

Mark 15:1-20, Failure of Sacred and Secular Rulers
June 14, 1997
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Overview

The structure of 14:53-15:20 compares the trial before the Sanhedrin and that before Pilate. The one rejects Christ through deliberate malice, the other through lack of political courage.

1. Structural similarities:

- a) In each, the Lord is confronted with two questions, one indirect (via accusers), the other direct (by the judge). In both, he declines to reply to the accusers, but does reply to the judge, and the testimony he bears in both cases is the same: he is the one to whom all dominion belongs.
- b) In each, after the conclusion of the trial, the Lord is cruelly abused by the judge's underlings.
- c) In each, the condemnation by the authorities is echoed by the Lord's denial by the common people, each time marked by three questions.

2. Contrast: Each of these three sections (and later vv in ch. 15) is marked by references to our Lord's kingship, which are lacking in 14. Mark mentions kings only in ch. 6 (Herod, killing a prophet) and 15 (Jesus, killed as a prophet). Yet the two make the same point. The position of the one described in Dan 7 as the "Son of Man" would be termed by a Roman, "king of the Jews."

A. 1, The Jewish Rulers (the Sanhedrin) Reject Christ

This paragraph is the bridge between the two trials, and leads us to expect that they will be strongly similar with one another.

Mark makes very clear the deliberate malice of the Jewish leaders.

1. Deliberateness: "held a consultation ... the whole council [Sanhedrin]"
2. Appearances: "bound Jesus," to make him look like a common criminal.
3. Why Pilate? Because they could not kill him? Rather, political: to shift the popular onus to the Romans. Thus the introduction of the question about "king of the jews"--they are trying to convert their charge of blasphemy into a Roman charge of treason.

B. 2-15, The Secular Ruler Does Not Defend Him.

In each case, note the response of Pilate. He knows that Jesus is innocent, yet yields to popular pressure. Problems with politicians are nothing new.

1. 2-5, Pilate and Jesus--leads to his amazement.

Here the king is *recognized* by the Roman governor. As before Sanhedrin, there are two cycles of interrogation, one based on the witness of others, one a direct question. As there, the Lord refuses to answer the accusations of others, but does reply to a direct question.

a) 2, KING: Direct challenge: he answers.

1) Both the question and the answer begin with an emphatic "You."

a> Pilate to Jesus: "You--bound as you are and rejected by these noble citizens--are you really the king of the Jews?"

b> Jesus to Pilate: "You yourself say so."

2) The Lord's response is sometimes read as ambiguous. This is not appropriate; it combines a strong affirmation with an appeal to the inner knowledge of the questioner.

Occurrences:

a> Before Pilate (Mt, Mk, Lk). In John 18:33-37, accompanies the Lord's description of his kingship, and expressly (34) forces Pilate to face the difference between what others say and what he believes

b> Before Sanhedrin (Mt 26:64), parallel to "I am" in Mk, and accompanied by an explicit statement of his claim to be the Messiah, and in Lk 22:67,68, with emphasis on what their response is.

c> To Judas at the Last Supper (Mt 26:25), clearly an affirmative, and again the emphasis on his own knowledge is appropriate.

d> Summary: a strong affirmative: "You yourself know that what you have said is so." In the present case, borne out by Pilate's sign on the cross, 15:26.

3) Thus at the outset Pilate is presented as knowing that Jesus is the King of the Jews.

b) 3-5a, Accusation by the chief priests: he is silent.

c) 5b, Pilate marvels. The same word used to describe the response of people to the Lord's miracles (5:20; 6:51) and astute words (12:17). This is incredible; Pilate is amazed at the Lord's composure and dignity.

d) *Application*: The repetition of the Lord's behavior here and before the Sanhedrin gives us an important principle for witness. It is not our place to answer third-party accusations against the gospel that questioners bring us, but we should respond to their own questions, while trusting the Lord to show us the difference.

2. 6-15, KING 2x: Pilate, Barabbas, and the Crowd--leads to his compromise.

Here the king is *rejected* by the multitude. Pilate's questions set up a popular referendum on the king, cf. Deut 17:15 (king set up by the people); 1 Sam. 10:24; . NB: Had Jesus been a reactionary, this would have been a dangerous thing to do! Pilate's three questions are reminiscent of the maids' three questions to Peter, and his denial of the Lord, in the preceding trial.

a) 6-8, Background:

- 1) The custom at the feast of releasing a prisoner.
- 2) The existence of two prisoners at this time: Jesus, and Barabbas.
- 3) The arrival of a citizens' committee to request the customary release. This "multitude" is likely to be identified with those who heard Jesus gladly throughout the gospel. Of course, they do not even know yet that Jesus is being held.

b) 9-11, KING: First question: Shall I release the king of the Jews?

- 1) Motive: he knows of the priests' envy toward Jesus, and wants to test the crowd's support of Jesus directly. Knowing Jesus' innocence, he would like to release him, if it should be politically possible.
- 2) 11, The priests manage to persuade the people to ask for the murderer instead.
- 3) Thus this section shows not only Pilate's weakness, but also the failure of the people to support the Lord. They are the rocky soil of ch. 4 that shows an initial burst of enthusiasm, but then fails to follow through in the crunch.

c) 12-13, KING: Second question: What shall I do with the king of the Jews?

By now, the multitude is completely in the hands of the chief priests, and are manipulated to ask for the Lord's death.

d) 14, Third question: What has he done wrong?

A completely appropriate question for a judicial proceeding, and one that they bypass, simply insisting on the death penalty.

e) 15, Capitulation

Pilate's amazement of the interaction with Jesus is not enough; he fails under popular pressure. The political cost of doing what is right is too great, and he commits the twofold sin of leaving the sin of Barabbas unpunished and of executing an innocent man.

C. 16-20, KING: Abuse by Soldiers

This section recalls the abuse of the Lord at the hand of the High Priest's servants in 14:65. It is not a pretty picture, and at first we may wonder why it is preserved for us in such gory detail. The answer is Heb. 12:1-4 and 1 Pet 2:21-25, to show us the patience with which our Lord "endured the cross, despising the shame," so that we might not "be wearied and faint in [our] minds," and to remind us of how he "str[ove] with sin," so that "with his stripes we are healed."

1. Pilate has already had him scourged. The scourge had bits of lead, glass, and bone embedded in its thongs, so that it tore the flesh from the back of the victim. The Lord is bleeding profusely, his flesh in shreds, his clothing sticking to the clotting blood.
2. 16, The soldiers take a detour on the way to the cross. They have heard the charge of kingship, and it is in their minds utterly incongruous with the miserable wretch they see before him. They call their comrades to see the spectacle.
3. 17, The coronation. Mark mentions two items:
 - a) The purple robe, which acc. to v.20 replaces his own, so we are to imagine it ripped from his back, reopening the wounds of scourging.
 - b) The crown of thorns. Arid areas like Palestine abound in thorny plants; a dozen possible candidates, some with thorns an inch or more long; compare the thorns of a locust tree. This is not just a blackberry bush. Would have torn his flesh and sent more blood running down his face.
 - c) Matt. mentions that they put a reed in his hand for a scepter. Mark mentions this reed in v.19, where the soldiers hit him on the head with it, driving the crown of thorns deeper into his scalp.
4. "Began" in 18, and the use of the imperfect tense for the three actions of 19, suggest that these were repeated actions. We can imagine each soldier in turn coming before the Lord, and while the others roar with laughter:
 - a) hailing him as king of the jews,
 - b) taking his "scepter" and beating him on the head with it,
 - c) spitting in his face,
 - d) then kneeling down in mock homage.
5. When they have exhausted their cruelty, they once again rip the garments from his wounds, re-clothe him in his own robe, and lead him out to be crucified.
6. *Application*: Twofold, based on Heb. 12:1-4 and 1 Pet. 2:21-25.
 - a) For the believer: This is our *example*. Bear this picture in

mind whenever you are called upon to suffer for the Lord, "lest you be weary and faint in your minds." "Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example." Our affliction will seem ever so slight when we compare it with this.

- b) For the unbeliever: This is our *substitute*. Why did he put up with this abuse, instead of calling down the host of heaven to stamp out these impudent creatures? Because he was suffering in our place. One day "every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is" not just King of the Jew but "Lord," Phil. 2. These soldiers and other unbelievers will be there, recalling bitterly how they once mocked him; believers will be there, thanking him for suffering for them. On which side will you be?