

**When Prophecy Became Passion:
The Death of Jesus and the Birth of the Gospels**

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Introduction

Look at all my trials and tribulations
Sinking in a gentle pool of wine
What's that in the bread, it's gone to my head
Till this morning is this evening life was fine.

So runs the crass but catchy refrain of the disciples as they sit down with Jesus at the Last Supper in the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*. They continue:

Always hoped that I'd be an apostle
Knew that I could make it if I tried
Then when we retire we can write the Gospels
So they'll all talk about us when we've died.

Now as anyone acquainted with any Biblical scholarship will know, there are so many questionable assumptions in this chorus that one can hardly decide where to begin. Of the four canonical Gospels, only two bear the names of apostles; none are thought to be written by eye-witnesses, and the centre of attention in the Gospels is, of course, not the apostles but Jesus.

And yet this rather unpromising starting point has a striking and unexpected connection with our topic: how were the Gospels born? What was the catalyst for the creation of these extraordinary new pieces of literature? Why did the early Christians begin forging individual traditions about Jesus into large scale narrative biographies? For all that is bizarre about Tim Rice's formulation just quoted, it gets one very important thing right: the Last Supper as a focal point, and the notion that there is something significant about it that might help us to understand how the Gospels emerged onto the scene.

1. Earliest Christian Tradition

Our journey, then, begins here, at Jesus' last meal with his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion. The earliest known tradition of Jesus' life story is a version of the Last Supper. It is one of the best attested features of Jesus' life and it occurs when the apostle Paul, writing within twenty years of the event he is retelling, reminds the recipients of one of his first letters, the church at Corinth, of the tradition about Jesus' Last Supper. Paul's letters are occasional, written in response to particular difficulties arising in the churches he had founded, and we can be grateful to the Corinthians for having argued about the Lord's Supper because it provides Paul with the occasion not only to give us his own teaching about sharing in this ritual but also to underline

this teaching with a reminder of the origins of the eucharist. *In the night that he was handed over*, Paul tells the Corinthians, *he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body which is for you* (1 Cor. 11.23-24). The passage is striking because it demonstrates that from very early on, tradition and memory were playing key roles. *Do this in remembrance of me*, Jesus says (11.24). Paul keeps the memory alive as, presumably, other early Christians did too by passing on the tradition: *for I received from the Lord that which I also handed on to you* (11.23). And there is a theological reason for the pattern of repeating and retelling: to do this is to fulfil the command of Jesus and to identify with his sufferings, proclaiming afresh Jesus' death until he returns (11.26).

But does this story witness to anything more than an early Christian underlining of the importance of the tradition, memory and eucharist? Well, there is a fascinating detail here that it is easily overlooked. What is interesting is the way in which Paul introduces the eucharistic words. He says *in the night that he [Jesus] was handed over* (11.23). Sometimes in history you can find out interesting things by observing what a writer thinks his or her readers can take for granted. Paul here apparently assumes that the time note, *the night that he was handed over*, would be understood by his hearers. "O, *that night*"; not any other night, not any ordinary night. It is a note that

hints that his hearers knew a good deal more of this story than Paul has time or need to share here. The Corinthians, we must assume, are familiar with some kind of narrative of Jesus' last days.

But is there any more that we can go on than this? Can we be sure that the Corinthians knew more than just these few details? Well, we are lucky that the Corinthians were a pretty dissentious lot and not only were questions being asked in Corinth about the eucharist, but also they were getting asked about resurrection. So Paul has the opportunity to expand on traditions about the resurrection and in 1 Cor. 15, he provides a short Easter narrative, recounting, in sequence, an appearance to Peter, then the twelve, then James the Lord's brother, then all the apostles, then five hundred people and finally "as to one untimely born" to Paul himself. We have, then, in 1 Corinthians two very important snap-shots, one of the narrative about the eucharist, on the eve of Jesus' crucifixion and so towards the beginning of the Passion Narrative, and one of the narrative about the resurrection, at the culmination of the Passion Narrative. The difficulty with snap-shots, though, is that they leave us longing for more. [We'd love to see the home movie] What else did the earliest Christians narrate about Jesus' Passion? How did they tell it? And what began the process?

Once again, a closer look at 1 Corinthians proves illuminating. Paul begins the passage on the resurrection (1 Cor. 15) as he had earlier begun the passage on the eucharist (1 Cor. 11.23-26), by stressing *tradition*. Paul says that he is “passing on” to the Corinthians that which he has also received, and, he says, this material is of first importance (1 Cor. 15.3). Now as he begins his narration of these crucial events, he lists several key things, all linked with the word *that* (ὅτι) almost as we might construct a bullet-point list:

- *that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures*
- *that he was buried*
- *that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures*

There is a twice recurring feature here that looks very interesting: *according to the Scriptures*. Paul, and the tradition he has received, are clearly stressing this element. The theological drive at the heart of this conviction is not difficult to fathom, especially for early Christians eager to persuade others that the apparent scandal of a crucified Messiah, a criminal at the heart of their new faith, was in fact prophesied in the Scriptures – he was, in other words, right at the heart of God’s plan for the world and not an embarrassing mistake.

That this was indeed a key feature in the development of the Passion Narrative is confirmed when we turn to the evidence of the Gospels. Here, on

line after line, we have direct quotations, echoes of and allusions to the Hebrew Bible – its very texture dominates the accounts. The psalms and Isaiah are particularly frequently found. Just think, for example, of Jesus' silence at his trials. What better example could there be of someone fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy that he would be silent before his accusers? Or consider Jesus' words from the cross in Mark and Matthew, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me", as clear an allusion to Psalm 22.1 as one could wish for.

2. Prophecy Historicized or Tradition Scripturalized?

It seems clear that from early on the Scriptures played a pivotal role in Christian propaganda. Indeed for some scholars the role is so major that there is something a little fishy. Could it really have been that the pattern of Jesus' life and death adhered so closely to the Scriptural models and antecedents, and in such detail? What I would like to explore on the next part of our journey is the role played by the Scriptures in the Passion Narrative with a view to revealing something very interesting about the origins of that narrative. In order to do this, we will need to take a moment to look at a particularly influential current theory from John Dominic Crossan.

Crossan, who has published extensively on the Passion Narratives, is acutely aware that to explain their origins will demand finding an adequate account

of the role played by the Scriptures there. The term he uses to describe how the Passion Narratives came about is the suggestive one *prophecy historicized*.

He explains the phenomenon like this:

“The individual units, general sequences, and overall frames of the passion-resurrection stories are so linked to prophetic fulfillment that the removal of such fulfillment leaves nothing but the barest facts, almost as in Josephus, Tacitus or the Apostles’ Creed In other words, on all three narrative levels – surface, intermediate and deep – biblical models and scriptural precedents have controlled the story to the point that without them nothing is left but the brutal fact of crucifixion itself.”¹

Several important elements in Crossan’s approach make it worthy of special attention. It is a mark of Crossan’s skill as a communicator that he is able to encapsulate his thesis in one aptly chosen term and that his use of this term, *prophecy historicized*, has generated fresh interest in the origins of the Passion Narrative. Further, like many of the best teachers Crossan makes his point by means of contrast, placing his own view at one pole and the alternative view, that the Passion Narratives are *history remembered*, at the

¹ John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998): 521.

other pole. This “history remembered” view he attributes to Raymond Brown² and he characterises it like this:

“Jesus’ companions knew or found out what happened to him, and such historical information formed the basic passion story from the very beginning. Allusions to biblical precedents were illustrative or probative for that story, but not determinative or constitutive of its content. Maybe, from all the details known to them, they chose those that fitted best with such biblical precedents, but in general it was history and not prophecy that determined narrative sequence and structure.”³

In *Who Killed Jesus?*, Crossan uses the Darkness at High Noon (Matt. 27.45 // Mark 15.33 // Luke 23.44 // Peter 5.15, 6.22) as his primary illustration of how that explanation would work. He writes :

“To explain those accounts as ‘history remembered’ means that Jesus’ companions observed the darkness, recorded it in memory, passed it

² Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (2 vols.; Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1994).

³ Crossan, *Birth of Christianity*: 520.

on in tradition, and recalled it when writing their accounts of the crucifixion. It happened in history, and that is why it is mentioned in gospel.”⁴

The explanation of “prophecy historicized”, on the other hand, involves reading the Gospel accounts alongside Amos 8.9-10, which speaks of the day of the Lord when God promises to “make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight.” “I will make it like the mourning for an only son,” He says, “and the end of it like a bitter day.” And then, Crossan explains:

“By ‘prophecy historicized’ I mean that no such *historical* three-hour-long midnight at noon accompanied the death of Jesus, but that learned Christians searching their Scriptures found this ancient description of future divine punishment, maybe facilitated by its mention of ‘an only son’ in the second-to-last line, and so created that *fictional* story about darkness at noon to assert that Jesus died in fulfillment of prophecy.”⁵

⁴ John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus? The Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995): 2.

⁵ *ibid.*: 4.

I have spent a little time explaining Crossan's thesis because many have apparently found it persuasive and it has reached a wide public through several best-selling books and through the advocacy of the Jesus Seminar, who when they came to vote on the Passion Narrative agreed that prophecy historicized is indeed the best explanation for its origin.⁶ But that is not the only reason for spending time looking at Crossan's view. It is important because he is taking seriously the role played by prophecy in the Passion Narrative. The Hebrew Bible was simply too important a resource for the earliest Christians for it not to have been utilised in a thoroughgoing way. Whatever one thinks of his answers, Crossan is asking the right questions.

I would like to suggest, however, that a different and more plausible answer to these questions is available. We should be put on our guard, to begin with, by the severity of the contrast Crossan sets up between his own view and that of Raymond Brown, between prophecy historicized and history remembered.

⁶ See, for example, Daryl D. Schmidt's endorsement of the thesis in "Septuagintal Influence in the Passion Narratives", *Forum New Series* 1.1 (Spring 1998): 95-118, especially 107. Cf. Marcus Borg's use of Crossan's terms in N. T. Wright and Marcus Borg, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (London: SPCK, 1999): 84-5. The Jesus Seminar overall finds the thesis persuasive. The proposition "Detailed information about the crucifixion of Jesus is derived from prophecy historicized" receives a "red" rating, "The Jesus Seminar: Voting Records: The Passion Narrative", *Forum New Series* 1.1 (Spring 1998): 227-33 (230).

The reader is presented with a choice: is it history or is it prophecy? Did it happen or is it fictional? The contrast between the two views presented is simply too stark. Given these sole alternatives, *history remembered* or *prophecy historicized* and given the undisputed level of Scriptural allusion in the Passion Narratives, few critical scholars would be able to resist Crossan's conclusion. But the choice offered by Crossan is not a necessary one. Only the most ardent fundamentalists would go for the view that the Passion Narratives were simply made up of "history remembered", and the term is in fact not one that is used by Raymond Brown, whose work Crossan is effectively caricaturing.⁷

But there is a more nuanced alternative available and it might be explained like this. The multiple echoes of Biblical themes and the varied allusions to Scriptural precedent are plausibly explained on the hypothesis that from the beginning there was an intimate interaction between event, memory, tradition and Scriptural reflection. Events generated Scriptural reflection, which in turn influenced the way the events were remembered and retold. And the process

⁷ Although Brown does indeed see the "basic incidents" of the Passion Narrative as derived from "early Christian memory" (*Death of the Messiah*: 16), he also sees the whole process, from eye-witness and "ear witness" through to the evangelists, as involving embellishment from the Christian imagination (for example *Death of the Messiah*: 14).

of casting the narrative in this language might be described, to utilise a somewhat cumbersome but nevertheless illuminating term from Hebrew Bible scholarship, *scripturalization*. This term is used by Judith Newman of Jewish prayers in the Second Temple Period, which increasingly used Scriptural models, precedents and language.⁸ The thesis of Newman's book is that increasing devotion to developing Jewish Scriptures, in a liturgical context in which such Scriptures were getting used more and more, led inexorably to the intermingling of those Scriptures with Jewish prayers. It is a view that could shed some very interesting light on the Passion Narratives in the Gospels.

In order to see the phenomenon of scripturalizing at work, and to assess whether it has any better explanatory power than does "prophecy historicized", it will be useful to take a closer look at an element in the Passion Narrative, ideally one that tends to be securely regarded as history. Let us turn, therefore, to one of the very few details in the Passion Narrative which Crossan regards as historical, the note in Mark 15.40-41 of the women

⁸ Judith H. Newman, *Praying by the Book: The Scripturalization of Prayer in Second Temple Judaism* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999).

watching the crucifixion from a distance,⁹ and then let us take a closer look.

Crossan attempts to disentangle tradition from Markan redaction and writes:

“Their existence and names in 15.40-41 are pre-Markan tradition, but their criticism in 15.47–16.8 is Markan redaction. In other words, the inclusion of women observing the burial and visiting the tomb is no earlier than Mark, but the inclusion of women watching the crucifixion is received tradition. But is the latter historical fact? My best answer is yes, because the male disciples had fled; if the women had not been watching, we would not know even the brute fact of crucifixion (as distinct, for example, from Jesus being summarily speared or beheaded in prison).”¹⁰

Now the example is an interesting one for two reasons. First, Crossan’s remark that “the male disciples had fled” and so could not have provided

⁹ In favour of the historicity of this detail, Gerd Theissen points out that the names given here appear to presume the readers’ knowledge of their identity, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (ET, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992): 177-8. See Chapter 4 overall for a fine discussion of the origins of the Passion Narrative. For Crossan’s discussion of Theissen, see *Birth of Christianity*: 504-5.

¹⁰ *Birth of Christianity*: 559. See also *Who Killed Jesus?:* 181-5 for reflections on the role played by the women in the story. In *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991): 415, Crossan suggests that the first version of Mark originally ended just before these verses, at 15.39, the Centurion’s Confession.

details of the crucifixion is curious.¹¹ How do we know that the male disciples had fled? What is the source of our information for this detail, so key an assumption in Crossan's case? The detail is found in Mark 14.50, "Everyone deserted him and fled", where it follows directly from Jesus' announcement in 14.49, "Let the scriptures be fulfilled". And the scripture in view here is clearly Zechariah 13.7, "Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered", quoted by Jesus in Mark 14.27, where Jesus predicts the falling away of the disciples. But if this key foundational detail is itself so explicitly Scriptural, Crossan's model demands that we see this too as "prophecy historicized". And if this detail is prophecy historicized, how – to use Crossan's logic – can we trust it as history? If we cannot trust the historicity of this element, there is no obligation to accept the absence of the disciples as a foundational premise for the whole. In other words, without the knowledge that there was no one present at the crucifixion, we do not require the thesis of the inevitability of the "prophecy historicized" model.

Second, the wording of the verse in question is noteworthy:

'And there were also women watching from a distance (ἀπὸ

¹¹ See the quotation above, *Birth of Christianity*: 559.

μακρόθεν)' (Mark 15.40; cf. Matt. 27.55 // Luke 23.49).

The note that they were watching “from a distance”¹² echoes the wording of Psalm 38.11 LXX, “My friends and companions stand aloof from my affliction, and my relatives stand from a distance (ἀπὸ μακρόθεν)”. It is one of those details that virtually every commentator on the passage mentions.¹³ What we have here is an element with a strong claim to be historical getting expressed in language derived from the psalms. It is not as if the women’s witness has been created on the basis of Psalm 38.11, which does not refer solely to women, let alone to those particular named women. Rather, the traditional element is being remembered and retold in the light of the Scriptural passage that was thought to be fulfilled. In other words, in this verse we see the exact

¹² Contrast John 19.25-27 where the Beloved Disciple and Jesus’ mother are close enough to hold a conversation with Jesus. Joel Marcus, “The Role of Scripture in the Gospel Passion Narratives”, in John T. Carroll and Joel B. Green (eds.), *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendricksons, 1995): 205-33 speculates that the Johannine account “may be more accurate historically than the Synoptics” in view of the fact that “Romans often allowed friends of crucified criminals to stand by them until they died” (212). But on this point contrast Brown, *Death of the Messiah*: 1029 and 1194, “it would be unusual for the Romans to permit family and sympathizers such proximity”.

¹³ Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, Volume 2: 1158. Kathleen E. Corley, “Women and the Crucifixion and Burial of Jesus”, *Forum New Series* 1.1 (Spring 1998): 181-226, notes that “Luke reinforces this connection with Psalm 38.11 by the addition of οἱ γνωστοί (friends) (Luke 23.49)”: 212, n. 211. Her full discussion of the passage, with some useful bibliography is on 209-17.

opposite of the process of “prophecy historicized”. An historical tradition been expressed using the terminology of the scriptures. Or, we might say, the tradition was scripturalized.

Yet even the suggestive term *scripturalization* does not solve all the problems with the Passion Narrative. Like Crossan’s “prophecy historicized” it hints at something too one directional. Though helpful, it might give the impression of a neutral, un-interpreted raw event that has been given an interpreted, scripturalized overlay, something that is over simplistic and unrealistic. Perhaps, then, we should think instead of a creative interaction between the different elements, an interaction that began at the start. Consider, for example, that anguished cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”. It seems unlikely that this was invented by Mark, in whose Gospel it first appears, not least in that it is given in an Aramaic version as well as Greek and in that the bystanders are all depicted as failing to understand it. Yet other elements in the same crucifixion story also bear striking resemblances to Psalm 22 too, such as the casting of lots for Jesus’ garments, elements that are much less securely regarded as history. What I suggest is happening here is that the events themselves were generating scriptural reflection from the earliest times as the first Christians attempted to come to terms with these extraordinary events, and that the scriptures then, in

turn, influenced the formation of the tradition. It was an interactive process in which history, scripture, memory and tradition were mutually influencing one another as the narrative was being born.

3. The Passion as Liturgy

In our search for Gospel origins, we have discovered the importance of recognising the interaction between scripture and tradition, and seeing the Passion Narrative as a major location for this activity. But when did this process begin and how did it happen? What was the context for this interaction? Are we talking about scribes debating in synagogues, early Christians telling stories at dinner parties, philosophical discussions in the market place? I don't think that it is any of these, at least not primarily. The social context that gave birth to the forging of narrative materials about the Passion was the church service, worship, the liturgy. How can we know this? Well, think back for a moment to our beginning point, the disciples at the Last Supper and Paul's account of that first eucharist in 1 Corinthians. Paul, remember, is retelling the Corinthians that story in the context of their inability to behave properly in their own worship. As early as our evidence takes us, we have liturgy as the context in which the retelling of the story, *and what's more a connected story*, appears. What we have, in other words, is a liturgical context for the earliest known narration of the events in Jesus' Passion. Could it be that we have further evidence anywhere else of the

telling of the Passion Story in the liturgy? Indeed we have: there is some very telling circumstantial evidence from within the Gospels themselves.

The evidence looks like this and it is something we have already begun to encounter, the darkness that engulfed the earth at noon. Remember that for Crossan, this is explained on the basis of a prophecy, Amos 8.9, getting historicized. This is a good example of the limitations of that model since all that Amos 8.9 is able to explain is, at best, one element in the story – the darkness at midday. But this time reference is one of many in the Passion Narrative and they all have one thing in common: they happen at three hour intervals. The darkness that comes over the earth at 12 lasts three hours until 3 p.m., when Jesus dies (Mark 15.33-4). Before the darkness begins, Jesus has already been on the cross for three hours, since 9 a.m. (Mark 15.25). Before that, Jesus was brought before Pilate at dawn, 6 a.m. (Mark 15.1, πρωϊ). Nor does the pattern stop there. There appears to be something like a twenty-four hour framework, broken up neatly into three hour segments. Thus, if we imagine the Last Supper taking place at 6 p.m. (14.17, “When it was evening . . .”), Jesus and the disciples would then go to Gethsemane at 9 p.m.,¹⁴ Jesus

¹⁴ Mark 14.37-41: “Could you not watch one hour? . . . again he came . . . and he came the third time . . . the hour has come”

would be arrested at midnight, and Peter denies Jesus during the Jewish trial at 3 a.m., cockcrow (14.72).

Nor is it simply that these stories fit nicely into this schedule. Individual units themselves seem to be patterned in such a way that they reflect this kind of structure. Jesus in Gethsemane asks his disciples to watch with him and is distressed that they could not stay awake for “one hour” (14.37), and then twice again he comes to them (14.40-1). And then, similarly, Peter denies Jesus three times at cockcrow, the Roman watch at 3 a.m. (14.54, 66-72)

Explanations for this marked three-hour structure that so dominates the Passion Narrative have not, on the whole, been forthcoming. The difficulty is, of course, that life is not quite as neat and tidy as this – events do not happen in even three hour units. That the pattern is intentional and in some way significant seems to be confirmed by a saying of Jesus located just before the beginning of Mark’s Passion Narrative:

“Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will return – whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the cock crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let

him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"
(Mark 13.35-37).

The text itself appears to be drawing attention to the three hour pattern, alerting the bright reader to what is to come. And though an explanation has been put forward separately by three different scholars, a Canadian (Philip Carrington) in the 1950s,¹⁵ an Englishman (Michael Goulder) in the 1970s,¹⁶ and a Frenchman (Étienne Trocmé) in the 1980s,¹⁷ it is still hardly known at all in mainstream scholarship.¹⁸ These three scholars claim that the liturgy is the only thing that would make sense of this. What is happening, they suggest, is that the early Christians were holding their own annual celebration of the events of the Passion at the Jewish Passover, remembered as roughly the time of Jesus' death. While other Jews were celebrating Passover, Christian Jews held a twenty-four hour vigil in which they retold and relived the events surrounding Jesus' arrest and death, from (what modern Christians would

¹⁵ Philip Carrington, *The Primitive Christian Calendar: A Study in the Making of the Marcan Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952).

¹⁶ Michael Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974) and *The Evangelists' Calendar* (London: SPCK, 1978).

¹⁷ Étienne Trocmé, *The Passion as Liturgy: A Study in the Origin of the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (London: SCM, 1983).

¹⁸ However for recent, relatively sympathetic comments see D. Moody Smith, "When did the Gospels become Scripture", *JBL* 119 (2000): 3-20 (5-6).

call) Maundy Thursday at 6 p.m. to Good Friday at 6 p.m. Perhaps Mark's account of the Passion, with its heavy referencing of Scripture, its regular time notes, was itself influenced by such a liturgical memory of the Passion.

Now this theory remains precisely that, a theory, but like all the best theories, this one has explanatory power – it is able to shed light on several other oddities in the Passion Narrative, elements that have consistently eluded the commentators:

- *The date of Jesus' death.* There is a famous contradiction here. Is John right that this was on the day before Jewish Passover, when the paschal lambs were being slaughtered (14 Nisan), or are the Synoptics right that Jesus died at the feast of Passover itself (15 Nisan)? The liturgical theory would suggest that the disagreement is not so much over which day, historically, Jesus actually died on, but on which day it was celebrated and remembered by early Christians. And the fact that there was a big debate in the second century over precisely this question, when to remember Jesus death, with the Quartodecimans in Asia controversially taking the
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Johannine view while others took the Synoptic view, is suggestive for this theory.¹⁹

- *The time of the crucifixion:* was it at 9 a.m. (the Synoptics), with darkness coming over the earth at 12 p.m.; or was it at 12 p.m. (John)? Again, the liturgical theory would shed light. The disagreements were between Johannine Christians who remembered the crucifixion at one time and others who remembered it at the other time. The actual memory of the time of Jesus' crucifixion has effectively been lost and the liturgy is pulling the events into contexts that have more to do with the time at which they were celebrated than anything else.
- *The rushed timetable:* it has always been a problem to try to understand why the timetable of Jesus' last hours appears to be so rushed. Why did the Jewish authorities hold a trial in the middle of the night? Why are so many of the characters in the narrative so eager to have Jesus crucified on a festival (or the eve of a festival)? Again, if this has more to do with the constraints of the liturgy than with memory of precise timings of events, there is a natural explanation for the condensed timetable.

A theory that explains so much, especially a theory that has no direct competitors, is one we should take seriously.

¹⁹ Eusebius, *H.E.* V. 23-5.

4. The Birth of the Gospels

My title tonight has been “When Prophecy Became Passion” and I have been suggesting that there is something about this moment, the moment when the interaction between history, tradition and scriptural reflection began, that gave birth to the Gospels. How did this happen? Somehow, from very early on, the conviction arose that Jesus’ death and resurrection happened *in accordance with the Scriptures*. Perhaps Jesus himself set the train in motion by relating his own destiny to Biblical models with which he must have been familiar. And no doubt certain events themselves triggered scriptural reflection, sending the first Christians to their Scriptures in their attempt to make sense of the extraordinary events they had witnessed. Soon, interaction is taking place. It’s an interaction that is ultimately quite frustrating for the scholars of the historical Jesus who are keen to disentangle the historical nugget from its interpretative overlay and who thus consistently run into problems in this material. But this frustration should not lead us into making unrealistic demands of the data. The real fascination with the interaction between scripture and tradition here lies not in the light it might shed on historical Jesus research but in the help it gives us with understanding Christian origins and, in particular, the birth of the Gospels.

When scripture began interacting with tradition – this is the catalyst for the birth of the Gospels, and they were “born from the womb of the liturgy”.²⁰ I use the imagery of birth deliberately; while they were born out of narratives of Jesus’ death, their growth, their coming to maturity would yet require the development of a life-story which would lead up to the already established Passion story. But even here, we can see the groundwork already being laid from very early on. In the epistle that provided us with our early snap-shots of the Passion Narrative, Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, there is another intriguing feature. Twice, Paul quotes sayings of Jesus, one on divorce (1 Cor 7.10-11, “not I, but the Lord”) and one on mission (9.14, “the Lord has commanded . . .”), witnessing to the knowledge and use of materials about Jesus’ life from early on. Indeed in the second case, Paul’s practice (working for a living on the mission field) was at odds with the saying of Jesus clearly used by others, that those who preach the gospel should get their living by the gospel. For some time, no doubt, the oral knowledge of such materials to which Paul and other early Christians here witness would have been adequate. But in time the growth of the church, and the desire to represent

²⁰ Goulder, *Evangelists’ Calendar*: 297. For a critical appraisal of Michael Goulder’s overall lectionary theory, see my *Goulder and the Gospels: An Examination of a New Paradigm* (JSNTSup, 133; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), Part 3. I argue that the evidence for the overall theory is problematic, but that the idea of a liturgical origin of the Passion Narrative, following Etienne Trocmé, *Passion as Liturgy*, is less problematic. On the liturgical origin of the Passion Narrative, see in particular *Goulder and the*

Jesus materials for new generations of Christians with different agendas, demanded the forging of oral traditions about Jesus' life into coherent narrative units, so that the Passion story was now prefaced with narratives featuring traditions about Jesus life.

The Gospels therefore grew backwards. First the Passion story, then in the first Gospel, Mark, this is fused with a narrative of Jesus' ministry. Mark presents a Gospel of "Christ crucified", according to the earliest Christian pattern (1 Cor. 15.3-5), and specially emphasised by Paul, a pattern encourages him to make the first half of his Gospel an announcement of the arrival of the Christ (Mark 1-8, culminating at 8.29) and the second half a narrative of his road to crucifixion (Mark 9-16). Mark's Gospel is a work of raw, brutish genius; he is the first to compose a book like this and others admire this initiative, while at the same time wanting to make up for its inadequacies, to supersede it by copying out the bulk of it and expanding and correcting it. Matthew embraces Mark but looks to improve on it; he is strongly influenced by Mark's project but thinks that he can write a definitive work by supplying a proper beginning (birth narratives), a proper ending (resurrection stories), and much more in between (teaching material). Luke subsequently understands Matthew's project to "fix" Mark's shortcomings

and is influenced to try the same himself. He too tries to fix Mark, now with more birth narrative and more resurrection narrative, and quarrying Matthew for sayings material, but avoiding his wooden, over-thematic presentation, attempting to produce a plausible gospel with narrative flow. For John, the Synoptic Gospels are not adequate and his unique take corrects the others' too subtle Christology, prefacing the whole with a poem that takes us back to the origins of the cosmos.

Yet in spite of this steady growth, evolving from that key interaction between tradition and scripture in a worship setting, the Gospels all remain true to their origins in the Passion story. Their narratives are driven through from beginning to end with Passion predictions, and with echoes, allusions and prefiguring of Jesus' death and resurrection, but most importantly a narrative with a driving force that carries the reader breathlessly forward towards Calvary. This is how, when prophecy became passion, Jesus' death sowed the seed that gave birth to the Gospels.

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