

## Chapter 5

### The Death of Jesus

If the call of Jesus to “deny oneself” to the disciples means that they should give themselves over completely, even heedlessly, to the work of the kingdom for Jesus’ sake and for the sake of the Gospel, then the death of Jesus, with which this injunction is paired, must also be seen as the same kind of reckless denial of self. Interestingly, Mark never has Jesus speak about what his coming death will actually accomplish. If Peter and the other students cannot understand why Jesus must die, we, the readers of Mark, must find ourselves in their company. Although we know that the reckless courage of Bartimaeus and the woman with the flow of blood had the salutary results of healing, there is no promise from Jesus about what benefits his death will have beyond the fact that after three days he will rise from the dead. Similarly, his only promise about denying oneself is that it is through losing one’s life that one finds it.

Things are not so ambiguous, though, as they first appear. The courage of the men who take the roof off a house to lower a lame man to Jesus for healing results in healing, and in the forgiveness. Jarius receives his daughter back healed as a result of his recklessness in approaching Jesus despite his important position in the synagogue. Those who are willing to lose their lives will find them. The death of Jesus does not depart from this picture. The benefits of his death, however, are not clear until it occurs. There is no courage if there is an assured, known outcome. Asking Jesus for healing has the possibility of public humiliation along with continued suffering. Leaving one’s nets to follow an apocalyptic teacher has all of the ingredients of shame and financial loss. To attempt healings and exorcisms in the name of Jesus entails the risks failure and ostracism. Indeed, when Jesus stands before his judges, he is utterly alone. Pilate’s wife has no dream about him. Nobody speaks in his defense. His students have run away, and one, in fact, betrayed him to the authorities in the first place. All of the humiliation is his as will be the ignominy of public whipping and execution. These events fill in the content to Jesus’ predictions that he will suffer at the hands of his accusers, but we, the readers, cannot know how much ridicule and shame are in store for him until we actually arrive at chapter 15.

### Jesus’ Death as Suffering

It is remarkable to westerners that the author emphasizes the social shame heaped upon Jesus almost to the exclusion of any description of Jesus’ physical sufferings or mental anguish. Eduard Schweizer correctly sees that the author betrays no interest in the physical effects of the scourging (Mark 15:15)<sup>1</sup> or even of the crucifixion itself (Mark 15:23).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Mark does not even tell us whether Jesus was nailed to the cross or simply bound to it.<sup>3</sup> The two instances in which there is possibly minimal attention paid

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<sup>1</sup> Eduard Schweizer, *Mark* 338.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 346: “Since the physical anguish did not constitute Jesus’ real suffering, it is not described. His real suffering was caused by his rejection.”

<sup>3</sup> Only John 20:25 mentions nails. Matthew and Luke follow Mark in not specifying the means of affixing Jesus to the cross. Mann, *Mark* 348, mentions thirst and dehydration as contributing to the

to the agonies of crucifixion, the two offerings of drink in Mark 15:23, 36, Jesus himself refuses it in the first instance and does not request it in the second.

Schweizer's contention that the suffering of Jesus that is important is the anguish of his rejection raises the issue as to whether "suffering," as we use the term in modern English is, in fact, an important for Mark's understanding of the death of Jesus at all. The verb *paschō* (**pasxw**) only occurs three times in Mark, twice in relation to the suffering of the Son of Man (Mark 8:31; 9:12) and once in relation to the experience of the woman with the flow of blood and her attempts to find healing at the hands of physicians (Mark 5:26). Nouns that refer to suffering such as *pathos*, *pathētos*, *pathēma*, do not occur in Mark at all. If Mark wanted to tell us about the mental anguish of Jesus during his trial and crucifixion, we might expect some repetition of or elaboration of the words of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane when he announced his sadness<sup>4</sup> and chastised his students for not staying awake while he prayed (Mark 14:32-41). Jesus' mental suffering is palpable in this passage, but its purpose in the story is not to make us feel sympathy for Jesus but to help us understand the cost of his willingness to accept God's will (Mark 14:36). Further, we discover in Mark 14:38 that Jesus' concern for his disciples' wakefulness has to do with their wellbeing, not his psychological comfort. At the end of the pericope it is Jesus who announces the advent of the arrest party and urges his students to their feet to meet his captors with him.

The Greek verb *paschō* (**pasxw**) has two main senses. It can certainly mean to have something bad happen to one. It can mean the suffering one experiences as a result of illness or injury. It can mean punishment or hardship. The second meaning, however, is the primary meaning, the one from which the first derives. To "suffer" means above all to experience anything at all. In this sense it can operate as the passive of the verb *poieō* (**poiew**) "do." To suffer something is to have something done to one or to experience something. Although what is done or experienced is often unpleasant in the New Testament, it is not always so.<sup>5</sup> Our English word "suffer," on the other hand, most often has negative connotations, although it too can have the general meaning "experience" or "happen to one."<sup>6</sup> In the three occurrences of *paschō* in Mark, we do not need to argue that they lack negative connotations, but there does not appear to be any special emphasis on either the mental distress or physical anguish that Jesus suffered. The reader may quite reasonably infer that Jesus suffered both, but nothing in the text of Mark leads us to suppose that it is the suffering of Jesus *per se* that brings benefit.

suffering and death of a crucified person. So it is striking that Jesus is offered drink twice, with the first offer being of a drugged wine that would help reduce Jesus' suffering.

<sup>4</sup> This is an allusion to the refrain  
τί περίλυπος εἶ, ψυχῆ, καὶ ἵνα τί συνταράσσεις με; in Psalm 42:6, 12; 43:5 (LXX Psalm 41:6, 12; 42:5).

<sup>5</sup> Bauer, *Lexicon, sub voce*, tells us that the word gradually loses its general sense except when context demands that reading and that its unqualified meaning is most often negative. L-S on the other hand does not make this judgment which seems tendentious. To experience is sometimes to experience negative things, and, indeed, that may be the reason one writes in the first place.

<sup>6</sup> *OED Online sub voce*.

The habitual piety of western Christians is to emphasize the suffering of Jesus as the means of redemption, laying particular stress on the pain of betrayal and crucifixion Jesus endured.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps no writer ever put it more succinctly than did Charles Wesley (1707-1788) in his famous Easter hymn “Jesus Christ is Risen Today”

But the pains which he endured, Alleluia!  
our salvation have procured. Alleluia!<sup>8</sup>

Excellent as Wesley’s hymn is, this is not Mark’s understanding of the death of Jesus. Likewise, Mark is a stranger to the sentiments of Peter Abelard’s (1079-1142) words:

Grant us with thee to suffer pain that,  
as we share this hour,  
thy cross may bring us to thy joy  
and resurrection power.<sup>9</sup>

Although Mark has Jesus encourage his students to pick up their cross and follow him (Mark 8:34), there is pointedly no mention of the actual pain the cross would bring. That it would bring pain one could not doubt, but Mark does not dwell upon that aspect of self denial. Although one might argue that this emphasis upon the pains of Jesus is never an important part of the New Testament’s piety, it is not necessary for us to make that argument. Rather, we may be content to note that the specifics of the sufferings of Jesus play no role in Mark’s understanding of the redemption Christ’s death brings.<sup>10</sup>

What Jesus’ death does accomplish is very clear in Mark. The means by which his death accomplished its purpose is not so clear. To these issues we now turn.

### Forgiveness of Sins

It is no surprise to learn that Mark portrays the death of Jesus as bringing about the forgiveness of sins. Just as John the Baptizer washed those who came to him for remission of their sins (Mark 1:4), Jesus too, early on, claims the power of God to forgive sins (Mark 2:5). As we have seen, Mark makes sure that we know that Jesus is forgiving those sins against God that only God alone could forgive, the very sins to which resort to the temple and its cultus would have been required.<sup>11</sup> Characteristically, there is no

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<sup>7</sup> One may point to such popular religious entertainment as the recent film by Mel Gibson, *The Passion of the Christ*, to illustrate the extent to which the bloody, awful nature of Christ’s sufferings might be used for a western audience to enhance this particular theory of redemption.

<sup>8</sup> *The Hymnal 1982*, 207. These words Wesley adapted from the English *Lyra Davidica* of 1708, a translation of a 14<sup>th</sup> century Latin hymn.

<sup>9</sup> “Alone Thou Goest Forth, O Lord,” *The Hymnal 1982*, 164. The English is the translation of F. Bland Tucket (1895-1984).

<sup>10</sup> Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), 226-229, reminds us that western interest in the physical pain and mental anguish of Jesus is not as important in eastern piety. His summary of the difference is that Orthodoxy deals with Christ principally as Victor whereas western piety deals with Christ as Victim. The crucifixion for the east, he explains, is an act of victory over evil.

<sup>11</sup> See above, Chapter 3.

preparation for this result until it occurs. In Mark 2:1-4 we are led to expect that Jesus will heal the paralytic. Instead, he says, “Child, your sins are forgiven (Mark 2:5).”

At one level Jesus seems uninterested in forgiveness, focusing instead on what cannot (Mark 11:25) or should not (Mark 4:12) be forgiven. Although he enjoins his students to forgive others in order to receive forgiveness from God (Mark 11:25), he does not forgive his own enemies—at least not in so many words—in the Gospel of Mark.<sup>12</sup> In Mark 3:28 we learn that there is an unforgivable sin, and in Mark 4:12 the words of Isaiah are taken over to suggest that the purpose of Jesus’ ministry is to harden the hearts of Israel so that Israel will not receive forgiveness. We have seen, however, that nobody is ever clearly identified as having committed such an eternal sin, and Mark 4:12 reminds us that the hardness of Israel’s heart is necessary for the accomplishment of Jesus’ messianic role. This is no less true of the wrongs against Jesus that officials in Jerusalem commit against him than it is for other sins Israel might commit.

At the moment of Jesus’ death in Mark two things happen: (1) the curtain of the temple is rent from top to bottom (Mark 15:38) and (2) the centurion declares that Jesus was a “son of God (Mark 15:39).” Other things happen in association with the death of Jesus, of course. The death sequence begins with darkness that came over the land at the sixth hour and lasted until the ninth hour (Mark 15:33). Luke 23:44 has the darkness arrive only at the ninth hour when Jesus died, but in Mark darkness is the condition of the entire crucifixion. There follows the invocation of the lament in Psalm 22 (LXX Psalm 21) and the misunderstanding of the bystanders who believe he is calling Elijah and interfere with those who want to give Jesus something to drink (Mark 15:34-36).

The women who witness the death of Jesus in Mark 15:40-41 should be associated with the following account of Jesus’ burial as France has claimed.<sup>13</sup> Hooker, though, is also correct to point out that the women who had “followed” (*ēkolouthoun*, **h̄kol ouqoun**) Jesus are notable for their presence at the crucifixion in contrast to Jesus’ students whom he called to follow him.<sup>14</sup> The women exercise a courage that Mark uses to set the stage for their role in the outcome of the Gospel story.

It is difficult to underestimate the importance of the rending of the temple veil at the death of Jesus within the context of Mark’s Gospel. Whatever polemic one might want to see in this picture, the fact is that the veil is a significant, even indispensable part of the temple apparatus.<sup>15</sup> The function of the curtain is both to hide the holy presence (Exodus 26: 31-35) and to provide access to it on the Day of Atonement when the high priest offered the annual blood offering for the forgiveness of Israel’s sins.<sup>16</sup> The

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<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the only place where we find Jesus forgiving his enemies is in Luke 23:34: “And Jesus was saying, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’” This verse, however, is missing in P<sup>45</sup> Ⲁ<sup>1</sup> B D\* W Q 070. 579. 1241 *pc* a *sy*<sup>s</sup> sa bo<sup>pt</sup>. There is no other statement of forgiveness in any of the Gospels.

<sup>13</sup> France, *Mark*, 661.

<sup>14</sup> Hooker, *Mark* 379.

<sup>15</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* III.vii.7. The description of the sanctuary in France, *Mark* 656, is quite good.

<sup>16</sup> J. Gnllka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (EKK II/2; Zürich, etc.: Benziger, 1979), 2:324.

enclosure bore the presence of the Lord, seated upon the ark-throne, and its curtain involved both prohibition and access. Above all, the curtain was quite physically the way to the place of atonement.

Ernst Lohmeyer believed that the rending of the temple veil implied the end of the temple and its cult:

God has destroyed that which seemed built to last for ever, and laid bare that which by its holy destiny was to remain always in unapproachable darkness. Thus in the Master's death there was a consummation of His life work—the Jewish cult was nullified.<sup>17</sup>

This alarming conclusion is justified only if we continue in the traditional belief that Mark was composed before the destruction of the temple in 70 CE.<sup>18</sup> This desire sometimes leads to absurdities such as Schweizer's claim that Mark nowhere refers to the destruction of Jerusalem and then dismisses Mark 13:14-20 as reflecting a time when "war was anticipated."<sup>19</sup> The fact that Mark 13 is, indeed, integral to the Gospel,<sup>20</sup> and the fact that Mark 13:1-3, 14-20 clearly refer to the destruction that occurred in 70 CE, leaves me with little choice but to believe that the Gospel came into being after that event. Joachim Gnilka sensibly suggests that the work came into being after 70 CE,<sup>21</sup> and that seems to be a reasonable estimate if one believes, as Gnilka does, that Mark was the earliest Gospel.

The anti-Jewish, nay, even anti-Semitic triumphalism that gloats over the rending of the temple veil and the destruction of Jerusalem is totally contrary to the apocalyptic seriousness with which both events are viewed in Mark. Further, once we recognize that the author is dealing with *faites accomplies*, *i. e.* with events that have already occurred, then we may properly turn our attention to the importance they have in Mark.

The veil of the temple is the figure of the invisible presence that sits behind it enthroned upon the cherubim. It is what the priests who enter the sanctuary see and report. It is a veil, a curtain, not a wall, and access to the divine presence is as easy as stepping behind any curtain. Although only the high priest is supposed to avail himself of this privilege and only once each year on the Day of Atonement, at least one gentile,

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<sup>17</sup> Ernst Lohmeyer, *Lord of the Temple*, trans. Stewart Todd (Richmond: John Knox, 1962), 52.

<sup>18</sup> For a review of the discussion see France, *Mark* 35-41. While erring in the author's desire to relate the contents of the Gospel of Mark to Peter and continuing the tradition of early dating, does give a reasonable overview of the recent discussion.

<sup>19</sup> Schweizer, *Mark* 25. Nineham, *Mark* 430n, brings forward both Christian and Jewish texts to support the idea that the rending of the veil is a portent of the destruction of Jerusalem. We have no quarrel with that view, but in the case of the Clementine *Recognitions* 1.41, at least, the destruction of Jerusalem was well in the past. The tradition that Yohanan ben Zakkai had rebuked the temple doors for their premature opening some forty years before the fall of the temple as a portent of destruction would have been quickly forgotten if the temple had suffered no destruction.

<sup>20</sup> Mann, *Mark* 77. Agreement with Mann on this point does not signal this author's agreement with Mann's theory of Mark as a digest of Matthew and Luke.

<sup>21</sup> Gnilka, *Markus* 1:34.

Pompey, is said to have entered it.<sup>22</sup> The entire temple cult is witness to the accessibility of God and of God's willingness to forgive Israel and make Israel holy.<sup>23</sup> The reason this cultus did not function as intended in the time of the writing of Mark is because it no longer existed, not because of some supposed unworthiness or legalism or formalism on the part of those who resorted to it in the time of Jesus. After the healing of the man with leprosy, Jesus' command to him is unequivocal:

See that you say nothing to anybody but go away, show yourself to the priest, and offer the sacrifice for your cleansing what Moses commanded as a witness to them. (Mark 1:44)

There is simply no way to construe this command as a rejection of the temple. Further we find no gloating over the destruction of the temple or its city in Mark 13. Rather, Mark has Jesus portray the event in apocalyptic terms, reminding the community that even this awful and momentous sign cannot mean that the end is at hand.

The rending of the temple curtain is a positive figure, an interpretation of what has just happened at Golgotha. Like the Day of Atonement ritual in which the priest goes into the Holy of Holies, the death of Jesus has brought forgiveness of sins, exactly the promise of Mark 2:1-11. The death of Jesus is not just a sacrifice, although it is that, it is the whole of the ritual.

Yet the death of Jesus is a sacrifice, and this fact is also clearly enunciated in the words Jesus used in Mark to bless the cup at the final supper:

And he said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant that has been poured out for many. *Amen*, I say to you that I will not drink of the fruit of the vine again until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God." (Mark 14:24-25)

It is not necessary or required for our analysis to say which sacrifice of the temple cult the death of Jesus might have represented for Mark or, indeed, whether it necessarily corresponded to any of them. France correctly points out that the word "covenant" suggests the Exodus-Passover tradition much more than it does any other but contents himself, perhaps as we should, by referring to the many blood offerings in the Pentateuch that bring redemption.<sup>24</sup> The rending of the curtain and the anticipatory words of institution in Mark 14:24-25 make it inevitable that the reader will view the death of Jesus as sacrifice and, indeed, sacrifice for sin. Further, the words of institution make it clear that the sacrifice is not just for a few but "for many" (**u<sup>pe</sup>r pol I wa**).<sup>25</sup> The rending of the temple veil shows that the promise of these words was fulfilled when Jesus died.

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<sup>22</sup> Josephus, *War* 1.7.6.

<sup>23</sup> Lohmeyer, *Lord of the Temple*, 10-13.

<sup>24</sup> France, *Mark* 569-571. On the rending of the veil as a "Pentecost" see Stephen Motyer, "The rending of the veil : a Markan Pentecost?" *New Testament Studies*, 33/1 (1987):155-157.

<sup>25</sup> Although the Qumran sect used the term "the many" הרבִּים to describe the sect itself, there is no particular reason to interpret the expression here in a sectarian manner.

Son of God<sup>26</sup>

H. M. Jackson maintains that (1) and (2) are connected and that the centurion makes his declaration after witnessing the rending of the curtain.<sup>27</sup> This interpretation seems unlikely in light of the description of the centurion's location, "Standing there in front of him" (Mark 15:38). Raymond E. Brown also supports this interpretation, interpreting "having seen that he thus expired" in Mark 15:39 to include not only the death of Jesus but also attendant events, including the rending of the temple veil in Mark 15:38. Brown further believes that the objection to his interpretation would be based on knowledge of Jerusalem's topography, a knowledge that we cannot suppose Mark's first readers would necessarily have.<sup>28</sup> This is not cogent. The author does not tell us anything at all about the relative positions of Golgotha and the Temple Platform and does not presuppose the reader's knowledge of the temple's architectural arrangement, but we cannot take this lack of specificity as evidence in favor of Brown's interpretation. It is an argument from silence. The readers know the temple veil have been rent. What the centurion knows or doesn't know about that event is not part of Mark's story.

Debate about what about the death of Jesus might have enticed the centurion to make his declaration is unhelpful speculation because it moves our attention away from Mark's composition into the realm of a psychological study of a figure in a story.<sup>29</sup> Further, it is also of no particular moment what the centurion means by his declaration. The ancient reader could have understood the centurion to be confession that Jesus is the messianic Son of God or that he was a Hellenistic "divine man." That understanding would derive mainly from the reader's mindset, not Mark's and certainly not the centurion's. The issue for us is what the confession means within the context of Mark's narrative.

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<sup>26</sup> Recent publications on this topic include Geert van Oyen "Irony as propaganda in Mark 15:39?" *Persuasion And Dissuasion In Early Christianity, Ancient Judaism, And Hellenism*, Pieter W van der Horst, Maarten Menken, Joop F M Smit, Geert van Oyen, eds. (Leuven ; Paris ; Dudley, Mass.: Peeters, 2003), 125-141; Earl S, Johnson, Jr, "Mark 15,39 And The So-Called Confession Of The Roman Centurion," *Biblica*, 81/3 (2000): 406-413. Whitney Shiner, "The Ambiguous Pronouncement of the Centurion and the Shrouding of Meaning in Mark," *JSNT* 78 (2000): 3-22; Tae Hun Kim, "The Anarthrous *yios theou* in Mark 15,39 and the Roman Imperial Cult," *Biblica*, 79/2 (1998): 221-241. I find it difficult to support Robert Gundry's contention in *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 4, that **uiϑj qeou**=in Mark 15:39 somehow corresponds to **uiϑu=qeou**=in Mark 1:1. The textual evidence is anything but solid in favor of **uiϑu=qeou**=in Mark 1:1; and so even if one believes the phrase belongs there, it is not safe to base a higher-critical argument on the basis of it.

<sup>27</sup> H. M. Jackson, "The Death Of Jesus In Mark And The Miracle From The Cross," *NTS* 33/1 (1987): 16-37.

<sup>28</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (New York, etc.: Doubleday, 1994), 2:1144-1145. See also Claude Wiéner, "Voyant qu'il avait ainsi expiré (Marc 15,39)," *Penser la foi* (Paris : Cerf, 1993 ; Paris : Assas, 1993), 51-58.

<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, the claim of Wolfgang Schenk, *Der Passionsbericht nach Markus: Untersuchungen zur Überlieferungsgeschichte der Passionstraditionen* (Gutersloh: Gutersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1974), 48-50, 58-61 that the centurion is responding to a vision of Jesus' soul's departure, and the counterclaim of Gnilka, *Markus* 2:325.

The word “recognition” is the right word.<sup>30</sup> The death of Jesus leads the unnamed officer to recognize something suddenly. Like the other reckless acts of faith recorded in Mark, the centurion’s cry is unexpectedly brave and, perhaps, given the circumstances, somewhat foolish. All that Mark shows us of the centurion’s experience is limited to Golgotha; and even though the events there may have been frightening (the darkening at noon) and moving (Jesus’ cry from the cross), these by themselves do not lead the centurion to his reckless action. It is the death of Jesus that does this—inexplicably, it seems. Has the officer never seen a man die on a cross previously? Has the weather always been perfect for the executions he has attended? Was this the first crucifixion with cries from the cross and taunts from the crowd? No reader would be led to such conclusions any more than a reader would suppose that the centurion had witnessed the rending of the temple veil. The centurion’s “recognition” has all of the surprising and heedless energy of the others who have suddenly reached out to Jesus in faith during Jesus’ life.

E. S. Johnson held that the centurion, as a professional soldier, is hardly likely to have risked his career to make such an acclamation and Mark’s readers would not have expected for him to do so.<sup>31</sup> He is quite right. Those are the very reasons why the centurion’s cry is an example of reckless faith. It is even less what we might expect from a Roman centurion than the desperation of Jarius is what we might expect from a synagogue official whose daughter is in danger of death. Johnson has unintentionally reminded us of the reason for aligning this soldier with Jarius, the woman with the flow of blood, Bartimaeus, and the others in the Gospel of Mark who unexpectedly reached out to Jesus. We must agree with Whitney T. Shiner that the cry of the centurion is not an example of “conversion.”<sup>32</sup> She finds this unfortunate misinterpretation in D. E. Nineham’s commentary, a view he bases on comments of Martin Dibelius and Johannes Weiss.<sup>33</sup> Weiss, however, interprets the centurion’s action in light of subsequent history, as a forerunner of the gentiles who will come to Christ, not as the first “convert” in any material sense.<sup>34</sup> This is an argument, then, about the setting of the Gospel within its community. Weiss correctly points out that it is the death of Jesus that is the precipitating event for the centurion’s cry.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The “recognition” (**epignwsij**) of the true identity of someone or the sudden realization of a religious truth

<sup>31</sup> E. S. Johnson, “Is Mark the Key to Mark’s Christology?” *JSNT* 31 (1987). 3-22.

<sup>32</sup> Whitney Shiner, “The Ambiguous Pronouncement of the Centurion and the Shrouding of Meaning in Mark,” *JSOT* 78 (2000): 11-12.

<sup>33</sup> Nineham, *Mark* 430-431.

<sup>34</sup> Johannes Weiss and Otto Baumgarten, *Die Schriften des Neuen Testaments neu übersetzt und für die Gegenwart erklärt von Otto Baumgarten* (2d ed. rev; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1907), 1:205.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* Shiner, 11, denies this, arguing that the first readers might be expected to marvel at the centurion’s conviction by the signs attending the death of Jesus while missing the importance of the cross itself. Again, as Shiner herself will argue, this is not a story about conversion. We do not have to worry about the centurion’s theology of the cross, only that of the Gospel of Mark.

What does the centurion receive for this reckless declaration? To approach this question we should turn our attention to the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27-30) and Peter's rash declaration of loyalty before Jesus' arrest (Mark 14:26-30).

And Jesus went out and his students into the environs<sup>36</sup> of Caesarea Philippi, and along the way he asked his students, saying to them, "Who do people say that I am?" And they spoke to him, saying, "John the Baptizer, and others Elijah, and others one of the prophets." And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter, answering, says to him, "You are the Christ."<sup>37</sup> And he sternly ordered them against telling anyone about him. (Mark 8:27-30)

And when they had sung a hymn they went out to the Mount of Olives, and Jesus says to them, "All will take offense at me, for it is written,

I will strike the shepherd,  
and the sheep will be dispersed.<sup>38</sup>

But after I have been raised, I will go before you into the Galilee." But Peter said to him, "Even if all are offended, I won't be." And Jesus says to him, "*Amen*, I say to you, that you on this very night before the cock sounds twice will deny me three times." But he was speaking even more forcefully, "Should it be necessary for me to die with you, I will not deny you." And in this way all of the others added their voices. (Mark 14:26-31)

In the first instance, Peter receives with the other students a warning about not making Jesus' messiahship known. In the second instance, Peter receives the prediction that he will deny Jesus three times that very night. These rebukes do not mean that Peter is wrong to make his declarations, but he receives no praise for them, no reward, no pride of place. The same is true for the centurion whose next mention in the Gospel is of "going about his normal business" by reporting the death of Jesus to Pilate in Mark 14:44-45.<sup>39</sup>

The confession of Peter does not make Peter any more faithful at the time of Jesus' arrest than he would have been without it, any more than his declarations of loyalty in Mark 14:44-45 make him resolute in the courtyard of the high priest. What, then, is the value of either?

The outcome of Jesus' prediction of Peter's faithlessness was that after the second cockcrow, "Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him, 'Before the cock crows

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<sup>36</sup> The plural **taj kwħaj** may denote the villages associated with a large walled city like Caesarea Philippi. See Bauer<sup>3</sup> 461b..

<sup>37</sup> For the variants "the Son of God" and "the Son of the living God," see Nestle-Aland<sup>27</sup> *ad loc.* This variant may, indeed, be constructed from the centurion's cry.

<sup>38</sup> Zechariah 13:7.

<sup>39</sup> Shiner, 12.

twice you will deny me three times.’ And falling over he wept.” (Mark 14:72) Peter’s emotional distress reflects his recognition that Jesus understood him better than he understood himself. All that Peter had confessed about Jesus was true, and it was also true that Jesus deserved his loyalty even unto death.<sup>40</sup>

Gnilka has perhaps put his finger on the matter by commenting that Peter’s denial and his conviction at the second cockcrow creates a remorse that results in Peter’s absence from the events of Jesus’ passion the so that his salvation comes solely through grace.<sup>41</sup> Above all, the conviction of Peter is in truth the conviction of all the students who heard Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi and who joined with Peter on the Mount of Olives to promise their steadfastness even unto death. Peter is not the lone culprit. None of the men who followed Jesus were with him through his trials and none witnessed his execution. Joseph of Arimathea buried him (Mark 15:42), and the women came to the tomb on the first day of the week to finish cleansing and preparing his body (Mark 16:1-2), but no disciple was at the tomb to roll away the stone (Mark 16:3). Jesus was not deserted by everyone, but he was deserted by the students who should have been closest to him.

What, then, is the reward of Peter’s confession as well as the cry of the centurion? It was not fame or accolade, improvement of character or conversion to a new faith. The reward, as we shall see in the next chapter, was the revelation of an unexpected, breathtaking graciousness.

In summary, the reckless death of Jesus resulted in the rending of the temple’s veil and the declaration of the Roman centurion. These results pick up the great and related themes of Mark about atonement and discipleship that find their culmination in the last eight verses of the extant Gospel of Mark.

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<sup>40</sup> France, *Mark* 623, has Mark base Peter’s reaction on the fact that Peter fell “into precisely the trap of which Jesus had warned him.” What “trap?”

<sup>41</sup> Gnilka, *Markus* 2:294. I am not quite sure what Gnilka means by “Die Gnade den Jünger gerettet hat,” but I do agree that the text instills confidence (*Zuversicht*) in the reader, not despair, confidence that the failings of Peter do not disqualify him as a student of Jesus.