Mark 15:16-24

Jesus is mocked and paraded to his crucifixion

Date: 1st CE
Place: Rome
Language: Greek

Category: New Testament
Title of work: The Gospel According to Mark
Reference: Mark 15:16-24

Commentary:
This passage narrates Jesus's journey to the site of his crucifixion, following his sentencing by the Roman governor Pilate, whom the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem have handed him over to after his arrival in the city. Jesus is led into the praetorium by soldiers, where he is dressed in purple robes and a crown made of twisted thorns in order for the soldiers to mock this so-called “king of the Jews” (the title which Jesus is accused of having given himself – see Mark 15:1-15). The soldiers then re-dress Jesus in his own clothes and lead him outside, where a passer-by is enlisted to carry Jesus’s cross (the carrying of one’s own cross to the site of execution was common practice). After being paraded to Golgotha, the site of the crucifixion (which was outside the city walls of Jerusalem), Jesus is executed, and his clothes are divided out between the attending soldiers, who cast lots to decide who gets what. Jesus’s clothes would have had little value to the soldiers, and this instance simply serves both to recall the prophecy of Psalms 22:18 and enhance the pitiable state that Jesus has been reduced to at the hands of the Roman officials.

Several scholars have noted parallels in this scene (and also Jesus’s so-called ‘triumphal entry’ into Jerusalem in chapter 11) with the Roman triumphal procession. In this triumphal parade, the victorious Roman general would ride through the city, with conquered peoples dragged along in chains, and various spoils of war, towards the Capitoline Hill, where the celebrations would culminate in sacrifices of victims, including the captured kings and generals, as an expression of Roman hegemony (see Cicero, Against Verres II.5.77, who tells us that the sacrifice of these victims marked the end of the triumph). However, as Alan Georgia argues, direct parallels of specific features and narrative sequence are perhaps not the best way of understanding the way in which the author of Mark utilised the Roman triumphal tradition here. Rather, he suggests that influence can be seen in the “ritual movements, symbolic categories, and performative logic employed in the Roman triumph,” which Mark naturalises to both subvert Roman power and emphasise Jesus’s kingly identity (Alan Georgia, “Translating the Triumph,” p. 18). There are certainly grounds for arguing that Roman triumphal celebrations were not only physically prominent, but also utilised within the social and literary milieu in which Mark was writing. For instance, Josephus’s Jewish War VII, which reflects Mark’s immediate context, records the triumph of Titus and Vespasian in 71 CE. Moreover, the Greek narrative tradition to which Mark’s Gospel belongs reconceptualised Greek heritage during the early-Roman Empire in response to imperial domination, seen particularly through the novel of Chariton, Callirhoe, which includes an elaborate parousia (coming/arrival) narrative utilising several Roman triumphal themes. The symbolic importance of the triumph for the literature of this period, then, should not be overlooked.

For Thomas Schmidt, the crucifixion narrative, including this procession of Jesus through Jerusalem, is Mark’s attempt at a subversive “anti-triumph,” which sees the execution of Jesus as an assertion of his authority – the fact that he is made a spectacle of and publicly mocked is Mark’s way of subversively confirming that he is a king, and is a threat to Rome, in the same way that a king defeated in battle would be (Thomas Schmidt, “The Crucifixion Narrative,” p. 1-2). Schmidt argues that the soldiers’ mocking of Jesus by dressing him in regal purple effectively mimics the dressing of the glorious victor, his procession to the site of the cross is reminiscent of the parading of conquered victims through Rome, and his eventual crucifixion mirrors the sacrifice of Rome’s victims at the end of the triumphal parade. Effectively, then, Mark’s author makes Jesus into both a victor and a victim at the same time. There is indeed a good basis for suggesting that the symbolism of Jesus’s journey through Jerusalem to the cross draws on that of Roman triumphs, especially in terms of the insinuation of his identity as a king (the fact that he is a defeated one at this stage in the narrative matters little). Indeed, in the Res Gestae of Augustus, nine monarchs or
children of monarchs are described as being led ahead of his triumphal chariot, marking each one of his victories, and as Mary Beard highlights (The Roman Triumph, p. 207), kings were the only prisoners of war inscribed by name on the Fasti in the Roman Forum – defeated royalty were the perfect display of Roman superiority and military might, and their downfall contrasted with the conquering Roman general. Alan Georgia sees the dressing of Jesus in purple as an abrupt and slightly awkward detail, which seems to interrupt the flow of the narrative slightly. He suggests that the Markan author perhaps wanted to add this kingship motif, with Jesus wearing regal colours, but inserted it hastily at the last minute (Alan Georgia, “Translating the Triumph,” p. 31). However, this episode need not be as awkward as Georgia suggests – the theme of clothing in relating to Jesus’s kingly status has already been utilised in chapter 11, when the disciples and the crowd lining the streets take off their cloaks to place on the colt and line the streets as Jesus rides into Jerusalem, hailing him as the long-awaited Davidic king.

Just at the Jerusalem Temple arguably functions as the cultic destination for Jesus in Mark 11:1-11 (Jesus’s entry into the city), Golgotha, where he is to be crucified, can be seen as the cultic destination here. It has been argued that Mark plays on an allusion to the Capitoline Hill here, by emphasising that Golgotha means “the place of the skull/head.” This mimics the semantics of “Capitoline,” (caput = “head” in Latin) and therefore further emphasises Jesus’s dual role as victor (i.e. a Roman general would finish their triumphal procession at the Capitoline Hill) and victim (Jesus’s own procession ends with his death, where he is more akin to the sacrifices made by the conquering Roman general) (see Alan Georgia, “Translating the Triumph,” p. 32). However, not all commentators are convinced by the types of parallels and allusions to the Roman triumph discussed above. Adela Yarbro Collins, for instance, in her recent commentary on Mark, claims that Schmidt’s parallels in particular are rather far-fetched (see Adela Yarbro Collins, Mark: A Commentary, p. 725). Nonetheless, the similarities are striking enough in places for it to remain a significant possibility that the Gospel writer drew on and subverted this Roman tradition in order to make the case for Jesus’s kingly identity, by allowing him to both mimic and fall foul of Rome’s affirmations of royalty and power. His “defeat” through death (which as his resurrection will prove, is not really a defeat at all in the eyes of the Gospel writer) might temporarily enable Rome and the Jewish leaders to make a display of their authority, but by treating him in the manner that conquered royalty would be treated, they actually unknowingly acknowledge his claim as God’s promised Davidic king (see 2 Samuel 12:13-14), who will establish his eternal rule in God’s name. Indeed, as Mark Goodacre points out, Mark’s account (the earliest of the Gospel narratives) is not only the first extant narrative of this particular event, but also one of the “first narratives of any hero’s death by crucifixion,” meaning that he did not have a conceptual framework with which to work (see Mark Goodacre, “Scripturalization in Mark’s Crucifixion Narrative,” p. 34). Elements of Rome’s dominating language, symbols, and rituals are therefore naturalised here to create a new model for what would become a highly polemically charged series of triumphant deaths at the hands of Rome in the numerous martyr acts produced by the Christian literary tradition.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:
crucifixion
flogging
Golgotha
Jesus
kingship
mockery
parade
place of the skull
praetorium
ritual clothing
Roman hegemony
Roman soldiers
Roman triumph
sacrifice
victim

Yarbro Collins, Adela, Mark: A Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007)
Goodacre, Mark, "Scripturalization in Mark's Crucifixion Narrative", in The Trial and Death of Jesus: Essays on the Passion Narrative (ed. Geert van Oyen, Tom Shepherd; Leuvan: Peeters, 2006), 33-47

Other sources connected with this document: Text

Mark 11:7-11

Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem

- Read more about Mark 11:7-11

Text

Mark 15:1-15

Jesus before Pilate

- Read more about Mark 15:1-15

Relief / Sculpture

Arch of Titus, Roman Forum (81-82 CE) Reliefs

- Read more about Arch of Titus, Roman Forum (81-82 CE) Reliefs

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