

## 14 Death on a Cross

The Sanhedrin continued meeting thru the nite and by morning they had agreed their plan. They would hand Jesus over to the Roman governor for execution. There are a number of reasons why they mite have done this, and we do not know which was decisive, but whatever their motives, it was the most momentous decision ever taken by any authorities on earth.

It is sometimes thought that the Sanhedrin did not have the power of capital punishment, but it does seem from other records<sup>1</sup> that they had the authority to condemn blasphemers to death by stoning. It's very likely, however, that stoning was not a practical option. The High priest had dispensed with witnesses, and stoning required that the first stones should be thrown by the witnesses to the charge. Besides, it would mean bringing Jesus out into the volatile crowd with all kinds swarming about to watch or to interfere. If they caused a riot, they would not be able to control it, the Romans would intervene and they would be in the very trouble they were trying to avoid. Worse than that, they would be blamed for it. It could all get nastily out of hand and rebound on them.

On the other hand, putting Jesus into the hands of the Roman authorities would place him beyond reach of any rescue. If the governor could be persuaded that Jesus was a dangerous criminal who should be executed quickly to prevent any unrest, they would have nothing to fear from the Jerusalem crowd. In fact they could devote their energies to ensuring that the crowds got the right message and were properly marshalled on their side. After all, nobody cares to fight for a loser, and once he was in the hands of the Romans, it would be abundantly clear that Jesus was a loser.

The account of Jesus' trial before Pilate reflects a most extraordinary reversal of powers and roles. But perhaps it's something that happens more often than we realise, in the corridors of political power. By all the obvious rules, Pilate had the power. Rome was the superpower, the undisputed ruler of the Mediterranean world, and the governor had at his command a disciplined army that could, if necessary, crush the whole city of Jerusalem. And yet, it appears, he was weak. Compared with the sophisticated operators from the temple he was a blundering political novice. Perhaps he was an arrogant or a lazy man who depended too much on the power Rome gave him without bothering to develop the political acumen that would have helped him to fight Rome's battles himself.

In all the gospels, it is clear that the temple authorities had the skill to manipulate the governor, tho it was a dangerous game, and probably one they would not play too often. Pilate could be ruthless and had slaughtered worshipers in the temple before this. The fact is that, when the Jewish authorities sent Jesus bound to Pilate, the governor knew he was being dragged into one of their private squabbles, but he had neither the skill nor the resolve to resist to them.

He questioned Jesus: "Are you the king of the Jews?" And Jesus affirmed: "You've said it." But otherwise he made no answer to the pack of charges the authorities were

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 7: 54 - 60

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bringing against him. To claim to be king of the Jews, in defiance of the Roman prerogative of appointing all kings within their empire could have been treason – but it was obvious to Pilate that Jesus was no serious thret to Roman power. It just wasn't credible that a man who spent his time discussing religious issues in the temple, who had never spoken against Roman authority, who hadn't a sword to his name, nor, it would seem, any real followers, needed to be dealt with as a dangerous criminal. If only all the Jews wanted to be kings like this, it would be all the easier for Rome! Pilate was incapable of seeing how such a one as Jesus could be a challenge to Roman interests.

But the Jewish authorities knew that their authority was under thret and they wanted Jesus executed as a criminal: visibly and permanently disgraced. They would pressure the governor to condemn him, and they knew how to do it. Jerusalem was not an easy city to manage, and Pilate would be reminded that he needed them. He could be made to find it expedient to go along with their wishes.

Pilate, for his part, was more interested in outwitting the Sanhedrin than in executing another meaningless victim. And for that he had a trick up his sleeve. Passover, the big Jewish festival, was the ideal excuse for an act of gubernatorial clemency: a gesture of Roman humanity and sensitivity to the national occasion. As he had done at other Passovers, he would free a prisoner. The people would be allowed to ask for an amnesty: one prisoner to be released in honour of the day. Pilate knew that Jesus had been popular and he would surely now be the people's choice. Pilate would show those smug barbarians over in the temple that he knew how to handle this city.

But the temple set were no fools. They knew Pilate was no friend, and they anticipated his clumsy attempt at playing the local game. They had been frightened enuf of the crowd while Jesus was at large, because they understood Jesus' influence. But now they were in control and Jesus out of the way, and once again they knew how to handle their people. When somebody popular and famous rides openly into the city with a happy crowd of followers, it's the easiest thing to go and join in the shouting. And when a brilliant young speaker metaphorically tweaks the noses of the authorities in public dispute, it's easy to be on his side, enjoying the bigwigs' discomfort. But when a man's arrested, in chains, when the army has him and you know that the real authorities have at last shown who's boss, then the people will know that it's time to shout on the other side. The temple authorities used all their influence on the city, making sure their own cheerleaders, with clear instructions about who and what to shout for, were spread among the crowd that was gathering outside the praetorium.

Pilate was easily outmanoeuvred. The crowd clamoured for Barabbas, a terrorist convicted of sedition and murder, and Pilate was reduced to remonstrating with them like a weak parent with a fractious child.

“In that case, what am I to do with the man they call the king of the Jews?” The Sanhedrin, the real leaders in Jerusalem, knew what they wanted done with that man, and it was easy, now, to get the crowd shouting to their tune:

“Crucify him!”

So Pilate gave in. Suddenly, he was the one at the crowd's mercy. Now he was afraid of causing a serious disturbance where he had come expressly to maintain the peace. It would have been a major humiliation if, having personally come to Jerusalem to maintain order, he found himself at the centre of an embarrassing riot, even if he did have the military resources to put it down. He gave in. Jesus he ordered to be scourged as a cruel preparation for death, and then crucified.

The Gospel according to Mark is profoundly theological. In fact, as I have said before Mark's is the most theological of the gospels, for he presents theology where it most actually is: in what happens, in the acts and decisions of people, in God's command of the real events of history. Luke's theology comes in unforgettable songs and stories, John's in profound and extensive reflection, Matthew's in the architectural arrangement of his work, but Mark's comes in the simple race of events as people act within them and so act out their own selves as well as the history of God's work among them. That may be an over-simplification, but it is one that helps us to recognise the all-important theology in Mark.

Because of that, it is easy to overlook Mark and to imagine that he is just giving us a quick biography, a history which we must rely on others to interpret. On the contrary, it is Mark who shows us the enactment of the covenant between God and God's people, the basis of all theology and of all reality. Mark shows us, in the events of a night and a day the meaning of all history, realised in Jesus the Messiah.

Mark's account reminds us that the events of that night and that day were in the hands of God. They happened "so that scripture might be fulfilled." But it also makes clear that they happen by the will and the choice of people, each one deciding or failing, acting or reacting according to their own self, their fear, their ambition, their strength and determination, their loyalty, their weakness, their indecision. They are not manipulated by God like puppets in a stage-box. They are real as human beings and their autonomy is effective for whatever sphere their position gives them. The governor can release or condemn to a cruel death. The servant can make trouble for a discomforted stranger. All of them, the disciples, Peter, the High Priest, the Governor, the servant girl, members of the Sanhedrin, officers, soldiers and the Jerusalem crowd: they are themselves, individually and collectively and in the interrelations and tensions in which they prevail upon one another to act. Here is the whole of human self-determination, individual, mutual and collective, and they decide.

And yet it is God who decides. Not like the commander of a Roman legion by crushing opposition and forcing conformity to his will, any more than by manipulating people like puppets; but because God is God, resourceful to affirm what people are and what they choose to do, and to rule in it, thru it, bringing to light what it fully and really is, while with infinite resourcefulness accomplishing God's intentions.

When we act with human autonomy we act in some responsibility for what we do, intending to accomplish what we have proposed to ourselves. We are neither slaves nor cogs in some predestined machinery. The death of Jesus is to be understood in terms of human responsibility, individual and collective. It was a political murder, of the kind that is perpetrated every day by the most respectable of strong governments

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when they are dealing with the inconvenient weak. In 1975, the British ambassador in Jakarta advised that it would be in the best interests of his government if the Indonesian army took over the Portuguese colony of East Timor, which was approaching independence. At the same time Henry Kissinger gave a private go-ahead on behalf of the US president and flew back home to Washington. The next day the people of East Timor were crucified and 200,000 people died in the brutal 25 years that followed. Political murder is commonplace. It is part of the way our governments still manage their affairs. It is the act of accountable human beings, of politicians and soldiers each in their own way, and of the people who elect politicians or fall in behind them from a sense of loyalty or pride in the national identity they represent.

Jesus' death was the act of responsible human beings and the act of respected national representatives. It was the deed of people, and of peoples: Jesus was crucified by Roman authority at the behest of the leaders of his own people. But the account Mark gives us is not concerned to attribute blame. It is concerned to show us something far more important: that in the event where no-one comes out with any glory, not even Jesus' closest friends, God is at work, the Messiah is declared at last, and the covenant – the eternal and unbreakable commitment of God - is definitively enacted.

(It should not be necessary to say, but it is horrifically necessary to say, that there is no basis whatever for a charge against the Jewish people over the death of Jesus. A number of people acting at the time, Jewish and Roman, were guiltily implicated, but even this gospel written within a generation of the event shows no interest in blame or self-righteous comparisons. It is interested in the meaning of decisions and acts that were nothing less than the whole world's decision about the Messiah.)

The Jewish leaders in the Sanhedrin decided to hand Jesus over to the Roman authorities for a Roman execution. That was the most momentous decision of all human history. The High Priest and the Sanhedrin, the Council of rulers of Israel, met thru the night to agree their plan – the decision of the High Priest and the leaders of Israel – which was to hand over to the gentiles, for gentile execution, the man who had claimed to be the Messiah. We will not here, or in all the books we could ever write, be able to explain, to exhaust the significance of the things that were happening that night in Jerusalem. The body that was symbolically broken in the bread, and given, is given indeed, to be broken by the cruel power of Rome. The covenant blood, to be shed for many – and who are those many? – will be shed indeed, but the High Priest, the supremely sanctioned shedder of blood, the one who above all others may rightly slaughter in the name of the covenant for Israel, the High Priest, with the council that speaks for all Israel, has decided that the blood shall be shed shamefully, profanely, by common Roman soldiers. They don't know what they are doing, but they are responsible for what they are doing, and God is supremely responsible for what they are doing, for the inexhaustible meaning and power of this act that fulfils the very covenant of God with Israel.

The covenant is to be enacted by the pagan gentiles, the blood shall be shed on their cruel altars; Jew and gentile in this will be together and when the covenant which had cherished Israel for centuries comes to be enacted in its fulfilment, it shall be a covenant of Israel and of Rome, a covenant of all the nations. So they have chosen.

So God has chosen. And the prisoner condemned to die, Jesus the Messiah, has nowhere to go outside of that decision.

It seems that every word spoken on this night pregnant with death and life, is roaring with eternal decision and judgement. Every act turns the corner of history and enters the world onto a course it has not taken before. They don't know what they are doing, but they know what they think they are doing, taking the necessary political steps to ensure that the whole scope of authority, Jewish and Roman, is secured, of one mind and committed to getting rid of Jesus. Jesus had warned that when the moment of judgement came they might not be ready for it, and when it came, they were not only unready, but blind to it though they stood in the midst of it and were indeed its instruments.

Pilate, yielding to the crowd and to the superior tactics of the temple, gave the judgement they wanted. He handed Jesus over to the soldiers, to be flogged without mercy, as the practice was, in preparation for crucifixion. Like torturers everywhere and like officers of the law in too many places, the soldiers enjoyed this part. Once judgement had been passed, the prisoner was in their power for them to do what they liked. The Roman practice of scourging is too horrible to be described, but it ensured that every surface of flesh was torn to shreds and every nerve exposed to maximum pain. The Romans, when they had a slave or a criminal to execute, did not like to show a strong man going out to die. They had no intention of letting their prisoners go nobly to execution. When they appeared in the streets, on their way to the cross, they had to appear already bloody and disfigured, groaning or screaming in their pain. Every step towards their death was meant to underline their helplessness, their shame and their defeat. It was a public lesson.

The prisoners would carry their own cross. Not, of course, the whole structure on which they would be executed. That would be a feat of strength for a healthy, undamaged man. They would carry their own personal beam to add to the structure, made to assist publicly at their own torture. But even that would sometimes be too much for a man weakened by the preliminary flogging. So it was with Jesus. When they found he was too weak to carry his burden, they constrained a passing Libyan (Cyrene is in modern Libya) to shoulder it for him. They would not ask a Roman soldier to do such a thing, and perhaps, at this delicate time in Jerusalem, it would be unwise to offend the Jewish crowd, so they seized on the first foreigner who came by. The Romans had been put in charge of the enactment of God's covenant, and the Romans made sure that other gentiles, too, were actively involved.

They brought him to the place called Golgotha, the Skull. They offered him a drugging mixture of wine and myrrh, but he refused it. We do not know whether this was done to calm the prisoners and to make them manageable during the excruciating process of nailing and hoisting onto the scaffold, or whether it was a little symbolic act of mercy allowed to charitable onlookers. Perhaps, as is the way of such things, it was both.

They crucified him, and the soldiers shared out his clothing. That was always worth something. They threw dice to decide who should get what part. It was late in the morning when they crucified him, with two other criminals, and the charge against him was displayed: the King of the Jews.

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Crucifixion was total humiliation. It was public proof that you counted for nothing. It was the execution for slaves and criminals from the lowest class, for outsiders of no standing. Hung up for everyone to see and to learn the lesson, you died helpless and in terrible pain. Your execution declared you a total loser. You had broken the rules of powerful Rome, as only a pitiful fool would attempt to do, and you paid the fool's price.

People love a public execution. You know exactly who the losers are and whose side to put yourself on; and you can just watch your side winning. Among the curious and the ghoulish looking on, word of the charges brought in the Sanhedrin had got round and they taunted him: "You were going to destroy the temple and build it up again in three days. If you can do that, just get yourself down off the cross and save yourself." Priests and officials from the temple were there enjoying their triumph. They had been publicly embarrassed by Jesus, and it must have been important to them to point the lesson: that the man who had notoriously out-argued them in their own temple was really no more than a figure of ridicule and a criminal now getting what he deserved. "He was good at saving others, but he can't save himself!" they mocked. "Let the Messiah get down off his cross. When we see that, we'll believe in him!"

Crucifixion is surely the most cruel and dehumanising method of execution ever devised. In full public view the condemned criminal is forced to torture himself to death. Even the executioners, once they have nailed him and hoisted him up on the scaffold, can forget him if they like. They can play dice and sort out the spoils among themselves, for the dying criminal will arrange his own torture. Nailed thru the arms and the feet, his muscles racked with savage cramps, he has to struggle painfully to breathe. And nature just will not let him give up and stop breathing. To lift his body so that his lungs can take in air, he has to push up on his feet, grinding them on the nails that hold them, in spite of the agony. And then, when he can bear that no longer, and his body drops down in weakness, the weight pulls at his nailed arms and his tightened lungs begin again to suffocate. He is given just the space of a few inches in which to breathe, in which to move from one torture to another until, after many hours, and sometimes days, death becomes his end.

Jesus lasted from mid-morning well into the afternoon. The sky had clouded over and the world had become dark, but an even greater darkness had enveloped the soul of Jesus. He had known God as his Father, had lived his life in obedience to the will of God and had told his people of the kingdom, the rule of God, about to triumph among them. He had saved others. He had saved many others, and he had come in joy and foreboding to Jerusalem to save all of his people, to show the nation of Israel the way of her God. And now he was alone, dying in shame and helpless agony. They had handed him over to godless gentiles and in the depths of a godless world, he was alone. Their emptiness was his emptiness now, and he found himself abandoned. Even God was now nowhere for him.

Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

In the end, there is nothing. Except that God is still "my God."

Jesus cried out aloud in agony, and died.

The great veil of the temple, that shielded from unauthorised view the holiest of places where only the consecrated priest might stand before God, fell, torn in two.

A Roman centurion, the officer of the guard on duty, saw how he died, and something moved within his pagan heart. The covenant was now, and permanently, established; only not now, and not ever again would it be for the voice of the Priest to proclaim God's decree from the temple. The voice of the priest would now forever be dumb, and the voice of a gentile soldier, seeing in his own rough and confused but awestricken way, proclaims for all the world now and henceforth to know: "Truly, this was the son of God."

The Messiah has come into his own.

Some women were there. Mark hadn't thought to mention it before, but they had been with Jesus and his disciples as they went about Galilee, where they had cooked for them, and washed their clothes. They too had come to Jerusalem with him, and, unlike the men disciples, they were there when he died.

And there was someone to bury him. Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin, had sufficient standing to approach Pilate and ask for the body. It would seem that the Sanhedrin had not, after all, been unanimous. And Pilate apparently bore the man no personal malice. His death had been a necessary sacrifice, expedient for Pilate's continued authority and for the maintenance of Roman order in Palestine, but he need not be consigned to the common pit dug for the other criminals. Pilate wanted only confirmation that the man was really dead, and Joseph could have the corpse. The centurion was summoned, to tell the power that ruled the world that the Jewish Messiah was dead, and Joseph was given the body.

He and the women put him in a tomb and rolled a stone across the mouth of it. There was no time for anything more, for the holiest Sabbath of the year was already upon them.

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The adventure of the Messiah was over, and it only remained to give him honourable and proper burial. As soon as the Sabbath was over and they could go to work, the women came back with spices to anoint the body as the custom was and give him some decency in death. The men, his disciples, were not there, and it was only when they were on the way, that the women remembered the stone that Joseph had helped them put against the entrance of the tomb. They alone would not be able to move it, so how could they get in to anoint him?

But when they got to the tomb, the stone was already rolled back. Inside, instead of a dead body, there was a young man dressed in white and sitting on the ledge, who told them: "If you're looking for Jesus of Nazareth, he is not here, he is risen. Now you must go and tell his disciples, and Peter, that he has gone ahead of you to Galilee and you will find him there."

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After all, and after all, he was going back to Galilee, and they would meet him there.

It was all too much for the women, who rushed out of the tomb and ran away. They said nothing to anyone they passed, for they were terrified.