The Death of Jesus

Mark 15.33-39; Matt 27.45-54; Luke 23.44-48; John 19.28-30

The death of Jesus is the culmination of the Passion, the sequence of events beginning with Jesus' (triumphal) entry into Jerusalem. In all four Gospels, the crucifixion follows the trial before Pilate (Mark 15.1-15; Matt 27.11-26; Luke 23.13-25; John 18.28-19.16). In Mark and Matthew, Jesus undergoes mockery by the soldiers (Mark 15.16-20; Matt 27.27-31; cf. John 19.2-3) before being led away to be crucified. The three Synoptists tell how Simon of Cyrene is made to carry Jesus' cross (Mark 15.21; Matt 27.32; Luke 23.26), and Luke tells of the multitude, made up particularly of women, which follows Jesus to the site of crucifixion (Luke 26.27-31). In the Synoptic Gospels, the narration of Jesus' death is followed is by a reference to the female witnesses of the crucifixion (Mark 15.40-41; Matt 27.55-56; Luke 23.49) and then an account of Jesus' burial (Mark 15.42-47; Matt 27.57-61; Luke 23.50-56). In John's Gospel, the piercing of Jesus' side (John 19.31-37) precedes the burial (19.38-42).

The Shared Story

The Gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion display a shared pattern that could be labelled a 'story' in a basic sense – a series of connected events with a beginning, middle and end. The death of Jesus is the climax of the sequence.

Mark and Matthew relate Jesus' death in similar fashion:

- Darkness descends at noon and lasts until three in the afternoon;
- at three o'clock, Jesus utters the cry, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*;
- hearing Jesus cry to God, some of the bystanders mistakenly think that he is calling for Elijah;
- one of them puts a sponge full of sour wine on a stick and offers it to Jesus;
- Jesus is mocked with the words, "*Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down/save him*";
- Jesus gives a loud cry and dies;
- the temple curtain is torn in two;
- the Roman centurion confesses Jesus as God's Son.

The cry of abandonment, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*, echoes Ps 22.1. Mark and Matthew both first give the saying in Aramaic and then translate it.

Luke's account is somewhat different. Assuming his dependence on Mark, he omits the cry of abandonment, the God-Elijah misunderstanding, the offer of sour wine (but cf. Luke 23.36) and the mockery based on the God-Elijah misunderstanding. He narrates the sequence: fall and persistence of darkness; tearing of the temple curtain; Jesus' last words; death of Jesus; pronouncement of the centurion; response of the crowds.

John's account is different again, though as in all the other versions Jesus speaks from the cross before he dies.

Mark

In Mark and Matthew, Jesus not only experiences the horror of crucifixion but the sense of God-forsakenness. It is noteworthy that the cry of abandonment is Jesus' final saying in Mark, giving it a special prominence in this Gospel.

In Mark, the centurion's confession of Jesus as God's Son, the climactic Christological confession of the Gospel, is a direct response to Jesus' death. The Gospel writer emphasizes the perfect viewing position of the centurion: he *stood facing him*. And he makes clear that it is the manner of Jesus' death that elicits the confession: *when the centurion…saw that in this way he breathed his last*. For Mark, it is in his dying that the true nature of Jesus' divine sonship is revealed.

Matthew

Matthew records the first words of Jesus' cry of dereliction as *Eli, Eli* (v. 46) in contrast to *Eloi, Eloi* in Mark. Both were legitimate first-century transliterations of the Aramaic into Greek. Matthew's rendering, however, makes more comprehensible the confusion with the name Elijah.

Matthew uniquely speaks of spectacular events following the death of Jesus: an earthquake, the splitting of rocks, the opening of tombs and the raising of saints, and their appearance to many. In describing these events, Matthew compresses an extended time sequence, which goes beyond the crucifixion. Note that it is *after his resurrection* (v. 53) that the raising and appearing of the saints take place. The disturbances following Jesus' death give the event an 'apocalyptic' character (cf. 24.29). It is in reaction to these events that Jesus is declared to be God's Son. In Matthew, the confession that Jesus is God's Son is made by and the centurion *and those with him* (v. 54).

Luke

The words, *the sun's light failed* (v. 45) are more literally rendered, 'the sun was eclipsed', and so Luke portrays the fall of darkness of midday as a solar eclipse. Luke's description of the occurrence is of a piece with his penchant for objectifying the supernatural.

He gives as Jesus' final words, "*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*" The utterance, exclusive to Luke, expresses submissive trust in God and contrasts sharply with the cry of abandonment that precedes Jesus' death in Mark and Matthew. The words recall Ps 31.5 *(Into your hand I commit my spirit)* and are a fitting culmination of Jesus' prayerful communion with God the Father that has been a marked feature of this Gospel.

In Luke's account, the centurion praises God and pronounces Jesus *innocent*, which may simply mean that he is guiltless from a judicial point of view. The political innocence of Jesus is an important theme of Luke's in the Passion (e.g. 23.22). Yet, the underlying Greek word can also mean, more positively, 'righteous', and so, on a higher level - beyond the centurion's own understanding - it may indicate Jesus' status as a 'righteous' person (cf. 1.6; 2.25; 14.14; 23.50) whom God will vindicate (14.14).

Luke has the crowds who view the spectacle *beating their breasts* (v. 48) as they return home (as the women had done en route to the scene of crucifixion: 23.27).

John

In John, Jesus' death follows his words to his mother and the beloved disciple (vv. 26-27), which are only found in this Gospel. The death of Jesus is narrated succinctly. Jesus states, *I am thirsty* (v. 28), which is a saying peculiar to this Gospel. That Jesus thirsts underlines the reality of his human experience, which is important to John (e.g. 1.14; 4.5-6; 11.35), but it also brings scripture to fulfilment (the scripture in view is most likely Ps 69.21), and this is what the evangelist emphasizes (v. 28). In John's account, the sponge filled with sour wine is put on *a branch of hyssop* (v. 29) and held up to him. Hyssop has Passover overtones: Exodus 12.22 stipulates the use of hyssop for daubing the blood of the lamb around the door of the house on Passover night. This small detail thus helps to reinforce John's presentation of Jesus as *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (1.29).

Jesus' dying utterance, *It is finished* (v .30), a single word in the original, is fittingly in this Gospel a cry of triumph and accomplishment (Jesus completes the work the Father gave him to do: 17.4). Jesus, we are told, *gave up his spirit* (v. 30). A more literal translation would be 'handed over his spirit'. The wording suggests that Jesus is in control of his death. He has already said in this Gospel that no one takes his life from him; he has the Father's authority to lay it down and to take it up again (10.17, 18).

Summary

The Gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion take the same 'story' shape, but each Gospel writer brings out a particular aspect of Jesus' death. Mark and Matthew both emphasise Jesus' experience of God-abandonment. Mark draws a direct connection between Jesus' death and the centurion's acclamation of Jesus' divine sonship. Matthew portrays Jesus' death as an 'apocalyptic' event. Luke focuses on Jesus' submissive trust in the Father and emphasises Jesus' innocence/righteousness. John conveys Jesus' sovereignty over his death. This evangelist hints at the sacrificial nature of his death and presents it as the accomplishment of Jesus' earthly mission.

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