

# On the Burial of Jesus in Mark 15:42-47

George W. Shea, S.T.D.

<Writing in the> Catholic Biblical Quarterly <on Mark's account of the burial of Jesus (15:42-47), Raymond E. Brown, S.S., contends that Joseph of Arimathea was not an adherent of Jesus, but buried him anyway, ignominiously, in a criminal's grave, out of respect for the approaching Sabbath, and also in compliance with Deut 21:22-23 which (as it had come to be interpreted) commanded the burial of crucified criminals before sunset of the day of execution.<sup>1</sup>

Brown challenges, not the veracity of Mark's burial account, but rather the usual understanding of it (Joseph an adherent of Jesus, whom he buried honorably, in his own grave). It is rather the veracity of the other Gospels that is disputed, insofar as these support the customary interpretation of Mark. It is very possible, he says, that Matthew and Luke have changed and developed Mark's outlook (233); neither they nor John offer much plausible historical data about Joseph's burial of Jesus beyond what is in Mark (234). An earlier and briefer version of these views was proposed in the same scholar's> The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

<The late Msgr. Shea submits that the usual understanding of the Markan passage is correct, and in support of this position offers the following scrutiny of Mk 15:42-47, and of Brown's treatment of that passage.>

Raymond Brown begins with the evangelist's statement (v. 43) that Joseph was a "respected (<euschemon>) councillor (<bouleutes>)" (238-239). We take the latter term first. Brown thinks it means Joseph was a member of the Great Sanhedrin, the Jerusalem Sanhedrin, not just of some lesser council. And rightly so, given the absence of any indication that a lesser council is meant,<sup>3</sup> plus the consideration that a mere member of an inferior body would not have had the "clout" needed to gain access to Pilate, as will be seen later. True, Brown finds it curious that Mark uses this Greek word here for the first and only time, but W. Lane plausibly explains that the evangelist chose the word with Gentile readers in mind.<sup>4</sup>

Councillor Joseph is described as <euschemon>, a word which has met with a wide variety of translations. Joachim Jeremias, for one, thought it meant the Sanhedrist was rich,<sup>5</sup> but this has not found much favor: if Mark had wanted to declare Joseph's wealth, would he not have used <plousios>, as elsewhere (10:25; 12:41), instead of the ambiguous <euschemon.><sup>6</sup> Brown opts for "respected," but he lists also, seemingly as acceptable, "prominent," "honorable," "outstanding" (238 with note 20).

Other renderings by translators and commentators are: reputable, decent, well-respected, honored, distinguished, comely, noble = of the nobility; noble = upright, virtuous; in good standing; and finally, of good position,<sup>7</sup> of high rank<sup>8</sup> of some distinction in the Sanhedrin.<sup>9</sup>

Which translation is on target? Since the rest of Mark's burial account wastes no words, one may assume that <euschemon> is vital to the report, does not assert anything irrelevant, such as Joseph's appearance, or social graces, or affability. Nor can it be affirming something that would be self-understood of a senator, that is, a quality verifiable of all by reason of their membership in the highest Jewish civil and religious body, as well as their pure Israelitic ancestry.<sup>10</sup> Nor does it wish to declare Joseph to be upright, virtuous or the like, since his high moral character is implicit in the following clause, "who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God" (v. 43).

Thus we are left with the conclusion that the <euschemon> of v. 43 means "of good position," "of high rank," "of some distinction in the Sanhedrin," taken as ascribing to Joseph some sort of preeminence in the Sanhedrin. In that body there was a group known as the high priest's consistory,<sup>11</sup> and it must be that Mark is saying Joseph belonged to this top echelon. Such could be Bruce Vawter's understanding of <euschemon>, when he describes Joseph as a "leading" member of the Sanhedrin.<sup>12</sup>

This interpretation of Mark, not found in Brown, supports the usual understanding of Mark's burial account. Vawter rejected a Markan Joseph similar to Brown's with the reflection that it would be difficult to explain why Joseph went to all the trouble he did for someone in whom he did not take a personal interest.<sup>13</sup> Vawter's reflection becomes all the more telling when we think of Joseph as a high-ranking, a "leading," Sanhedrist, with many responsibilities and things to do, whereas there were, surely, others who were less busy, but no less zealous for the sanctity of the Sabbath and for compliance with Deut 21:22-23, who could do the burying.

Our attention is next directed to the fact that Mark does not term Joseph a "disciple." Seeking to exploit this, the article argues that, had Mark wished to describe the burial of Jesus as one performed by a disciple, he could easily have done so, as when he told of the interment of John the Baptist (6:29) by "his disciples" (240).

It is surprising to find Brown arguing in this way. For he attended the reading of a paper by Joseph Blinzler at the Symposium of 1979 held in Rome on the Resurrection, wherein this scholar pointed out that Mark reserves the term "disciple" for those who accompanied Jesus on his journeys<sup>14</sup> (while remaining well aware there were others who were attached to Jesus in various degrees: see, e.g., 2:2.12; 3:7; 10:1.46-49).

Therefore it is not enough to note that Mark does not call Joseph a disciple; one must further establish that Mark's Joseph was not attached to Jesus in any degree at all.

And in fact Brown tries to do just that, by appealing to the phrase "the whole Sanhedrin," which Mark uses twice (14:55; 15:1) for the Jewish authorities who had decided on Jesus' death (239). From this phrase Brown concludes that nothing would dispose the reader to think of Sanhedrist Joseph as a follower of Jesus (239).

Assuredly, no follower of Jesus would have voted for his death. But that Joseph did thus vote is far from certain, since the texts in question readily admit of other interpretations, compatible with the usual view of Mark.

For one, Joseph was not present at the proceedings against Jesus.<sup>15</sup> Or else the phrase "the whole Sanhedrin" \_ and the "all" of Mk 14:64 \_ are instances of the hyperboles found frequently in Mark, and in other Gospels, as well as elsewhere in Jewish literature.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike Brown's understanding of Mark, neither interpretation puts the evangelist in conflict with Jn 19:38 (Joseph a disciple [John's terminology differs from Mark's]), or with Mt 27:57 (Joseph a disciple; or, attached to Jesus<sup>17</sup>). And both do justice to John's assertion that some authorities (i.e., Sanhedrists) were pro-Jesus.<sup>18</sup> As to the statement of Luke 23:51 that Joseph had not consented to the Sanhedrin's purpose and deed, it can, of course, signify that Joseph did not attend the Council session, or that he was present and voted "no," or else abstained.

Brown next takes up Mark's description of Joseph as one "who also himself was looking for the kingdom of God" (v. 43). This does not necessarily mean, we are told, that Joseph was an adherent of Jesus, because Mark includes, among seekers after the kingdom, pious observers of the law who were outside the circle of Jesus' followers (239).

Conceding that anyone looking for the kingdom would be an observer of the law, we must still wonder why Mark, understood as Brown understands him, introduces Joseph in that way. The expression, "who was himself also looking for the kingdom of God" clearly suggests an expectancy of something which has yet to come to pass, or at least is not yet possessed. It can hardly refer to something already existing and in hand \_ the law.

If concern for the law was Joseph's motive in going to Pilate, it seems more likely that Mark would have called him "devout" (<eulabeis>).<sup>19</sup> That he instead has Joseph "looking for the kingdom of God" intimates the Sanhedrist was a follower of Jesus.

In behalf of this view one could cite a great number of noted New Testament scholars for whom Mark's clause, of itself, or when taken in its context, bespeaks an attachment of Joseph to Jesus. A selection must suffice.

J. Blinzler reasoned that the expression must be taken as ranking our Joseph among Jesus' adherents.<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere he says the courageous, great-hearted, reverent actions of Joseph, reported in Mk 15:43-46, clearly show his attachment to and love of Jesus.<sup>21</sup>

For William Lane, Joseph's earnest expectation of the coming redemption had apparently attracted him to Jesus and his teaching about the kingdom of God.<sup>22</sup> Mark's statement about Joseph seeking God's kingdom led Rudolph Schnackenburg to conclude the Sanhedrist had obviously been impressed by Jesus' teaching.<sup>23</sup> D. E. Nineham conceded "looking for the kingdom of God" may mean Joseph expected it to be brought by Jesus and that he was a disciple.<sup>24</sup>

H. C. Kee couples "looking for the kingdom of God" with Joseph's courageous request to Pilate (v. 43) to arrive at the conclusion that Joseph had responded to Jesus' announcement about the dawning of the kingdom.<sup>25</sup> Mark's assertion about Joseph and the kingdom moved Henry Swete to deem Joseph a secret disciple.<sup>26</sup> C. H. Dodd thought it implied Joseph was friendly to Jesus, and perhaps a potential disciple.<sup>27</sup>

Bruce Vawter rounded out his above-mentioned rejection of a theory like Brown's with the remark that, furthermore, "Mark's observation that 'he too was looking forward to the kingdom of God,' we may be sure, was not idly written." Finally, Brown himself says in effect that Mark may have subtly suggested Joseph was pro-Jesus by describing him as one "who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God!" (245).

Before we leave the topic of Joseph's motive for burying Jesus, we may put the question: if the motive was zeal for the Sabbath and the law, why did not that zeal extend also to Jesus' two crucified companions, spoken of in Mk 15:27?

Mk 15:43 indicates Joseph needed courage to approach Pilate with his request for the body of Jesus. Brown believes this poses a difficulty no matter what view one has of Joseph (241). But this is not true for the usual understanding of Joseph. One can readily account for his need of courage vis-a-vis Pilate. Joseph's plea would have been irksome to the Prefect, because he had already been approached in this matter (Jn 19:31), and would have to reverse, as to Jesus, the decision he had made on that occasion. This reversal would open the door to more wrangling with the Jewish authorities (see Jn 19:21-22) who had made the first request.<sup>28</sup> Add to this that Joseph would be coming with his petition well after the close of Pilate's working day, which, like that of all Roman officials, had begun around dawn and ended at noon.<sup>29</sup> There is no basis for the suggestion that Joseph's need of courage stemmed from the fact that Jesus had been crucified for treason, and to request his body for burial might implicate Joseph in the treason.<sup>30</sup> For, after all, Pilate did not really think Jesus was a traitor.<sup>31</sup>

The further import of Mk 15:43-44 for our discussion should not be overlooked. According to the Greek text of v. 43 (<eiselthen>), Joseph "went in to Pilate" (Lattimore: "went into the presence of Pilate"<sup>32</sup>). So determined was Joseph to obtain the body of Jesus for decent burial that he ignored the Jewish ban (lest one incur ritual impurity) on entering a Gentile's quarters (see Jn 18:29), in the hope that this gesture would help win a favorable response to his request.<sup>33</sup>

So we find Joseph on Pilate's "turf," and in the role of a suppliant. He, the high-ranking Sanhedrist, entreats the Prefect; he, the pure-blooded Israelite, beseeches the Gentile, Pilate.<sup>34</sup> And the Prefect, after obtaining verification of Jesus' death from the centurion (v. 45), graciously granted, freely gave (<edoresato>) the corpse to Joseph.<sup>35</sup>

All this is readily intelligible of Joseph as usually understood, but not of Brown's Joseph. There would be no reason for the latter to go against his Jewish grain and enter a Gentile habitat, no reason to plead with Pilate, no place for graciousness on the Prefect's part. In office since 26 A.D., Pilate must have known of Jewish concern for the Sabbath and the dictates of Deut 21:22-23, and would have been prepared for, and ready to comply with, a request for timely removal and burial of the crucified. No doubt, a liaison officer was posted outside his quarters to receive and forward messages from the Jewish authorities. Notice that Jn 19:31 tells of the latter's request put to Pilate, but not of the Prefect's assent \_ so routine was this that it could be left to be understood.

Reply may be made at this point to the surmise (241) that Pilate would not have been apt to release the body of a crucified would-be-king to a follower or sympathizer. Even if Pilate thought of Jesus as a would-be-king, he had no reason to fear his followers would abuse the concession of the body (by making a hero of the "king of the Jews" and a shrine or rallying point out of his tomb). For they would know that such conduct would surely result in destruction of the tomb, and for the body of Jesus the abhorred fate of cremation.<sup>36</sup> Pilate's ability and will to act quickly and ruthlessly against demonstrators was common knowledge (see Lk 13:1). Moreover, Joseph was a man of wealth and his fortune could be confiscated.

We move on now with Brown as he seeks (242-243) to determine the kind of burial given Jesus \_ honorable or dishonorable? Inexplicably, in this task he completely ignores the import of the Greek word used by Mark for the cloth Joseph bought to shroud the body of Jesus (v. 46): <sinдон>. It regularly means a fine (finely woven) fabric, most often linen, but sometimes cotton.<sup>37</sup> Brown does not advert to the fine quality of the shroud;<sup>38</sup> in fact his article does not even mention <sinдон>.

Although not the most expensive,<sup>39</sup> nevertheless such material was costly. From the fact that the "young man" of Mk 14:51 was clad in a <sinдон> commentators conclude he was from a well-to-do family.<sup>40</sup> Certainly it was not the grade of material a non-adherent would buy for the dishonorable burial of an executed malefactor.

Therefore Mark's <sinдон> signals, and according to J. Blinzler<sup>41</sup> was meant to signal, the dignity of the burial. W. Lane asserts that Mark's detail about the wrapping of Jesus' body in fine linen indicates he was given an honorable burial.<sup>42</sup> D. Daube makes the point that when Joseph is said to have bought a linen cloth, therefore not using just any cloth that was to hand, this was to eliminate any suggestion of shame marking the burial.<sup>43</sup> The significance of the linen bought for Jesus' burial mounts, if at the

time of Jesus executed criminals were buried "in ragged, torn, old, dirty winding sheets."<sup>44</sup> Be that as it may, the <sinдон> of Mk 15:46 thoroughly refutes Brown's dictum (242) that nothing in Mark's burial account suggests an honorable burial for Jesus.

But does not Mark's Greek word for "wrapped" (<eneilesen>, v. 46) hint at a dishonorable burial, as Brown imagines? He terms the verb "pedestrian," and opines that the substitution of a different verb in Matthew and Luke represents the first step in the (alleged) upgrading of the burial to an honorable one (242-243). C. S. Mann, however, observes that Mark's verb has a wide range of meanings, including the quite neutral sense of "to wrap."<sup>45</sup> One may, therefore, and in view of Mark's <sinдон>, one must rule out Brown's "pedestrian" sense of the verb.

What of other amenities regarded as requisite for an honorable burial — washing and anointing of the corpse? Mark makes no mention of these, and Brown argues from this that they were really and deliberately omitted, in keeping with an ignominious burial (242).

Many others likewise believe washing and anointing were omitted, but simply because there was not enough time. Blinzler, however, maintained (in the paper read in Rome) that these services were rendered but Mark did not need to report these customary practices: it is their omission that he would have mentioned.<sup>46</sup>

But, even if these amenities did not take place, must their omission necessarily spell dishonor to Jesus? After all, in the experience of the Jewish people there must have been countless situations wherein amenities were omitted, not willfully, but of necessity (e.g., as in war).<sup>47</sup>

Various reasons may be advanced to explain why Joseph (and his assistants), although anxious to do so, may have been unable to provide these services for Jesus. Lack of time is often proposed as a reason. That aside, there is Paul Gaechter's suggestion that ointments could not be obtained from the shops, because the throngs of Passover pilgrims had bought up all the supplies.<sup>48</sup> Gaechter added that this would help account for the large quantity of scented substances brought by Nicodemus (Jn 19:39): he wished to compensate in this way for the absence of ointments.

If one thinks it unlikely that the ointments were sold out, Gaechter's basic idea could still be retained: ointments required preparation from sundry ingredients (mixing and cooking were involved<sup>49</sup>) and the supply of ready-to-use ointments had been bought up, but not the raw materials. These, however, were useless to Jesus' buriers, because time and the facilities for preparing the ingredients were lacking.

Since the tomb was in a garden (Jn 19:41), cared for by a gardener (see Jn 20:15), water must have been available, from a spring, stream, or brooklet.<sup>50</sup> Was the body of Jesus washed? Yes, if with Blinzler (above) one holds Mark did not think it necessary to report the customary amenities. Others deny a washing, usually on the grounds of a supposedly hasty burial.

W. Bulst, S.J., formerly of the latter opinion, subsequently offered a different reason for the omission: a custom, based on the age-old Jewish respect for blood as the seat of life, of not washing a bloodied corpse before burial.<sup>51</sup> The same reason could apply, one may assume, to the omission of an anointing.

In sum, the body of Jesus may or may not have been washed and anointed, but even if these offices were omitted, unproved is Brown's claim that this would indicate a dishonorable burial.

So much for the modalities of the interment. The next topic to be discussed is the burial place – was that honorable? Of course, the Sanhedrist's own tomb would have been an honorable burial place. But Brown denies (243) that the body of Jesus was put there: Jesus' burial place was near Golgotha, but a wealthy Sanhedrist would not have had his family tomb in such a locality, i.e., in the immediate vicinity of a place of public execution.

To his contention Brown himself had supplied the beginning of a reply in his commentary on John: "We are not certain that Golgotha was an habitual place of execution."<sup>52</sup> Indeed, it has been said that it was the custom of the time not to have a fixed place of execution.<sup>53</sup>

So it may be that Joseph had obtained the property before Golgotha became an execution site; appropriate here is Blinzler's remark that we do not know when or under what circumstances Joseph acquired the property.<sup>54</sup> Also noteworthy here is an earlier remark of Brown, that "the area may have been a prestigious place for burial."<sup>55</sup> Finally, Joseph, being now removed from Arimathea, and getting along in years (a high-ranking senator!) had need of a family burial tomb in the environs of Jerusalem, but a suitable one could have been hard to come by,<sup>56</sup> so he may have had to settle for the area near Golgotha, even if the latter was an execution site. Blinzler added a further thought on the matter – the tomb met the Jewish requirement that a human habitation be at least fifty yards away from a place of execution (he was viewing the garden as a place of human habitation).<sup>57</sup>

To return now to Brown's scenario, Jesus' body was, he insists, consigned to a place meant for the burial of executed Jewish criminals, a cavity chiseled out of the wall of the execution hill (243).

How well does this contention square with what we can learn from Mark (15:45; 16:3-5) about the burial place of Jesus? Hewn out of rock (v. 46), the Markan tomb was cut into a hillside. This issues from the fact that, of the women coming to the sepulchre on Easter, it is said that "looking up, they saw that the stone was rolled back."<sup>58</sup> "Looking up" is the usual sense of the Greek verb used here (<anablepsasai>), and there is no good reason to understand it otherwise.<sup>59</sup>

Thus the Markan burial site was not a grave dug into an open, flat area of earth, but rather a cavity in a rocky hillside; and, indeed, a man-made cavity, "hewn out of the rock" (15:46).

Within it, as can be gathered from Mk 16:5, was a stone bench or shelf, formed by cutting back the wall. The tomb interior was roomy enough for the presence of Joseph and an assistant, as they laid the body of Jesus on the shelf, and for the three women on Easter (16:1.5) and for the "presence" of the "young man" of Mk 16:5.

After the burial the tomb was made secure by a stone (15:45), a very large one (16:4), which was rolled against the entry.

Whether there was an anteroom to the burial chamber cannot be ascertained from Mark. Even so, the Markan tomb has emerged for us as one wrought by considerable labor, of the sort that belonged to people of high station.<sup>60</sup>

Hence the Markan tomb, contrary to Brown, cannot have been a place intended for the burial of an executed criminal: it is incompatible with the Jewish attitude, mentioned by Brown (242) that such a person should be buried shamefully.

Nor does Mark's tomb correspond in any other way to what is commonly held about the place officially appointed for interring executed Jewish criminals.<sup>61</sup>

By all accounts, this burying place was located far outside the city; but Mark's tomb was near the city.<sup>62</sup>

Moreover, the criminal's grave was dug out of the soil, whereas Mark's tomb was hewn out of rock.<sup>63</sup>

And, instead of being called a tomb (<mnemeion>, Mark's term, v. 46), the burial site for executed criminals was referred to as a "place," or, more graphically, as a "pit," or "trench," or "ditch."<sup>64</sup>

Finally, whereas, being on a hill near Jerusalem, Mark's grave was located on high ground, while the burial place for criminals was down in the boggy lowland of a valley, in order that the corpses interred there might decompose the more quickly in the humid atmosphere.<sup>65</sup>

Obviously, therefore, Brown's vision of an executed criminal's grave, which he takes the Markan burial place to be, is completely at odds with what is commonly held about the officially appointed grave for executed Jewish malefactors.

Further, as was seen above, the tomb of Jesus' burial had a shelf or bench, formed by cutting back the wall.<sup>66</sup> Surely, such a refinement, honorific as well as entailing some expense, would not be a feature of an executed felon's grave, even if this were a cave.

That Mark did not understand Jesus' burial place to be one for a criminal may also be argued from his designation of it as a <mnemeion> (15:46b; 16:2). This word signifies "a token of remembrance," "a commemorative monument," that is, something to perpetuate the memory of the deceased.<sup>67</sup> Hence, when that term is used, a permanent, not temporary, burial is meant.

It follows that <mnemeion> would not be used for a criminal's grave (which the Markan tomb would be by Brown's reckoning), since such a resting place was only temporary. For, after decomposition of the flesh, kin and/or friends could remove the bones to the family burial place, a fact noted by Brown (237). Hence authorities regularly argue that the term <mnemeion>, of itself alone, rules out any idea that Mark thought of Jesus' burial place as that for an executed malefactor.<sup>68</sup>

If not an officially owned piece of real estate, to whom, then, did the tomb belong? That it was someone's property, not an unclaimed area waiting to be taken over by the first claimant, follows from the fact that the tomb was (at least) partially man-made, "hewn out of rock," with a shelf, and represented therefore an outlay for labor.

The owner can have been none other than Joseph of Arimathea. He, a member of the Sanhedrin, a leading one at that, and a zealous observer of the law, would never have usurped another's property,<sup>69</sup> least of all another's burial place.<sup>70</sup>

To return to Brown, he sees another argument for his view in the fact that, of the women who were present at the burial, Mk 15:47 says only that "they saw where the body was laid." Brown believes this shows a lack of cooperation between Joseph and the women, which is intelligible only if Joseph was not a follower of Jesus (243-244).

Brown appears to have forgotten that in those days Jewish women were not supposed to talk with men in public, not even with their husbands, and, most definitely, not with strangers.<sup>71</sup> Joseph was a stranger to the women, both in the Brown scenario and in the usual understanding of Mark: he was from Judea, they from Galilee. Also to be considered is the segregation of the sexes then required at funerals.<sup>72</sup>

To forestall a further objection from Mk 15:43, it is enough to note that lamentation ceased when the burial was over.<sup>73</sup>

Finally, hoping to clinch his case, Brown claims that his interpretation of Mark enables one to make sense of Acts 13:27-29, a text which seems to imply that those who were involved in Jesus' death were also involved in his burial (244).

In reply, if enemies buried Jesus, they would have made it the ignominious burial which was standard for executed Jewish criminals, that is, a temporary burial, in a pit, down in a valley lowland, far from Jerusalem. But, as we have seen, Jesus' burial site was on high ground; was near Golgotha and Jerusalem; was hewn out of a rocky hillside; and was termed, not "pit," but <mnemeion>, which bespeaks an honorable and permanent burial place. And one should also notice that Acts 13:29 uses the verb <ethekan>, "they laid" rather than "cast," which speaks for rather than against an honorable burial.<sup>74</sup>

Those, therefore, who are said in this text to have buried Jesus, cannot have been inimical Jews. Paul Gaechter arrived at the same conclusion from Mark's description of the burial place as a tomb hewn out of rock.<sup>75</sup> He added that the (inimical) Jews had no right to

remove the body from the cross and bury it, because it belonged to the Romans.

To sum up, whatever the explanation of Acts 13:27-29 may be, this text cannot be used to argue an ignominious burial of Jesus by enemies.<sup>76</sup> As to efforts to explain the text otherwise, a few may be noticed here.

Gaechter supposed an unannounced change of subject in the text, and proposed the translation: "After they had fulfilled all that had been written of him, one took him down from the cross. . . ."<sup>77</sup>

Likewise convinced that the text does not ascribe Jesus' burial to enemies, E. Haenchen says "in reality Luke has only shortened the account as much as possible."<sup>78</sup>

J. Dupont appealed to the literary function of the passage: like similar passages in Peter's preaching, this one from Paul wishes only to oppose, to the work of those who had Jesus put to death, the work of God, who raised him to life; there was no need to mention the intervention of Jesus' friends in the matter of his burial.<sup>79</sup>

Seeking to confirm his use of the text from Acts, Brown turns to a variant reading for the end of Jn 19:38, which has "they came and took his body," instead of "he (Joseph) came. . . ." (244). If "they" is the original reading, Brown would have it understood of Jesus' enemies. But we may insist, with no less right, that the word refers to Joseph and his assistants in taking the body of Jesus down from the cross for burial. Or, if one is willing to have Nicodemus on the scene that early, "they" could refer to him and Joseph.<sup>80</sup>

Continuing his catena of texts thought to suggest enemy burial of Jesus, Brown cites the <Gospel of Peter> 6:21.23 (244). But since the relation of this work to the canonical Gospels is much disputed, and its indulgence in fantasy is notorious, it is of negligible worth in the present discussion. Neither do the other texts cited by Brown merit serious attention.<sup>81</sup>

Before concluding, we may examine the claim that the original story of Jesus' burial, held to be found in Mark, evolved, grew with the telling: (a) Matthew, Luke, John escalate the burial from one by a pious Jew, who acted solely out of zeal for the law, to one by a disciple of Jesus; (b) John upgrades the burial to a royal interment.

Brown upholds the first point in his article (245), and in <The Virginal Conception>, etc., where he labels the "introduction" of Joseph's discipleship, "an anachronistic retrojection."<sup>82</sup>

In reply, it is not Joseph's status that changes, it is the terminology used in his regard. Surely the evangelists had the right to choose their own language to express the same reality.

As to the other point, espoused by Brown on more than one occasion,<sup>83</sup> this, too, must be rejected.<sup>84</sup> Other notables, besides kings, were buried in gardens.<sup>85</sup> The large quantity of spices (Jn 19:39) was not a feature found only in the burial of kings: rabbis are known to

have been honored in this way,<sup>86</sup> and Jesus was revered by his followers as a rabbi.<sup>87</sup> Recall also Gaechter's point about Nicodemus wanting to compensate for the lack of ointments. Also to be considered is the practice of spreading spices on the shelf where the body was to repose, and around the floor of the burial chamber for the sake of the mourners who would be visiting the tomb in the next few days.<sup>88</sup> Very likely, some of the spices were burnt for the same reason.<sup>89</sup>

To conclude, it is certain that friends buried Jesus,<sup>90</sup> most notably, Joseph of Arimathea. Mark, it is true, does not term Joseph a disciple of the Lord. But his burial account, along with 16:1-5, indicates beyond all doubt that the Sanhedrist was an adherent of Jesus, and buried him honorably, in his own family tomb.

#### ENDNOTES

1 "The Burial of Jesus (Mark 15:42-47)," *CBQ* (50, 2), April, 1988, 233-245.

2 New York: Paulist, 1973, 113-117. For brevity's sake, we omit mention of several other views similar to that of Brown.

3 Cf., e.g., I. Marshall, <The Gospel of Luke> (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint 1979), 879, on <bouleutes>.

4 <The Gospel of Mark> (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint 1982), 577, note 84.

5 <Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus> (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 224, note 8.

6 To reject "rich" as the meaning of Mark's <euschemon> is not to deny Joseph was a man of means. Jeremias, <Jerusalem in the Time>, 223, note 8, argues Joseph's wealth from his ownership of property with a garden (Jn 19:41; 20:15). See also Mt 27:57.

7 M. Zerwick, S.J., <A Grammatical Analysis of the New Testament> (translated, revised, adapted by Mary Grosvenor, vol. 1, Rome: Biblical Institute 1974), 164; <The James Moffat Translation of the Bible> (rev. ed., New York: Harper and Row, 1955); C. Lattey, S.J., <The New Testament in the Westminster Version> (New York/Toronto: Longmans, Green, 1948).

8 <The Confraternity of Christian Doctrine Translation of the New Testament from the Latin Vulgate> (Paterson, N.J.: St. Anthony's Guild, 1947). The Vulgate renders <euschemon as nobilis.>

9 J.B. Phillips, <Peter's Portrait of Jesus> (Cleveland/New York: Collins, 1976), 137.

10 See Jeremias, <Jerusalem>, 298, note 104, and 300, note 118. If it be objected that the high priests of that era were anything but revered, this is true but irrelevant, since, with few exceptions, commentators do not consider Joseph to have been a priest.

- 11 On this consistory or "cabinet," made up of priests and laymen, see Bo Reicke, <The New Testament Era> (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 46-49.
- 12 Bruce Vawter, C.M., <The Four Gospels: An Introduction> (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), 305.
- 13 Ibid., 390.
- 14 Josef Blinzler, "Die Grablegung Jesu in historischer Sicht," <Resurrexit: Actes du Symposium International sur la Resurrection de Jesus> (Rome, 1970), ed. E. Dhanis, S.J. (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1974), 69. At p. 105 one learns that Brown participated in the discussion of this paper; and the CBQ article cites the published paper as "useful" (234, note 3).
- 15 John P. Kealy, C.S.Sp., <Luke's Gospel Today> (Denville, N.J.: Dimension Books, 1979), 443.
- 16 On hyperbole in Jewish usage, see the note to Josephus, Wars, 2.19.1, in W. Whiston, <The Works of Josephus>, (new ed., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1987), 630. See Mk 1:5.27.32.33.45; 5:28; 6:33.5; etc. Relevant here are remarks in Werner E. Kilber, ed., <The Passion in Mark> (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) by J. B. Donohue, 65, note 15, and by K. E. Dewey, 97 with note 4. Both speak of Mark's tendency to "universalize" scenes. Mk 14:53b is a text cited.
- 17 Mt 27:57 is rendered "who was attached to Jesus" in W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, <Matthew> (AB6, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971); see also p. lxxvii.
- 18 See Raymond E. Brown, <The Gospel according to John I-XII> (AB29, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), 484; C. H. Dodd, <Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel> (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), 87-88.
- 19 In Acts 8:2 "devout" (<eulabeis>) men bury Stephen and make lamentation for him. Brown (248) regards these men as law-observant Jews who were not followers of Jesus.
- 20 Blinzler, "Die Grablegung," 58.
- 21 Ibid., 69.
- 22 <The Gospel of Mark>, 579.
- 23 <The Gospel according to St. Mark> (vol. 2, New York: Crossroad, 1981), 160.
- 24 <The Gospel of St. Mark> (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963, reprinted 1976), 434.
- 25 "Joseph of Arimathea," <Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible> (vol. 2, Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 981.

26 <The Gospel according to St. Mark> (ed. 3, London: Macmillan, 1989), 391.

27 Dodd, <Historical Tradition>, 87, note 2.

28 See Jn 19:31. Brown discusses this text in <The Gospel according to John XIII-XXI> (AB29a, 1970), 933-934.

29 On the Roman official's working day, see W. Lane, *Mark*, 549; A. N. Sherwin-White, <Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament> (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 45. Joseph's wealth and his membership in the consistory would win him access to Pilate, but, since he was coming "after hours," would not obtain him a warm welcome.

30 J. Blinzler, <Der Prozess Jesu> (ed. 3, Regensburg: Pustet, 1960), 289, has Joseph's need of courage stem from the risk of appearing to be involved in the treason; similarly Brown's article, 241.

31 See Mk 15:10-14; Lane, <The Gospel of Mark>, 555-556.

32 Richmond Lattimore, <The Four Gospels and the Revelation. Newly translated from the Greek> (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1969). J. B. Phillips, <The New Testament in Modern English> (rev. ed., New York: Macmillan, 1972): "went into Pilate's presence."

33 On the ritual impurity that would be incurred by entering a Gentile's quarters, see Brown's discussion in <John XIII-XXI>, 845-846. Joseph could not here avoid defilement the way he may have done at the burial \_ by using his servants.

34 "Entreated," "begged": for this sense of <etesato> (v. 43), see W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, <A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament> (ed. 2, Chicago/London: University of Chicago, 1979), <aiteo>; see note 35 below.

35 Many take <edoresato> (v. 45) to suggest a gracious act on Pilate's part, e.g., Vincent Taylor, <The Gospel according to St. Mark> (ed. 2, Grand Rapids: Baker, reprint 1982), 601.

36 Even though Edom was a mortal foe of Israel, Amos regarded the Moabite burning of the Edomite king's bones as a heinous crime calling for divine vengeance, a violation of a universally binding divine law: Amos 2:1-2. Jews still abhor cremation; cf. Maurice Lamm, <The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning> (rev. ed., New York: Jonathan David, 1981), 56-57, 84.

37 See Liddell-Scott, <A Greek-English Lexicon> (new ed., by H. Jones, R. McKenzie, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961) at <sinдон>: "fine cloth, usually linen." Also Arndt-Gingrich, *Lexicon*, <sinдон>; J. Blinzler, "<Sinдон> in evangeliis," <Verbum Domini> 34 (1956), 112-113; Joseph Fitzmyr, <The Gospel according to Luke X-XXIV> (AB28a, Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 1527; Paul Gaechter, S.J., "Zum Begraebnis Jesu," <Zeitschrift fuer katholische Theologie> 75 (2, 1953), 220, 222: "<sinдон> of first quality." "Fine linen" used to be found in English translations of Mk 15:46 (King James version;

Rheims version).

38 Brown, <John XIII-XXI>, 941, mentions <sinon> twice, but says nothing about the quality of this fabric. Some commentators on Mark bring out the fine quality of <sinon>, not at 15:46, but at 14:51-52: thus W. Lane, <Mark>, 527.

39 According to Blinzler, "Die Grablegung," 61.

40 For example, W. Lane, <Mark>, 527; H. Swete, <Mark>, 354. <Sinon> was used in the expensive embalming process to enwrap the mummy: see F. M. Willam, "Johannes am Grab des Auferstandenen," <Zeitschrift fuer katholische Theologie> 71 (2, 1949), 206; also S. Richard, "Linen," <Harper's Bible Dictionary> (ed. P. Achtemeier, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 563.

41 Blinzler, Prozess, 291, and "<Sinon> in evangeliis," 112.

42 <Mark>, 658.

43 <The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism> (London: University of London/Athlone, 1956), 12.

44 John Lightfoot, <A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica> (vol. 3, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 215.

45 <Mark> (AB27, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1986), 658.

46 Blinzler, "Die Grablegung," 63.

47 Perhaps relevant here is the then lively conviction that, if someone intended a good deed, but was prevented, God reckoned it as though it had been done; see C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, <A Rabbinic Anthology> (New York: Schocken, 1947), 288.

48 "Zum Begraebnis Jesu," 222-223; <Das Matthaues-Evangelium> (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1962), 939. The myrrh and aloes of Jn 19:39 were dry substances: Gaechter, "Zum Begraebnis," 222.

49 See Gaechter, "Zum Begraebnis," 224, Lk 23:56; also <Matthaues-Evangelium>, 939.

50 See J. A. Hastings, ed., <A Dictionary of the Bible> (Edinburgh: Clark, 1898), II, 108-110, on Gardens; <Harper's Bible Dictionary>, "Gardens."

51 "Turiner Grabtuch und Exegese heute," <Biblische Zeitschrift> 28 (1, 1984), 38. See Lamm, <The Jewish Way>, 15, 28, 244.

52 See Brown, <John XIII-XXI>, 943.

53 See Ferdinand Prat, S.J., <Jesus Christ> (vol. 2, Milwaukee: Bruce, 1950), 378; Nineham, <Mark>, 421-422.

54 Blinzler, "Die Grablegung," 85, 105.

55 Brown, <John XIII-XXI>, 943.

56 Consider how difficult it was to obtain burial space on, for example, Mount Scopus: see Y. Yadin, <Jerusalem Revealed> (New Haven: Yale University, 1976), 67.

57 Blinzler, "Die Grablegung," 85.

58 <anablepsasai>, Mk 16:4.

59 Lattimore, <The Four Gospels>, translates the word "looking again." At p. 292 he defends this translation on the grounds that the usual sense ("looking up") does not seem to have any point here. It escaped him that the women looked up because they had to, in order to inspect the tomb entry.

60 R. H. Smith, "The Tomb of Jesus," <Biblical Archaeology> 30 (1967), 87-88; cited by Lane, <Mark>, 580, note 2. J. Schmid, <Mark>, 301, says Jesus was laid in an "excellent rock tomb," of a kind that "only well-to-do and distinguished people owned." Like Mark, Matthew says the stone closing the tomb was great (27:60), and from this detail Donald Senior infers the "fitting magnificence of the tomb" (<The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew> [Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1985], 152). A. Parrott, <Maledictions et Violations de Tombes> (Paris: Paul Guenther, 1939), 81, gives as the price of a Nabatean tomb 1000 Nabatean drachmas. We may note here that a tomb in which no one had yet been laid was especially valuable; see F.-M. Braun, O.P., <La Sepulture de Jesus> (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1937), 16, note 1, for evidence of this from two tomb inscriptions; see also Parrott, 46.

61 Brown (237) notes that only after the time of Jesus is there mention, in the Mishna, of two official burial places for executed criminals (one for those who were beheaded or strangled, the other for the stoned or burned). See also Blinzler, "Die Grablegung," 94.

62 Far outside the city: see W. Lane, <Mark>, 578; Blinzler, "Die Grablegung," 94, 97; 98, note 2. Authors refer in this connection to Jer 22:19. The Markan tomb, on the contrary, was near Golgotha, as one can gather from Mark (Brown, 243), as well as Jn 19:41; and Golgotha was near the city.

63 Blinzler, "Die Grablegung," 99, continuation of his note 133: the Jewish graves for criminals were not rock-hewn, but "Gruben" (trenches, ditches, pits), into which the bodies were cast, then covered with earth.

64 See Arndt-Gingrich, <Lexicon, s.v. mnemeion>; Alfred Edersheim, <The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah> (vol. 2, ed. 5, New York: Anson Randolph, n.d. [1885]), 319-320.

65 After the flesh had decomposed, family and/or friends could remove the bones to the family grave (as Brown notes, 237). Probable evidence of this practice is the celebrated discovery in 1968 of the bones of a man who had been crucified, named Jehohanon; on this find see Lane, <Mark>, 565; Brown, 237.

66 Brown's <CBQ> article does not deny that the Markan tomb had such a feature, and <John XIII-XXI>, 982-983, 989, reasons to a shelf from Jewish usage and from Jn 20:12.

67 See Arndt-Gingrich, <Lexicon, s.v. mnemeion>; Alfred Edersheim, <Life>, II, 319-320; Blinzler, "Die Grablegung," 62.

68 See Gaechter, <Matthaeus-Evangelium>, 939, note 94; Blinzler, "Die Grablegung," 62, 107.

69 See Exod 20:15.17.

70 His burial place was a Semite's dearest possession, for various reasons, notably because of the belief that failure to be buried would cause suffering in the afterlife. Symbolic of this concern for burial is the fact that the first Israelitic acquisition of land in Palestine was the cave purchased by Abraham for a family burial place (Gen 23:3-19).

71 See Jeremias, <Jerusalem>, 360; Brown, <John I-XII>, 173 on Jn 4:47. Edersheim, Life, II, 618, says it would hardly have been in accordance with Jewish manners if the women had mingled more closely with Joseph (for Edersheim, a disciple).

72 See Brown, <John I-XII>, 424 on Jn 11:19; Edersheim, <Life>, II, 328.

73 See E. Feldman, <Biblical and Post-Biblical Defilement and Mourning: Law as Theology> (New York: Yeshiva University, 1977), 135, note 168.

74 Blinzler, "Die Grablegung," 96.

75 Gaechter, <Matthaeus-Evangelium>, 939, note 35.

76 Blinzler, "Die Grablegung," 107.

77 Gaechter, <Matthaeus-Evangelium>, 939, note 35.

78 Ernst Haenchen, <The Acts of the Apostles> (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), 410; see Carlo Martini, S.J., <Il Problema Storico della Risurrezione negli Studi Recenti> (Roma: Universita Gregoriana, 1959), 81.

79 See the discussion in Blinzler, "Die Grablegung," 106-107.

80 See Blinzler, "Die Grablegung," 77, note 67.

81 In particular, the Ephesian inscription from the sixth century, cited by Brown, is historically worthless: Blinzler, "Die Grablegung," 94.

82 At p. 114.

83 See Brown in Blinzler, "Die Grablegung," 105; CBQ article, 242,

note 29; <Virginal Conception>, etc., 116, note 193; Brown, <John XIII-XXI>, 960.

84 See Blinzler, "Die Grablegung, 73, note 55.

85 See article "Burial" in <Harper's Bible Dictionary>, 146, col. B.

86 See Brown, <John XIII-XXI>, 960.

87 See Mk 9:17; 11:21; Jn 4:31; 6:25; 9:2, etc.

88 See Gaechter, <Matthaeus-Evangelium>, 940, on Mt 27:60; <Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Bible> (translated and adapted by Louis Hartmann, C.S.S.R., New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 287.

89 See Jer 34:5 with 2 Chron 16:14 and 21:19.

90 C. Martini, <Problema>, 81: "Mk 15:42ff. attributes the burial of Jesus to friends."

George W. Shea, S.T.D. received his doctorate in sacred theology from the Canisianum Seminary in Austria. Ordained to the priesthood in 1936, Msgr. Shea taught theology at Immaculate Conception Seminary in Darlington, NJ from 1939-1942 and 1946-1960. Msgr. Shea attended all four sessions of Vatican II as a "peritus" and was pastor of Our Lady of Sorrows Church in South Orange, NJ for thirteen years before retiring in 1981. Msgr. Shea died on July 8, 1990.

This article was taken from the Spring 1991 issue of "Faith & Reason". Subscriptions available from Christendom Press, 2101 Shenandoah Shores Road, Ft. Royal, VA 22630, 703-636-2900, Fax 703-636-1655. Published quarterly at \$20.00 per year.

Copyright (c) 1996 EWTN

---

Provided courtesy of:

Eternal Word Television Network  
PO Box 3610  
Manassas, VA 22110  
Voice: 703-791-2576  
Fax: 703-791-4250  
Data: 703-791-4336  
Web: <http://www.ewtn.com>  
FTP: ewtn.com  
Telnet: ewtn.com  
Email address: [sysop@ewtn.com](mailto:sysop@ewtn.com)

EWTN provides a Catholic online  
information and service system.

---