THE GOSPEL OF MARK
PART 2
SOCIAL UPHEAVAL IN ROME
The Gospel of Mark
The pastoral situation

- How would we know?
The Gospel of Mark
The pastoral situation

- How would we know?

**When?**
- Jesus predicts the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (Mark 13:1-2) > 70 CE

**Where?**
- Mark 10:12 implies a woman can initiate divorce (a Roman custom) Rome? Antioch?
- Roman/Latin terms appear (kodrantēs 12:42; modios 4:21, legiōn 5:9, 15; kentryiōn 15:39)

- Irenaeus of Lyons c. 180 CE calls Mark Peter’s “interpreter,” who wrote down what Peter preached; Peter ended up in Rome (Adversus haereses 3.1.3)
The Gospel of Mark
The pastoral situation

- Sociopolitical conditions

1. **64 CE**
   - 10-day fire destroys 11 of Rome’s 14 districts; Nero blames Christians

2. **65**
   - Piso’s Conspiracy to overthrow Nero fails; many leading citizens executed or exiled
   - Plague kills 30,000; a tornado south of Rome destroys much property

3. **66**
   - The province of Judea rebels against Rome

4. **68-69**
   - Galba rebels against Nero; Nero commits suicide; Galba becomes emperor
   - Galba is murdered; Otho becomes emperor and commits suicide 3 months later
   - The Tiber floods and tenements collapse
   - Emperor Vitellius battles with Vespasian for control, burning the Roman Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, Rome’s patron deity

5. **69-70**
   - Vespasian defeats Vitellius
   - Vespasian’s son Titus defeats the Jewish Revolt and destroys the Jerusalem temple
   - Vespasian becomes the Roman Emperor and founds the Flavian dynasty

[Forum Romanum, a reconstruction from Archeolibri](https://youtu.be/q-yUaLqsbuw)
The Gospel of Mark
The pastoral situation

- Ideological and theological challenges
  - Vespasian’s victories over the Jews and over Vitellius brought the period of civil war and instability in Rome to an end
  - Titus, the victor in Judea, was allowed a triumph in Rome in 71 CE
The Gospel of Mark

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- Social challenges – tough living conditions
  - 65-70% of the population lived at or below minimal caloric intake
  - In the city of Rome, population density was high, sanitation poor
  - Water was collected from 591 open, public water basins (laci)
  - The food supply was unstable
  - Infant and child mortality was so high that it skewed the overall life expectancy at birth to the mid-20s
  - Medical care was limited; disease and malnutrition common
  - Most were engaged in difficult manual labor; injury from accidents meant lost livelihood
  - An economy built on slavery
  - Household hierarchies and social hierarchies
PASTORAL ISSUES & GOSPEL THEMES
The Gospel of Mark
Pastoral Context & Resulting Themes

- Death of eyewitnesses

- Response to turmoil of mid-1st century
  - Nero’s persecution of Christians (64 CE)
  - Jewish Revolt, destruction of Jerusalem (70 CE)
  - Rome’s victory signaled cosmic support
  - But life was marked by oppression and sickness

- Challenges of discipleship
  - pressure under persecution
  - internal tensions over leadership

- Spread of message not only to Jews but also Gentiles

THEMES

- Gospel written
- Jesus as suffering messiah
- Real enemy = Satan (religious leaders = proxies)
- disciples’ failures
- messianic secret
- overtures to Gentiles
The Gospel of Mark
Christology: A Suffering Messiah

- three key titles
  - Messiah
  - Son of God
  - Son of Man

- a suffering messiah
  - not power and glory, but suffering and death
  - earthly but also cosmic contest, resolved in
    - signs of power (δυναμεῖς) and exorcisms
    - willingness to do father’s will
    - resurrection
MARK’S PASSION NARRATIVE
The Gospel of Mark
The Significance of the Passion

One could call the Gospels passion narratives with extended introductions consisting of isolated units.

The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964; original 1892) p. 80, n. 11.

Martin Kähler
1835-1912
The Gospel of Mark
The Significance of the Passion

Last days in Jerusalem
Passion narrative
The Gospel of Mark
The Significance of the Passion

Pharisees & Herodians plot to kill Jesus
Herod kills John the Baptist
Jesus predicts his arrest, death, & resurrection
Chief priests & scribes seek to kill Jesus
Prophecies: woman anoints, Jesus predicts betrayals of Judas and Peter

Last days in Jerusalem
Passion narrative
The Gospel of Mark
Why is the passion so important?

- Mark believes Jesus is the messiah
- The messiah was supposed to usher in God’s reign on earth
- Jesus was crucified by the Romans; their kingdom won
- How then can Jesus be the messiah spoken of in scripture?
The Gospel of Mark

Why is the passion so important?

- The Romans had also just destroyed Jerusalem and the Jewish temple
- Where was God’s victory?
- Where and how could believers maintain their relationship with God?
The Gospel of Mark

The passion & the plot of Mark

- Mark telegraphs Jesus’ death at every turn
- He interposes scenes of Jesus’ power with teachings about the reign of God to explain what it is, and what it is not
- If we read carefully to identify linked scenes, we can see how the passion is explained within the plot
RACISM & BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY
Black Liberation Theology

- Developed in response to two phenomena:
  - Malcolm X’s view that Christianity was a “white man’s religion”
  - Southern white Christianity’s support for slavery and Jim Crow segregation laws

- July 31, 1966: National Committee of Negro Churchmen published their “Black Power Statement,” urging a more aggressive approach to combating racism using the Bible

- James Cone (completed Ph.D. 1965)
  - the dominant culture has corrupted Christianity
  - God is not on the side of the oppressor, but of the oppressed
  - Justice and liberation (the exodus message) are reconstructed as self-definition, self-affirmation and self-determination for blacks

James H. Cone
1938–2018
The Lynching Tree
Cheap Grace and Costly Grace

- Cheap grace
  - Cross as decoration
  - Non-offensive religious object
  - A symbol of holiness

- Costly grace
  - Seeing through the superficial piety to the ugliness of oppression
  - And acting sometimes against our own interests to redress it
  - For Americans, this means seeing the lynching tree when they see the cross
The Lynching Tree
The Cross in Black Christian Tradition

- Calvary and the cross dominate black worship
- For the black church, the cross is God’s message of liberation in an unredeemed and tortured world
- An offensive symbol is at the center of the gospel
- It signals God’s solidarity with the oppressed
The Lynching Tree
Cone’s Connection of the Cross to the Lynching Tree

- Both public spectacles undertaken by those in power to maintain power
- Both reserved for low-status criminals, reinforcing or performing *their* powerlessness
- Both are deaths involving torture
- The cross and lynching tree need each other as we reconstruct the symbol
  - The cross redeems the lynching tree and its victims
  - The lynching tree frees the cross from false piety