

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN - PART XXII

THE CRUCIFIXION AND DEATH OF CHRIST

I. The crucifixion account in John continues to present Jesus as in charge of the situation and as offering Himself as the final Passover Lamb.

A. Passing over Simon of Cyrene's role, John describes Jesus as carrying the Cross Himself. This description does not contradict the idea of Simon also carrying the cross, but emphasizes that Jesus was still able, not only to walk, but also to carry a very heavy object, at least in part.

- There is also a reference to Isaac carrying the wood that was to be used for his sacrifice up the hill of sacrifice. The hill of sacrifice was Mount Moriah, which would later become Mount Zion on which Jerusalem was built. See Gen. 22,

B. John uses the Hebrew description of Calvary, Golgotha. Golgotha in Aramaic and Calvaria in Latin both mean the skull. Part of the reason for the name was that the hill was roughly shaped like a skull, but it was also a fitting name for a place of crucifixion. The name also indicates the revisiting of death, but in the case of Jesus the voluntary taking on of death to conquer it.

C. John simply describes Jesus as crucified in the middle of two others, not commenting on whether they were criminals, as the other Gospels do, or whether they were repentant, as Luke does. The theme again is simply that Jesus is the center of all reality, positive or negative.

D. Probably in order to retaliate against the religious leaders who cornered him into allowing the crucifixion, Pilate not only has the inscription "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" placed above the cross, but does so in the sacred language of the Jews, and in the two international languages.

- The leaders in Jerusalem want him to say only that Jesus made this claim, but Pilate insists on the inscription, which indicates that they have killed the one who would lead them.

- At a crucifixion, the Roman government would put above the cross an inscription summarizing the charges against the accused. The implication here is that Jesus is being crucified for being the king of the Jews. Pilate does not realize how

prophetic his words are, for Isaiah and Zechariah had prophesied long ago that one would suffer in order to lead God's people. See, e.g., Is. 52:13-53:12; Zech. 12:10; see also Ps. 2. In addition, the prophets had regularly suffered for being prophets; Job had suffered for being just; the faithful often suffered persecution at the hands of enemies, as for example, Tobit and the Maccabees had done. It was only fitting that the final leader should suffer for being the leader. See, e.g., Heb. 7:26.

E. John also emphasizes that Jesus had a seamless tunic. According to Jewish tradition, the high priest would wear a seamless garment, which was never to be torn. See Ex. 28:32; Lev. 21:10. There may also be a reference to the coat of Joseph that his brothers take, not realizing that Joseph would be their savior. See Gen. 27:2. The Church fathers also often saw in the seamless robe a sign of the Church's unity, which was never to be torn. The word for divisions in 1 Corinthians (schizmata) literally means a tearing.

- The casting of lots for it fulfills Psalm 22:19, which is the last verse of that psalm to describe the suffering of the speaker. The next verse switches to a prayer for deliverance. The rest of the psalm describes not only the fulfillment of that prayer, but also the whole world glorifying God.

- Matthew and Mark describe Jesus praying the first line of the psalm, "My God, my God why have You abandoned me?" John, focusing more on the idea of fulfillment, describes the crossover passage that leads into glory.

- The dividing of the other clothes into four equal pieces is also ironic. As the religious leaders made sure to retain ritual purity, in the midst of conspiring against the source of all purity, the Roman soldiers are just in minor things, while participating with indifference in the greatest of injustices.

II. The emphasis then switches to Jesus' own action, which restore a new creation.

A. John describes either four or five people at the foot of the Cross: (1) the Mother of Jesus; (2) her sister; (3) Mary the wife of Clopas (probably the same as the Cleopas described in Luke on the road to Emmaus); (4) Mary Magdalene; and (5) "the beloved disciple," who is very likely John. While Mary, the wife of Clopas, may be the same as the sister of Jesus' mother, it seems unlikely.

- The sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus, may have been the mother of James and Joses, described at the foot of the

Cross in Matthew 27:56 and Mark 15:40, for James and Joses are relatives of Jesus. See Mark 6:3. (Here, as is the case with the "brothers" of Jesus describes in Mark, the term sister can mean simply a close relative.) She may also have been the mother Matthew also describes another Mary, who is the mother of the Apostles James and John, who was also there at the Cross. See Matt. 28:56. That Mary, the mother of James and John, may be the wife of Clopas. Mark also describes Salome at the Cross. Salome may have been the sister of Mary and the mother of James and Joses

- The four faithful women (or possibly the four characters, i.e. the three women and John) contrast with the four soldiers.

B. In any case, John gives a special place to Mary, the mother of Jesus. He does not refer to her by name, as with the other Mary, but rather as "the mother of Jesus," for that would be her great title.

- In the Jewish world, the mother of the king was a high position. That is why, in 1 and 2 Kings, the mother of the king is almost always noted. The king would likely have several wives, but only one mother; thus, the queen mother was the most powerful position next to the king. See, e.g., 1 Kings 2:19 (the enthronement of Bathsheeba, the mother of Solomon); 1 Kings 10:13; 1 Kings 15:13 (the deposition of an idolotrous queen mother); Jer. 29:2. Thus, in identifying Mary as simply "the mother of Jesus," John is giving the glorious title of the queen mother of the kingdom of God. See Rev. 12:1.

C. Jesus refers to her simply as "Woman" as He did at the wedding of Cana. As before, this title was respectful, but formal, like Mrs. in English. The use here, therefore, would be unusual. It seems that He is referring to His mother as the woman, the one would restore what Eve lost. The reference is complete as He tells her to be the mother of John, and John to take her as mother, which is the Hebrew meaning of the name Eve.

- Jesus uses the phrases, "Behold, thy son" and "Behold, thy mother," with the positive connection to St. John's opening declaration "Behold, the Lamb of God" and the negative connection with Pilate's declarations "Behold, the man" and "Behold, your king."

- One reason why John is here referred to as "the disciple whom he loved" is so that all Christians can here identify with John, at the foot of the Cross and taking Mary as our mother. See Rev. 12:17.

- At a more basic level, Jesus is entrusting Mary into John's care, for she was a widow without children. If she had had other children, they would presumably be the ones to care for her. See 1 Tim. 5:4.

III. Jesus then indicates in His last words that he is bringing about a new creation.

A. John says that Jesus "was aware that everything was now finished" and Himself said, "It is finished." These words would reflect the end of the first creation account. See Gen. 2:1. Jesus is still in complete command, proclaiming the accomplishment of His mission.

B. Jesus' statement "I thirst" has several implications.

1. On the most basic level, it indicates His humanness.

2. It also indicates His thirst for the salvation of souls, reflecting a similar statement made at His encounter with the Samaritan woman. See John 4:6-7.

3. Jesus statement also led the people to give Him common wine on a hyssop, which has three implications.

- First, as Matthew and Mark make more clear, the thirst and receipt of vinegar is part of the lament of the psalmist in Psalm 69, which like Psalm 22 is a lament over danger, a plea for help, and a triumphant note of confidence at the end. See Ps. 69:4, 22.

- Second, the hyssop was used to sprinkle the blood of the Passover Lamb on the doorpost, thus setting aside the Chosen People and saving their firstborn from death. See Ex. 12:21-22. Psalm 51 also asks God to purify the speaker with water or blood from a hyssop branch, perhaps reflecting the purification of a cured leper with blood sprinkled from a hyssop branch. See Lev. 14:1-9; Ps. 51:9. In this case, the hyssop branch is receiving the blood of the pure sacrifice that will in turn cleanse God's people, save them from death, and set them aside as a holy people.

- Third, the wine given to Jesus may well have been the fourth and highest cup of the Passover. The third cup seems to have been the one that Jesus consecrates for the Eucharist, for that cup would have been followed by the Hallel, or songs of praises. See Matt. 26:28-30. The Hallel would then have been followed by the fourth cup, the Cup of Acceptance. While that wine was poured into that cup the Jews would pray, "God is Mighty! May He soon rebuild His Temple. Thus, Jesus here drinks the last cup, which is both the saving cup of God, but also Jesus taking upon

Himself the bitter cup of judgement and death, see, e.g., Jer. 25:15. Seen in this light, the words, "It is finished" could refer to the fulfillment of the Passover, or the completion of the first Mass.

C. Jesus' death is described in a calm way, with Jesus simply bowing and, still in command, handing over His spirit. Jesus is in command even to the death. There may be a reflection of Psalm 31, which is also a prayer for assistance and a declaration of confidence in deliverance by God. See Ps. 31:5. See also Luke 23:46, Acts 7:59. In the Old Testament, no one hands over his spirit; rather, the spirit is taken from him by death. Here, however, Jesus, being divine, is in charge of His own death.

- The notion of handing over His spirit could also mean sending the spirit onto the Church to give her new life, as God breathed His spirit into Adam to give him life. Jesus had promised the Spirit at the Last Supper and will expressly confer upon His disciples the Spirit after His Resurrection. See John 20:22.

D. John then recounts the piercing of Jesus' side to make sure He was dead.

1. Once again, there is an irony of the religious leaders being scrupulous about the leaving of dead bodies on the cross during Passover, after having had no scruples about crucifying the Messiah.

- The people who were crucified could only breathe by lifting up their bodies to relieve the pressure on their lungs. Once their bones were broken, they would suffocate. Jesus, having been scourged intensely, had already died

2. The Passover lamb had to be unblemished, and could have no bones broken. See Ex. 12:46, Num. 9:12. Thus, it would be unfitting for the soldier (known by tradition as Longinus) to have broken Jesus' legs. See also Ps. 34:21.

3. The piercing also recalls the prophesy of Zechariah about the people looking upon one whom they have pierced in preparation for the new Messianic era. See Zech. 12:10; see also Is. 53:5.

E. The blood and water flowing from Jesus' side can symbolize Baptism and the Eucharist or the Church as both purifying and sanctifying, taken from the side of Christ as Eve was taken from the side of Adam. See Ez. 47; John 7:38. In the Old Covenant, purification and sanctification were often done by the sprinkling of blood and/or water. See, e.g., Ex. 24:8; Num. 8:7; Ez. 36:25; 2 Mac. 1:21.

IV. The burial accounts then present two rather timid disciples of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, finding some courage and asking for the body of Jesus. They are also upholding the ancient law of the Covenant. See Duet. 21:22-23.

- A. Once again, John refers to a garden, indicating a return to the Garden of Eden and restoration of the damage done there.
- B. The fact that the tomb was new indicates no one else as buried there. It was only fitting that the tomb of Jesus should be for Him alone.
- C. The enormous amount of burial myrrh and aloes would be befitting a king. The combination of aloes and myrrh reflects the consecration of the ark of the covenant and the priests, as described in Exodus. See Ex. 30:22-33. There is perhaps also a reflection of the anointing of a king in the wedding song of Psalm 45. See Ps. 45:9; see also Heb. 1:9 (applying that Psalm to Jesus.)