

THE CROSS: TOLD "IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE SCRIPTURES"

They [the disciples] all forsook him, and fled.

Mark 14:50

He died ... in accordance with the scriptures.

1 Cor. 15:3

The desertion of the disciples is surely one of the most certain historical memories of the early Christian movement. Not only was it counterintuitive, but it also constituted a negative recollection about the actions of people who, when the gospels were written, were regarded as larger-than-life heroes. A movement does not tend to introduce negative stories about its founders, but it is also unable to suppress a searing historical memory that is so vivid it is incapable of being forgotten. In that latter case, what usually happens is that an exonerating explanation is developed to temper the recollection.

That is exactly what one finds in Mark's original and thus primary narrative of the crucifixion, quoted above. Not only are the disciples portrayed in the surrounding text as having been unable to watch with Jesus, but all are said to have forsaken him and fled; and one of them, no less a person than the chief of the apostles, Simon Peter, actually denied that he had ever known Jesus. So bitter was this memory that

an explanation exonerating the disciples was developed at a very early stage in the first gospel narrative. It was placed into the story of the cross to introduce the second three-hour segment of Mark's liturgical drama. As the disciples departed from the upper room for Gethsemane after concluding the Passover celebration with a hymn, Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered'" (14:27). The quotation is from Zechariah (13:7). What Jesus is made to say, according to Mark, is that the apostolic desertion was necessary, inevitable and even predicted by Jesus. Mark was saying that this desertion had to occur, that it was part of the divine plan. The disciples could have done nothing else. One does not provide so perfect a "divine justifying explanation" for something that never occurred. History was clearly present in this story. That desertion, however, forces upon us another realization—namely, that Jesus died alone. We need to embrace that reality no matter how uncomfortable it makes us feel. No one was there either to witness the death of Jesus or to record it.

We need next to realize what is surely a fact: that what we are reading in the earliest story of the crucifixion is not remembered history. Before we can fully articulate what it was, however, we need to take one further interpretive step into understanding what the gospel writers were looking to accomplish. Examining Mark's original passion narrative, we seek to identify the sources of that narrative, which has now become for us a set of very familiar details. If we can understand how its author originally crafted his narrative, then we will be able better to discern his purpose and intention, and by traveling this route seek to enter the experience that demanded his explanatory narrative. The clue that unlocks this quest is found, I believe, in the words of Paul in I Corinthians to which I have previously alluded. When Paul wrote his sparse account of the crucifixion, he asserted that the death of Jesus was "in accordance with the scriptures."

A careful study of the story of the crucifixion as Mark described it reveals a heavy dependence on two major passages from the Hebrew scriptures, which in turn serve as springboards to other passages that are used to fill out the details of the story of the cross. The major passages are Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. To pull these two crucial sources into our consciousness and to trace how they triggered other recollec-

tions of additional texts to complete the story is therefore our next step in the interpretive process.

The most obvious clue that directs us to Psalm 22 is the cry of dereliction that Mark places onto the lips of Jesus as his only distinguishable words from the cross (15:34). Mark records the cry both in Aramaic and in Greek. It translates, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" It is of interest to note that both Luke and John omit this cry from the cross, replacing it with words that seem much more confident and victorious. Mark, however, makes this cry the climax of his crucifixion drama. In this he is followed in an identical manner by Matthew. Expositors through the centuries have struggled with what this cry means, since it appears to run so counter to the image of Jesus as the invading deity that was to dominate theological formulas for the first five hundred years of Christian history. Whatever else they sought to make of this cry, they had to recognize that it is quoted directly from the first verse of Psalm 22. The entire psalm had, I suspect, been used to interpret this portrait of Jesus' death long before Mark's writing. The passion narrative has all the marks of a developing tradition and the influence of this psalm on shaping it is undeniable. Let me point out the rich connections.

Psalm 22 says, "All who see me mock at me, they make mouths at me, they wag their heads; 'He committed his cause to the Lord; let him deliver him, let him rescue him, for he delights in him'" (vv. 7-8). Compare this with Mark's words: "And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads, and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!' So also the chief priests mocked him to one another with the scribes, 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'" (15:29-32). Matthew makes the connection with Psalm 22 even more explicit when he adds to Mark's statement the words, "He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him" (Matt. 27:43).

Psalm 22 goes on to say, "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; . . . my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue cleaves to my jaws" (vv. 14-15). That is the passage that created both the crucified image of a dangling body held to the cross

only by spikes and ropes and the sense of thirst that tormented the victim. Mark's account suggests that those near Jesus filled a sponge full of vinegar and put it on a reed to quench this thirst (15:36). John would later heighten this story by having Jesus say the words, "I thirst," before the sponge, filled with vinegar, was lifted to his lips. John added that this was done "to fulfill the scripture" (19:28-29). He was obviously referring to Psalm 22.

This psalm continues: "They have pierced my hands and my feet—I can count all my bones" (vv. 16-17). The image of crucifixion seemed obvious here to Mark. Once again John heightens this narrative about the bones of Jesus by demonstrating that Jesus' legs were not broken, so that once again the scriptures might be fulfilled (19:33). John also develops the "pierced" aspect of this story by suggesting that one of the soldiers, upon finding Jesus already dead, "pierced his side with a spear," expanding the narrative to include a reference from Psalm 34, "He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken" (v. 20), and adding a note from Zechariah, "I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a first-born" (12:10).

Later in Psalm 22 we find these words: "They divide my garments among them and for my raiment they cast lots" (v. 18). Mark incorporates this verse almost verbatim when he writes, "And they crucified him and divided his garments among them casting lots for them, to decide what each should take" (v. 24). Once again John expands this storyline with more imaginative details: "When the soldiers had crucified Jesus they took his garments and made four parts, one for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was without seam, woven from top to bottom, so they said to one another, 'Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be'" (John 19:23-24). Then John adds, "This was done to fulfill the scriptures" (v. 24b), and he proceeds to quote Psalm 22:18. The story is being told so that it conforms to this Hebrew psalm and to the scriptures that are clearly open before the writers. It is not the other way around.

With the dependence on Psalm 22 clearly established, we turn now to Isaiah 53. The earliest interpreters of Jesus leaned heavily on all of

the "Servant Songs" of Second Isaiah, of which Isaiah 53 is a part. In the next section of this book, I will examine the whole of Second Isaiah (chapters 40–55, written by an unknown prophet and added to the text of Isaiah) much more fully; but for our purposes here, I will concentrate on that part of Second Isaiah that seems to have been crucial to the writers of the story of the cross and especially to Mark, who as the original creator of a passion narrative would be the shaping influence on all of the others.

Isaiah 53 describes the way the death of the "servant" affected the lives of others and this clearly laid the groundwork for the various theories of atonement that were developed to put flesh on Paul's words that "Christ died for our sins." "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our inequities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (53:4–6).

Isaiah 53 then says, "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 that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth" (53:7). Mark incorporates this note into his story by writing, "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 [Jesus] was silent and made no answer" (Mark 14:60).

Isaiah 53 stated that the servant "made his grave with the wicked" (53:9), and later that he "was numbered with the transgressors" (53:12). Mark incorporates these notes into the narrative by saying, "And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left" (15:27). The two robbers say nothing in Mark; they are simply part of the scenery. They were, however, destined to grow. Matthew says of these robbers that they "also reviled [Jesus]" in the same way as the crowd (Matt. 27:44). Luke then turns one of them into a penitent thief so that Jesus can assure him of his intercession on that thief's behalf: "Today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:39–43). Luke's addition was in response to yet another line in Isaiah 53, where it is written that the servant "made intercession for the transgressors" (53:12). In a

similar manner, to fulfill the same textual expectation, Luke alone has Jesus intercede for the soldiers: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

Finally, Second Isaiah wrote that the "servant" was "with a rich man in his death" (53:9). This inspired, I am now quite convinced, the story of Joseph of Arimathea, who was described in Mark as a "respected member of the council" (15:43), and therefore a man of means, who provided the tomb for Jesus' burial. Matthew expands this story very specifically to identify Joseph with the text in Isaiah by introducing Joseph as "a rich man from Arimathea" (27:57).

When it suddenly becomes obvious that the story purporting to describe the crucifixion of Jesus has been built on narratives from the Hebrew scriptures, scholars must recognize that the passion story is not based on the eyewitness accounts of those who saw the crucifixion, and that the event therefore probably did not actually happen as described. The passion story is, rather, a highly stylized interpretive portrait designed to lead the person reading or hearing it into an understanding of who Jesus was. The story was written without eyewitnesses because there were no eyewitnesses! The story was crafted to identify Jesus with messianic images familiar to the readers of the Hebrew scriptures. As I sought to demonstrate in the previous chapter, the crucifixion account was designed for liturgical use. This means that anyone seeking to discover the meaning of Jesus today must be prepared to acknowledge that this story of the crucifixion is not history. While Jesus was undoubtedly crucified by the Romans, the familiar details that accompany the story of the cross are not literally true and did not actually happen. There was no actual dialogue ever recorded with the high priests, or with Pilate, or even with the crowd. There were no words of Jesus spoken from the cross that we know. There were no thieves crucified with him, penitent or otherwise. There was no tomb in which he was laid and no Joseph of Arimathea who presided over his burial. The disciples had fled when Jesus was arrested, so Jesus died alone. The familiar narratives which purport to describe how he died were designed to help people discern what his followers had come to believe about him—namely, that his death was not a tragedy without meaning, but the fulfillment of the scriptures and therefore an event of sacred and saving significance. That does not make the gospels' interpretation wrong, but

it does mean that even the story of the cross is not a literal story. If there had been eyewitnesses, then surely the story would not have been created based on ancient Jewish texts!

Church leaders have always known about this linkage with Hebrew scriptures, but, unable to face its implications, they devised another explanation. They applied a magical interpretation to the Hebrew scriptures and began to suggest that God had led the authors of those scriptures, the prophets in particular, to a vision of the messiah who was to come. This vision supplied them with the exact words that Jesus would say (or would cause to be said by others) and predicted the deeds that Jesus would someday perform. This in turn, they agreed, would be the sign that would demonstrate for all to see that Jesus was the expected one.

It was an ingenious solution, so long as the world believed that God actually wrote the scriptures and could plant hidden clues within its sacred pages that would find fulfillment in a specific God-filled life hundreds of years later. Of course, this would also mean that this intervening God would have to micromanage the world in order to guard those scriptures from distortion or destruction as they journeyed through history. Their secret and hidden predictions would need to be protected from external forces. Those forces could be foreign enemies who might defeat the Jewish nation and, with that defeat, destroy the Jewish sacred writings, a fate that sooner or later appeared to be the destiny of the great majority of nations. Those external forces might also include natural disasters like floods that might destroy both an entire nation and its sacred artifacts. It also meant that this ever-invasive God would have to guide the hands of the scribes who preserved the sacred texts, so that in that period of hundreds of years in which these words were hand-copied, no mistakes would be made, no words would be added or omitted. This meant also that God had to make certain that when these writings were translated into Greek the original clues were in no way compromised. In short, this point of view required a supernatural heavenly guardian guiding those sacred prophetic texts through the centuries, lest their magical secrets be lost and the messiah go unrecognized.

This perspective, which requires a superstitious way of reading the scriptures, was ingenious but hardly credible or realistic. Yet it still

prevails in fundamentalist circles. Matthew encouraged it more than most with his formula "This took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet" (1:22), a phrase he used in a variety of forms many times in his text. John repeats this formula again and again when he writes, "For these things took place that the scriptures might be fulfilled" (19:36). That is, however, not the way it occurred.

The earliest Christians, all of whom were Jews seeking to interpret the power they had found in the life of Jesus, feverishly explored the sacred writings of their people, searching for a way not only to understand what the sources of his power were, but also, and more importantly, to make sense out of the fact that the one in whom they believed they had experienced the meaning of God had actually been executed on a cross. As they processed this internal debate, they found consolation and affirmation in their sacred writings, so that these writings began to shape their memory of Jesus. They fitted his life into this emerging scriptural portrait. Far from Jesus fulfilling the expectations of the people of Israel for a messiah who was to come in some programmed way, they simply told the story of Jesus so that he fitted into this scriptural pattern. Of course, Jesus could be seen magically to have fulfilled the scriptures if the early Christians began with those scriptures and forced their memory of Jesus to fit those expectations. It was particularly easy to do this since there were no eyewitnesses. The Jesus story could be created out of scriptural whole cloth. Surely, he died "in accordance with the scriptures." I suspect that the story of his death was first composed homiletically—that is, by church leaders preaching on these texts in the synagogues—and then it was gradually transmuted into liturgical forms as Christians devised a worship tradition to expand and even to replace the Passover, a tradition in which this biblical reconstruction of the final events in Jesus' life would be repeated year after year as part of the liturgy of Holy Week.

The Jesus experience was real. However, the gospels' explanation of that experience, even the explanation of his death, was anything but remembered history. The story of Jesus' death was told in a manner similar to that of his birth: both were filled with mythical characters that fired the church's imagination and later altered the church's memory as these dramatic personae began to be thought of as real. Among these nonhistorical characters from the story of the cross were

the thieves crucified with him, the crowd that taunted him and Joseph of Arimathea, who provided the tomb for his burial. Among the mythical words that Jesus was said to have spoken were the sayings from the cross, every one of them.

The reality is that Jesus was executed by the Romans. The reality is that the common method of execution by the Romans was crucifixion. The reality is that his death cried out for explanation because it countered everything that the disciples experienced about God through the life of this Jesus. Yet neither the way he died nor the events and the people who filled the story of the cross are historical. All are part of a magnificent interpretive portrait. Jesus had opened doors into the disciples' souls that cried out for understanding. They were caught between the transforming memory of his life and the chilling reality of his death. They lived in that valley of despair until they resolved this conflict. At some point something happened to them that transformed his death into another expression of his life-giving love. That is what enabled them to see his death as being a part of the fulfillment of God's plan. I will return to this conflict in my final chapters. For now I simply introduce these themes and let them begin to bubble!

We now turn to that moment of transformation and explore its dimensions. It is called Easter.