

Mark 15: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Mark chapter 15 And as soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. And they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate.

And Pilate asked him, Are you the king of the Jews? And he answered him, You have said so. And the chief priests accused him of many things. And Pilate again asked him, Have you no answer to make?

See how many charges they bring against you. But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed. Now at the feast he used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked. And among the rebels in prison who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas. And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he usually did for them. And he answered them saying, Do you want me to release for you the king of the Jews? For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him released for them Barabbas instead.

[1 : 04] And Pilate again said to them, Then what shall I do with the man you call the king of the Jews? And they cried out again, Crucify him! And Pilate said to them, Why? What evil has he done?

But they shouted all the more, Crucify him! So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas. And having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.

And the soldiers led him away inside the palace, that is, the governor's headquarters. And they called together the whole battalion. And they clothed him in a purple cloak. And twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him.

And they began to salute him, Hail the Jews! And they were striking with a reed, and spitting on him, and kneeling down in homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak, and put his own clothes on him.

And they led him out to crucify him. And they compelled the passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross.

[2 : 05] And they brought him to the place called Golgotha, which means place of a skull. And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him, and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take.

And it was the third hour when they crucified him. And the inscription of the charge against him read, The King of the Jews. And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right, and one on his left.

And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads, and saying, Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross.

So also the chief priests, with the scribes, mocked him to one another, saying, He saved others, he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.

Those who were crucified with him also reviled him. And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!

[3 : 16] Which means, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And some of the bystanders hearing it said, Behold, he is calling Elijah. And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink, saying, Wait! Let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.

And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion who stood facing him saw that in this way he breathed

his last, he said, Truly this man was the Son of God.

There were also women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the Younger, and of Joses and Salome. When he was in Galilee they followed him and ministered to him, and there were also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem.

And when evening had come, since it was the day of preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.

Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died, and summoning the centurion he asked him whether he was already dead. And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph.

[4 : 41] And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud, and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb.

Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of Joses, saw where he was laid. Mark chapter 15 begins with a consultation between the chief priests, the elders, the scribes, and the entire Sanhedrin. They then deliver Jesus over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate questions Jesus concerning the charges against him. The charge that he claims that he is the king of the Jews is the messianic claim as seen from a Gentile perspective.

Some have suggested that Pilate's question should be read in a sarcastic tone. You are the king of the Jews? Joel Marcus then suggests that Jesus' response to this question is the edgy one. You are saying it. Such an answer might antagonize him. It presents Pilate himself as bearing witness to Jesus being the king of the Jews. But beyond this, Jesus doesn't give any more responses to Pilate.

[5 : 47] Pilate presses him to answer the charges made against him, but Jesus makes no further response. Once again, this is reminiscent of Isaiah chapter 53 verse 7, the lamb who is led to the slaughter, who is silent before its shearers.

This is the silence of one who is facing the threat of death, and for that reason it is remarkable, and Pilate is amazed. One would expect a person in Jesus' position to be doing anything and everything to defend himself, but Jesus is silent.

Pilate gives the people the choice between Barabbas and Jesus as the one to be released to them. Pilate seems to be searching for a means of escape here. He recognizes that the chief priests have delivered Jesus up through envy.

However, he needs to keep the chief priests, the elders, and the Sanhedrin on his side, so he needs to condemn Jesus. He also wants to satisfy the crowd. Like the Jewish leaders, he fears the crowd and doesn't want to go against it.

A customary release of a prisoner seems to offer him an opportunity to get Jesus off, without taking responsibility that would render him unpopular. The practice of releasing a prisoner seems to be a strange one, and presumably it's not a commitment on the part of the Roman governor, so much as an occasional Passover time crowd-pleasing gesture that's snatched at now as a way out of a difficult position.

[7 : 07] What it does do is it sets up Barabbas and Jesus as two ways that the people can choose. The choice between Barabbas and Jesus seems to be a choice that shouldn't be a choice at all.

Why would they prefer an insurrectionist and a murderer over Jesus who healed the sick and raised the dead? Yet as the chief priests stir up the crowd, this is exactly the way that they choose.

Mark makes certain that we have an idea about what sort of man Barabbas is. Barabbas means son of the father, which again invites comparison and contrast with Christ himself as the true son of the father.

In choosing Barabbas, the people choose the violent revolutionary over the true Messiah, and this is a choice that over time would eventually seal their fate in AD 70. The crowd cry out for Jesus' crucifixion, not just for his condemnation, but that he should be put to death in the most grisly way possible.

The actions and the description of the crowd here is similar to the way that we find demon-possessed persons described elsewhere in Mark. The crowd are whipped up in a sort of demonic frenzy, with the chief priests being involved, but behind them I think we can see Satan himself.

[8 : 19] Pilate releases Barabbas to the crowd, scourges Jesus, and then delivers Jesus up to be crucified. There's a parodic coronation and enthronement that follows.

Gentile soldiers, the whole battalion, ridiculing the king of the Jews, gathering as an audience before him, dressing him up with a crown and a scarlet robe. Now this is appropriate because soldiers recognise kings.

Soldiers are the ones that surround kings and express the glory of the rulers of this world. And now in a parody of a coronation, we're seeing something of the truth of what's taking place.

Jesus is the true king, and this is his exaltation that's going to happen. He's going to be lifted up on the cross, and then raised to God's right hand. We might also reflect upon the fact that all the other people in this situation, none of them seem to be in control.

The chief priests and the scribes are envious of Christ and his influence, driven by their passions. They're also fearful of the crowd, as is Pilate, who is concerned to pacify them.

[9 : 22] Pilate also needs to keep the chief priests and the scribes on his side. The crowd is caught up in a satanic frenzy. And paradoxically, Jesus, the one who is condemned to crucifixion, seems to be the only one who isn't operating out of his fear and passions.

A passerby called Simon of Cyrene is compelled to carry the cross for Christ. Simon is a Gentile who carries Christ's cross, the very mark of true discipleship.

Yet Simon Peter, the chief of the disciples Jesus called, and the one who had been given the charge to carry the cross and follow Christ, is nowhere to be found.

Once again, we're having a juxtaposition here. We've seen juxtapositions between Christ and Peter, between Jesus and Barabbas, and now we're seeing one between Simon of Cyrene, and also Peter, Simon Peter.

The division of Christ's garments and the casting lots for them again looks back to Psalm 22, verse 18. They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.

[10 : 29] The voice of scripture is behind the text at many points here, and we can hear its voice as the voice of fulfilled prophecy. This is the voice of the Davidic suffering king.

It gives the reader or the hearer a sense of what is taking place in the death of Christ. They crucify him in the third hour, around 9am. He's offered myrrh and wine, drugged wine, to dull his awareness of the pain, which he refuses.

His refusal of the drugged wine draws our mind back to his statement that he would not drink of the fruit of the vine until he drank it new in the kingdom, a sort of Nazarite vow that Christ takes as he goes out to do battle with the evil one.

It is also a commitment consciously to bear the pain of the cross, not to shrink away from it in insensibility, but to face up to it fully. Finally, perhaps we're supposed to see a relationship between Christ not drinking wine and the fact that the priests were not supposed to drink wine while they were on duty in the temple.

Jesus is performing a sacrificial work here, and it's important that he does so in his full and right mind. The charge for which he's being crucified is placed above him, that he is the king of the Jews, and there are robbers placed on either side of him, like people would be on either side of an enthroned king.

[11 : 47] There's a fulfilment of Isaiah chapter 53 verse 12 here, that he was numbered with the transgressors. There's also a continuation of the theme of a parodic enthronement.

As people pass by, they mock and they wag their heads. Again, this looks back to the words of scripture in the past. Psalm 22 verse 7. Once again, Psalm 22.

All who see me mock me. They make mouths at me. They wag their heads. Lamentations chapter 2 verse 15. All who pass along the way clap their hands at you.

They hiss and wag their heads at the daughter of Jerusalem. Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of all the earth? Jesus is ridiculed as the one who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days by the passers-by.

He's ridiculed by the chief priests, by the scribes and the elders, as the one who, though he saved others, cannot save himself. He is the supposed king of Israel and claims to trust in God, but God is not coming to his aid.

[12 : 50] There's darkness over the land from noon to three o'clock, and this progression through hours, the third hour, the sixth hour and the ninth hour, perhaps invites us to see some deeper order in what's taking place and the divine superintention of the crucifixion.

Perhaps we could even see it as something akin to trimesters leading to the birth of a new world. Darkness over the land from noon to three o'clock recalls the final of the cycle of plagues before the death of the firstborn, which itself occurred at the darkness of midnight.

Once again, there's darkness over the land, darkness that reminds us of the exodus and associates Israel with Egypt as it was judged in the plagues. And now we have another death of the firstborn, the true firstborn that dies for the people, and they were substituted by lambs, but this is the true lamb of God.

And we should be alert to the Passover connotations here, because the Passover lamb would be killed around this sort of time. Christ is the true Passover lamb. He's the true firstborn son.

He's the one that dies so that the people can be released from slavery, that a new exodus can take place. Mark has been working with themes of Isaiah and of Isaiah's new exodus throughout.

[14:02] And now we maybe see these coming to their full head, that this is the time when the exodus is taking place. Christ prepared for the Passover, and now he is the Passover lamb being sacrificed.

The darkness here could not have been a solar eclipse, but it may have been an extreme sandstorm, as it was in the case of the exodus, or perhaps also it could have been a covering up of the skies with heavy cloud cover.

The darkness at his death contrasts with the light of the dawn that will be associated with his resurrection. And the darkness of the day of the Lord is described in the Old Testament. Zephaniah chapter 1 verse 15.

A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness.

Amos chapter 8 verses 9 to 10. And on that day, declares the Lord God, We have a number of the elements here that appear in the crucifixion of Christ.

[15:19] As in the prophecy of Amos, it's noon when the sun goes down, and the earth is darkened. There's also the death of an only son, the firstborn son of the Father.

We might also consider the similarities between the description of Jesus' trial, mockery, crucifixion and death, and the events described in relation to the events leading up to and in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Jesus is suffering the fate of Jerusalem. He's presenting an alternative for all those who trust in him.

At the ninth hour, Jesus cries out with a loud voice, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

These are the first words of Psalm 22, a psalm that's been alluded to or cited on a number of occasions already within this account. It's a psalm of the suffering Davidic king.

The bystanders don't recognise that Jesus is quoting scripture. Like Eli in the temple, who couldn't recognise the prayer of Hannah, they can't recognise the voice of scripture and the voice of the psalms.

[16:19] They hear, but they do not understand. And perhaps there's another irony here, as the coming of Elijah was associated with the arrival of the great and terrible day of the Lord in Malachi chapter 4.

Jesus is offered sour wine at this point, recalling Psalm 69 verse 21. They gave me poison for food and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink. He again cries out with a loud voice and he dies. And the curtain of the temple, the realm of God's dwelling, the very heart of the religious order is torn from top to bottom. It's a sign of God's action. It's not torn from the bottom to the top, but from the realm of God's dwelling, from the top.

Also, it's an anticipation of the fulfilment of Christ's words concerning the temple. This is a tearing in judgement. It could also be seen as a tearing in mourning. The high priest tore his garments as he was not supposed to do, earlier on in outrage at Jesus' blasphemy.

But God is tearing the clothes of his tabernacle in mourning for his son. It's also an opening up of a realm that has been closed off so that people can come into God's special presence.

[17:28] There's debate about which part of the temple this curtain is in. Is it the curtain at the entrance to the temple itself, or is it the curtain that is at the entrance of the Holy of Holies?

One way or another, God is opening up a way for people to come in. The response of the centurion seeing all of this is to confess that Jesus is the Son of God. This is the response of a Gentile in faith.

