

Mark 14:53-72: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Mark chapter 14 verses 53 to 72. And they led Jesus to the high priest, and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together.

And Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. And he was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire. Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none.

For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, We heard him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.

Yet even about this their testimony did not agree. And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?

But he remained silent and made no answer. Again the high priest asked him, Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed? And Jesus said, I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven.

[1 : 0 9] And the high priest tore his garments and said, What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision? And they all condemned him as deserving death.

And some began to spit on him and to cover his face and to strike him, saying to him, Prophecy. And the guards received him with blows. And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came.

And seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, You also were with the Nazarene Jesus. But he denied it, saying, I neither know nor understand what you mean.

And he went out into the gateway, and the rooster crowed. And the servant girl saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, This man is one of them. But again he denied it, and after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.

But he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, I do not know this man of whom you speak. And immediately the rooster crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.

[2 : 2 1] And he broke down and wept. Earlier in Mark chapter 14, Jesus was seized by the mob with Judas at night, and taken now to Caiaphas the high priest.

The setting of night highlights the urgency and the underhandedness of what is taking place. The authorities are concerned to deal with Christ as urgently as possible, before the feast proper starts.

And so, rather than following a more deliberate and slower procedure of justice, they are trying to deal with things as rapidly as possible. The Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, brings together false witnesses against Christ.

They are seeking to get the conviction that they so desperately desire. And they repeatedly try and fail until some come forward, accusing him of statements challenging the temple. Jesus had challenged the temple on a few occasions, particularly during the final week in Jerusalem.

He claimed it had been made into a den of robbers, a place of traders, a den for brigands to take refuge from God's justice. Acts chapter 6, verses 11 to 14 is one testimony to the way that the early Christians were seen to speak against the temple and what it stood for.

[3 : 30] Then they secretly instigated men who said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God. And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council.

And they set up false witnesses and said, This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.

In the story of Stephen's trial, we see many of the beats of the story of Christ's trial being played out again. And once again, there's that threat to the temple that's at the centre of the charges being made.

Jesus is a prophet like Jeremiah or Ezekiel, one of the prophets who speaks against the temple and the way that it's being used in the people's life. It's being perverted.

It's being made into something they're putting their hope in while they're disobeying the will of the Lord. In Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 1 to 14, we have an example of such a charge.

[4 : 33] The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Stand in the gate of the Lord's house and proclaim there this word and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you men of Judah who enter these gates to worship the Lord.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words. This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.

For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever.

Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered, only to go on doing all these abominations.

Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the Lord. Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel.

[5 : 56] And now, because you have done all these things, declares the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen, and when I called you you did not answer, therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh.

Jesus makes a statement about the temple in John chapter 2 verses 18 to 22, which seems to be alluded here in the statements that are made by the false witnesses against him.

So the Jews said to him, What sign do you show us for doing these things? Jesus answered them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. The Jews then said, It has taken 46 years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?

But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture, and the word that Jesus had spoken.

So the false witnesses make a true statement, but with the attempt to destroy him, false witness can have a broader sense than simply a false message. Jesus is convicted by true testimony, but true testimony that is perverted.

[7 : 13] Jesus is silent before his accusers, and once again this seems to be in fulfilment of the scriptures. In Isaiah chapter 53 verse 7, He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth, like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

The high priest asks him if he is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed. What does this have to do with the earlier claims about his statements concerning the temple? Well, the Messiah was the one to cleanse and restore and reform the temple.

Jesus, we should remember, has been performing messianic style actions for the last few days. His triumphal entry, his action in the temple. Calling the Messiah the Son of the Blessed would not have the same strong metaphysical meaning that later Christian theology would give it.

The Son of God, in that sense, is the one who is the Davidic Son, the one who is going to inherit the throne of his father David. Now as we play that out and work out all the things that are associated with that, we'll see that it's not just a human figure.

But the initial and immediate sense of Son of God or Son of the Blessed is not the divine Son in the way that we would think about that in terms of the Son as the second person of the Trinity.

[8 : 32] Jesus affirms the statement that the high priest gives to him in the loaded words, I am. And he identifies himself once more with the Son of Man in Daniel's vision in Daniel chapter 7 verses 13 to 14.

I saw in the night visions and behold with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man and he came to the ancient of days and was presented before him and to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom.

That all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

There also seems to be an allusion here to Psalm 110 verse 1. The Lord says to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.

The hearers of Jesus' statement, he declares, will see Jesus at the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven. What on earth could this mean?

[9 : 34] Jesus seems to be saying that he's coming to the throne of God in the middle of history to receive power. The point is not that he's coming to earth. But the leaders of the Jews will see proof of his ascension to power when he is vindicated in the destruction of their temple and city.

The coming of Christ then, the coming of the Son of Man, is not primarily a downward movement to earth. Rather, it's the movement to the throne of God, the movement to the right hand of the power of God.

And the high priest's response to this is to tear his clothes. We should recall from Leviticus chapter 21 verse 10 that the high priest was specifically commanded not to tear his clothes.

The high priest and the court charge Jesus with blasphemy and declare him to be worthy of death.

They do not, however, have the jurisdiction to carry out that sentence, so they must deliver him to Pilate later on. This trial was probably not a trial in the fuller sense of the term, more a hearing that is an attempt to establish charges to be presented to Pilate later on, the one with the actual authority to cast the death sentence.

[10:56] So why was Jesus declared to be guilty of blasphemy? First of all, he committed a sort of cultural blasphemy. He opposed the temple and the religious leaders, and he claimed messianic status.

But also he seemed to go beyond that. In claiming to be the Son of Man who would sit at the right hand of the power of God, he was claiming something for himself that went beyond the status of any man.

This was a blasphemy in a stronger sense of the term. Their response is to spit in his face, to cover his face, to strike him, and to mock him. The way that he's being treated here is probably intended to remind the reader of the Isainic servant in Isaiah chapter 50 verse 6.

Peter's denial is paralleled with and contrasts with Jesus' trial.

Mark brings that contrast to the attention of the hearers of his gospel by moving the narrative to and fro between them. Both are questioned. One is faithful, but the other is unfaithful.

[12:07] And there's a gradual escalation. First he's approached directly by the servant girl and he denies it. He then tries to move location. And then he's accused to the bystanders by the servant girl.

And he denies it strongly again. Then the bystanders accuse him together of association with the followers of Jesus. His accent gives him away. He seems to be a man of Galilee associated with this teacher that's come down from Nazareth.

In responding to this charge, Peter seems to call a curse upon himself, an anathema upon himself, which is something of the utmost seriousness. In denying Christ, he's calling a curse upon himself.

Hearing the cock crow that second time brings sudden and horrified self-recognition. He recognizes his earlier pride. He recognizes his lack of wakefulness.

He's not been alert. He's not recognized what he's been doing. And he's sleepwalked into this great sin. He comes to his senses. He completely removes himself from the situation.

[13:11] And he weeps bitterly. A question to consider. What can we learn from the way that the testing of Peter is contrasted with the testing of Jesus, both in Gethsemane and in the house of Caiaphas, the high priest?