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## Darkness at Noon: Mark's Passion Narrative

Robert H. Smith

*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*

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# Darkness at Noon: Mark's Passion Narrative

Robert H. Smith

The author is assistant professor of exegetical theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

The puzzle of Mark's Gospel is not how Jesus can be both human and divine, son of Mary, and Son of God. The mystery has to do rather with the cloud brooding over this Jesus as He proceeds to a lonely and forsaken death. Over all His days as over all His words and works, over His power and His weakness, over His speech and His silence, there falls the shadow of the cross. How can such a portrait be "the good news of Jesus Christ" (1:1)? How can this somber and sobering document be called a "gospel"?<sup>1</sup>

## I. THE SETTING: PERSECUTION

The answer is to be found in the situation addressed. A series of catastrophes overtook the Christian communities in the middle '60s of the first century: Nero turned his cruel attentions upon the Roman churches (A. D. 64-65); war with all the brutality it entails broke over Judea as Jews rebelled against their Roman overlords (A. D. 66-70); the entire first generation of Christians, able to bear eyewitness testimony to the words and deeds of Jesus, was dying off; the consummation of the age with the glorious coming of the Son of Man was unexpectedly delayed. Links with the past and the future were tenuous, and in the present enemies of the church had all the power.

The following exposition of Mark's Passion narrative agrees with the opinion that the recipients of the gospel were in the first place persecuted Christians living and dying in the days of Nero, and it attempts to exploit that background in fresh ways in order to understand why Mark has pictured Jesus as he has.<sup>2</sup>

Tacitus (born in A. D. 57 or 58), writing around the end of the first century or beginning of the second, says that a great fire broke out in Rome on July 19 in the year 64 and raged for 6 days, completely destroying three districts, reducing seven more to a few scorched ruins, and leaving unscathed only four of the total of 14. Homes, palaces, and temples were ruined. Many citizens perished in the

<sup>2</sup> The gospel is of course anonymous and bears no postmark proving beyond question that Rome is the place of origin, but early tradition inside the New Testament (Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philemon 24; 1 Peter 5:13) and outside it (1 Clement 5; Papias and Clement of Alexandria according to Eusebius, *EH* II, 15, 1-2; III 39, 15 VI, 14, 6; and Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* III, 1, 2) connects Mark with the city of Rome and the apostles Peter and Paul, who were martyred, but does not explicitly tie the gospel to Nero's persecution. It is the gospel itself which focuses attention on persecution. (8:34-38; 10:29-30; 13:8-13)

The present essay is a study of Mark's editorial policy or what is sometimes called a redaction critical investigation. It focuses not on the precise course of events in Jesus' last days or on the actions and feelings of the original disciples and enemies of Jesus but rather on the fresh use to which the author is putting the traditional material in his own time (the '60s) and circumstances (Roman persecution) in what is sometimes called "the third *Sitz im Leben*" or life setting.

<sup>1</sup> "Gospel" is a favorite Markan expression for the good news that the long-awaited kingdom of God, the turning of the aeons, had arrived in Jesus. See 1:1, 15; 8:35; 10:29; and compare these verses with the parallels in Matthew and Luke; see also 13:9-10; 14:9.

flames, and others lost all their worldly goods. Looters prowled the streets and even fanned fires. Nero devised emergency shelter and brought in food from Ostia, but the populace was bewildered and mean. They heard that during the fire Nero had stood on his private stage and had in song compared the fate of Rome with the destruction of ancient Troy.

Nero undertook to rebuild the city, improving its architecture and water supply. The Sibylline books were consulted and the gods propitiated. Still the suspicion persisted that Nero had deliberately set fire to the city to clear the way for a greater Rome. At that point says Tacitus,

to suppress this rumor, Nero fabricated scapegoats—and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians (as they were popularly called). . . . First, Nero had self-acknowledged Christians arrested. Then, on their information, large numbers of others were condemned—not so much for incendiarism as for their antisocial tendencies. Their deaths were made farcical. Dressed in wild animals' skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, Tacitus says, the Romans pounced on known Christians and on those who freely acknowledged their faith and then extracted from them—by what exquisite tortures we are not told—the names of fellow Christians. Persecutors are notoriously interested in the leaders of offending movements

and are willing to offer concessions to the small fry in exchange for testimony against the leaders. It always happens in religious and political persecutions that some refuse to give the evidence sought, while others, anxious to save their own skins or their own families, betray erstwhile friends. Still others, if they think it will help them, deny any connection with the persecuted faith and readily change their creed. And surely those who could manage it simply went underground or got out of town. Treachery, betrayal, defection, fear, flight, the agony of decision—these are some of the realities pertaining to the situation addressed by Mark.<sup>4</sup>

Persecution tests more than physical courage. It inflicts spiritual wounds, especially when the persecuted are innocent by any ordinary standards of morality and justice. The Roman Christians regarded themselves not only as guiltless but as the elect, the privileged people of God, and persecution plunged them into dismay. How could God permit His own children to be maligned, abused, tortured, put to death?

Once persecution ceased, with state and populace turning to other affairs, further problems inevitably arose. What should the survivors do about those who had turned state's evidence and those who had lapsed, if such persons now sought readmission to the Christian community? How should the community handle the resentment and suspicion between those who had borne the brunt of suffering and those who had fled the city (but kept the

<sup>3</sup> Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* XV, translated by Michael Grant (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 365. See also Suetonius, *Nero* 16, 2. It is not likely that after Nero's persecution Christianity was formally outlawed, forbidden by a decree of Nero or the senate. No trace of such legal action exists. But the affair surely put the church on the wrong side of the state and constituted a menacing precedent. See W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1967), pp.

<sup>4</sup> Some comparisons are illuminating. See Fabian von Schlabrendorff, *The Secret War Against Hitler* (New York: Pitman, 1965), especially chs. 14–23. Better still for a glimpse into the terrors of persecution is Hans Helmut Kirst, *Soldiers' Revolt* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966). The chief character in this chilling historical novel is modeled on Fritz-Dietlof, Count von der Schulenberg. Both books describe the horrors unleashed in the aftermath of the abortive July 1944 attempt on Hitler's life.

faith)? How could the whole community make sense out of the experience of suffering and assimilate it as something positive, working not to the erosion of faith but to its deepening?

Challenges have been issued in recent years, but the grounds for abandoning the persecution tradition seem slight, and the alternates appear not simply complex and unnecessary but intellectualistic and speculative. Eduard Schweizer thinks Mark wrote in order to combat incipient Docetism, devoted to the kerygma of the triumphant Christ but indifferent to the tradition of the words and deeds of the historical Jesus. Theodore J. Weeden and Ralph Martin imagine that Mark was moved to write his gospel in order to combat a divine-man Christology, one in which Jesus was pictured as a charismatic wonder worker in His earthly life and since the resurrection as an exalted Lord whose powers the Christian can now share mystically or sacramentally. In opposing such heresies, which make light of the cross as a momentary interruption in an otherwise glorious career, Mark is supposed to have stressed the suffering and death of Jesus, subordinating but not eliminating the tradition of the miracles and words of Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1970) is an excellent commentary on Mark. Ralph Martin, *Mark: Evangelist and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), summarizes and critiques in a very helpful manner recent study on Mark's Gospel. On Theodore J. Weeden, *Mark: Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), see Martin and also Smith, "New and Old in Mark 16: 1-8" in *CTM* 43 (1972), 521f.

Martin reads Mark on the background of the Neronian persecution but when he says "there is far more in Mark's Gospel than a tract for martyrs" (p. 70), he seems to be operating with too narrow a view of persecution.

These reconstructions build on the assumption that Mark is a kind of theological professor, representing one school of thought against another. The problem is perceived as primarily intellectual and theoretical even though it has practical ramifications.

But the gospel is kerygmatic and consolatory, primarily pastoral and secondarily theological—or its theology is thoroughly practical. People hard pressed by circumstances cried out in anguish and confusion and were on the brink of despair. They were ordinary folk, who like ordinary Christians of all times and places have longed for success or peace or signs of God's presence and favor. To be close to God, they thought, must surely mean to be happy and untroubled. The malady is what Luther described as "theology of glory," and it is the religion of the natural man.

In their baptism the Christians of Rome had heard the voice of the Father covenanting with them as His beloved children. They could point to other experiences assuring them of God's fatherly concern. They may have enjoyed very little power in and of themselves. Perhaps some members were able to perform signs and wonders, but there is no evidence that the majority were endowed with unusual powers. Their lives and expectations were not so different from those of most Christians in subsequent ages. They found suffering dismaying, especially suffering inflicted by a cruel and sadistic opponent completely lacking in sympathy and bereft of the most elementary understanding of the nature of their faith. Misrepresented as dangerous to the state and as haters of humankind, they were hounded and killed without mercy. They cried out, as Christians have regularly cried out, "Why has God let this happen to us? Why has He forsaken us?"

## II. THE STRUCTURE OF MARK

Mark offered a fresh and profound interpretation of the Christian tradition, holding before his readers parallels between their experiences and those of Jesus. Jesus is indeed the Son of God, but Mark stresses that the first declaration by the Father of Jesus' sonship occurred as Jesus began His public ministry of service to others (1:11). A second pronouncement of divine sonship immediately followed the first prediction of His Passion and the call to take up one's own cross (8:31, 34; 9:7). The third and final declaration of sonship came from the centurion who confessed Jesus as the Son of God at the precise moment of Jesus' death (15:39). He is Son, not in spite of suffering but precisely in and through His suffering service. Roman disciples of Jesus were thus reminded that their experience of deprivation by no means proved that they were not God's children. Sonship, service, and suffering are intimately connected, and Jesus called disciples to "take up your cross and follow Me," to move even towards martyrdom in full confidence of God's fatherly care.<sup>6</sup>

Each of the announcements of Jesus' sonship appears in a different segment of the gospel, which readily divides into three major sections: 1:1-8:26; 8:27-10:52; 11:1-16:8.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 8:34, where the word about bearing one's cross is a summons to readiness for actual martyrdom, while in the Lukan version the simple addition of "daily" or "every day" (Luke 9:23) shows that for Luke in his changed situation the word is a metaphor for renunciation and for strenuous effort as a follower on the path behind Jesus, portrayed as pioneer, pathfinder, and leader to life (see Luke 23:26, "behind Jesus," and the portrait of Christianity as a "way" or road in Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22; also compare 2 Peter 2:2; it is a path on which Jesus travels first as leader, according

The three segments tell the story of progressively deepening unbelief and rejection. The first section (1:1-8:26) tells how Jesus publicly teaches with authority and performs acts of power. The crowds register astonishment but fail to understand Him. Some scribes think He speaks blasphemy (2:7) and are offended that He eats with tax collectors and sinners (2:16) and that He does not piously observe the sabbath (2:23-28; 3:1-5). As early as 3:6 the Pharisees and Herodians consult about how to destroy Him, and Jesus Himself speaks ominously of the days when the Bridegroom will be taken away (2:20). A truth squad of scribes from Jerusalem calls Him demon-possessed (3:22). His own mother and brothers and sisters come to take Him home because, they think, "He is beside Himself." (3:21, 31-35)

A series of miracle stories is interrupted by the report of the beheading of John the Baptist (6:14-29). Pharisees and scribes dispute with Jesus about cleanliness (7:1-23). The disciples appear to be without understanding and hard of heart (6:52; 7:18). A pagan woman displays more faith than Jesus' fellow countrymen and more persistence than Jesus' disciples (7:24-30). The section closes with the story of the healing of a blind man. (8:22-26)

In the second section (8:27-10:52) Jesus focuses not on the crowds but on His disciples and teaches them privately.<sup>7</sup> No longer is Jesus confessed by demons. Miracles nearly cease. The disciples imagine that they

<sup>7</sup> "The crowds" are mentioned 22 times in 1:1-8:26 but only 3 times (8:34; 9:14 ff.; 10:1) in the central section. On this and other items in this paragraph see R. H. Lightfoot, *History and Interpretation in the Gospels* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1935), pp. 77-80.

are loyal and insightful and think of themselves as superior to the uncomprehending crowds. Furthermore, the teaching of Jesus now shifts from calling to repentance and from controversy with religious leaders to the nature of messiahship and of discipleship.

The three "Passion predictions" punctuate this central section of the gospel (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). Each of the Passion predictions is associated with one of three scenes illustrating the failure of the disciples. At the beginning of the section Peter speaks for all and confesses Jesus as Messiah (8:29), but how far Peter is from really grasping the nature of Jesus and His mission is clear from His immediate rejection of the cross (8:31-33), earning him the title "Satan."<sup>8</sup>

At the end of the section James and John, who with Peter constitute a privileged inner circle, also show that they think of Jesus as moving smoothly and irresistibly toward Messianic majesty. They express the desire to sit in places of honor beside Him in His glory (10:35-37). Jesus calls their thinking worthy of Gentiles.<sup>9</sup>

A third scene, involving all the rest of the disciples, is located between the one involving Peter and that featuring the sons of Zebedee. When Jesus comes down from the mount of Transfiguration, He is met by a man who has brought his son, deaf and dumb, to the disciples. Jesus cures the lad, but the point of the pericope

(9:14-29) seems less the power of Jesus than the inability of the disciples, whose prayer life or relationship with the Father is somehow deficient.<sup>10</sup> (9:29)

At the close of the central section of the gospel (8:27-10:52) the disciples are still obtuse, even though they are confident that they possess religious insight. The section closes, as had Part I of the gospel, with the account of the healing of a blind man (10:46-52; compare with 8:22-26). It will take a miracle of divine intervention to heal the eyes both of crowds and of disciples, enlightening them with regard to Jesus and His cross.

The final third of the gospel (11:1-16:8), opening with the entry into Jerusalem, is the narrative of Jesus' death and resurrection. In this section the forsakenness of Jesus is completed. In rapid succession Jesus clashes with Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees, lay and cleric (11:27-12:40). The chief priests and scribes set in motion their plot against Him (14:1-2) and enlist the aid of Judas, poignantly named "one of the Twelve" (14:10-11, 20, 43). Peter and all the rest boast (14:29-31), but all of the Twelve without exception forsake Jesus (14:50) and Peter even denies any knowledge of Him (14:66-72). The authorities, Jewish and Roman, commit what Mark describes as a judicial murder by condemning Him in their respective courts (14:64; 15:15). Roman soldiers scourge, mock, and crucify Him (15:16-20, 24). Passersby are pitiless in their jibes (15:29-30), while chief priests and scribes join in deriding Him (15:31-32). Even those who share His fate—both of them according to Mark (in contrast to Luke 23:39-43)—revile Him (15:32). Then as Jesus dies He utters the single say-

<sup>8</sup> Compare Mark 8:29-30 with Matt. 16:16-20 to see how Matthew regards Peter's answer and insight far more positively than does Mark.

<sup>9</sup> Read Mark 10:35 alongside Matt. 20:20 to see how Matthew again casts the disciples in a more favorable light.

<sup>10</sup> In the same context see also how Matt. 18:1 softens Mark 9:33-34.



ing from the cross recorded by Mark, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (15:34) Thus the Gospel According to Mark is the record of the steady and relentless forsaking of Jesus and of His being handed over into the darkness and pain of death on a Roman cross. The parallel with the situation of their own congregation would not be lost on Roman readers.

### III. TEMPLE AND MESSIAH

Why was He crucified? What were the grounds of His rejection? Jesus' trial is a moment of stillness in the eye of the storm. Everything that has gone before is summarized, and previous conflict is climaxed. Issues are clarified, motives revealed, points of view and sets of values exposed. The issue for the moment is in doubt. The action ceases. But then once judgment has been pronounced, the movement again begins and the end comes quickly.

There are of course two trials or two sets of conflicts: Jesus faces the patriotic religion of Jewish messianism and the civic religion of Rome, devoted to the *pax Augusta* and the Roman imperium. In the confrontations Jesus' lordship or messiahship is being defined. To be Messiah is to be God's plenipotentiary, God's agent of the house of David for establishing God's kingship. The temple plays a prominent role in expectations of the Messiah: The Messiah is to purify and glorify the temple, making it the place from which the Word of the Lord will sound forth and to which the nations will hasten. (2 Sam. 7:1-16; Ps. 89:20-38; Ezek. 47:1-12; Zech. 6:12-13; Mal. 3:1)

In his trial scenes Mark focuses the reader's attention on the twin issues of temple and Messiah. Both themes, temple and Messiah, appear in the scene before the Sanhedrin. Many bear false witness against Jesus: "We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple

made with hands, and in three days I will build another not made with hands'" (14:58). When Jesus is silent and unanswering in the face of these charges, the high priest rephrases the accusation, asking, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" (14:61). Jesus confesses—and this is the high point of the entire pericope—"I am, and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." (14:62)

It is ironic that this high point occurs at a low point. Nowhere previously has Jesus made such a statement about Himself, but He can now make His confession because it is at this moment safe from the danger of political corruption, since He claims to be "the Christ, the Son of the Blessed" while standing before them as their prisoner, at their disposal, in their power. That is far different from making a high claim on the basis of a miracle or other show of strength.

In the scene before Pilate there is no talk of temple, and the vocable "Messiah" is absent. However, the charges of incendiarism and political pretensions are present, but in appropriate translation. Those arresting Jesus had drawn from Him the taunt, "Have you come out as against a revolutionary?" (*lestes*, 14:48). Pilate offers the crowds a choice between Jesus and Barabbas, and while Jesus is called "the King of the Jews" (15:2, 9, 12, 26, compare with 32), Barabbas is described as being "among the rebels who had committed murder in the insurrection" (15:7). The whole career of Jesus recited in the preceding chapters shows how He is the opposite of a Barabbas. Jesus is the Christ and had spoken of the temple, but not as His accusers say. Nevertheless He is crucified between two revolutionaries, as though He were one of them. (15:27)

It is important to note that talk of temple and Messiah begins al-

ready in ch. 11. As Jesus approaches the city, and before He enters it, those who accompany Him lift their voices in muted Messianic acclaim, "Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming" (11:10).<sup>11</sup> Immediately Jesus enters the temple; but after looking about, He leaves, only to return on the next day to drive out the merchants and overturn the tables of the money changers (11:

15-19). The cleansing of the temple is sandwiched between two paragraphs telling of the cursing of the fig tree (11:12-14, 20-21), indicating that the accounts are to be read together.<sup>12</sup> Both speak of judgment upon Israel.<sup>13</sup>

Jesus is constantly in the temple (chs. 11-12) disputing about His authority, clarifying the nature of His messianity. He parries questions about the source of His authority (11:27-33), speaks of Israel's history of unbelief and its tradition of courting God's judgment and disaster (12:1-12), skillfully avoids letting Himself be pegged as a political Messiah with a platform of collaboration or of armed resistance (12:13-17),<sup>14</sup> presses beyond exegesis or travels straight through texts to confront questioners with the reality and might of the living God Himself (12:18-27),<sup>15</sup> continues to speak of God and of one's obligation to God and neighbor on the basis of the

<sup>11</sup> In keeping with the oblique way in which his gospel witnesses to Jesus' dignity, Mark in his account of the entry is rich in suggestion but very reserved. There is no explanation of the mysterious fact that the new colt (a horse? see Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957]) is ready and waiting. Jesus mounted the colt, and His disciples—a larger group than the Twelve—spread their cloaks on the road and others cut branches off the shrubs in the fields and laid them on the path before Him. Jesus rode toward the city from the Mount of Olives, but there is no quotation of Zechariah. A shout went up, but it evidently came from the band of disciples and followers of Jesus and not from a great urban multitude. Furthermore, the enthusiastic words recognize the nearness of the Kingdom but do not give "full-throated Messianic homage" to Jesus. The cry is "almost Messianic" but not quite; see Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1952). Apparently the demonstration died down before He actually reached the city.

Matthew declares that the whole city was stirred by Jesus' coming, and he strongly insists that the prophecy of Zechariah has come true: The day of the Lord has drawn near in Jesus, the Fulfiller of promise.

According to Luke the crowds began at the approach of Jesus to praise God for the ministry and mighty works of Jesus, and they echoed words sung by angels greeting Jesus' birth: "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest."

John's Gospel openly portrays Jesus as king. The notion of meekness, stressed by Matthew, is omitted by John in his use of Zechariah. Jesus is fully in charge and secures the necessary animal by Himself. As He nears the city, crowds with palm branches come out from Jerusalem to greet Him, and the procession takes on a distinctly triumphant and royal character. Jesus is unmistakably acclaimed King of Israel.

<sup>12</sup> John H. Elliott presented an essay at the 1971 meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Atlanta, Ga., on "The Markan Sandwiches" in which he spoke of "intentional juxtaposition of two or more pieces of originally independent material through inclusion, insertion (interpolation or intercalation), or interweaving which suggests an implicit comparison, contrast, or significant relation in the material as arranged."

<sup>13</sup> See Luke 13:6-9 for a parable with the same theme in Lukan garb. Luke does not otherwise contain the account of the cursing of the fig tree.

<sup>14</sup> As coins bear Caesar's image, so man himself bears God's image, and a person is to render and give to God no less than himself. Jesus is no Zealotic revolutionary.

<sup>15</sup> Thus He refused to be classified as a Pharisee against the Sadducees or as a Sadducee versus the Pharisees; the Son of God does not belong to parties and sects.

Shema, surpassing all casuistry to lay claim on the whole person (12:28-34), calls into question popular notions of what it means to be the Christ by declaring that the Messiah will be more than the Son of David and will not be the royal figure of popular political hope (12:35-37), and closes by issuing warnings against the leaders of the people (12:37b-40) but praising an indigent widow who exemplifies His call to total surrender and self-giving (12:41-44). His attitude to temple (traditional temple leadership and ritual) and Messiah is the focus throughout.

Talk about temple and Messiah continues in the Little Apocalypse (ch. 13), as Jesus speaks about the transitory character of the great buildings of Jerusalem, even the temple (13:1-2), and about the false claims to messiahship which will be advanced in days ahead (13:6, 21-22). The passages at 13:21-22 and 13:26 echo the dialog between Jesus and the high priest in 14:61-62.

Beyond the trial, temple and Messiah are paired again at the cross in the mockings. Passersby taunt Jesus as the one "who would destroy the temple" (15:29), and priests with scribes call out, "Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross" (15:32). And then as Jesus breathes His last, two signs occur corresponding to the two accusations: The curtain of the temple is torn in two (15:38) and the centurion makes his confession. (15:39)

Roman Christians were called to ponder anew Jesus' attitude to power and to existing institutions in and through the Passion narrative. Jesus is the bringer of the new cloth and the new wine (2:21-22), and there is a time of tearing and rending now, but Jesus led no coup d'etat, sought no coercive power over others, was no fanatic paving the way for a "brave new world" by burning down existing structures.

#### IV. INTERPRETING THE DEATH OF JESUS

##### A. Providence

A few passages both within and beyond the Passion narrative comment directly on the suffering of Jesus—and hence on that of His disciples. The three Passion predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34), even though they are heavy with the foreboding of death, contain a theology of providence. These sayings declare that it is not merely sinful men who lead Jesus to the cross but the Father who is working out His predetermined plan. That is the meaning of the passive verb "will be delivered" (see the various uses of the verb *paradidomi* in 1:14; 3:19; 9:31; 10:33; 13:9, 11, 12; 14:10-11, 18, 21, 41, 42, 44; 15:10, 15) and of the "must" of 8:31. The latter is the equivalent of Paul's "according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-5), and it is echoed in Mark's use of Old Testament allusions and quotations. At table on the night of His betrayal Jesus said that "the Son of Man will die as the Scriptures say He will" (14:21), and at His arrest He said, "Let the Scriptures be fulfilled." (14:49)

The crucifixion of God's Son is no senseless tragedy. A meaningless death is what people still call a bad death, one which threatens to overwhelm and plunge into madness or unfaith. The insistent reference to the Old Testament and the will of the Father shows that Jesus' death, far from being devoid of all rhyme or reason, corresponds with the highest purposes of all: The plan of God—and so also the Christian martyrs of Rome (and every other place) fall not merely into the greedy jaws of death but into the hand of God by the mysterious will of God.

Mark portrays Jesus as the innocent sufferer familiar in Psalms 22, 31, 69 and others. He is a martyr, an innocent sufferer standing in the long line of righteous persons rejected by an

uncaring world. The marvelous silence of Jesus (14:60-61; 15:5) is meant to show that Jesus, like the righteous sufferers of old (Ps. 38:11-15; Is. 50:5-6; 53:7-9; compare 1 Peter 2: 22-23) faces His torment without sniveling or pathetic efforts at self-defense, without abusing His tormentors, and without complaint to God. His silence means that His attitude is one of trust in the Father, and also in this He is a model for all persecuted Christians.

Even His last word is no "cry of dereliction." That familiar title is a misnomer. There is no escaping the torture and abandonment, and proofs of God's presence and favor are totally lacking, raising in acute form the question, "Who is the one who thus dies?" But Mark means, "He prayed Psalm 22," a prayer which does not resolve the tension but interprets His death as one which is in God's plan and is crowned with unexpected triumph. Ironically, a pagan voices the appropriate response: "Truly this man was God's Son." (15:39).

Mark's portrait depicts providence. Jesus has traveled the way before the disciple. He is no stranger to all the loss and pain His followers suffer. Tortures of body and torment of soul, rejection and forsakenness, are part of the path of sonship and discipleship. Jesus neither wanted nor sought the suffering, but when it comes, as the inevitable result of this world's misunderstanding of God's kingship, He bears the rejection and pain in filial obedience, dutiful and faithful towards the Father in the midst of anguish and uncertainty, all the way to the cross. Jesus' uttering of the Passion predictions voices His acceptance of God's plan, as does His use of Scripture; the prayer in Gethsemane (14:32-42) depicts the struggle of the Son to know the Father's plan and to be in accord with that plan. He rises from that prayer refreshed and assured, trusting totally in the Father, and there is no

further trace or whisper of faltering or doubt on His part.

One of Mark's persistent themes is that suffering does not mean disfavor with God; it does not snatch His children from His hand; and even though it is darkness, the light of vindication will dawn as surely for the disciple as for Jesus. Foreseen, the sufferings are in His ken and mysteriously under His control. What breaks upon the disciple in time of persecution is terrible but not necessarily overpowering. As Jesus bows to misunderstanding and suffering, bearing it as the Father's strange will for Him, so the disciple is called to do likewise.

### B. *The Beginning of the End*

Mark 13, the 'Little Apocalypse,' offers another clue to interpreting Jesus' death. Apocalyptic by definition deals with that which is universal, ultimate, and cosmic in scope and significance. Ch. 13 comes where it does before the Passion narrative and does not stand at the end as the final chapter because it does not speak only of events to follow long after the crucifixion of Jesus. It rather affords a framework within which to ponder the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus' suffering is not just the suffering of one more martyr in a long history of martyrdom. Ch. 13 indicates that His death has universal significance, ultimate power, cosmic sweep. His death is itself precisely that event which ushers in the last times, inaugurating eschatology.

The language of 13:21-27 is like that of 15:33-39: Three hours of mockery (15:25-32) are followed by three hours of darkness, commencing at high noon (15:33-39). So begins the tribulation, the labor pains of God's new world, as the sun is darkened. Amos too had foreseen the day

of "darkness at noon" (Amos 8:9).<sup>16</sup> It is the time of mysterious portents declaring the end of the old world and the beginning of the new.

And as Jesus had prophesied in the Little Apocalypse, strange events begin to happen: The temple curtain is torn in two from top to bottom (15:38) and the Roman centurion in charge of the execution detail confesses Jesus as God's Son.

Jesus' death begins to "destroy this temple made with hands" (14:58). There begins the shaking of the foundations which will end only when "there will not be left here one stone upon another" (13:2). Negatively it spells judgment on the old, but positively it means the dawn of the new era, the opening of fresh access to the Father, the signal for the building of a new temple "not made with hands" (14:58; John 2:21; Heb. 9:1-14), the time when the elect begin to be gathered in from the four winds, from the four corners of the earth (13:27).

One mark of the era of new access is the free and ready approach of the

Gentiles, signified in the confession of the centurion who sees no sign of power but only the death of Jesus. That death is itself therefore in some sense a triumph, and as the old temple suffers cracks, the pagan enters by his faith and confession into a new sanctuary not made with hands, a house of prayer for all peoples (11:17; Is. 56:7). The vineyard is given to others (12:9), and yet it is not true that the Jews are excluded; unbelief and faithlessness are excluded, but certain Jewish female disciples of Jesus continue with Him to the end, and their presence binds crucifixion, burial, and resurrection into an indissoluble whole (15:40-41, 47; 16:1). Furthermore, as a Jewish counterpart of the Gentile centurion, "Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God," obtains Jesus' corpse from Pilate and gives Jesus decent burial. (15:42-47)

Ch. 13 comments not only on the rejection of Jesus but also on the period of suffering and persecution which will not end until the Gospel has been proclaimed in the presence of Gentiles everywhere (13:9-10; 14:9).<sup>17</sup> In this chapter Mark assures the Roman Christians that their sufferings, cruel though they are, are the labor pains out of which will be born God's new world. Christians suffer that pain with the Christ knowingly and even willingly, paying in their bodies the price of this old aeon's resistance to the glories held in store and anxious to be born. Now is a time of sorrow, but soon will come the hour beyond all sadness and pain, beyond the laboring, when suffering will give way to joy and fulfillment.

<sup>16</sup> The world (or the country, Judea?) put on a shroud when Jesus died, for something preternatural and uncanny happened, something eschatological, as Jesus' own prophecy concerning the last things, uttered at 13:24-25, was fulfilled. Arthur Koestler chose *Darkness at Noon* as the title for his historical novel (New York: Macmillan, 1941) based on the 1938 Moscow Trials. Peter Viereck in the foreword to the Signet Classic edition suggests that the title is derived from Milton's *Samson Agonistes*: "Oh dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon." Koestler himself endured tortures at the hands of the Franco forces in Spain in 1937. Koestler's Rubashov in the midst of the darkness of his torment achieved mystic union with the transcendent, gained his own soul, and so triumphed over his tormentors. Jesus gained eschatological victory in the moment of darkness, and His church lives from that paradoxical victory as it also strains toward the moment of the lifting of the veil (10:29-30)

<sup>17</sup> The naming of Alexander and Rufus (15:21) may be a reminder that the Gospel had reached the capital of the world. See Rom. 16:13. 12

Thus ch. 13 is instructive concerning the eschatological dimensions of the cross of Jesus and of the sufferings of His disciples. The latter are called not to be swerved from mission by their own cross but to persevere in trust, in watchfulness, and in faithful testimony.

### C. Ransom for Many

The ransom saying (10:45) at the close of the second portion of the gospel (8:27—10:52) is a large clean window into Mark's thought. The nearest verbal parallels to the words of the saying are in earlier persecution literature, in Is. 53:12, but especially in the Books of the Maccabees.<sup>18</sup>

Persecution in the days of the Maccabean resistance to the Seleucid descendants of Alexander the Great was not general but selective. Many Jews gladly Hellenized or modernized. However, a later generation revered the memory of those who happily suffered martyrdom rather than compromise their allegiance to the Law. Their heroic deaths became the object of veneration. In their suffering positive meaning and value were found. They served as examples and more. It was believed that the martyr's death in-

fluenced positively the destiny of the people as a whole. So the martyr is reported to have said, "Thou, O God, knowest that though I might save myself I am dying by fiery torments for Thy law. Be merciful unto Thy people and let our punishment be a satisfaction on their behalf. Make my blood their purification (*katharismos*) and take my soul (*psyche*) to ransom their souls (*antipsychon auton*)." (4 Macc. 6:27-29)

The same author declares that "through the blood of these righteous men and the propitiation of their death (*ton hilasterion thanaton auton*) the divine Providence delivered Israel." (4 Macc. 17:22; compare 2 Macc. 7:37f.)

Rabbis of early New Testament times thought that outpoured blood had atoning power even when that blood flowed from a criminal. One reason for inflicting capital punishment was so that the criminal could atone for his sins. (Mishnah, Sanhedrin 6:2)

Jesus was not a guilty criminal but a righteous man, an innocent victim. By the virtue and power of His outpoured life other lives are delivered and set free (see 8:37 for some of the same language), the lives namely of "many" (10:45; 14:24), that is, "all" or "the whole, comprising many individuals," or "the entire community."<sup>19</sup>

And so the Son of Man came, not as people might have expected, not to lord it over others and act as judge, but as archetypal or representative man to serve and suffer in a representative capacity and to give His life to set the many free.

<sup>19</sup> On the meaning of "many" see J. Jeremias on *polloi* in Gerhard Kittel, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* VI, 536-545, or see his notes in *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (New York: Scribners, 1966), pp. 179-182. See the use of "many" in an inclusive sense in Mark 6:2; 9:26b; Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 10:17. At Qumran "the many" meant the entire community.

<sup>18</sup> The following remarks in the text are much indebted to C. K. Barrett, "The Background for Mark 10:45" in *New Testament Essays*, edited by A. J. B. Higgins (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), pp. 1-19. Eduard Lohse, *The History of the Suffering and Death of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), agrees with the view taken here as he speaks about the closely related Words of Institution: "The reference to blood is not necessarily to be viewed in relation to the blood of sacrificial animals, as though Jesus were being compared with the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb. On the contrary the Bible speaks of the shedding of blood even more often in connection with the offering of human life, beginning with the blood of Abel and on down to the blood of the prophets and

Much the same interpretation of the death of Jesus is declared by the Cup Word (14:24). Covenants were not made without the shedding of blood. Jesus viewed His death as the means by which God established a covenant, a fresh relationship with Himself. His blood was more than one more sacrificial provision for restoring a person to a place within the old covenant. The import of the words is that nothing less than a new covenant came into force by the death of Jesus.

This new covenant is celebrated and presented in a meal, eloquent of the death of Jesus, which is the immediate prelude to the Messianic banquet and its eschatological fellowship in the consummated kingdom of God. (14:25)

Some aspects of the Bread Word need to be included here, unsatisfactory as any such brief treatment is bound to be. Eduard Schweizer thinks the Markan Bread Word, "This is My body," means "I am present."<sup>20</sup> He rightly opposes Jeremias' view that Jesus identifies Himself in this word as the paschal lamb. Julius Schniewind interpreted the word to mean, "I am Bread for you . . . the true Bread, Bread from God," declaring that the Bread Word in Mark says precisely the same as the statements in John 6:32, 48, 51.<sup>21</sup>

But "I am present" and "I am Bread for you" are not completely adequate exegeses of the text. They overlook too much. Jesus not only speaks the word of interpretation but also gives the bread to be eaten

and does that only after He has taken that bread in hand and broken it. What He means can be set forth in a series of statements: "I commit and dedicate Myself into death. I am present to be consumed. I come to you to be consumed by you as food to nourish your own commitment, dedication, service. I am for you, and He who is I-Am-for-You lives in you and through you."<sup>22</sup>

The Barabbas incident (15:6-15) belongs together with the ransom saying and the Words of Institution. And it remains to indicate the connection of all this with the persecuted Christians of the Roman congregations.

Christians were falsely accused (as was Jesus) of being apocalyptic firebrands and destroyers, of preaching the end of the world in hatred of this present world and of helping the end to come by putting this world to the torch. And their low opinion of the world was matched, it was thought, by their high opinion of themselves, their Messianic delusions. As Jesus was misunderstood in His words and deeds on temple and Messiah, so were the Christians. And just as Barabbas,

<sup>22</sup> See Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, translated by Martin H. Bertram (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), p. 176. Noteworthy is the consensus expressed in "The Eucharist: A Lutheran-Roman Catholic Statement" printed in *The Eucharist as Sacrifice* (New York: U.S.A. National Committee for L.W.F., 1967). The document quotes deliberately from *Consultation on Church Union: Principles* in the following: "Lutherans and Roman Catholics alike acknowledge that in the Lord's Supper Christ is present as the Crucified who died for our sins and who rose again for our justification, as the once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the world who gives himself to the faithful." To the question, "Do we in the eucharist genuinely encounter Christ in the full reality of his person and sacrificial action?" is given the response, "We affirm that in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper Jesus Christ, true God and true man, is present wholly and entirely, in his body and blood, under the signs of bread and wine." (Pp. 191-192)

<sup>20</sup> See Eduard Schweizer, *The Lord's Supper According to the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), p. 17, where the exact words of Schweizer are as follows: "The sentence would have originally meant: 'This is my body (= myself),' i. e., 'This is I myself.' This saying assures the church, then, that the risen Lord himself is present at the Supper."

<sup>21</sup> Julius Schniewind, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Rupprecht, 1952), p. 182.

a real fanatic and revolutionary, went free, so the real incendiaries in the case of the city of Rome escaped as the blame fell on the Christians. The innocent suffered instead of the guilty.<sup>23</sup>

Jesus died as a ransom for many, shedding His life's blood to establish a covenant to the benefit of many (14:24). Is there a sense in which the Christian is one with his Lord also in this? Paul speaks of filling up in his body the sufferings of the Christ. Jewish tradition thought a certain amount of suffering and tribulation must precede the dawning of the Kingdom. Does the suffering of every Christian contribute to the portion of tribulation which precedes the coming of glory and so have positive effect? Does it have the power to testify to others of the truth? Were persecutors in some cases impressed with the Christians' enduring of pain and loss so that they sought the reason of the hope that was in them (1 Peter 3:15) and themselves became confessors? Was the blood of the Roman martyrs the seed of the church? It seems very likely that these questions are to be answered affirmatively.

## V. JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES

Throughout his gospel Mark has directed his congregation to see the truth about itself in the face—and fate—of Jesus, in His Passion and His action. The misunderstanding and spurning of Jesus by crowds and authorities, friends and disciples, reaches crescendo proportions at the beginning of ch. 14, and it may be useful to read the story of Jesus' last hours in the light of the fire at

Rome.

The priests' plot (14:1-2) is rendered operative by Judas' treachery (14:10-11), and that collaboration brackets the anointing of Jesus at Bethany (14:3-9) in another Markan sandwich (see note 12). The Gospel, proclaimed "in the whole world" (14:9), inevitably contains word of Jesus' burial (14:8), an event produced by those who rejected Him, but tellers and hearers of the Gospel also know that nameless ones like the anointing woman did not share in the plot but honored Him as best they could. The total sandwich (14:1-11) speaks of rejection and of succor, and so also for Christians, suffering has been not the only experience, but they too as they faced the test have been upheld by the sacrifices of some.

Jesus is betrayed, and yet He sets the stage for His own betrayal and knows ahead of time that it is approaching. Foreknowledge and readiness to suffer do not remove responsibility from traitors, but God is also magisterially and mysteriously at work in the sufferings which come, and they are not the catastrophic result of man's evil only. (14:12-21)

At table Jesus dedicates Himself into death and offers a share in all the blessings procured by His death to those who are His table companions, nay more, to those who receive the dedicated and crucified One into themselves and who so become one with Him (14:22-25). By receiving the crucified One who offers Himself, by taking up one's cross and following, one finds not death but life. (8:34-9:1)

One will betray and all will forsake Him and be scattered, even the strongest and apparently most adamant (14:26-31). As Jesus prays in Gethsemane, the inner circle sleep instead of keeping watch and joining Him in prayer, so that traitor and captors creep up and take them unawares (14:32-42). The scene at His arrest displays attitudes all too familiar to the

<sup>23</sup> Pär Lagerkvist, *Barabbas* (New York: Random House, 1951), develops novelistically the idea that the Barabbas scene is intended to be a study in substitution. The end of the Nobel Prize winning novel is set on the background of the fire at Rome, to which Barabbas contributed, not comprehending the nature of the kingship of Jesus.



persecuted congregation: One disciple betrays with a mockery of affection, another swings with a sword as though Jesus seeks political power or the authority of arms or prolongation of life at any cost, and finally all without exception flee away and leave Him desolate. (14:43-52)

The chief of disciples and spokesman for the others follows at a distance and then draws near, but buckles beneath the first slightest pressure and utters a series of solemn denials precisely simultaneous with Jesus' voicing of His good confession (14:53-73). In one way or another the behavior of Jesus' disciples has been repeated beginning at Rome and extending with less provocation around the globe and throughout history.

The disciples are absent from ch. 15. They take cover and only strangers or women act bravely and decently. Nevertheless at the end, after His resurrection, Jesus shows compassion towards all those who had failed Him so utterly. He is forgiving. He has borne His knowledge that death would scatter His disciples (14:27) less with resentment than with sorrow, and even more He looks ahead to gathering them anew (14:28). The gospel closes with the heavenly message, "You will see Him" (16:7). That is a word of purest absolution. He turns not to new disciples but gathers the same ones who had scattered, forgives those who had confessed Him with misunderstanding and who had boasted only to betray, deny, and abandon Him.

The readers are reminded throughout Mark's Gospel of the failings of the Twelve, not because Mark has a vendetta against them but because he wants his readers to recall what manner of men they were—not supermen but all too ordinary—and how the Lord turned to them yet again and gathered and lifted them up for renewed service. Can the faithful and strong in the church do less with their weak? Can the nameless congregation do less or

differently for leaders who had collapsed? The wellspring from which flows the life of the church is the faithfulness of God, and the church lives in spite of all the faithlessness of disciples.

## IN CONCLUSION

Mark did not explain the sufferings of the congregation or offer a theodicy, exonerating God. He wrote not an essay but a gospel. He retold the story of Jesus' doing and teaching and suffering; but what he sought was not to satisfy historical curiosity nor to rouse in his readers pity or sadness at the Man of Sorrows. He made fresh and kerygmatic use of the traditions about Jesus' Passion, applying them to the crisis of the '60s. He recognized that the suffering and confusion of the congregation was a temptation, a test, a snare. It threatened to melt courage and drive to cynicism or despair. Into that situation he spoke again the story of Jesus, stressing not so much humanity or power as the obedient and trusting sonship of Jesus, Son of Mary, Son of God, tempered and made perfect in the crucible of His sufferings, and he offered far more than a chronicle of Jesus; he called Christians to watch and pray with Jesus. He presented "Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified; He has risen, He is not here," that is, He is not in a tomb, not in time past (16:6). "He is going before you" once again as Leader (16:7; 10:32), calling fearful and amazed disciples to shoulder their crosses and follow to life.

Given the unbelief of the world, suffering is a necessary prelude to glory. Faith, however, is itself already a victory, seizing ahead of time in the midst of darkness the outstretched but veiled hand of the Father, refusing to be swerved from the path of trust and service.