

# The Crucifixion and Death of Jesus

We don't have a great deal of time to examine the mockery and abuse on the part of the soldiers which is reported by Mark and Matthew, and also in John, and the reasons for its omission by Luke: we saw elements of it transferred to the Herod story last week, which is an incident described only by Luke, and we shall see further elements of it transferred by Luke to the crucifixion scene itself.

However, we should take note of some consequent omissions from the Lukan account, some of which may surprise you: for instance, there is no *scourging* of Jesus in this Gospel: and this is a rare sign of bad editing on Luke's part, as in the third prediction of the Passion (18:31) Jesus clearly says that he will - in the following order - be first

- handed over to the pagans, then
- mocked,
- maltreated,
- spat upon and
- scourged

before his execution. The implication is that Luke has deliberately, if inefficiently, edited out the cruel experience of Jesus at Roman hands. Luke has him mocked and beaten by the Temple guard that arrests him - remember that no Roman soldiers appear in this rôle, except in John - and is also said to be treated with contempt, and made fun of, and dressed in a shining garment by Herod's guards. There is no specific mention of spitting. Pilate *threatens* to scourge him when he returns, in an effort to buy off the crowd; but when he is forced to grant their wish and release Jesus to the will of the priests, he does not fulfil the threat to have him flogged.

Nor, as we eliminate one Sorrowful Mystery, is there in this Gospel a *crown of thorns*, whose nature and intention is a good example of something which has probably changed simply because of translation. The medieval painters all assumed that this crown of thorns was an instrument of torture, something else to make Jesus bleed; in fact the "thorns" are a questionable quantity, as the adjective we translate as "thorny" is actually *akanthinos*, which implies not a circlet of dangerous spines, but a ceremonial wreath woven from the weed acanthus, which grows freely in the eastern Mediterranean and forms the dignified adornment of the Corinthian capital and many other sculptural carvings. Thus, rather than assuming it to be an instrument of torture, we should associate the crown with the mockery of his alleged kingship. Crowns in the ancient world were not our gold hats with jewels in, but diadems or garlands; acanthus would be as appropriate as anything for crowning someone, and available. Anyway, Luke does not include this feature of the tradition, despite having it in front of him in black and parchment-colour in the Gospel of Mark.

If anywhere, this coronation would have fitted the Lukan scene of mockery at Herod's, where the tetrarch's attendants dress him in a splendid robe to mock his alleged kingship; but it wouldn't match the mockery at the high priest's, where Jesus is mocked, not as a king, but as a prophet. This mockery ironically fulfils Jesus' earlier statement about himself in 13:33: *it would not be right for a prophet to die outside Jerusalem*; it is conspicuous in this Gospel that the sort of maltreatment he had predicted is not visited on Jesus by pagans, but only by Jews - assuming Herod's attendants to be Jews. But if Jesus' ill-treatment flows from a mockery of his status *as a prophet*, this isn't unaccountable for Jews. Deuteronomy 13 commands that any person recognised as a false prophet must be put to death in the name of God. for the safety of the other members of the community. Once again, we are discovering

that the behaviour of the Jews in the story of the Passion - so long represented as iniquitous by Christian propaganda - may have a very convincing warranty in the Bible; if those who call for Jesus' death are convinced he is a false prophet, their behaviour is entirely justifiable from Scripture itself, recalling the Johannine prediction: *The time is coming when those who put you to death will think they are doing a holy duty for God.*

We should acknowledge here the importance that Luke has given to Jesus' prophetic rôle. At the other end of the Gospel, Luke describes Jesus' first homily, at Nazareth, where he purposely seeks out the text of the call and anointing of Isaiah as a prophet of messianic fulfilment. Jesus' very simple preaching is his claim to be the fulfilment of these words. It may be simple, but it brings a prophet's reward: rejection by his own people, and then persecution. Here, at the beginning of the Gospel, is the Gospel's whole plan in a single incident. Jesus' response to the criticism of the congregation is to turn to outsiders; it is justified by prophetic examples - Elijah to Sidonian Zarephath, Elisha to Syrian Naaman - and the eventual Christian mission to the Gentiles, by which Luke came to be a Christian, and which he describes in the Acts of the Apostles, is supported not only by these citations, but by the countless emphatic moments in Luke's Gospel where *foreigners* receive Jesus in a way that puts his own people to shame. Luke is consequently committed to positive presentation of outsiders. He alone gives us the parables of the Prodigal Son and the good Samaritan, where the outsider proves to be favoured over the apparently faithful; among the demoniacs, the sick, the lepers who appear in all the Synoptic Gospels, Luke gives us Levi the taxman and his sinful friends, the ruined widow of Nain, the public sinner who anoints Jesus' feet at supper. For Luke it is always the outsider who sees most and responds most. He is clearly preparing us for the mission to the Gentiles which he will describe in his second volume, where the excluded pagans are the building-blocks for a new People of God. The establishment of this new People will require prophetic ministry, as the first one did. For the Old Covenant God raised up Moses. Jesus will be the prophet of the New Testament.

In this context Jesus speaks to Jerusalem (Lk 13:34):

Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You who kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Look: your house will be left to you.

In turning his face resolutely towards Jerusalem in 9:51, Jesus resolves to go the way of the prophets who are slaughtered by Jerusalem. Is his Transfiguration conversation with Moses and Elijah about "his" exodus which he would accomplish in Jerusalem an assimilation to him of the Mosaic rôle - thus presenting him as "the prophet like Moses" who was expected to return?

On arrival in sight of Jerusalem, Jesus begins to weep and utters a prophecy over it; but to what extent is it a prophecy of his own (19:41ff)? This is what he says in Luke:

If you too had only recognised on this day the way to peace! But in fact it is hidden from your eyes! Yes, a time is coming when your enemies will raise fortifications all round you, when they will encircle you and hem you in on every side; they will dash you and the children within your walls to the ground; they will leave not one stone standing on another within you, because you did not recognise the moment of your visitation.

Compare the following quotations from OT prophets:

Is 29:3            I shall encamp all around you, I shall lay siege to you and mount assault-works against you

Jr 52:4	The King of Babylon advanced on Jerusalem with his entire army, and pitching camp in front of the city he raised earthworks all around it
Ez 4:1ff	Take a brick, lay it in front of you. On it engrave a city, Jerusalem; You are then to besiege it, trench round it, build earthworks, pitch camps and bring up battering-rams all around. Then take an iron pan and place it as though it were an iron wall between you and the city. Then fix your gaze on it: it is being besieged, and you are besieging it. This is a sign for the House of Israel.
Ez 21:23ff	is worth reading in full.
Ps 137:7ff	Remember Lord, the day of Jerusalem, how they said, <i>Down with it, raze it to the ground!</i> Daughter of Babel, doomed to destruction, a blessing on anyone who treats you as you treated us, a blessing on anyone who seizes your babies, and shatters them against a rock!
Ho 10:14f	Turmoil is going to break out among your people, and all your fortresses will be laid waste on the day of battle, dashing mothers to pieces on their children; so shall it be done to you, Bethel, because of your great wickedness; at dawn, the king of Israel will be no more.
14:1	Samaria will pay the penalty for having rebelled against her God. They will fall by the sword, their little children will be dashed to pieces, and their pregnant women disembowelled.
Nahum 3:10	She too went into exile, into captivity; her little ones too were dashed to pieces at every crossroad; lots were drawn for her nobles, all her great men were put in chains.

It's clear that Luke is laying on the lips of Jesus the words of the classical prophecies of Israel. Whether Jesus said these things or not, it is clear that Luke alone wanted us to hear them, and this is a part of his overall decision to present Jesus as a prophet.

### **The Road to Calvary**

We have seen how Pilate three times declares Jesus' innocence, and yet hands him over to be crucified: in John's Gospel the same thing happens. But we have a quite special Lukan construct to frame the crucifixion. We can see it as a triptych (three-frame picture) with the Crucifix in the middle panel, and a secondary scene on either side.

The side-panels include two story-teller's groups of three. The first panel groups

- Simon of Cyrene,
- a large crowd, and
- the women of Jerusalem

together. They modify Mark's presentation of the Way of the Cross very significantly. Luke picks up the Simon of Cyrene story, and, in a tiny addition (*opisthen tou Iesou*) identifies him as one carrying the Cross "behind Jesus". Luke's Jesus has already told us that no-one can be his disciple unless he carries the cross and comes after him. Here, it is the compulsion of Roman soldiers that creates a disciple for Jesus, and this matches exactly the unconscious collaboration we explored last week, where God uses the misdeeds and ignorance of pagans and unbelievers and turns them into moments of grace: Caesar Augustus fulfils Micah 5. The large crowd is also said to be *following Jesus*, and they are given a voice by the weeping daughters of Jerusalem. It's obviously perfectly possible that such women did indeed appear at the crucifixion; it is said (Talmud) that noblewomen traditionally gave sedative drinks to condemned criminals in NT times (strange that no other Evangelist has retained any memory of them). But they are truly important figures from the prophetic past. Prophets were constantly warning that the misdeeds of Israel - so often seen as sins committed by kings and generals, that is, men - will be suffered and mourned by the daughters of Jerusalem, seen as innocent victims of the evil of others. Now they are allowed to voice the tenderness of

Jerusalem, in contrast to the acts of its rulers. But Jesus responds by calling *them* to conversion. They are to cease weeping for him, and start weeping for themselves and (once more) their children. Mark 13 gives us Jesus' very prophetic warning to Jerusalem, *Woe to those with child, or with babies at the breast, when those days come!* Luke has related this warning specifically to the crucifixion; and the link appears once more, which the early Church certainly made, between the death of Jesus and the destruction of the Holy City in AD 70. Probably women of Jerusalem living at the time of the Cross were dead by then; but their children were not.

Despite this foreboding, it is quite clear that Luke has introduced a response of *compassion* into the representation of Calvary, which is quite absent from Mark or Matthew. Just as, at his birth in Luke, Jesus was welcomed by large numbers of Jewish people (Mary & Joseph, the shepherds, Simeon and Anna) so at his death many voices assert his justice and innocence: except that now there are Gentiles among them: for the third panel of the triptych is occupied by

- the Roman centurion who says "This was truly a righteous man",
- the crowds who go home beating their breasts, and
- the women from Galilee who contemplated his death.

The central panel responds to the tradition that Jesus is mocked as he hangs on the cross. Once more there are three sources of this abuse:

- the chief priests,
- the soldiers, and
- the first of the two co-crucified.

We should note that the whole population of this triple scene is embraced in the prayer of Jesus, *Father, forgive them*. But the Lucan masterpiece which dominates all the details is certainly the conversation between Jesus and the second man crucified with him: usually called "the repentant thief", this man is called by Luke simply *a wrongdoer*, and he actually expresses no repentance. Rather, he simply accepts that his own punishment is deserved for his unnamed crime, and asserts Jesus' innocence. Then he asks Jesus to remember him in the Kingdom to which he is about to depart. The rewarding of the man goes far beyond what he asks, and this is the totally Lucan element: like Lazarus starving at the gate, he displays no moral excellence; he expresses himself as justly condemned to death, and in this he shows himself to be ultimately poor. *Blessed are the poor: they shall be rich*. This particular poor man will be with Jesus in the happy hunting-grounds (*paradise* is a Persian term meaning the deer-park of a prince). This extraordinary promise from a crucified convict represents the last conversation Jesus has with any human being.

It is surely for this reason that the rending of the Temple veil is moved by Luke to a place *before* the death of Jesus, so that it can be seen as a theological sign rather than as God's angry response to the killing of his Son. In Mark, and even more in Matthew, it appears as a horrific, almost sacrilegious tearing-up of God's covenant: the verb which describes it, *schizein*, is violent and dramatic. By making it precede the death, Luke softens its negative meaning (without cancelling it altogether), and points to its representing the transfer of Temple significance from Mount Zion to Mount Calvary. If he had left this unremittingly negative sign of God's displeasure unmodified, it would have gone against the positive framing of the Crucifix in the balanced triptych of three favourable judgments of Jesus before and after his death which we have been noticing.

There is another point to notice. In all three of the other Gospels, a great point is made of the dangerous allegation that Jesus was planning the downfall of the Temple, which was a capital

crime in Gospel times. In Luke's Gospel this claim has been entirely omitted from the description of the trial: the Jewish interrogation was about his claim to be Christ and Son of God, and the Roman one about incitement to revolt, opposition to Roman tax, and the claim to be a king. In all of the Synoptics Jesus predicts the downfall of the Temple in the context of the fall of Jerusalem. But in Matthew one of the witnesses in the Jewish trial claims he has heard Jesus say, *Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up*; John gives us a quite similar quotation in the argument over the cleansing of the Temple, although Matthew has not recorded this statement in the body of the Gospel. The question arises, did Matthew think this was *not* said by Jesus, and formed part of the *false witness* gathered by the Sanhedrin? In Luke, the whole controversy about the future of the Temple has been extracted from the Gospel, so there is in the incident of the torn Temple veil no element of fulfilment.

What were the last words of Jesus? We have three reports to choose from, and I hope that by this time you will try neither to include all of them serially, or to choose between them. They each relate to one theological presentation of the meaning of the Cross. The answer to the question is therefore "We don't know" - at least in historical terms. Mark and Matthew use Ps 22:2 (*My God, my God, why have you deserted me?*) John uses a majestic "*It is accomplished!*"; Luke uses a confident sentence from Ps 31:6, *Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*. The draught of vinegar has been moved back into the soldiers' mockery immediately after they have crucified him, and before the conversation with the criminals. Elijah is not mentioned, the trigger for his being mentioned (*Eloi, Eloi*) having been removed. We have seen how Luke removed from the beginning of the Passion Jesus' words "My soul is sorrowful to the point of death" - themselves an adaptation of a phrase from Ps 42:6 - and furthermore we have noted the lack of any total convulsion in the Gethsemane passage; so now he alters the violent verb *boan* (*scream*) to the more pacific word *phonein* (*cry out*), and he replaces the future verb *paratithenai* to the present, and the word *Father* has become part of the citation. The psalm in question does not represent a tortured soul, but a deeply trustful one: the next phrase is "you have redeemed me, O Lord." Although deliverance is also a presence in Ps 22, Mark has given Jesus the most tortured of its phrases, while Luke has deliberately replaced this with a prayer of trust. We may say that, amid the welter of uses of the treacherous word "paradidomai", whereby Jesus is handed over by others, when he comes to die he hands over (*paratithenai*) his whole self. We can go further because of Luke's theology: Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit descends on him at his baptism, he has been led by the Holy Spirit, and he is said to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Consequently this "giving over" of his whole self is the willing return of Jesus to the place of his divine origin. It is the completion of a perfect circle involving his whole life and mission.

Let us not miss the significant difference by which "my God" is replaced by "Father": Jesus is making the psalm entirely personal, entirely his own. At the beginning of the Gospel the young Jesus asks, *Did you not know I must be in my Father's house?* But there is another very significant nuance between the two presentations of Jesus. In Mark, Jesus moves from the garden, where he calls God "Abba (Father)", to the Cross where he uses "My God". This is surely a movement of gathering alienation. But Luke's Jesus has been entirely consistent, calling God "Father" in the garden, asking the Father to forgive as he is nailed, and calling on the Father in his dying words. Note that these last two prayers appear only in Luke.

It could not have been made clearer to us that the attitudes Jesus is displaying must also be our attitude, as his followers, when we face death ourselves. In Acts 7:59 Stephen, the first Christian martyr, will shout with a loud cry and say *Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!* You may like to think about this passage from Justin's *Dialogues* composed perhaps fifty years after Luke's Gospel:

Hence God also teaches us by his Son that we should struggle (*agonizesthai*) in all ways to become righteous, and at our departure (*exodos*) to ask that our souls may not fall under any evil power. For when Christ was giving out (*apodidonai*) his spirit on the Cross, he said: *Father, into your hands I place my spirit*. This also I have learnt from the memoirs.

This is a sensitive and comprehensive example of someone reading carefully what was written, and absorbing the exact sense of the words that Luke chose for his theme.

Luke sent away Satan from the temptation scene in the wilderness “to return at his appointed time (*kairos*)”. The Passion of Luke began with Jesus’ recognition of the arriving Hour of his enemies, and of Darkness. These words in the night-scene of the arrest are even more appropriate as the three hours of darkness gather round the scene of his death. But his final words proclaim that the darkness has not been able to separate him from his Father; and at the end of the Gospel we shall hear him say: *Now I will send upon you what the Father has promised*; and when he is seen at the Second Coming, it will be “in the glory of the Father”.

People find the multiplicity of the offered last words of Jesus problematical. They want to know which, historically, is the correct account.

Some question the possibility of the Mark/Matthew version, on the grounds that it throws doubt on Jesus’ divinity; a doubt resolved instantly by Mark, in the confession of the centurion: *this was God’s Son*. Nor does the cry suggest despair: the God who has abandoned Jesus is still *My God*. The centurion could hardly have spoken as he does if the cry had suggested despair to him. God’s involvement is confirmed by the instant tearing of the Temple veil the moment after his death. In Matthew it is further amplified by the earthquake, the rending of rocks, the opening of tombs, the raising of the dead, and the entry of some of them into the Holy City after his raising, and their appearance to many. This complex of signs attaches to the death of Jesus instantaneous divine response, on an apocalyptic plane (not, therefore, one which should send us to seismology, for example, looking for historical records of earthquake or eclipse).

At the same time, it is hard for people to come to terms with the fact that John has Jesus saying: *I am never alone because the Father is always with me....I have overcome the world*. In Luke’s Gospel Jesus feels enough confidence to promise paradise “today” to the criminal - and it is “paradise with me”. Such calm confidence is not a contradiction in historical terms of the factual report of the Crucifixion. It is an example of the contrasting theological understanding expressed in the four Gospels. We have noted before that where history is lacking, as in the birth narratives, the Gospel writers always turn to the Old Testament scriptural traditions to supply their narrative detail. For instance, the events after the death of Jesus which Matthew adduces to express the meaning of what happens almost certainly came to him in a short verse-form, which we can perceive in Greek that is not Matthean in quality:

And the earth was shaken,  
And the rocks were rent,  
And the tombs were opened,  
And many bodies of the fallen-asleep holy ones were raised

To this simply-constructed verse Matthew has added, in his own style of writing, the sequel:

And having come out of the tombs after his raising,  
they entered the Holy City and were made visible to many.

Looking for historical correspondences for these incidents is fruitless; but anyone with a working knowledge of Scripture would never begin such a search. When Jeremiah describes judgment in 4:23, he writes, *I looked at the earth and it was waste and void, at the heavens*

*and their light was gone; I looked at the mountains and they quaked, and all the hills were moved.* Joel in a parallel passage (2:10) writes: *Before them the earth shall tremble and the heavens be shaken; the sun and moon shall be darkened, and the stars shall withdraw their light.* Ps 77:19 reads: *At the cry of the just the earth trembled and shook.* Matthew's readers would have little difficulty in hearing these echoes in his narrative. They are an appropriate use of the scriptural vocabulary that every observant Jew inherits.

To these negative and terrifying signs Matthew has added a benevolent one, related to the opening of the tombs and the rising of the bodies of the dead saints. It is interesting that he inserts a small phrase to preserve the primacy of the Lord's resurrection (*after his rising*), whilst preserving the link between the death of Jesus and the rising of the just. It is almost certain that Matthew, and his readers, would have had in their minds the great oracle of Ezekiel 37 about the valley of dry bones. This begins with the dramatic words, *I will open your tombs, and bring you up out of your tombs, O my people, and I will lead you into the land of Israel, and then you will know that I am the Lord.* As in many other places, Matthew takes what Mark gives him, and enhances it by quoting Scripture from the Old Testament, so here. There is one more fascinating fact to notice. In the beginning Matthew gave us the star, the Magi, and their arrival in Jerusalem, and the intervention of Herod as wicked king. At the Passion he also gives us the account of Judas' repentance and dealing s over the thirty pieces of silver, and his ultimate suicide. It seems almost certain that, whilst these stories are entirely elaborated out of OT Scripture, they all contain vivid references to Jerusalem, and they may well point to Matthew's use of a special source created by believers in the Holy City itself.

In our Passion Narrative, Luke, the centurion has the last word at the scene of crucifixion. Luke has chosen to alter the words of Mark's centurion, *Truly, this was the Son of God.* Why?

Luke has a way of rejecting stories that seem humanly unlikely (like the sudden following of perfect strangers in Mark's call of the apostles). Here it is likely that Luke's distaste for the negative account of the Passion, which we have now explored, impelled him to recast the account of Jesus' death with particular care. His centurion says *Truly, this was a just man.* This seems relatively limp compared to the divine terms of Mark. But closer examination reveals the same kind of OT seedbed behind this choice of words. Ps 31 gave the Lukan Jesus his last words. The same psalm gives us (v 19) *Let the lying lips be struck dumb that speak insolently against the Just One with pride and contempt.* Wisdom (3:1) says *The souls of the Just are in the hand of God (cf into your hands....);* the context is describing the plot of wicked enemies to destroy a Just man who professes to have knowledge of God, who calls himself a son of God, and who calls God his Father (cf *Father, into your hands...*) and the adversaries say: *If the Just One is the Son of God, He will help him.* This passage is in Matthew's description of Jesus' adversaries at the Cross. Luke uses it, typically in a positive sense, at the centurion's confession. Finally, the centurion is the last of a long series of positive judgments from the Romans running through the entire Passion Narrative. Imposed-upon Simon of Cyrene, a convicted criminal, and now the leader of the previously mocking soldiers have come almost instantaneously to use of him the language of discipleship.

The first to see Jesus in Jerusalem was Simeon, who said: *My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all the peoples: a light of revelation to the Gentiles.* The first one to see Jesus after his death is one of the Gentiles, who gives glory to God, the first of the Gentiles to see his light.