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Exegesis Case Study

MARK 14:1-11

Wm. H. Stauffer

INTRODUCTION TO MARKAN STUDIES

Even a cursory glance at Mark's Gospel will reveal the inordinate proportion of that writing devoted to the last days of Jesus' life. That fact alone indicates the importance Mark attached to the Passion of Jesus. And for that reason this Gospel is commonly denoted as, in the title of one Bible study course, "The Journey to the Cross," following Martin Kaehler's reference to Mark as a Passion narrative with an extended introduction.¹

But more is contained in that statement of Kaehler's than a mere spatial reference, more even than an agreement that the Passion of Jesus in Mark is the climax of the Gospel. Following Martin Dibelius there has been a widespread view that the Passion narratives existed as an extended block of traditional material before Mark's writing.² Thus it has been generally concluded that while Mark may have been free to stamp the material he collected for the first thirteen chapters with his own theological understanding, he was bound by the givenness of the Passion tradition to incorporate it untouched. The fact that the Synoptics and John agree, if not in all details at least in the general events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion, aids and abets this supposition of an already formulated pre-Markan narrative. These hypotheses were extended to draw this further conclusion: that the Passion narrative was the purest and most valid historical material in the Gospels, being uninfluenced by either the early

1. M. Kaehler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*, tr. & ed. C.E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), p. 80.

2. M. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, tr. B.L. Woolf (New York: Scribners, n.d.), p. 180.

church or the evangelists.³

Present scholarship is now re-examining those hypotheses and conclusions.⁴ This re-examination has openly challenged those findings and, in fact, arrives at an opposite conclusion. While acknowledging with the past that the hermeneutical key to reading and understanding Mark is the Passion of Jesus, present scholarship makes this important addition: "The hermeneutical key to reading and understanding the Gospel of Mark is the role which the Evangelist has given to the passion of Jesus as the primary perspective for understanding all the other traditions about Jesus incorporated in the Gospel."⁵

The present analysis of the Passion in Mark leads to the same conclusion which pertained to the first thirteen chapters of the Gospel, namely that Mark's own theological insight is clearly evident in his presentation of the Passion of Jesus. Rather than regarding the Passion as a traditional narrative Mark has simply taken over, there is an emerging consensus that, "It is itself the end product of a varied and complicated development, but a text which owes its final form and coherent structure and meaning to Mark . . . The Passion Narrative as a whole and, to a certain extent, each individual part of it bears the imprint of the theology of the whole work."⁶

It should be noted here that while there is a growing consensus on Markan involvement in shaping the Passion narrative in his Gospel, the consensus on the purpose of his writing it in that shape is not evident. For example, T.J. Weeden proposes that Mark attempts to settle a christological dispute: Jesus the "divine man" vs. Jesus "the suffering servant."⁷ W.H. Kelber hypothesizes that Mark was written to create a new response and identity for the Christian community after the collapse of the church and society with the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. It returns the focus of the contemporary Christian community to the life and ministry of Jesus, from Jerusalem to Galilee.⁸

Without necessarily subscribing to the conclusion of any particular scholar, the new Markan scholarship does open up these hermeneutical insights: (1) that Mark, including the Passion narrative, is not a history of Jesus (*deus dixit*), but rather a proclamation of Jesus (*deus loquens*), the one who suffered. Without that understanding there is no Jesus, no cross, no faith. There is no Christian faith without a

3. M. Dibelius, "Die alttestamentlichen Motive in der Leidensgeschichte des Petrus — und des Johannes-Evangeliums," p. 223 referred to in W.H. Kelber, ed., *The Passion in Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), p. 2.

4. W. Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, tr. J.C.G. Grieg (Cambridge: J. Clarke, 1971). Wrede early opened the door for such a re-examination when he proposed that the scheme of secrecy was an invention of Mark and not of Jesus himself.

5. P.J. Achtemeier, "Mark as Interpreter of the Jesus Traditions," *Interpretation*, XXXII (Oct., 1978): 339.

6. J.R. Donahue, "Introduction: From Passion Traditions to Passion Narrative," in W.H. Kelber, ed., *The Passion in Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), p. 20.

7. T.J. Weeden, *Mark: Traditions In Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

8. W.H. Kelber, *The Kingdom in Mark: A New Place and a New Time* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974). A concise survey of "Mark's Gospel in Recent Research," by H.C. Kee appears in *Interpretation*, XXXII, 353ff.

present cross;⁹ (2) that, as a *deus loquens* for the church of his and every age, Mark's presentation of Jesus is a voicing against which we can reverberate our lives and relationship and hear the dissonances and harmonies with the life and relationships of Jesus;¹⁰ (3) that, as a *deus loquens* for the church of his and every age, Mark's presentation of Jesus is a parable which is always speaking to revise, renew insight and restate how we may appropriate the life of discipleship in the present.¹¹

These hermeneutical insights open the way for a fruitful exegetical and homiletical task.

EXEGETICAL COMMENT¹²

The text of Mark 14:1-11 begins the climax of Mark's Gospel proclamation. It is divided into three parts: vv1-2 and vv10-11 form a continuous narrative, interrupted by the anointing story vv3-9. The bracketing verses supply the background information which render the anointing story, and the rest of the Passion narrative, intelligible.

Vv. 1-2

These verses are probably a circumstantial reconstruction of the facts since there is no way for the church to have known the plotting of the "chief priests and the scribes", a non-technical term which vaguely characterizes the Jewish authorities or Sanhedrin (*cf.* also v10). Mark probably intended vv1-2 to mean that the authorities determined that if Jesus was to be put out of the way it needed to be done quickly and quietly so public anger would not be aroused. This was because of the crowds present for the Passover which, though not now celebrated at the Temple (Deut. 16:2), was celebrated in Jerusalem. But the statement is inexact and v2 could be read that the authorities decided not to approach Jesus, even secretly, during the festival. However, Mark is definite that Jesus would be killed during the feast (14:17ff.) and that he was arrested during the feast (14:43ff.).

Perhaps Mark, not knowing the facts of the authorities' plot, expressed himself vaguely. Perhaps the offer of Judas' aid swayed their deliberation, though it appears to be a plot sufficiently matured that it was determined "to arrest Jesus secretly and put him to death." (v1). Perhaps there was an already formulated story containing a different chronology than Mark used which was left unresolved by Mark, *e.g.* if Jesus was arrested before the Passover he could not be present at the Passover

9. P.J. Achtemeier, pp. 339ff. Also, *Mark, The Proclamation Commentaries* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), pp. 21, 100.

10. E. Schweizer, "The Portrayal of the Life of Faith in the Gospel of Mark," *Interpretation*, XXXII, 369ff. Also, *The Good News According to Mark*, tr. D.H. Madvig (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976), pp. 11ff.

11. J.R. Donahue, "Jesus as the Parable of God in the Gospel of Mark," *Interpretation*, XXXII, 369ff.

12. The major works consulted for the exegetical study were: P.J. Achtemeier, *Invitation to Mark* (Garden City: Image Books, 1978). F.C. Grant, "Mark," *The Interpreters Bible*, VII, (New York: Abingdon, 1951). D.E. Nineham, *Saint Mark* (London: Penguin Books, 1975). E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark*, tr. D.H. Madvig (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976).

meal with his disciples as Mark said he was, and the last supper would not be a Passover meal as Mark said it was (14:12ff.). Or, if Jesus was arrested after the feast, the whole chronology of the Passion narrative is askew and the insistence of Mark that Jesus was arrested and killed during the feast (14:17ff., 43ff.) becomes meaningless.

Yet Mark takes great care to establish a chronology. A literal reading of the Greek is, "Now it was the Passover and the Unleavened Bread after two days." Even that time is unclear. It is unclear if the two days are exclusive (48 hours to the Passover), or inclusive (24 hours to Passover). Are the days calculated in the Roman style, midnight to midnight, or by Jewish reckoning, sundown to sundown? It is generally agreed that Mark used Jewish reckoning, which is important for understanding the subsequent references to the feast which plays such a central role in Mark's Passion narrative. However, even this agreement on the time is not without problem. Mark 14:12 identifies the "first day of the Unleavened Bread" (15th Nisan) with the day "they sacrificed the passover lamb" (14th Nisan). Perhaps the Passover was popularly known as the first day of Unleavened Bread. The lamb was ritually sacrificed in the Temple on the 14th Nisan, and all yeast and leavened bread was destroyed by noon that day. But that confuses the chronology of 14:1 which makes reference to the "two days" before Passover and Unleavened Bread. The elision of the Passover rites and the Unleavened Bread make it extremely difficult to determine the exact moment Mark meant to designate in v.1.

Such a confusion of chronology would be most easily explained if Mark incorporated several bits of traditional material, each of which contained its own time designation. Perhaps, then, if the chronology is problematic, it is more important to seek the meaning Mark intends by his chronology. The ensuing Passion narrative reveals a very deliberate process as Mark tells it. Each step in time is intentional, underscored by the phrase "as the Scriptures say," (cf. 14:21,29 *et. al.*). The intent of God, as Mark sees it, is to proclaim Jesus, the suffering and sacrificed Messiah, as the faithful one and the model of our discipleship.

Vv. 3-9: The Anointing Story

This meaning is underlined by Mark's use here of the anointing story. Matthew 26:6-13 locates this story in the same place within the Passion narrative as Mark. John 12:1-8 places it before Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Luke 7:36-50 narrates a similar story in an entirely different context and with an entirely different intent (a teaching on forgiveness) near the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The differences in the several Gospels suggest that this story circulated independently, without any indication of where it occurred in Jesus' ministry. In its Markan form the anointing takes place in Bethany at the home of Simon, the leper, an anonymous, though apparently well-known man because this is his only identification in the Gospels. John also sets the occurrence in Bethany, but at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Luke sets the story at the home of Simon the Pharisee. All, then, use this independent story in different ways, and perhaps the historical detail surrounding the event is less important than the meaning for which this story is told.

As Mark uses this story there is an evident anonymity of the characters, unlike

the story in the other Gospels (cf. John 12:3; Matt. 26:1; Luke 7:37). The woman who anoints Jesus in the Markan account is anonymous, being identified with Mary Magdalene only after the fourth century by the Syrian father, Ephraem. "They," her retractors, also remain anonymous in Mark 14:4-5. This may serve to highlight the fact that Mark's version is comparatively original. Certainly it puts into high relief the response of Jesus to the action and reaction of these anonymous characters. In concert with Mark's intent, the anonymity serves to make the action and reaction universally personal, calling forth our own reaction to and understanding of discipleship.

The woman's action called for a reaction. Her behaviour was unorthodox — breaking into a circle of men, anointing Jesus "while he was eating," not before (v3). Her action was extravagant — an entire alabaster of the prized and rare Indian unguent with the value of a full year's wage, used up in one anointing (v3). Her action was eccentric — she "poured the perfume on Jesus' head" (v3). Anointing with oil was a usual refreshment in Jesus' time, though with less expensive oil, in smaller quantity, and of the feet not the head (cf. John 12:3; Luke 7:38).

The reaction was quick and critical. Shocked by the unorthodox extravagance and eccentricity of the woman's action, "some of the people" complained of the wantonness in the face of the wants of the poor. It was a natural reaction. Yet their criticism was wrong here and Jesus defends the "fine and beautiful thing" she did for him.

Some scholars see the original point of the story here and in the following verses (vv6-7) concerned with the poor and their care (cf. Deut. 15:11). This statement cannot be construed as a socio-economic proposal which would guarantee perpetual poverty to some. It is, at least, a call to care for the poor. But in the Markan form, with the addition of v7c, a new point is made: "You will always have poor people with you . . . But you will not always have me." Mark uses Jesus' reply to expose the incomprehension of the disciples and the others at table with Jesus (as the authorities were uncomprehending in vv1-2, and Judas in vv10-11), contrasting it with the understanding of his Messiahship shown by the woman's act of anointing him.

A new, second climax to the anointing story is introduced in v8, a dramatic underlining by Mark, a further indication of his control of the Passion material. "She has done all she could," i.e. "she poured perfume on my body to prepare it for burial," (cf. John 12:7 and the contrast "let her keep it for the day of my burial."). In Mark the anointing is interpreted as a symbolic and prophetic action in preparation for Jesus' suffering. The anointing of the head (v3) is an anointing to Messiahship (cf. I Sam. 10:1; Is. 61:1; *et. al.*), is an anointing to suffering Messiahship. The breaking of the oil jar may also have an added symbolism beyond the extravagance of the act. In Hellenistic times the oil flask was sometimes broken and placed in the coffin when the corpse was anointed. Jesus' statement concerning his anointing confirms both that he is the Messiah and that he will suffer and die, that he "shall not be with you always," (v7c). V8 cannot presage the resurrection when the women could not anoint his body with oil (16:1ff.). It would destroy not only the suffering Messiahship and the cross which Mark so painstakingly makes the focus of the Gospel, but also the Incarnation and the humanity of Jesus if he foresaw a

“*deus ex machina*” resurrection rescue from suffering and death.

The impact of the anointing story in Mark’s Passion narrative is to announce this anonymous woman as the first person to grasp the central importance of Jesus’ Passion. Her devotion and action emphasize the path of Jesus the Messiah, leading through suffering and sacrifice to death, which is the heart of the Gospel. (The soldier’s confession, 15:39, underscores the same point, “This man really was the Son of God,” seeing only how Jesus suffered and died on the cross.) This understanding, this faith, can be seen in “what she has done” and this is “what will be told in memory of her,” (v9). In the reference to the worldwide spread of the Gospel in v9 (not thought of before the time described in Acts 8:1; 11:14 ff.), Mark underscores that the key to understanding Jesus’ Messiahship and Passion, and the key to understanding discipleship, is located in the understanding of this woman.

So it becomes a perennial action which calls for each person’s reaction, “wherever the gospel is preached, all over the world,” to suffering discipleship.

Vv. 10-11: Betrayal

Mark immediately supplies an instance of the rejection of that understanding of Jesus’ Messiahship and the discipleship it entails. The account of Judas’ betrayal originally came after vv1-2. In the Markan account it serves as a foil for the preceding story.

The motivation for Judas’ betrayal is a puzzle. Theories abound. Judas’ betrayal of Jesus was motivated by his feeling of betrayal at the direction of Jesus’ Messiahship. Judas wished to force Jesus’ hand to act forcefully and decisively against the authorities and Rome. Judas was a scoundrel and devil-seduced (cf. John 12:6; 13:2,27). Judas was greedy (cf. Matt. 26:15; John 12:4-6), though no money is promised until after the betrayal is offered (v11). Mark gives no motive, nor does he make any moral judgment, only a statement that “Judas went off . . . to betray him.”

The fact of betrayal is also true of the rest of the disciples. The strange phrase, “Judas, the one of the twelve disciples,” is not meant to single out Judas as the only betrayer. Perhaps it is a linguistic anachronism, the force of the definite article long-since spent. Perhaps the definite article is nothing more than a means of distinguishing him from another well-known Judas. At Jesus’ arrest all the disciples betrayed him by running away (14:50). Peter denied him three times (14:66ff.) None were present at his crucifixion. None witnessed the resurrection or even heard of it because the women “said nothing to anyone,” (16:8). Judas was not the sole betrayer, but Mark uses the incident of Judas’ betrayal here to make clear that the hour of Jesus’ death, so often announced (3:6; 8:32; 10:33-34; 12:12), yet heard only by the woman who anointed him, was now at hand.

Precisely what Judas betrayed is unclear. Again, theories abound. John (18:2) suggests it was the place where Jesus went at night. Perhaps it was the fact that Jesus considered himself the Messiah (though sufficient opposition arose against him much earlier because of his attitude toward the Law and the Temple — 3:6; 11:18; 14:58). Again, Mark offers no explanation. Judas simply went off to betray Jesus to

the authorities.

In the light of the foregoing exegesis, a probable conclusion is that Judas betrayed his discipleship. "The one of the twelve disciples," as the other eleven of the disciples, should have understood the nature of Jesus' Messiahship and the necessity of the cross. He and they did not understand that these things must come to pass (8:31). Only the woman understood.

EXEGETICAL CONCLUSIONS

In the first eleven verses of chapter 14 Mark provides a guide to the meaning of the Passion. Jesus, the object of the malice of the authorities (vv1-2) and of the treachery of Judas (vv10-11), was for the same reasons the object of the woman who anointed him with oil, thus revealing she understood the Messiah, Jesus. By these three vignettes, Mark provides us with the key for understanding the following narrative and the entire Gospel. The Passion is the supreme act of the Messiah. The Messiahship of Jesus is the explanation of the Passion.

Either we profess and confess the way of the cross or, with Judas, the authorities, and the other disciples, we wait for the kingdom to come in power and great glory and thus betray and slay. Ironically, those latter views betrayed and slayed those who clung to them and power and glory, so that as the Temple fell in A.D. 70 there was no other way left but the way of the cross.

CONCLUSIONS FOR THE HOMILETICAL TASK

Rather than append a lengthy introduction to an already formulated Passion narrative, Mark composed and arranged his account of Jesus' suffering and death from many independent traditions. His method was to connect these independent stories with a minimum of comment; comment was given only to clarify his theology of the Christ, Jesus (e.g. vv7c-8). The arrangement of his material provided the meaning of Jesus. An inspired artist, he has created a canvas, a collage, in which the historical climax of Jesus' life is also the theological climax. The major themes of Mark are re-presented in 14:1-11: Jesus' conflict with the authorities (vv1-2), the lack of understanding of the disciples (vv10-11), and the necessity of suffering and death for the Messiah (vv3-9). The cross not only concludes Jesus' career, it is the climax of Jesus' career and the key to its meaning. For the first time the separate traditions about Jesus are given a coherent framework which interprets their meaning.

To understand Jesus is to understand the necessity for his suffering and death. Apart from that understanding there can be no Jesus, no faith, no discipleship. That may be the singular point Mark wants to make for his contemporaries — and for our contemporaries too. Between the first and second coming of Christ, life remains ambiguous. Between the first and second coming of Christ, suffering remains. Between the first and second coming of Christ, the faith-decision remains: to reject or accept the way of the cross. The barriers to faith also remain: the desire for well-

being, power, prestige.¹³ "When we look at the misery of our world, its evil and its sin, especially in these days which seem to mark the end of a world period, we long for divine interference, so that the world and its daemonic rulers might be overcome. We long for a king of peace within history, or for a king of glory above history. We long for a Christ of power. Yet if He were to come and transform us and our world, we should have to pay the one price which we could not pay: we would lose our freedom, our humanity, our spiritual dignity. Perhaps we should be happier; but we should also be lower beings, our present misery, struggle and despair notwithstanding. We should be more like blessed animals than men made in the image of God. Those who dream of a better life and try to avoid the Cross as a way, and those who hope for a Christ and attempt to exclude the Crucified, have no knowledge of the mystery of God and of man.

"They are the ones who must consider Jesus as merely a forerunner: They are the ones who must expect others with a greater power to transform the world, others with a greater wisdom to change our hearts. But even the greatest in power and wisdom could not more fully reveal the Heart of God and the heart of man than the Crucified has done already. Those things have been revealed once for all. 'It is finished.' In the face of the Crucified all the 'more' and all the 'less,' all progress and all approximation, are meaningless. Therefore we can say of Him alone: He is the new reality; He is the end; He is the Messiah. To the Crucified alone can we say: 'Thou art the Christ.'"¹⁴

The call of faith, the call of Jesus Christ, is still toward suffering and serving, to be, as he was, "The Wounded Healer."¹⁵ That is the call which comes in the anointing of our Baptism. In that call, in following that call, is the anointing to life.

13. See R. Nostbakken's article on TV evangelists as the new indulgence-hawkers (LCA-SCAN, September 1979). Also Luther's comments on the "theology of glory."

14. Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Scribner, 1948), p. 148.

15. Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972). Also Luther's comments on "the hidden church" and "the theology of the cross."