



The Gospel of Mark

A Living Word Independent Bible Study



The Gospel of Mark

Part 40

Mark 15:1-20

A Living Word Independent Bible Study

Mark 15:1-20

(NIV)

INTRODUCTION

Jesus' arrest has now been accomplished.

A trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin is over.

Peter's predicted denial has taken place.

Now, it is Rome's turn with Jesus, in one of the most dramatic scenes in the Passion narrative.

The issue here, as we have seen throughout the Gospel, centers on Jesus' IDENTITY.

Remember from Mark 1:1 that Jesus true identity is "the Son of God" ... and that even "Messiah" or "son of David" are insufficient identifiers (see chapter 12).

The lesson will culminate with Jesus being led outside of Jerusalem to be crucified.

Mark 15:1 (NIV)

Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.

“Very early in the morning”

This is better translated “as soon as it was morning”.

“reached a decision”

This takes us back to the hearing after the narrative interruption to portray Peter’s denial.

This does NOT imply a second hearing.

The same principal players we have already seen have now come to a conclusion.

“bound Jesus, led him away”

Most likely, Jesus was bound in ropes or chains.

“handed him over to Pilate”

This fulfills the predictions of 10:33 –

Mark 9:31 – “They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles”

Pilate’s office is not stated in Mark’s Gospel – implying that he was well known to Mark’s earliest readers.

Matthew and Luke refer to him as “governor”.

He was Roman governor of Judea from 26-37 AD.

He normally lived in Caesarea Maritima, on the Mediterranean coast, but resided in Jerusalem during the Passover and other Jewish holy feasts.

Mark 15:1 (NIV)

Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.

“Pilate”

Sometimes, Pilate is portrayed dramatically as a good man caught in an impossible situation, caused fundamentally by the Jewish leadership’s hatred of Jesus.

It is true, Pilate recognized their envy of Jesus. He officially declares Jesus has committed no crime (see verse 14 ahead).

In this kind of portrayal, Pilate wants justice for Jesus, but is overwhelmed by the Jewish leaders.

HOWEVER ... the historical record is quite different from this!

Pilate **HATED** the Jews.

He enjoyed provoking and irritating them and their leadership.

He often acted cruelly, and was responsible for the deaths of many Jews.

His Roman supporters were not pleased with his approach to ruling Palestine.

Mark 15:1 (NIV)

Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.

“Pilate” (continued)

Evidence suggests Pilate was not interested in real truth or justice when it came to the Jews.

He “borrowed” from the temple treasury for civic projects.

He posted military standards with images of the emperor throughout Jerusalem, even in the temple precincts, mainly to provoke the Jews.

Luke tells us about an incident of violence against Galileans:

Luke 13:1 – “Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.”

Pilate’s likely motivation in dealing with Jesus was more to oppose and embarrass Jewish leaders than any interest in securing justice for Jesus.

He typically pursued ANY occasion for making trouble for the Jewish leadership.

Crucifying the “king of the Jews” in front of the Jews themselves would give him great pleasure.

Mark 15:2 (NIV)

“Are you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate.
“Yes, it is as you say,”
Jesus replied.

“Are you the king of the Jews?”

With this question, Jesus’ second trial begins.

Note the contrast between the questions that open each of the two trials:

Mark 14:61 – “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?”

Mark 15:2 – “Are you the king of the Jews?”

The first question had been religious in nature – has Jesus sinned against God?

This had been before a group – the Sanhedrin. Their verdict was “yes” – he is guilty of blasphemy.

This group had no authority to execute.

The second question begins a civil/secular trial – has Jesus acted against the state?

This is before ONE man, not a group – Pilate, the governor.

The verdict desired by the Jews is guilty – a proven rebel/revolutionary.

Pilate COULD execute.

Note that two different courts pressed two different charges, with two different verdicts.

Mark 15:2 (NIV)

“Are you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate.
“Yes, it is as you say,”
Jesus replied.

“king of the Jews?”

This is the FIRST reference to Jesus as “king of the Jews” in Mark’s Gospel.

This is a ROMAN designation for Jesus that will appear throughout this section of the Gospel, from 15:1-30.

Just as Caiaphas had emphasized the word “YOU” in the question, “Are YOU the Messiah?” Pilate now emphasizes the word “YOU” in the question, “Are YOU the king of the Jews?” – very sarcastically.

“Yes, it is as you say”

The words are, literally, only “You say”.

Likely, Jesus also emphasizes the word “YOU” in his response – “YOU say so”.

In other words, this is PILATE’S choice of name, not JESUS’.

But Jesus does not deny it, either.

Mark 15:3-4 (NIV)

The chief priests accused him of many things. So again Pilate asked him, “Aren’t you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.”

“chief priests accused him”

This is prompted by Jesus’ answer.

“of many things”

Mark gives us no details of the actual Jewish accusations here.

“Aren’t you going to answer”

Jesus has not responded to the priests, and refuses to address their charges.

Mark 15:5 (NIV)

But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.

“Pilate was amazed”

Perhaps, this is because Jesus stands before his powerful accusers with calm and dignity.

But some scholars note that Roman law presumed guilt of those who refused to defend themselves – and this may be what amazed Pilate.

For the reader, in the ancient Greco-Roman culture, facing death stoically was heroic:

The Republic, by Plato: “The just man will have to endure the lash, the rack, chains, the branding-iron in his eyes, and finally, after every extremity of suffering, he will be crucified.”

Mark 15:6 (NIV)

Now it was the custom
at the Feast to release
prisoner whom the
people requested.

“the custom at the Feast”

There is no corroboration of this custom outside of the Gospels.

BUT ... Matthew, Mark, and Luke, AS WELL AS John, which is an entirely separate source, all attest to it.

AND ... there is ample evidence that Roman rulers released prisoners occasionally for political reasons, to curry favor among the crowds.

SO ... doing so at a potentially volatile time like Passover would make sense.

Mark 15:7 (NIV)

A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising.

“Barabbas”

This is an Aramaic name meaning “son of the father”. It was a common name, taken by many rabbis.

Some ancient manuscripts of Matthew call him “Jesus Barabbas”

This may have been intentionally excised by early scribes who did not like that this man shared a name with the Savior.

“the insurrectionists who had committed murder”

Mark does not explicitly say that Barabbas HIMSELF was a murderer, but that he was in prison with murderers.

“in the uprising”

It is impossible to determine which one is being referred to! There were many.

Mark 15:8-10

(NIV)

The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did. “Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate, knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him.

“The crowd came up and asked”

They could have been seeking the release of ANYONE at this time – they are simply anxious for Pilate to “do what he usually did”.

“release to you the king of the Jews”

This is INTENTIONAL irony on Pilate’s part.

As in “Look how generous I am! I’m even willing to give you THE KING OF THE JEWS!”

Again, he is currying favor with the masses – expressing willingness to release this popular teacher.

“out of envy”

Pilate IS astute – he sees that Jesus was not delivered to him because he is a genuine danger, but because his enemies envy him.

So he treads carefully here.

This is a political move – he seeks to learn:

Do the PEOPLE demand his death, or just a few ruling priests?

He does not want to offend the populace, especially at Passover.

Mark 15:11 (NIV)

But the chief priests
stirred up the crowd to
have Pilate release
Barabbas instead.

“chief priests stirred up the crowd”

These leaders are suddenly VERY concerned that Pilate might actually RELEASE Jesus!

So they go to work on the crowds, successfully calling for Barabbas' release.

Perhaps, Barabbas was chosen by the chief priests because they found the contrast between the known insurrectionist “Jesus, son of the father” and the innocent, supposed “Jesus, son of David” amusing.

Mark 15:12-13

(NIV)

“What shall I do, then,
with the one you call the
king of the Jews?”
Pilate asked them.
“Crucify him!” they
shouted.

“What shall I do”

The options are imprisonment and execution.

Pilate shrewdly forces the crowd to make the decision, in a political move designed to shift apparent responsibility.

“Crucify him!”

The crowd, then, demands execution, not imprisonment.

The chief priests are seeking to end Jesus’ movement and discourage his followers.

The Romans referred to crucifixion as the “slaves’ punishment” – it was considered particularly shameful.

Mark 15:14 (NIV)

“Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

“Why? What crime has he committed?”

Pilate is willing to crucify Jesus, but he wants to ensure he is not taking a political risk by doing so.

Will this act provoke the Jews, perhaps being seen as an act of unnecessary Roman brutality?

He is trying again to extricate himself from responsibility.

If they are going to insist on crucifixion, he wants to know why.

“But they shouted all the louder”

Giving no answer to Pilate’s question, the crowd just repeats the demand.

Mark 15:15 (NIV)

Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

“Wanting to satisfy the crowd”

Pilate only accedes to the demands of the ruling priests after convincing himself that to do so would not be a mistake.

“released Barabbas”

To please the crowd, and for political security, Pilate is willing to release a known insurrectionist.

“had Jesus flogged”

This was standard pre-crucifixion procedure.

Leather straps with sharp, abrasive objects embedded within, such as nails, glass, and/or rocks were used.

The flogging would result in severe lacerations of the skin and underlying flesh.

“handed him over to be crucified”

Jesus is now in the hands of the Roman troops.

Mark 15:16 (NIV)

The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers.

“palace (that is, the Praetorium)”

“Praetorium” is a LATIN loan-word into the Greek here, referring to the official residence of the governor when he resides in Jerusalem.

Where exactly this was located is debated.

Options include:

In the Fortress of Antonia on the northwest corner of the Temple Mount;

In Herod’s Upper Palace;

Or, near the southwest corner of the Temple Mount.

“whole company of soldiers”

This is a military term for a tenth of a legion.

It could be anywhere from 200 to 600 men.

Thus, a LARGE group wanted to take part in the mockery of a supposed “king of the Jews”.

Mark 15:17-18

(NIV)

They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, “Hail, king of the Jews!”

“purple robe ... crown of thorns”

These give Jesus a mocking appearance of a vassal king, or even of the emperor himself.

The emperor would wear a purple-bordered toga and a laurel crown for special events.

“Hail, king of the Jews!”

The words are an imitation of the Latin imperial greeting, “Ave Caesar, victor, imperator!”, which translates “Hail Caesar, victor, emperor!”

Mark 15:19 (NIV)

Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him.

“struck him with a staff”

The staff was part of the mocking kingly garb – the “royal scepter”.

The words “staff” here is actually “reed”.

The point is not to inflict pain here, but to deride.

“spit on him”

The action conveys disrespect and contempt.

It may even be mocking the blown kisses that the emperor would receive.

“paid homage to him”

Genuflecting before Jesus completed the parody.

The soldiers **WOULD** be required to genuflect before the emperor, “Son of God”.

Mark 15:20 (NIV)

And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

“when they had mocked him”

This may simply imply a wrap-up to the whole previous scene that we call “the mocking of Jesus”.

But this is actually the first time the text has used this particular Greek word, and it may imply some additional torture AFTER the parody.

The actual word implies cruel, torturous behavior.

“stripped him and put his own clothes on him”

This now ends the mocking scene.

At this point, Jesus’ claim to kingship appears ludicrous. But note this: The intent was to emotionally abuse Jesus.

And yet they WERE, unintentionally, proclaiming Jesus’ true identity!

In Jesus’ upside-down kingdom, God accepts the mean-spirited mockery as Jesus’ **ACTUAL MOMENT OF ENTHRONEMENT**, announcing to the world that **JESUS IS KING!**

God’s saving work often takes place at those exact times and places where the world mocks God.

Mark 15:1-20

(NIV)

SUMMARY

Throughout Mark's Gospel, we have seen the Jewish leadership as the primary enemy and antagonist of Jesus.

He has been deeply critical of their leadership, and we have seen them plotting to have Jesus killed.

HOWEVER, a more nuanced assessment is required.

Mark's Gospel is clear that a RELATIVELY SMALL group of Jewish leaders – chief priests, elders, and scribes – plotted Jesus' death and arranged to carry out the plan.

But it took TWO hearings to actually accomplish it – one controlled by Jewish leaders, and another by the INFINITELY MORE POWERFUL Roman, Gentile leader.

Mark 15:1-20

(NIV)

SUMMARY

Acts, quoting Psalm 2, implicates both Jews AND Gentiles together as responsible for Jesus death:

Acts 4:25-26 – “You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: ‘Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.’”

The implication is that ALL of us, all of humanity, as representatives of Jews and Gentiles, ALL of us killed Jesus, as REPRESENTED in the story of Jewish and Gentile LEADERSHIP.

This is especially true given the way Jesus’ own self-understanding as an atoning sacrifice for HUMAN sin came to be understood and acknowledged by his followers.



Bibliography

The following materials have been used as sources for this Bible study:

Dongell, Joseph R., *The Gospel of Mark: The Biblical Journey, One Book*, Seedbed Publishing, 2015.
Evans, Craig A., *Mark 8:27-16:20*, Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 34B, Zondervan Publishing, 1988.
Keck, Leander E., *Jesus in the Gospels*, Disciple Second Generation Studies, Abingdon Press, 2003.
The Quest Study Bible – New International Version, Zondervan Publishing, 1978.

The Gospel of Mark, Part 40, Mark 15:1-20
A Living Word Independent Bible Study