

# MARK

**A Commentary for Bible Students**



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ence was listening carefully, they would have heard that not even the boldest and strongest disciple is immune from failure. One may not be impervious to spiritual collapse, but one cannot escape the grace of the risen Lord Jesus.

### 3. JESUS' TRIAL BEFORE PILATE 15:1-15

Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision (15:1). It is possible that the earlier trial (14:53-65) was not the official meeting of the Sanhedrin, but a preliminary "fact-finding" body from which charges would be brought to the official gathering. However, the jury was most certainly rigged in the first trial, and the only reason Jesus was charged was due to His own testimony that He was "the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One" (14:61-62). **They bound Jesus, led him away** and formally handed Jesus over<sup>d</sup> to Pilate with charges that held the death penalty.

"**Are you the king of the Jews?**" asked Pilate (15:2). The question being asked by Pilate was slightly nuanced: "Are your claims limited to a religious agenda, or do you harbor political ambitions that are a threat

#### KEY IDEAS

##### PONTIUS PILATE

Information about this historical figure comes primarily from the Gospel accounts, Josephus, and Philo. Tacitus, an independent Latin historian, makes a brief reference. Based in Caesarea and ruling Palestine, Pilate was a subordinate to the authority in Syria, the commander of the East. Pilate's duty was to control the province by means of Roman policies. However as history reveals, this was no easy task. Eusebius (ii.7) chronicles that Pilate killed himself after he was tried and convicted for the slaughter of the Samaritans, which is chronicled by Josephus (Ant. xvii.4.1.).

to Rome herself?" Jesus' reply was somewhat ambiguous: "**Yes, it is as you say.**" The English seems a bit more certain than the Greek, which literally reads, "You say so." Throughout Mark, every human evaluation of Jesus fell short of the truth. Here is no exception. The title "King of the Jews" employed by Pilate is somewhat synonymous with the term "Christ" as it has been used by the disciples (8:29) and by the high priest (14:61). It is a politically and religiously

loaded term that implies an ambassador of God who is empowered to overthrow the pagan Roman rulers who are possessing the land that was God's gift to the Jews. As used by Pilate, "King of the Jews" implies at the least the possibility of political turmoil, at the most, revolution. But Jesus' less-than-direct answer to Pilate's question left him unconvinced that Jesus was the threat to Rome that the Jewish leaders implied. On the heels of this opening question, another salvo of charges comes from **the chief priests** [who] **accused him of many things** (15:3). Initially, the Jews brought to Pilate the charge of "King of the Jews," but then they brought additional evidence to support the original crime or even entirely new charges to inflame the already tense situation. From this point further, **Jesus . . . made no reply, and Pilate was amazed** (15:5). The word "amazed" (see 5:20; 6:6) carries with it a positive quality coupled with a sense of pondering the meaning of the events. Pilate's amazement appears to arise from the Jews' unbridled hatred for Jesus contrasted with His unquenchable humbleness and lack of self-defense in the face of lies. This may explain why in the ensuing verses, Pilate attempted to set Jesus free.

At this point Mark took his readers on a minor narrative digression regarding the practice of setting a prisoner free during the Passover feast. Though there do not seem to be any extant documents that provide direct historical evidence to this practice in Judea under Roman times, scholars have created a large body of data that documents that this custom is well known throughout the world in many ancient cultures.<sup>5</sup> A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. Additionally, Barabbas was an obvious threat to Rome, for his crime of murder was most certainly against a Roman soldier or a Roman citizen. The offense of insurrection was common during the early years of the first century until the Jewish war in A.D. 66-70, since Jews were trying to throw out their pagan rulers from the land and reestablish self-rule under the house of King David. It is possible that the two "robbers"<sup>6</sup> who were crucified beside Jesus (15:27) were from the religious-political party aligned with Barabbas.

"**Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?**" asked Pilate (15:9). The question was posed to the crowd, as will become apparent in 15:11. Yet Pilate knew it was **out of envy that the chief**

**priests had handed Jesus over to him** (15:9). A cunning politician, Pilate recognized that he faced severe problems. Passover was the time of the year when talk of rebellion saturated the conversation in Jerusalem. His only desire was to survive the feast days without a riot. With tens of thousands of pilgrims in and around Jerusalem and not enough soldiers to fend them off, Pilate chose the path of least resistance from the Jewish leaders. Yet, he was also astute enough to recognize from the many and varied accusations made against Jesus (15:3) that the Jewish leaders' motives were far from pure. Maybe Pilate noticed the contrasting attitudes displayed by the Jewish leaders and Jesus during His interrogation (15:2–5). Perhaps Pilate's political savvy made him alert to the malevolent aspirations of the Jewish leaders. Yet Mark may have been hinting at a larger, long-term issue. The term "envy" summarizes the thread of "rival claims of authority" that has run between Jesus and the Jewish leaders through the preceding chapters. From the time Jesus entered the Temple in Mark 11, Jesus' teaching and the people's popular response (11:18; 12:12, 37) had overshadowed, if not publicly humiliated, the Jewish leaders. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead. The man recently arrived from Galilee did not garner enough popularity to counteract the inciting of the crowd by the chief priests.

So, Pilate asked them for a verdict: **"What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?"** (15:12). Pilate's historical role in the narrative may be that of Roman judge, but a more subtle function in the passage is that of an interrogator who enhances the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders (15:10–11) rather than assigning guilt to Jesus. This was finalized as Pilate declared Jesus innocent of the charge(s) brought against Him. This passage is focused, much like the trial of the Sanhedrin, on Pilate's question and the title ascribed to Jesus: "Are you the King of the Jews?" "One could point out that Jesus' answer to Pilate's question is ambiguous when compared to his affirmative reply before the high priest."<sup>7</sup> Though His reply is in the affirmative, Jesus' response indicated there was a difference in how He and Pilate each defined the term. Jesus was indeed "King of the Jews" (Israel) neither as one who incited rebellion against Rome or as one who will restore Israel to its national splendor, but as one who paradoxically exercised His royal authority by

willingly enduring the mockery of His enemies and obediently choosing the way that led to death (14:35–36; 15:25–26).

Mark carefully crafted the narrative to show that in spite of Jesus' answer, Pilate did not believe that Jesus was an insurrectionist.<sup>8</sup> As a matter of fact, since Jesus remained silent (with the exception of His cryptic reply in 15:2), Pilate spoke as Jesus' only advocate. The disciples had abdicated that role. At this point in the passion narrative, no one stood beside Jesus, with the exception of the unnamed woman who anointed Jesus in 14:3–9. Jesus' actions and words had offended His disciples (14:4–5, 27, 37, 50) and enraged the Jewish leaders (14:43, 53–65). Thus, Jesus stood alone. Adding to the sense of Jesus' humiliation, the Roman governor of Judea was the lone spokesman interceding on His behalf.

**"Crucify him!" they shouted** (16:13). Crucifixion was the normal punishment in the provinces of Rome for insurrectionists and was certainly consistent with the charges being brought against Jesus. But Pilate forced them one last time to make their position clear as he asked, **"Why? What crime has he committed?"** (16:14). The question rang with religious overtones as it literally reads, "What 'evil' has he done?" Consistently throughout Mark, Jesus was accused of "doing evil," and now with the opportunity to recapitulate all the data in this last official trial before Pilate, not one scrap of evidence could be brought forth to convict Him. Ironically, Jesus the Judge has told us that the real reason for humanity's accusation against Him is the evil thoughts in our own hearts (6:52; 7:21; 8:17) or even the enigmatic accusation that an unredeemed mind is under the influence of Satan himself (8:33).

**Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate . . . had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified** (16:15). Earlier, Judas Iscariot handed Jesus over to the Jewish leaders (14:10–11; 42, 44). Next the Jewish leaders handed Jesus over to Pilate (15:1) for the furtherance of their own agenda. Now Jesus was being handed over by Pilate to the soldiers for flogging and crucifixion, in order to quell any possible uprising of the crowds.

Though Pilate never wavered in his belief that Jesus was not an insurrectionist ("King of the Jews"), he acquiesced to the pressure of the Jews and sentenced Jesus to death for this crime. The Jews, knowing Pilate

would not give Jesus the death sentence for blasphemy, had to unrelentingly push for this trumped-up charge of sedition. The charges brought by the Sanhedrin to Pilate were vastly different from the verdict handed down the night before. The duplicity of the Jewish leaders is commented on by William Lane:

It must be considered highly ironical that having branded Jesus as a blasphemer because he failed to correspond to the nationalistic ideal, the council now wanted him condemned by the pagan tribunal on the allegation that he made claims of a distinctively political nature.<sup>9</sup>

Pilate had to condemn Jesus for fear that he himself might have appeared to his superiors as a pseudo-insurrectionist in collusion with Jesus against Rome. Likewise, the Jews threatened an insurrection of their own if Jesus was not found guilty. In the midst of the appearance of insurrection (Pilate), the threat of insurrection (Jews), and the pardon of a convicted insurrectionist (Barabbas), Jesus was condemned of a crime of which no one believed Him to be guilty. In this scramble to maintain the religious and political status quo, the passion narrative handed down verdicts on two levels. Read at the surface level, the Jewish leaders and Pilate found Jesus guilty of the charges of blasphemy (religious) and sedition (political), seemingly as an act of their own self-preservation. The second-level verdict is handed down in each reader's personal mental courtroom as he or she overrules Jesus' human judges and vindicates Him of all charges.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Mark 14:62 reads, "I am." Matthew 27:11 reads, "You have said so" and Luke 22:70 states, "You say that I am." Both seem to soften the messianic claim

Mark is making. This presents the interpreter with an interesting set of problems. Reading Mark 14:62 as "you say I am" certainly explains the other synoptic renderings of this passage. On the other hand, Jesus' stark answer, "I am," would be the more difficult reading, commonplace in the Markan material. Additionally, in these hard readings, the usual pattern of both Matthew and Luke is to soften the words of Jesus. In conclusion, the stronger textual evidence that points to "I AM" cannot be discounted. This makes the passage even more important for Markan Christology. For the first time in Mark, the "Son of Man" phrase does not serve as a qualification or corrective to mistaken messianic perception. Rather, it is a clarification that the Messiah is in fact the Son of Man standing in their presence.

2. The gospel of John supports this thesis (John 18:26).
3. Raymond E. Brown, *Death of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), vol. 1, pp. 609–610, gives nine different possibilities for the meaning of this word.
4. This word in the Greek is *paradidōmi* and occurs twenty times in Mark with a wide range of meanings. But when used within the passion narrative, it takes on the meaning of "betray" (in association with Judas; 14:10–11, 18, 21, 41, 42, 44) or "hand over" (with reference to the Jews 15:1, 10 or to Pilate 15:15).
5. See Josef Blinzler, *The Trial of Jesus: The Jewish and Roman proceedings against Jesus Christ described and assessed from the oldest accounts* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1959), pp. 205–208; Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), vol. 2, pp. 814–19. Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans outside of Judea practiced this custom; there is no reason to believe that this is a contrived practice in this setting.
6. The term "robber" in 15:27 could mean thief. But the best definition of the term, both historically and within the context of Mark 15, is that of "insurrectionist" or zealot. Thus the robbers and Barabbas were from the same mold.
7. Frank Matera, *The Kingship of Jesus: Composition Theology in Mark 15* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1982), pp. 63–64.
8. Jack Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), pp. 126–27, Kingsbury's evidence that Pilate does not see Jesus as an insurrectionist is persuasive, especially when he exposes a third definition for the term, "King of the Jews" as it is employed by the Jews (15:26). Mark and his readers now are juggling three uses of the same phrase.
9. William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), p. 550.

# FROM THE CROSS TO THE GRAVE

Mark 15:16-47

## 1. SOLDIERS MOCKING JESUS 15:16-20

The mocking of the soldiers is bracketed by two similar phrases: “to be crucified” (15:15) and “to crucify him” (15:20) Thus, this cruel exhibition is a delay that will accentuate the shame and humiliation just prior to Jesus’ death.

**The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace** (15:16). Just as the judgment of the Sanhedrin led to the mocking of Jesus as a “prophet” (14:65), Pilate’s ruling placed Jesus at the will of the Roman soldiers for their time to humiliate Him as a pseudo-king. The soldiers took Jesus into what may have been part of Herod’s palace that might today be called the barracks or sleeping quarters. The **whole company of soldiers** (15:16) is a Roman military technical term for the tenth part of a legion, normally containing six hundred troops. It is not likely that that many soldiers were off duty during the feast. However, Mark was certainly relaying that all the soldiers who were available became part of this corporate mocking.

The mocking of the soldiers in 15:16-20 is so blatant that it causes the reader to stumble. The purple cloak, the crown of thorns, the sardonic homage; it is a mock coronation culminating with the words “**Hail, king of the Jews!**” **Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him.**(15:18-19). Matthew reported that Jesus was given a mock scepter (27:29), and this may be the weapon they struck Him with. The spitting served two purposes; first it is fulfillment language of

the Suffering Servant from Isaiah 50:6. Second, in the Greek, the word “spit” is onomatopoeic (*em-putuō*). A careful reader can almost feel the soldiers spit in cartoon style: “pthooy.”

Furthermore, as this demonstration continued to unfold, Mark has conveyed that no one in the story believed Jesus was a king by Roman standards or a messianic ruler according to Jewish law. Therefore, the reader draws another conclusion—He is a king, but not one by any human designation. His life approached its paradoxical climax: to be honored as God’s Royal Son, He must suffer and be shamed by people.

## 2. CRUCIFIXION OF JESUS 15:21–32

It might be worthwhile to survey the larger context, from arrest to crucifixion, by asking a pertinent question: “How might Mark’s readers be affected by the presentation of the crucifixion narrative as a whole?” Surprisingly, they may be carefully protected from much of the physical violence of the crucifixion. Notice how it was almost unanimously performed by individuals who are represented by unnamed, third-person pronouns. Interestingly, Mark gave more attention to the time (15:25, 33, 35) and the place (15:22) of the crucifixion than to the actual event itself. As a matter of fact, the only two direct references to the actual pain-searing act are minimized into a few nondescript words: **And they crucified him** (15:24; see Matt. 27:35; Luke 23:33; and John 19:18 for equally brief descriptions). No information is given about the nail placement, the position of feet, the style of cross, or Jesus’ writhing in agony. There is not even a word or comment made about Jesus’ blood.<sup>2</sup> Mark provided little commentary that might emotionally charge his audience beyond the bland description.<sup>3</sup>

Assuming that Mark purposely adopted this minimalist approach in which to report the crucifixion and death of Christ, what does it accomplish for his readers? First, from a negative perspective, it prevents the reader from being overwhelmed by the pain inflicted by the Jewish leaders or the Romans soldiers. Though each of them was complicit in corporately convicting Jesus, the text does not primarily focus on the pain they inflicted on His body. Next, from a positive perspective, the text

calls the reader’s attention to focus squarely on the shame and humiliation Jesus received.<sup>4</sup> Any historical understanding of Jesus’ flagellation and crucifixion must by its definition assume excruciating pain. Nevertheless, the bulk of the text that describes Jesus’ death centers on the verbal insults that were heaped upon Him during this ordeal. Moreover, the description of the physical abuse of Jesus by the Roman soldiers is toned down as the mocking and pseudo-coronation becomes the central core of Jesus’ agony (15:16–20).

The verbal injuries escalated. There were three groups of people who mocked Jesus while He was on the cross. First, **those who passed by hurled insults** (15:29). The literal reading of the text is that they were “blaspheming Him.” Mark’s carefully chosen word “blaspheme” must not be overlooked as he condemned Jesus’ accusers of no less than mocking the divine Son of God. The word is used almost exclusively in Greek literature and in other biblical texts of speaking evil against God. Thus, the ridicule being hurled by the passersby was the charge for which Jesus was earlier condemned by the Sanhedrin (14:64). Further, this word sets the tone for the reader as each subsequent mocking is encountered. Humanity once again was blind to the nature of Jesus. As a precursor to the full contents of the insults themselves, Mark described the mockers’ body language: **shaking their heads and saying**. This is a short quotation from Psalm 22:7–8<sup>5</sup> and makes another prophetic connection with reference to the suffering of Jesus. This messianic psalm, first mentioned in 15:24, continued to overshadow the following events as the writer returned to it again in 15:31 and in the final cry of Jesus in 15:34. The insult of the passersby was then quoted by Mark: **“So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!”** (15:29–30). It should not surprise the reader that this mocking is another unproven charge brought against Jesus in His earlier trial before the Sanhedrin. It was there that witnesses brought an almost identical testimony against Him, but the text makes clear, “even then their testimony did not agree” (14:59). Hidden behind this blasphemy was a declaration of innocence.

The second set of taunts against Jesus came from the chief priests and the scribes who are introduced with the adverbial phrase, **in the same**

KEY IDEAS		PSALM 22 IN MARK	
Psalm 22		Mark	
22:1-21—	Sufferings	15:20-27—	Crucifixion
22:18—	Dividing clothes and casting lots	15:24—	Psalm 22:18 quoted
22:7—	Insults hurled	15:29—	Psalm 22:7 quoted
22:27—	Gentiles' worship	15:39—	Centurion's confession
22:28—	The Kingdom of God	15:43—	Joseph looking for the kingdom of God
22:29-30—	Resurrection	16:6—	Jesus' resurrection
22:30-31—	Proclamation to God's people	16:7—	Command to tell disciples

way (15:31). Mark was making a connection between their words and their immediate predecessors. **“He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself!”** (15:31). Ironically, this may be the first time that the words of Jesus’ accusers were in perfect agreement, yet they were theologically wrong. Being other-centered as He is precluded Jesus from saving himself. But then the mocking went in a new direction from the scribes: **“Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe”** (15:32). These words are reminiscent of the demands for a sign (miracle) by the Pharisees in 8:11. Thus, the chief priests and the scribes were demonstrating their ignorance with reference to the nature of faith. Belief is in no way tied to a miracle. The passion narrative of chapters 14–16 demands a faith that is deeply rooted in a man who hung dying on a cross. Most people today would prefer to follow a Messiah who looks more like the Jesus of the first half of Mark. But the death of Jesus will have nothing to do with a Messiah who is not clothed with shame and suffering. It is He who we are called to trust in and faith in whom the Jewish leaders reject outright.

The threefold series of mocking is complete when **those crucified with him also heaped insults on him** (15:32). One wonders what must

have been on their minds as even these fellow sufferers spoke ill of Him.<sup>6</sup> Jesus was isolated from even the hint of a supporter, and He was encircled by enemies. As one can see, Mark shaped the crucifixion scene with an overwhelming attention on the mocking from the onlookers and the shame the innocent Jesus endured. Rather, Jesus’ death is portrayed by Mark as foretold in Scripture (14:49), in submission to the will of the Father (14:36) and housed in the language of corporate rejection and personal shame. All the while, Jesus was effectively silent and passive.

### 3. DEATH OF JESUS 15:33-39

**At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour** (15:33). The readers have now been carefully informed of the

temporal aspect of the crucifixion above all other elements, darkness from 12 noon until 3 p.m. The paragraph begins with “darkness,” and immediately the reader must determine if this is meant literally and in a metaphorical sense. The obvious irony found in the three previous mocking passages is keenly set off by the subtlety of the paradoxical employment within 15:33–39. Is this darkness theme also to be seen as a commentary on

the characters’ inability to perceive the reality stored in the deeper meaning of these events?<sup>7</sup> Then, following Jesus’ heart-wrenching cry, **“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me”** (15:34), the reader encounters another cold act of misunderstanding on the part of the characters. As Jesus cried out to God, the onlookers merely heard Him calling out a human name, Elijah.

KEY IDEAS
ELIJAH AND THE MESSIAH
Elijah’s significance within the Jewish tradition stems from two facts: first, he did not experience death (2 Kings 2:11), and second, Malachi spoke of him as a precursor to the Day of the Lord (Mal. 4:5–6), causing the Jews to see him as the herald of Messiah. In today’s Passover celebration, the front door is opened as families await the arrival of Elijah to usher in the messianic age.
The reference to Elijah by the crowd during Jesus’ crucifixion (15:35) apparently came from their misunderstanding of the Aramaic word <i>Eloi</i> (Jesus’ call to God in 15:34).

Mark focused his readers' attention on several other events surrounding the death. First, the actual Aramaic cry of Jesus, *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?* followed by Mark's insertion of a translation of Jesus' words into Greek. The importance of the translation should not be minimized. On one level, it serves as an aid to cross ancient language barriers. For it is quite probable that members of Mark's original audience would not have been conversant in Aramaic. Additionally, it is one of only a few places in the Gospel where the words of Jesus in their original Aramaic are preserved (see also 5:41; 7:34; 14:36), adding an air of authenticity to His final statement (15:34). Yet, modern readers must remember that the original audience would have heard the text of Mark read aloud (see introduction), and they also encountered the Aramaic cry aurally, just as the onlookers at the cross. They could just as easily have misunderstood these words as they were depicted by a passionate gospel reader. But, Mark's addition of the translation prevented the first-century listening audience from making the same aural mistake as the bystanders at the cross. In Jesus' day, Elijah was the one who would come as an agent of God to relieve the suffering of the helpless. The onlookers at the cross had yet to incorporate Jesus' suffering and death as an integral part of the divine plan. They waited for a miraculous deliverance on their own terms. The miracle came in the form of Jesus' death, but since it did not fit their criteria, they failed to recognize it. They assumed Jesus was crying out for deliverance and for the arrival of Elijah, the redeemer of the righteous sufferer.

Moreover, only Mark's audience has the interpretive key of Psalm 22 against which to hear the death cry. They know it to be a poetic story of personal humiliation and suffering, all the while containing a hope of future vindication. As a whole, Psalm 22 is a psalm of victory. The eyewitnesses of the crucifixion misunderstood the last words of Jesus, for those caught inside the world of Mark did not *hear* or *see* correctly. Then, they fashioned His cry of dereliction into their own humanly interpreted appeal. Yet the framework of Psalm 22 will help all future generations into understanding.

Next, Mark interjected an eschatological event; **the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom** (15:38). The juxtaposition of the tearing of the curtain with Jesus' death allows the reader to view two spatially separate events as intimately connected. From the place of

the crucifixion, an onlooker could not see the inside of the Temple. Thus, Mark's readers understand the connection of Jesus' death with the Temple veil tearing; access to God has been made available through Jesus' death, surprisingly spoken in advance of His resurrection (see also Heb. 10:19–21). Also, a subtle yet profound sense of vindication arises. Since Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem in chapter 11, His actions and teaching had forcefully addressed the inadequacy of the Temple as it stood. This began with His Temple-cleansing action in chapter 11 and culminated with His prophetic words regarding the Temple destruction in chapter 13. Now, anyone can find God because the veil is torn.

The tearing of the veil forms a kind of a bookend with an earlier cosmic event in the Gospel. The last time the word "tear" (Greek *schizō*; English "schism") was used by Mark was in Jesus' baptismal scene. When He came up out of the water, He saw heaven "being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove" (1:10). It was at that point in Jesus' life that He was filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit. One wonders if the tearing of the curtain at the death of Jesus meant that now God would soon turn loose on the world the same empowering and purifying Spirit.

Finally, Mark's audience encounters the confession of the centurion, which placed him in the same location as the previous mockers. With that in mind, Mark connected the sensory perception of the centurion with Jesus' death when he **heard his cry and saw how he died** (15:39, italics added). This is certainly an overt contrast with earlier misperception of the previous bystanders at the cross (15:35). For throughout the Gospel, it has been the sensory mistakes of humanity that have caused the recurring messianic misunderstanding. They have seen but not truly perceived; they have heard but not truly understood (4:12). Now the centurion, based on his hearing his cry and seeing how Jesus died, said, "**Surely this man was the Son of God!**" He was the first human to confess Jesus' true identity.<sup>8</sup>

The person at the cross who probably had the least background to grasp the truth of the event was the Roman centurion. He may have been the only man present without a personal agenda. He was simply acting in obedience to his superior, Pontius Pilate. Ironically, he was a Gentile and the person most directly involved in Jesus' death, for he undoubtedly carried



out Pilate's order to crucify Jesus. Surprisingly, it was not Jesus' wonder-inducing miracles or His authoritative teaching that conquered human blindness to His identity. Rather, it was the witnessing of Jesus' suffering and death. The goal throughout the entire book has been to have people confess what God the Father has spoken (1:11; 9:7) and what the demons realize (1:24, 34; 3:11; 5:7): Jesus is the Son of God.

Mark helped his readers see that the crux of the atonement was not only to deal with issues such as human injustice and its outworking of human suffering, important as they may be. Rather, the core problem is that humanity is incapable of grasping the mind of God, and this is due to the fact that humanity is under bondage to Satan. The climax of Mark's story is not that suffering is relieved because of the cross. For just the opposite is called for by Jesus (compare 8:34–35; 13:9–13). True discipleship is a call to share in suffering, shame, and death. Mark carefully reduced the display of physical suffering in order to reveal a worldview so radical that it caused "those who follow Christ to embrace that cruel and shameful death which anyone in his right mind would do anything to avoid."<sup>9</sup>

**With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last** (15:37). Jesus relinquished His breath and ultimately His life in utter obedience to the divine will and according to the Scriptures. One might assign blame to Judas for the death of Jesus, or the frightened disciples for failing to protect their master, or the envious Jewish leaders who conspired to put Him to death, or Pilate for issuing the fateful order. But in the end, the text of Mark does not allow that conclusion. It has been clear from the outset that the suffering and death of Jesus has been the central core of the gospel message (8:31–32; 9:30–31; 10:32–34), both scripturally (14:27, 49) and from the will of the Father (14:36). The cross may appear on the surface to be evil triumphant over good, but that is nothing but a false perception. God is in sovereign control, even in the face of the worst of human situations.

Thus, it is within the ironic shaping of the material that Mark chose to reveal Jesus' person and the heart of the gospel. The *titulus* affixed above Jesus' cross read "King of the Jews," yet Mark has conveyed to his readers that His coronation was as no other previous king. His throne was a cross and He died as a king without an apparent kingdom or subjects. The first servant to metaphorically bow at His feet was the Gentile centurion who stood with

a bloody hammer in one hand and Jesus' robe in another. The truth of the cross is profound: unless one fully embraces his or her own responsibility for the death of Jesus, there is not a full understanding of the person and work of Jesus.

#### 4. BURIAL OF JESUS 15:40–47

It is difficult to tell if the verses describing the women witnessing the events fit best with the death of Jesus or with the burial. It may be more appropriate to describe them as transitional, for in the end they prepare the reader for the resurrection. Moreover, the women are the only human witnesses to the resurrection account in the Gospel of Mark; thus their presence at Golgotha and at the tomb assure that there have been no mistakes. The tomb of Resurrection Sunday is the same location as the place of burial.

**Some women were watching from a distance** (15:40). All the disciples had fled from Jesus (14:50) and were absent in Mark's account of Jesus' crucifixion and death (however, see John 19:26). These women are distinguished from the other mockers with a subtle location marker as they were surveying the events **from a distance**. **Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome** (15:40). Mark's use of names in the gospel is sparse, so it is significant that they are mentioned here for the first time. Mary Magdalene is well known for her demonic deliverance (Luke 8:2) but also as an eyewitness to the resurrection in all four Gospels. Mary, the mother of James the younger and Joses, has often been identified as Mary, the mother of Jesus, who we heard introduced in similar fashion in 6:3 (Joses is an alternative spelling of the name Joseph), so the precedent has been set to identify her as the mother of Jesus' younger brothers without naming her as His mother. Moreover, what we have heard about Jesus' mother and family earlier in the Gospel (3:21, 31–35) does not indicate that she had been "following" and "serving" from their time in Galilee. Mary, James, and Joses are all quite common names in first-century Palestine, making identification uncertain at best. Salome will reappear with Mary in 16:1. Matthew, in his parallel account identified one of the women at the crucifixion as "the mother of Zebedee's sons" (Matt. 27:56).

Possibly Salome and the mother of James and John are the same woman.

Up to this point in Mark, “following” Jesus appeared to be a male-only group. Mark did not interject the general supporting role women played in Jesus’ ministry (Luke 8:1–3) nor the specific ministry of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38–42; John 11–12). But the description of the women here is interesting: they **followed him and cared for his needs** (literally, “serving” 1:13; 10:45) (15:41). Both of these terms are laced with discipleship language. And these women were only part of a larger following that had been with Jesus since He was in Galilee, maybe even from the inception of His ministry.

**It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached** (15:42). As mentioned previously, the time elements of Mark in the last chapter are tightly measured, almost in equal, three-hour increments. Jesus was officially charged by the Sanhedrin at dawn (15:1); at the third hour (9 a.m.) He was crucified (15:25); from the sixth to the ninth hour darkness reigned (15:33). Now, dusk was fast approaching. Additionally, this is the first clear reference in Mark that the day was Friday.

**Joseph of Arimathea [was] a prominent member of the Council** (15:43), which is most likely the Sanhedrin (15:1). He would have needed such a position to approach Pilate.<sup>10</sup> Mark further described Joseph as **waiting for the kingdom of God**. This phrase certainly hints at discipleship language, at least in a subversive way, as did Matthew (27:57) and John (19:38). Roman custom was for the body to remain on the cross, without a burial, as a lingering warning to others. Thus, it must have taken boldness to ask for Pilate to honor the Jewish request for a burial before nightfall (Deut. 21:23).

**Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead** (15:44). The surprise was not the fact of Jesus’ death, but that the death had been so speedy. Most crucifixions lasted for many hours if not for days. One must carefully balance the fact of Jesus’ suffering with the length and severity of His agony. The passion of the Christ was not based on the quantity of inflicted pain, but on the injustice that the perfect Son of God should suffer *at all*. Thus, Pilate called to the centurion to verify the death itself. **When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph** (15:45). There is an interesting word play in this verse with the preceding

one. Joseph asked for the “body” (*sōma*) of Jesus. The word *sōma* can have many meanings, often a living body, even in later New Testament language, the body of Christ, the Church. But Pilate granted Joseph the body (*ptōma*) of Jesus. This word means exclusively “corpse.” The resuscitation of a *ptōma* is not possible; He was dead and only fit for burial. Not surprisingly, the only other time Mark used this word is when John the Baptist’s disciples came and claimed his *ptōma* after his beheading by Herod.

The hurry of the event is understood, for timing meant everything on this day. Yet the reverence and the respect Joseph had for Jesus stands out. The **linen cloth** was a formal part of the burial process, as was washing and perfume or spices (15:46). Yet the latter may have had to wait until after the Sabbath was over.

Joseph **rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid** (15:46–47). The only people on earth who had the key to the proclamation of the Gospel were women, for they were the sole witnesses to Jesus’ death, burial, and the first to hear about His resurrection. Their witness is central to validating the contents of the gospel message.

#### ENDNOTES

Key Ideas Sidebar: Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord* (London: T & T Clark Publishers, Ltd., 2004), p. 182.

1. The soldiers under Pilate’s control may not have been pure Roman troops but “auxiliaries drawn from non-Jewish inhabitants of neighboring areas” (France, *Mark*, 637).

2. With all the violence (explicit and implied), it should be pointed out that prior to the passion narrative, the word “blood” is only used in Mark with reference to the woman in 5:25, 29. Its only reference in the passion narrative is found in 14:24, with Jesus’ words, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.” It is at this vital point in the Gospel’s closing passages that Jesus expressed the full extent of His mission. The surprising reference to blood in 14:24 and its absence at the crucifixion should alert the audience to this paradox. It also allows the audience to focus on the importance of the Last Supper words of Christ. This may prevent the blood reference from being subject to interpretation based only on the physical death on the cross. Rather, Mark forces the reader to define “blood” by its usage in the Last Supper passage in its metaphorical

and symbolic salvific use.

3. This certainly is not the only explanation for not lingering over the actual crucifixion in graphic details. The first-century literary world did not document the act of crucifixion because of its horrific nature. This observation has become the accepted answer to explain the sparseness of crucifixion accounts in extant literature. However, other compelling factors might just as adequately explain this historical absence.

First, this form of death sentence was almost exclusively carried out on people of no historical importance, namely slaves and rebels. Historians, therefore, should not expect to find documents transcribed and preserved for unimportant individuals.

Second, crucifixion, as barbarous as it was, was employed by Rome exactly for its abhorrent nature—to discourage slaves and rebels from seditious acts. Crucifixion's restraining value upon the lower classes was found in its visual effect upon eyewitnesses and in the ensuing story's graphic oral transmission.

4. For a recent reappraisal of "shame" being the core of the crucifixion, see Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament & Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

5. This is also a well-established ancient gesture of contempt (2 Kings 19:21; Job 16:4; Ps. 109:25; Isa. 37:22).

6. There is certainly a different "feel" in Mark since he does not include Luke's repentant robber (Luke 23:40–43).

7. Precisely, as a fulfillment of Christ's prophetic words in 13:24, "But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light." Possibly a reference to Amos 8:9 (RSV): "'And on that day,' says the Lord God, 'I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight.'"

8. One must remember that earlier in the Gospel, Peter proclaimed, "You are the Christ" (8:29). But at that time Peter was proclaiming Jesus to be the coming agent of God who would heroically vanquish the pagan Romans who possessed the land of Israel. For Peter, the term "Christ" and the mission of the Christ that Jesus would fulfill could not include suffering and death (8:31–21). Three times Jesus attempted to correct His disciples' distorted misperception of who He was (8:31–32; 9:30–32; 10:32–34), and each time they ignored His corrective. To use Mark's words to describe this perception dilemma, the disciples were blind and deaf. The centurion who "heard his cry and saw how he died" was the one who finally comprehended Jesus to be the "Son of God."

9. Morna Hooker, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 52.

10. The Gospel of John reports that Joseph went to Pilate with Nicodemus (19:39), also a member of the ruling council (John 7:50).

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