

Power and Parody in Mark's Passion

A Reading of Ched Myer's *Binding the Strong Man*

By Paul Teusner

Ched Myers (1988) *Bind the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*. Maryknoll, Orbis Books.

For Myer, Mark's Passion narrative is framed in a battle between three regimes of power, or "war of myths":

- The Roman Imperium: Pilate, soldiers, Roman centurion
- The Jewish State: Sanhedrin, chief priests, scribes
- The Kingdom: Jesus, followers

Arraignment before the Sanhedrin 14:53-65 and Pilate 15: 2-5

To threaten the temple is firstly to threaten a large economic source for builders, labourers and traders among the Jewish people, and secondly to attack the symbolic heart of the Jewish way of life, already threatened by the superimposition of Roman culture. Thus Jesus is a threat to the Sanhedrin.

Verse 58 shows that the Jewish authorities have unwittingly articulated the struggle between powers. Here Mark notes that a new regime will come through by the destruction of that which was "made with hands". The old power, the Jewish state, will be overthrown by the new power, the Kingdom.

Jesus' silence shows that he is not ashamed of being who he is, and that he is involved in political trials where juridical arguments are gratuitous. He breaks this silence when asked of his vocation: I am.

While all other testimonies are false, this is all the Sanhedrin need for a committal.

Why was Jesus handed over to the Romans? The charge of the Sanhedrin is a domestic offence, and crucifixion is a punishment usually reserved for enemies of the Empire. It is true to a wider range of historical sources than this account that the Romans had reasons of their own to get rid of Jesus.

The removal of Pilate's first name suggests Mark realised his audience knew of Pilate's reputation. Comparing the evangelist's account with other historical sources, it appears Mark endeavours to minimise Roman culpability and maximise the role of Jewish authorities. Pilate is less unscrupulous and brutal in Mark's account than in other stories about him.

Jesus' silence, even in the threat of execution, causes Pilate to wonder why his disdain for the legal game will willingly lead him to death. In the end, Jesus convicts himself of being the Human One, to suffer and die under the current regimes.

Jesus' conviction despite lack of evidence, the involvement of the Roman superpower, and the refusal to recognise the political charges of the accused, is a *parody* made by Mark to throw the interplay between Jewish and Roman politics into disrepute. The parody will be reinforced by the portrayals of violence in the narrative to follow.

Before the crowd with Pilate and Barabbas 15: 6-15

Barabbas is presented in a manner that has historical significance, of which Mark appeals to a reader's recognition. The Sicarii, a band of terrorists, aimed an overthrow of Roman authority in Israel. Mark endeavours to present two types of revolutionary: violent and non-violent. Pilate offers the crowd the power to set one prisoner free. Yet this choice is only *apparent*, as they are both prisoners, after all, and those mediating the choice hold the real power. Mark's contempt for the priestly class here is made clear, Jewish power will side with the most violent of criminals to ensure Jesus' eradication.

In this scene Pilate's apparent surprise at the crowd's conviction is more parody of the political and judicial system in which two sides in the "war of myths" join to defeat another.

Carnival to the cross 15: 15- 32

Jesus is now spat upon by Jew and Gentile alike. There is parody in the carnival of abuse, in the ridicule offered by Roman soldiers, where the hostility between Jesus and the Imperium is climaxed, and in the carrying of the cross, where the Empire presents a theatre of triumph, further exerting its power over the Jewish state.

The arrival of Simon the Cyrene provides ironic closure to Jesus' popularity among the Jews. Where all, including Simon Peter, flee, another Simon is forced into the picture to carry the cross for him. This can represent again Roman power over Jews, the denial of Jesus by his own followers and a reminder of the tension between town and country.

Crucifixion, death and burial 15: 32 - 46

The crucifixion portrays, with irony and spectacle, the final victory over the Kingdom by Jew and Roman regime. At the top of the cross, the inscription provided by the Romans showcases the defeat over the "king". At the bottom, the Jews taunt Jesus in daring him to call for Elijah. (Note that the presence of Elijah in Mark's words in the accounts of both Jesus' baptism and transfiguration provide an irony in this, the third apocalyptic moment – Elijah was there the whole time, so where is he now?)

Mark's "war of myths" culminates in two great judgment motifs. The first is the falling of darkness over the land, alluding to Exodus 10: 22 and the fall of the dominant world order. The second is the rending of the temple curtain, pointing to the temple destruction. So here, and only here according to Myers, do we read a sign of the two powers being overthrown.

Representatives of Jew and Roman regime after Jesus' death are Joseph of Arimathea and the Roman centurion. While many read these sections as a realisation of the true identity of Jesus, and therefore a vindication of the Kingdom against Jew and Roman regimes, Myers find them both ambiguous in the extreme. For example, the reader gets a view of the centurion "standing over", connoting opposition, not solidarity. Joseph is a member of the council, and most likely complicit in the trial and eventual execution of Jesus. And Mark portrays a hurried burial, not one performed according to tradition.

The use of the centurion and the council member, once again, reinforce the defeat the two regimes had over the third. For Myers, the Kingdom's vindication arrives after

the burial with the discipleship shown by the women later, the lowliest in either regime, who first witness the resurrection.