but nevertheless brilliant literary work. One strategy is to show that this death, though violent, was not accidental by having Jesus himself prophesy these events. Three times Jesus will tell his disciples what will happen to him in detail, all of which is explicitly fulfilled in the Passion Narrative. While everyone else, the disciples, the Jewish leaders, the Romans, either misunderstands or mocks him (only the women of Mark 14-15 seem to understand that there is no contradiction between Jesus's Messianic identity and his suffering), Jesus himself knows that his mission is "the way" of the cross. It is a point that could but won't get developed here, but it is intriguing that Mark does not simply have Jesus predict his Passion and then fulfil it. The fulfilment of Jesus' own prophecies happen in the most darkly ironic context, as if Mark knows that the only way of writing a compelling narrative is to combine the fulfilment motif with the nasty, stark reality of pre-crucifixion mockery. Thus, as Peter is in the very act of denying Jesus outside, and so fulfilling one of Jesus' predictions, the soldiers inside are spitting at Jesus, beating him and taunting him to "Prophecy!" (Mark 14.65). The shame of Jesus' public humiliation is trumped by the dramatic irony which confirms him as a prophet.¹⁵

¹⁴ See Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.34.

¹⁵ Among several useful discussions of dramatic irony in Mark's Passion Narrative, see Donald H. Juel, *The Gospel of Mark* (Interpreting Biblical Texts; Nashville: Abingdon, 1999); Jerry Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark's Gospel: Text and Subtext*

Use of the Scriptures

But the primary strategy used by Mark to deal with the sensational nature of the claims being made in the narrative he is developing is the use of the Scriptures. The Scriptures are the obvious place to go for an author like Mark immersed in early Christianity's obsession with demonstrating promise and fulfilment. Any approach to Mark's Passion story that fails to take seriously its extensive use of Scriptural quotation, allusion and precedent is unlikely to be able to explain what is going on here. So, why the Scriptures? Why the obsession with the Greek Bible?¹⁶

It is a tribute to Gospel scholarship of recent times that it has so stressed the role played by the Old Testament in the formation of the New. Monograph after monograph appears on the topic, conferences are held which centre on this topic alone, and it is now rightly perceived to be quite impossible to understand the New Testament without intimate knowledge of the Old. And yet in spite of the sheer volume of studies on this all important topic, it is surprising to see how often the function of the Old Testament in the New is simply taken for granted, as if it is self evident to any intelligent reader. But one of the elements that requires an explanation is the variation in the usage of the Scriptures at different points in the Gospel narratives. Why, for example, are references to the Old Testament so thick on the ground in the Passion Narratives but so scant when it comes to the neighbouring

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); see too Tom Shepherd's paper in the Mark Group at the SBL Annual Meeting 2003.

¹⁶ In Mark's case the term "Greek Bible" is the most appropriate one in this context since it seems most likely that Mark is familiar with Greek rather than Hebrew versions of the Jewish Scriptures.

resurrection stories, a problem that is sharply focused given the fact that both Passion and Resurrection were, from the earliest times, held to have happened *according to the Scriptures* (1 Cor. 15.3)?

In order to probe for an answer, it is worth bearing in mind what the Scriptures signified for first century Jews as well as the earliest Gentile Christian converts, and what it meant to say that Jesus died for our sins *according to the Scriptures*. The Scriptures were the perfect expression of the will of God. If you wanted to understand the mind of God, you went to the Scriptures. And this is one of the driving forces in the formation of the Passion Narrative. It is only when one combines the realization of the sheer horror of crucifixion with the fact that the Scriptures encapsulated God's will that one remembers that there is no more powerful way of explaining that this horrific event was in God's perfect plan, that it was his own divine will, than to narrate the very story of [38] crucifixion using the language of Scripture. And it is Mark's genius that he mounts this powerful argument for frightful death as God's will by narrating it in Scriptural terms, by using their vocabulary, their imagery, their very fabric to tell his surprising story.

In Mark's Passion Narrative, Jesus himself prays that what God wants will come to pass, "Not my will, but yours" (14.36, 39), and shortly afterwards it becomes clear that God's will does indeed involve Jesus' shame and abandonment. In contrast to key moments earlier in the Gospel (1.11 and 9.7), neither Jesus nor the reader hears God's voice. In answer to this prayer, there is silence. Now God's will is established by what already stands written in the Scriptures. Jesus knows this and says, as his fate is sealed at his arrest, "But let the Scriptures be fulfilled" (14.49). The Scriptures are

the answer to Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane. This is God's will, that Jesus is to be humiliated; its announcement is in the Scriptures that Mark is going to bring forward at point after point in his narrative of the crucifixion.

This reference in Mark 14.49 represents the last explicit mention of "the Scriptures" in Mark's Gospel. Every allusion that follows is precisely that, an allusion. There are no formula citations here and no other direct comment on "the Scriptures". Jesus' chilling pronouncement at his arrest, "Let the Scriptures be fulfilled", echoes throughout the narrative, so that now, on the only two occasions when Jesus speaks more than two words, it is to speak, like the narrator, utilizing Scriptural language, first to answer the High Priest with the quotation from Daniel 7.13-14 (Mark 14.62) and second, on the cross, in the quotation of Psalm 22.1 (15.34).

In the Crucifixion Narrative, the Scriptural allusions are, in other words, embedded in the account. It is not as if one could take away the Scriptural elements and still have a coherent narrative. They are fundamental to it, not tagged on extras acting as commentary on a narrative that would make sense without them. But if it is the case that Mark's primary reason for relying so heavily here on the Scriptures is to make clear that the frightful business of crucifixion was, on this extraordinary occasion, in God's will, its victim vindicated by a narrative that celebrated this as an event that the Scriptures themselves predicted, then we run up against a tough historical question, and a question that is already starkly posed in much recent literature on Jesus and the Gospels. Given the extensive use of the Scriptures here, in the Passion Narrative, could it be that the Scriptures themselves provided the very *sources* for the details of

the story? Could it be, to use the catchy phrase coined by John Dominic Crossan, that we are looking here at *prophecy historicized*?

[39]

Prophecy Historicized or History Scripturalized?

In the *Birth of Christianity*, Crossan explains the concept like this:

The individual units, general sequences, and overall frames of the passion-resurrection stories are so linked to prophetic fulfillment that the removal of such fulfillment leaves nothing but the barest facts, almost as in Josephus, Tacitus or the Apostles' Creed.¹⁷

For Crossan, and in this he is followed by a good number of scholars, especially those in the Jesus seminar,¹⁸ the *prophecy historicized* model is plausible because the alternative, that the Passion Narratives are "history remembered" is weak. Such a view, for Crossan typified in the work of Raymond Brown,¹⁹ is simply inadequate to

¹⁷ John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998): 521.

¹⁸ See, for example, Daryl D. Schmidt's endorsement of the thesis in "Septuagintal Influence in the Passion Narratives", *Forum New Series* 1.1 (Spring 1998): 95-118, especially 107. Cf. Marcus Borg's use of Crossan's terms in N. T. Wright and Marcus Borg, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (London: SPCK, 1999): 84-5. The Jesus Seminar overall finds the thesis persuasive. The proposition "Detailed information about the crucifixion of Jesus is derived from prophecy historicized" receives a "red" rating, "The Jesus Seminar: Voting Records: The Passion Narrative", *Forum New Series* 1.1 (Spring 1998): 227-33 (230).

¹⁹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (2 vols.; Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1994).

the task. It is just not plausible, for Crossan, that memory could so have imbued the text with these Scriptural resonances.

The severity of the contrast Crossan sets up between his own view and that of Raymond Brown, between prophecy historicized and history remembered, is unnecessary. The reader is presented with a choice: is it history or is it prophecy? Did it happen or is it fictional? The contrast between the two views presented is simply too stark. Given these sole alternatives, *history remembered* or *prophecy historicized* and given the undisputed level of Scriptural allusion in the Passion Narratives, few critical scholars would be able to resist Crossan's conclusion. But the choice offered by Crossan is not a necessary one. Only the most ardent fundamentalists would go for the view that the Passion Narratives were simply made up of "history remembered", and the term is in fact not one that is used by Raymond Brown, whose work Crossan is caricaturing.²⁰

[40] There is a plausible answer to Crossan, and it is not the "history remembered" view of Crossan's caricature of Brown. Rather, it involves introducing a helpful, if rather cumbersome term from recent Hebrew Bible scholarship, *scripturalization*. This term is adopted and developed by Judith H. Newman in her recent monograph *Praying by the Book: The Scripturalization of Prayer in Second Temple Judaism*.²¹

²⁰ Although Brown does indeed see the "basic incidents" of the Passion Narrative as derived from "early Christian memory" (*Death of the Messiah*: 16), he also sees the whole process, from eye-witness and "ear witness" through to the evangelists, as involving embellishment from the Christian imagination (for example *Death of the Messiah*: 14).

²¹ Judith H. Newman, *Praying by the Book: The Scripturalization of Prayer in Second Temple Judaism* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999). The term is borrowed from her

Newman's essential thesis is that in the Second Temple Period, Jewish prayers increasingly used Scriptural models, precedents and language. Increasing devotion to developing Jewish Scriptures, in a liturgical context in which such Scriptures were getting used more and more, led inexorably to the intermingling of those Scriptures with Jewish prayers. Jews were "praying by the book"; they were scripturalizing their prayers.

What is so interesting about this model in our context is that it makes such good sense of Mark's Passion Narrative. For here, the multiple echoes of Biblical themes and the varied allusions to Scriptural precedent can be explained on the basis of intimate interaction between the tradition and the Scriptural reflection. The traditions generated Scriptural reflection, which in turn influenced the way the traditions were recast.

The point might best be illustrated in engagement with Crossan. Right at the end of that Crucifixion Narrative, in Mark 15.40-41, there is a note about named women watching the crucifixion from a distance.²² This is how Crossan works with this material and the related mention of the women in 15.47-16.8:

teacher James L. Kugel, "Topics in the History of the Spirituality of the Psalms" in *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible Through the Middle Ages* (New York: Crossroad, 1986): 113-44, where he uses it with reference to the increasing perception of the Psalms as Scripture. Newman takes the term in a different direction. It is her usage of the term that I am working with in this paper.

²² Gerd Theissen argues for the historicity of this detail by pointing out that the names given appear to presume the readers' knowledge of their identity, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (ET, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992): 177-8. But while that may have been the case for the traditions on which Mark is basing his account, it is not convincing that Mark himself knows the identity of these women, not least given the (deliberate?) vagueness in the three

Their existence and names in 15.40-41 are pre-Markan tradition, but their criticism in 15.47—16.8 is Markan redaction. In other words, the inclusion of women observing the burial and visiting the tomb is no earlier than Mark, but the inclusion of women watching the crucifixion [41] is received tradition. But is the latter historical fact? My best answer is yes, because the male disciples had fled; if the women had not been watching, we would not know even the brute fact of crucifixion (as distinct, for example, from Jesus being summarily speared or beheaded in prison).²³

The example is an interesting one because of the wording of the verse in question,

Ἦσαν δὲ καὶ γυναῖκες ἀπὸ μακρόθεν θεωροῦσαι

And there were also women watching from a distance (Mark 15.40; cf. Matt.

27.55 // Luke 23.49)

The note that they were watching ἀπὸ μακρόθεν²⁴ echoes the wording of Psalm 38.11 LXX, “My friends and companions stand aloof from my affliction, and my

mentions of 15.40, 15.47 and 16.1. For a recent examination of the material on these women, see Susan Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel* (JSNTSup, 259; London & New York: T & T Clark International, 2004): 153-192.

²³ *Birth of Christianity*: 559. See also *Who Killed Jesus? The Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995): 181-5 for reflections on the role played by the women in the story. In *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991): 415, Crossan suggests that the first version of Mark originally ended just before these verses, at 15.39, the Centurion's Confession.

²⁴ Contrast John 19.25-27 where the Beloved Disciple and Jesus' mother are close enough to hold a conversation with Jesus. Joel Marcus, “The Role of Scripture in the Gospel Passion Narratives”, in John T. Carroll and Joel B. Green (eds.), *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendricksons, 1995): 205-33 speculates that the Johannine account “may be more accurate historically than the Synoptics” in

relatives stand afar off”, ἀπὸ μακρόθεν. It is one of those details that virtually every commentator on the passage mentions – critical texts list it as an Old Testament parallel and even Raymond Brown thinks he may hear an echo.²⁵ It is unlikely, and, indeed, it is rarely argued, that Mark has invented this verse on the basis of Psalm 38.11, which does not refer solely to women, let alone to those particular named women. Rather, the traditional element gets retold in the light of the Scriptural passage that was thought to be fulfilled. In other words, in this verse we see the exact opposite of the process of “prophecy historicized”. A verse that Crossan takes to be historical has, it seems, been expressed using the terminology of the scriptures. Or, we might say, the tradition was scripturalized.

[42] There is a still more fundamental problem with the logic of Crossan’s case here. He remarks that “the male disciples had fled” and so could not have provided anyone with details of the crucifixion,²⁶ but this raises the question: how do we know that the male disciples had fled? What is the source of information for this key background assumption in Crossan’s case? The detail is found in Mark 14.50, “Everyone deserted him and fled”, where it follows directly from Jesus’ announcement in 14.49, “Let the scriptures be fulfilled”. And the scripture in view

view of the fact that “Romans often allowed friends of crucified criminals to stand by them until they died” (212). But on this point contrast Brown, *Death of the Messiah*: 1029 and 1194, “it would be unusual for the Romans to permit family and sympathizers such proximity”.

²⁵ *Death of the Messiah*, Volume 2: 1158. Kathleen E. Corley, “Women and the Crucifixion and Burial of Jesus”, *Forum New Series* 1.1 (Spring 1998): 181-226, notes that “Luke reinforces this connection with Psalm 38.11 by the addition of οἱ γνωστοί (friends) (Luke 23.49): 212, n. 211. Her full discussion of the passage, with some useful bibliography is on 209-17.

²⁶ See the quotation above, *Birth of Christianity*: 559.

here is clearly Zechariah 13.7, “Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered”, quoted by Jesus in Mark 14.27, where Jesus predicts the falling away of the disciples. But if this key foundational detail is itself so explicitly Scriptural, Crossan’s model demands that we see this too as “prophecy historicized”. And if this detail is prophecy historicized, how – to use Crossan’s logic – can we trust it as history? If we cannot trust the historicity of this element, there is no obligation to accept the absence of the disciples as a foundational premise for the whole. In other words, without the knowledge that there was no one present at the crucifixion, we do not require the thesis of the inevitability of the “prophecy historicized” model.

A Liturgical Context?

The term scripturalization, and the process it describes, raises a key question about the origin of Mark’s crucifixion narrative. In what context does scripturalization happen? For Judith Newman’s *Praying by the Book*, the context is clear – it is worship, in which communal prayers are moulded in the very context where the Scriptures are being read. It is worth asking whether something similar might be claimed for Mark and his predecessors. The answer is that there is both external and internal evidence to suggest that early Christian worship may have provided the context for the development of Mark’s Passion Narrative.

The external evidence is well known but surprisingly rarely applied in this context. 1 Corinthians 11 features Paul’s narrative of the Lord’s Supper, discussed in the context of the celebration of the Eucharist in Corinth. So, as early as our evidence takes us, we have liturgy as the context in which the retelling of the story appears. [43] Significantly, Paul appears to be referring to a connected story. “In the night that he

was handed over . . .” (1 Cor. 11.23), Paul says, as if the Eucharist tradition is familiar as part of a larger narrative known to the Corinthians. What we have, in other words, is a liturgical context for the earliest known narration of the events in Jesus’ Passion, in Corinth in the early 50s. It is hardly a stretch to think that Mark’s community, only a few years later (in the 60s?), might also have been recounting traditions about the Passion in the context of their worship.²⁷ And there is some further evidence, albeit circumstantial, that this was exactly what was going on.

In order to explore the point, it will be useful to do so by engaging again with Crossan. One of his favourite examples of the “prophecy historicized” model is the darkness coming over the earth at noon, Mark 15.33. He writes :

To explain those accounts as ‘history remembered’ means that Jesus’ companions observed the darkness, recorded it in memory, passed it on in tradition, and recalled it when writing their accounts of the crucifixion. It happened in history, and that is why it is mentioned in gospel.²⁸

The explanation of “prophecy historicized”, on the other hand, involves reading the Gospel accounts alongside Amos 8.9-10, which speaks of the day of the Lord when God promises to “make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad

²⁷ I use the term “Mark’s community” of the community from which the Gospel emerged rather than to which it was written. Richard Bauckham (et al)’s useful corrective to the scholarly fixation with Gospel communities, in Richard Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for all Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans / Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), deals primarily with the issue of the “Gospel audiences” of its subtitle, and has relatively little to say about the communities in which the Gospels were written.

²⁸ Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?: 2*.

daylight.” “I will make it like the mourning for an only son,” He says, “and the end of it like a bitter day.” And then, Crossan explains:

By ‘prophecy historicized’ I mean that no such *historical* three-hour-long midnight at noon accompanied the death of Jesus, but that learned Christians searching their Scriptures found this ancient description of future divine punishment, maybe facilitated by its mention of ‘an only son’ in the second-to-last line, and so created that *fictional* story about darkness at noon to assert that Jesus died in fulfillment of prophecy.²⁹

[44] Although touted by Crossan as a key example, it actually demonstrates quite effectively the limitations of his model. All that Amos 8.9 is able to explain is, at best, one element in the story – the darkness at midday. But this time reference is one of many in the Passion Narrative and they all have one thing in common: they happen at three hour intervals. The darkness that comes over the earth at 12 lasts three hours until 3 p.m., when Jesus dies (15.33-4). Before the darkness begins, Jesus has already been on the cross for three hours, since 9 a.m. (15.25). Before that, Jesus was brought before Pilate at dawn, πρῶτον (15.1). Nor does the pattern stop there. There appears to be something like a twenty-four hour framework, broken up neatly into three hour segments. Thus, if we imagine the Last Supper taking place at 6 p.m. (14.17, “When it was evening . . .”), Jesus and the disciples would then go to Gethsemane at 9 p.m., Jesus would be arrested at midnight, and Peter denies Jesus during the Jewish trial at 3 a.m., cockcrow (14.72).

²⁹ *ibid.*: 4.

Nor is it simply that these stories fit nicely into this schedule. Individual units themselves seem to be patterned in such a way that they reflect this kind of structure. Jesus in Gethsemane asks his disciples to watch with him and is distressed that they could not stay awake for “one hour” (14.37), and then twice again he comes to them (14.40-1). And then, similarly, Peter denies Jesus three times at cockcrow, the Roman watch at 3 a.m. (14.54, 66-72)

Explanations for this marked three-hour structure that so dominates the Passion Narrative have not, on the whole, been forthcoming. The difficulty is, of course, that life is not quite as neat and tidy as this – events do not happen in even three hour units. That the pattern is intentional and in some way significant seems to be confirmed by a saying of Jesus located just before the beginning of Mark’s Passion Narrative:

Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will return – whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the cock crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: “Watch!” (Mark 13.35-37).

The text itself appears to be drawing attention to the three hour pattern, alerting the bright reader to what is to come. And though an explanation has been put forward separately by three different scholars, a Canadian (Philip Carrington) in the 1950s,³⁰

³⁰ Philip Carrington, *The Primitive Christian Calendar: A Study in the Making of the Marcan Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952).

an Englishman (Michael Goulder) in the 1970s,³¹ and a Frenchman (Étienne Trocmé) [45] in the 1980s,³² it is still hardly known at all in mainstream scholarship.³³ These three scholars claim that the liturgy is the only thing that would make sense of this. What is happening, they suggest, is that the early Christians were holding their own annual celebration of the events of the Passion at the Jewish Passover, remembered as roughly the time of Jesus' death. While other Jews were celebrating Passover, Christian Jews held a twenty-four hour vigil in which they retold and relived the events surrounding Jesus' arrest and death, from sunset on 14/15 Nisan, and for twenty four hours. Perhaps Mark's account of the Passion, with its heavy referencing of Scripture, its regular time notes, was itself influenced by such a liturgical memory of the Passion.

It is straightforward to see why the theory of a liturgical origin of the Passion Narrative has not proved popular. In both Carrington's and Goulder's cases, it was bolted on to thoroughgoing but less plausible cases for lectionary origins of one or more Gospels. In a far ranging, over-ambitious theses like this, strong elements that make up a part of the less compelling whole are easily lost.³⁴ But the advantages of

³¹ Michael Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974) and *The Evangelists' Calendar* (London: SPCK, 1978).

³² Étienne Trocmé, *The Passion as Liturgy: A Study in the Origin of the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (London: SCM, 1983).

³³ However for recent, relatively sympathetic comments see D. Moody Smith, "When did the Gospels become Scripture?", *JBL* 119 (2000): 3-20 (5-6).

³⁴ See further my examination of the lectionary theories, which concludes that the case for a liturgical origin of the Passion Narrative has been unfairly overlooked, Mark Goodacre, *Goulder and the Gospels: An Examination of a New Paradigm* (JSNTSup, 133; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), Part 3.

seeing the footprints of the liturgy in Mark's Passion Narrative are several. It explains several of the famous anomalies in the account, the rushed timetable, the night-time trial, crucifixion on a Festival, and so on. And, more importantly for our purposes, it provides us with a plausible context for the creation of the first Passion Narrative, with its marked scripturalizing tendency, and so – ultimately – it sheds light on the genesis of the Gospels themselves.³⁵

[46]

Summary

So, to summarise our discussion. (1) Scholars still seldom appreciate just what an extraordinary undertaking it is to have tried to write a narrative about a hero who was crucified. (2) Mark overcomes the problem with this *anomalous frightful* by grounding his story in God's will as revealed in the Scriptures. (3) The process concerned is one of *scripturalization*, the retelling of traditional materials in the light of the Scriptures, a view more plausible than the one now common, *prophecy historicized*. (4) The context for the scripturalizing work was one in which Mark was in continuity with Christians going back at least to 50s Corinth, and no doubt to 30s Jerusalem, and it was the liturgy, something that has left its own mark on the text and which may have explanatory power; it deserves further exploration.

³⁵ I am developing this thesis at greater length in my forthcoming book *When Prophecy Became Passion: The Death of Jesus and the Birth of the Gospels*.

Concluding Thoughts: Scripturalizing Abandonment

We began by reflecting on the shame, the horror, the humiliation of death by crucifixion. The task that faced Mark was daunting, in this first attempt to produce a written narrative of Jesus' death. It is a mark of his success in constructing the narrative that he is able to draw together what might at first appear to be two very contrasting forces, the need to write a compelling and plausible narrative suitable to *bios*, and so to be realistic about crucifixion, and the desire to scripturalize, to depict the ghastly death as God's will. One of the key ways in which Mark achieves this is by the use of the theme of desertion, loneliness, abandonment. The theme enables Mark to underline the shame of crucifixion and thus to render his narrative plausible, but at the same time to express it by using the language of the Scriptures that Mark sees as being fulfilled.

Jesus' abandonment is stressed from the moment that he declares, in 14.49, "Let the Scriptures be fulfilled" (presumably Zechariah 13.7, prophesied by Jesus in Mark 14.27). Now, in 14.50-52, all forsake Jesus and flee, first the general statement (14.50, "All forsook him and fled") and then the specific example (14.51-2, ". . . and he left the linen cloth and fled from them naked"). Likewise, perhaps the closest Scriptural quotation of all, and certainly the one most stressed by Mark, is Jesus' cry of dereliction (15.34) – once again abandonment and desertion are juxtaposed with the Scriptures, as Jesus utters a cry that is, of course, straight from the opening verse of Psalm 22. The hideous, lonely death [47] of this wretched crucified man is scripturalized so as to make clear that the crucified Messiah is indeed in God's will.

Among other things, this provides a warning against one of the clichés of historical Jesus scholarship. In these verses, where Jesus is, of necessity, largely silent, the Scriptures speak all the more loudly. They provide Mark with the means of telling a plausible story (a crucified victim might be depicted uttering a few choice words but extensive conversations are quite out of the question if one wishes to keep one's narrative plausible) at the same time as making it theologically robust. It acts as a useful reminder that discussions about the cry of Jesus from the cross as being an "embarrassment", as being the more likely historically because of that, are quite out of place.³⁶ Mark is not in the least "embarrassed" by this cry. It is an ideal means of expressing plausibly the horror of the cross at the same time as reaffirming, by quoting the Psalms, that it is in God's will.

It is this utterly abject, lonely, shameful death, characterised by an eerie silence, which provides the invitation to Mark to scripturalize the tradition, and thus to construct the first narrative of Jesus' crucifixion by subverting the readers' expectations, to say that here, where you would least expect it, honour, glory and vindication are found.

³⁶ Cf. John P. Meier's comments on the difficulties with this criterion in this context, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus Volume 1: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1991): 170-1. For a useful expression of the contrasting view, cf. Joel Marcus, "The Role of Scripture", 213: "It is difficult . . . to imagine that the church would have placed Ps 22:1 on the lips of the dying Jesus if the verse had not originally belonged there, since Jesus' use of this psalm verse created major difficulties . . . The church probably would not have created such problems for itself; rather, the cry of dereliction was simply too securely rooted in the tradition about Jesus' death to be dislodged."