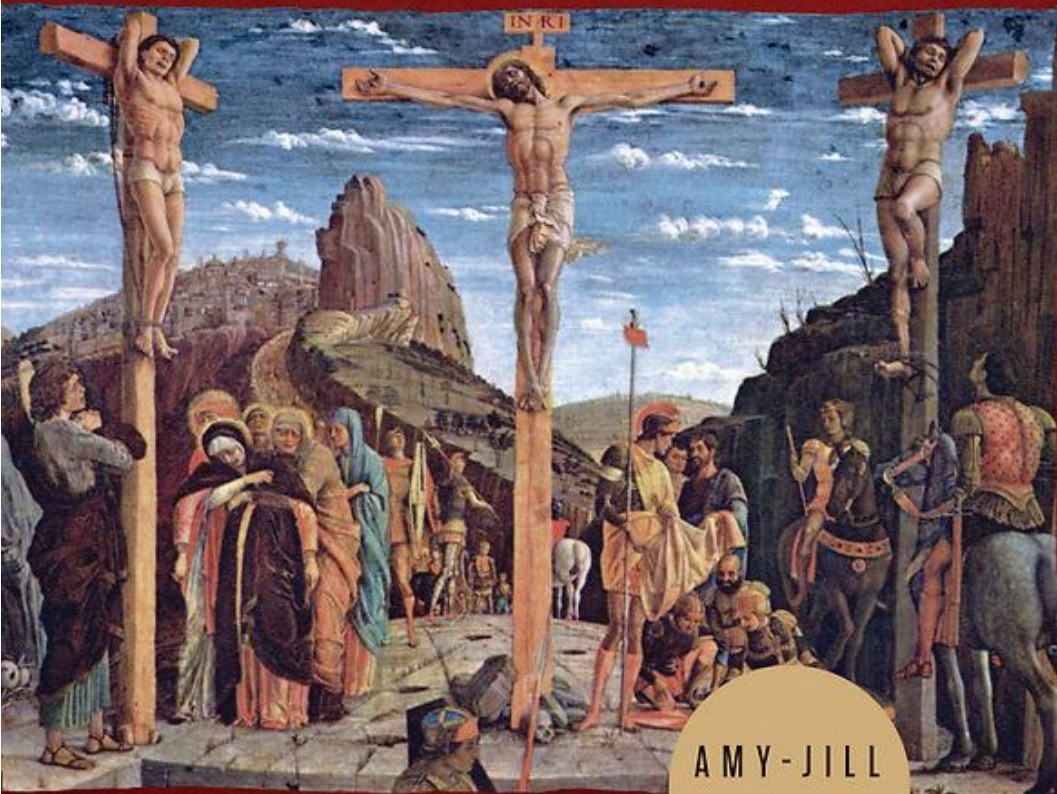


A BEGINNER'S GUIDE *to* HOLY FRIDAY

WITNESS *at the* CROSS



AMY-JILL
LEVINE

PRAISE FOR *WITNESS AT THE CROSS*

In each chapter of *Witness at the Cross*, Levine parses out the Gospel's witness accounts of Jesus's crucifixion and invites readers to be transformed by this theological symphony of the cross. This informative, witty, and accessible study provides a welcome preaching and teaching resource for clergy and laity. Small group leaders will also appreciate its six-chapter format ideal for a Lenten study.

—**Rev. Dr. Deborah Appler**, Professor of Hebrew Bible,
Moravian Theological Seminary

Amy-Jill Levine reminds us that the story of Jesus's death is something we do not just read; we are meant to experience it. In *Witness at the Cross*, she takes us by the hand and walks with us through the story, pausing alongside each of the characters to see and hear and feel how they individually experienced it, how each was affected by it. This is not just a fresh retelling of the Crucifixion narrative; it is a remarkably personal immersion and participation in the narrative. Amy-Jill Levine breaks open new dimensions and possibilities of the story's meaning for all of us.

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—**Rev. Dr. John S. McClure**, Charles G. Finney
Professor of Preaching and Worship, Emeritus,
Vanderbilt Divinity School

Witness at the Cross

Witness at the Cross
A Beginner's Guide to Holy Friday

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AMY-JILL LEVINE

WITNESSES

at the CROSSES

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE *to* HOLY FRIDAY

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Witness at the Cross
A Beginner's Guide to Holy Friday

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Chapter 1

BYSTANDERS AND SCOFFERS

Golgotha is heavily populated: Simon of Cyrene; the two men executed together with Jesus; the women, including Mary Magdalene and the mother of Jesus, whether at a distance or by the foot of the cross; the centurion and other soldiers; Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus; the Beloved Disciple. And there are the others: the chief priests and scribes who mock Jesus, and the bystanders who hear his words and witness the natural events marking his death. We turn first to the chief priests and their affiliates, whose historical presence at the cross I doubt, but whose literary message speaks volumes. Then we look at the bystanders in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark who deride Jesus for making statements against the Temple and think Jesus is calling Elijah. In all four accounts, someone offers Jesus a sponge soaked with sour wine, but the meaning of the gesture changes.

The Gospels are extraordinarily sparse in detailing Jesus's crucifixion—the nails, the pain—they instead focus on the responses and reactions of Jesus and the witnesses. They therefore pose questions: about our desire to deride others and to gloat at their misfortunes, about what we expect from Jesus as Lord and Savior, about how we interpret what we hear. They ask us about bystanders—are there any innocent bystanders? When we heard of children being separated at the border, what did we do? If we

are against capital punishment, do we try to stop the execution? Are lighting candles outside and praying enough? What do we do when we know something, sponsored by the state, or by the religious group to which we belong, is wrong?

They ask us, in the words of the old spiritual, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” and then they do more by asking, “What would you have thought, or done, had you been there?”

Nobody said this was going to be easy. As always, getting to Easter means time at the cross and time at the tomb.

The Different Perspectives

The passersby play different roles in the Gospels, as we might expect, since each Evangelist has different points to make. For Mark and Matthew, they are part of the chorus that taunts Jesus, along with the chief priests, elders, scribes, and soldiers, and the other victims being crucified. In Luke’s account, the “people stood by, watching,” while “the leaders scoffed” at Jesus (Luke 23:35). To what extent do the leaders speak for the people, and to what extent should they be differentiated? The question is more difficult today, in a participatory democracy wherein leaders are elected, than in antiquity, where the chief priests hold office both because of genealogy (they are of priestly descent, traced back to Moses’s brother, Aaron) and because Rome recognizes their legal authority in Judea. It was Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, who maintained Caiaphas in the role of high priest.

For Matthew and Mark, Jesus dies with the cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” a cry that reflects also the unity of enmity surrounding him. Luke’s Jesus does not die with an Aramaic prayer; Luke tends to avoid Aramaic (we’ve seen with Luke’s “the place that is called the Skull” rather than “Golgotha”). Nor does Jesus die deserted or in despair. While he is ridiculed (the Greek has a sense of turning up one’s nose) by priests and elders,

the soldiers, and one of the other two victims, he is also supported. The people here “watch” (Luke 23:35) rather than sneer; among them are the daughters of Jerusalem who wept for him. Further, in Luke’s account Jesus receives support not only from the so-called “good thief” or “penitent thief” but also by the palpable presence of the divine. Now Jesus dies with the address “Father” and then a citation from Psalm 31:5, “Into your hand I commit my spirit.” The next line of the psalm is “You have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.”

The Fourth Gospel depicts no chief priests, scribes, or elders at the cross. This depiction may be more historically accurate, as it would be odd for the chief priests, who work in the Temple and therefore should maintain states of ritual purity, to be at the site of executions and so in proximity to dead bodies. While burying a corpse is a major religious act in Judaism—it’s one of the few acts we perform on behalf of others for which there is no possibility of reciprocation, since the corpse cannot do anything for us—it does make one ritually impure. On the other hand, these priests would not be the first or the last representatives of a religious institution to be guilty of hypocrisy.

In John’s Gospel, there are no mocking passersby. The Fourth Gospel depicts Jesus as so fully in control that he chooses to take a sip of the wine offered to him and then announces, “It is finished” (John 19:30). The NRSV here reads, “Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit”: the King James Version offers the famous “[He] gave up the ghost.”

The Passersby

According to Mark 15:29-30a, “Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, ‘Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself and come down from the cross!’” Their headshaking possibly alludes to Psalm

22:7, “All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, / they shake their heads.” The term the NRSV renders “derided” is the Greek term “to blaspheme.” While the term primarily means to “abuse verbally,” the connotation of blasphemy, an offense against God, is not inappropriate. For Mark, to abuse Jesus is to abuse God. The irony: at the Sanhedrin trial, Caiaphas condemns Jesus for blasphemy (it’s a trumped-up charge, for Jesus did not blaspheme), when the passersby are the ones who literally blaspheme. The reference to the Temple reminds us of Jesus’s action there, and it also reminds us of the “false witnesses” who, at the Sanhedrin trial, accused Jesus of speaking against the Temple.

Following the darkness from noon to three o’clock, Jesus cries out in Aramaic, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which Mark translates into Greek as, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). The bystanders think that Jesus is calling for Elijah, since *Eloi* (or, closer, Matthew’s *Eli*) sounds like the ancient prophet’s name. Mark then recounts, “someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, ‘Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down’” (Mark 15:36).

Mark has, in a few short verses, introduced numerous themes established in the Gospel: Jesus’s relationship to the Temple, the cry of dereliction from Psalm 22, the concern for Elijah, and several other fulfillment citations. In all these instances, Mark positions us readers in a privileged role: we know more than the bystanders. We understand that Jesus does not remain abandoned, for we know the end of the story. Jesus had predicted both his abandonment and the restitution of relationship: he tells his disciples, “You will all become deserters; for it is written, / ‘I will strike the shepherd, / and the sheep will be scattered’ [Zechariah 13:7]. / But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee” (Mark 14:27-28). Since the scattering has come true, the reappearance will come true as well. And we also understand that Jesus is *not* calling Elijah, for

since we know the rest of the Gospel of Mark, we know that Elijah has already come twice: once as the Baptizer and second at the Transfiguration.

The Temple

The passersby taunt Jesus, “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days . . .” (Mark 15:29). We might have thought this accusation would come from the chief priests, who oversaw the Temple’s activities. Instead, distinct charges hint at distinct issues. The chief priests focus on the political, the “king of Israel,” since they are the nominal rulers. No need for a king, they may be thinking, since we have governmental authority. Jesus died sometime between 26 and 36 CE, the years Pontius Pilate was the Roman-appointed governor. There will be a king of Judea in 41 to 44, when Rome proclaimed the rule of Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great. Agrippa I appears in Acts 12:1-2, where he kills James the brother of John, the son of Zebedee; he appears again in Acts 12:20-23, where after failing to give glory to God, he is eaten by worms and dies (a splendid cautionary tale). Herod Agrippa I is succeeded, eventually, by his son, Herod Agrippa II (not much variety in names), who, along with his sisters Drucilla and Berenice, appears later in Acts. Paul attempted to convince Agrippa II of Jesus’s lordship (Acts 26) but failed; in 66, the leaders of the First Revolt against Rome succeeded in exiling Agrippa II from Jerusalem. He had no successor.

Although the priests are in charge of the Temple, the passersby reference the Temple in their mocking: “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!” (Mark 15:29-30). Did Jesus speak against the Temple? At the Sanhedrin trial, according to Mark 14:56, people gave “false testimony” or “false witness” against Jesus and that the testimonies did not agree. Among what Mark labels “false witness”

is the charge: “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands’” (Mark 14:58; see also Matthew 26:61 and Acts 6:14 for variations on this saying).

Friends, we have a problem in sorting out the various testimonies. In John 2:19, following the Fourth Gospel’s version of the Temple incident, Jesus states, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” Mark has one version of the saying as false; John has another version of the saying as true. *Oy vey* (a Yiddish interjection; a good expression to know). It seems likely to me that Jesus did say something about the Temple; Jeremiah had done the same centuries before, when the Kingdom of Judah was under threat by the Babylonian Empire. The prophet asked, “Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the LORD” (Jeremiah 7:11). The line is worth retweeting.

Josephus, our first-century historian as well as a priest who knew the Temple firsthand, reports that a fellow named “Jesus” [it was not an uncommon name], son of Ananias, predicted the Temple’s destruction (*Jewish War* 6.300-309). The local Roman authorities concluded that he was insane; during the First Revolt, he was hit by a catapulted stone and died. The people who wrote several of the Dead Sea Scrolls rejected the Temple because they found its leadership—appointed first by King Herod the Great and then by the Roman governor—illegitimate. Further, the Gospels were all written after the destruction of the Temple, which for them confirmed Jesus’s critique. Thus, Mark gives us another example of irony: the Sanhedrin thinks that they are hearing from false witnesses, but this charge is true: Jesus may well have spoken against the Temple.

For the majority of the Jewish population, in Judea and Galilee as well as the Diaspora, the Temple was a place of pilgrimage.

While God was everywhere and so could be worshipped everywhere, the Temple held a special sanctity because it was God's house (see Luke 2:49). It was also a symbol of the nation, so beloved that during the Second Revolt against Rome in 132-135, the Jewish general Bar Kokhba minted coins depicting the Temple.

For many of Jesus's initial followers, all Jews, Temple worship was consistent with Eucharistic celebrations. So too, today, people can attend a church service on Sunday morning and be part of a prayer circle or Bible study on Wednesday evening. Paul participates in Temple worship (see, e.g., Acts 21:23-26); in Romans 9:4, Paul speaks of the perpetual covenantal promises to Israel: "They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises." *Worship* here means the Temple service.

For others of Jesus's followers, and many more after 70 when Rome destroyed the Temple, Jesus becomes the new temple. The sacrifices offered by the priests in Jerusalem become first supplemented and then replaced by his final sacrifice in dying on the cross. Already Paul suggests the fluidity of the Temple's identity; he claims that "we [i.e., the members of the assembly in Corinth] are the temple of the living God" (2 Corinthians 6:16). The Epistle to the Hebrews locates Jesus both as ultimate high priest serving at the heavenly altar and as its final sacrifice. Thus, the universalizing church moves away from a national focus, represented by the Temple in Jerusalem, to a spiritual one. As the church becomes increasingly Gentile, the original concerns for the Temple, Jerusalem, and the land of Israel will fade.

Matthew, using Mark as a source, rewrites the verses concerning the Temple: first, Matthew includes the "elders" along with the chief priests and scribes; second, Matthew makes a small but momentous shift in wording. Whereas Mark 15:29-30 has these witnesses say, "You who would destroy the temple and build

it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!" Matthew 27:40 rephrases, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." We have heard the challenge, "If you are the Son of God," before. That is how Satan speaks to Jesus. In Matthew 4:3 (also Luke 4:3), the "tempter" says to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread"; in Matthew 4:6 (also Luke 4:9), he says, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, / 'He will command his angels concerning you,' / and 'On their hands they will bear you up, / so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

The bystanders, in Matthew's Gospel, take on the role of Satan. They tempt Jesus to choose to save himself rather than drink the cup prepared for him and die to save others. In the background is the concern for physical pain, be it from fasting or exposure, exhaustion or asphyxiation. People have a choice: we can side with Satan and take the easy road, or we can side with God and know that the road will be difficult. We also need to be careful here, lest we demonize people. Matthew's rephrasing is, on the level of literary artistry, brilliant. In terms of loving both neighbors and enemies, describing people as taking the role of Satan is dangerous.

As for the Temple, Paul presupposes that it will play a role in the working out of the end-times (the technical term for which is *eschatology*). In 2 Thessalonians 2:4, the apostle (or perhaps someone writing in Paul's name, for scholars debate the authenticity of this Epistle) writes of the "man of lawlessness," the "son of perdition," that "He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God."

We need an entire session on the Thessalonian correspondence. For now, we can note that Paul, who wrote before the

Jerusalem Temple was destroyed, thought that the Temple (we cannot be sure he meant the one in Jerusalem, but that seems likely) would be part of the eschatological scenario. (This verse is one of the many reasons why some Christians are convinced that a third temple [the first, built by King Solomon, was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE; the second, begun following the repatriation of the exiles from Babylon to Judea by Cyrus of Persia in 538, was substantially rebuilt by Herod the Great, with the renovations continuing through the first half of the first century] must be built. There's a major problem with this scenario).

Today, in Jerusalem, a mosque, the Dome of the Rock, stands where the first and second Temples stood. Some people, Jewish and Christian alike, anticipate a third temple. Others shudder at the idea, given the concern Muslims have to protect their own house of worship. Mosques have been built on land where churches once stood, and churches occupy spaces that once were homes to mosques; both churches and mosques stand on the land where at one time synagogues stood. We do well to know the history of the buildings and of the land where we worship. We also do well to consider which biblical predictions we anticipate being fulfilled and which we relegate to the back of the canon or the back of our minds.

The passersby are concerned about the Temple. Mark, likely writing after the destruction of the Temple in 70, sees in Jesus's Temple comments and actions a prediction of its destruction. Jesus may have predicted the Temple's destruction; had he done so, he would have been echoing Jeremiah, who predicted the destruction of the first Temple half a millennium before.

In turn, this echo helps us understand why Jesus may have spoken against the Temple. Jesus did not condemn the Temple because he thought it exploited the poor (the Temple worked on a sliding scale; it was a place where both rich and poor could

express fidelity to God). Nor was Jesus concerned about standards of ritual purity. Jesus himself spends time restoring people to states of ritual purity. Nor again was Jesus concerned that the Gentiles were restricted to the outer court since he restricted his own mission to Jews. Rather, Jesus's concern may well have been the same as that voiced by Jeremiah: worshippers who go through the motions but neither repent in their hearts nor act with love of neighbor and love of stranger. Ritual without repentance, financial contribution without fellowship and community, prayer without action, "faith without works" is dead (James 2:26).

The Cry of Dereliction

Jesus's "cry of dereliction" (another technical term), which Mark gives in Aramaic and then the Greek translation, is the first line of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The citation has multiple meanings, from its Aramaic language to its allusion to the rest of Psalm 22, to the role of lament Psalms, to the mistakes of the bystanders who hear Jesus cry.

Mark occasionally depicts Jesus as speaking in Aramaic. For example, to the little girl whom he raises, Jesus says, "Talitha cum," which, Mark tells us, means, "Little girl, get up!" (Mark 5:41). In Mark 7:34, Jesus heals a man who is deaf: "Looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha,' that is, 'Be opened.'" (When I first typed this line, I wrote "he signed and said . . ."; thus, I had Jesus fluent in sign language.) In Gethsemane, Jesus prays, "Abba, Father"—the translation is correct; "Abba" means "father," not "daddy"—for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want" (Mark 14:36). The Aramaic signals at least two things. On the aesthetic level, Aramaic in Greek (or English) texts sounds like we are getting closer to what Jesus actually said, even as it reminds us that we are reading a translation. More, the psalm was originally written

not in Aramaic but in Hebrew, so Jesus himself appears engaged in an act of translation.

Second, in Mark's Gospel, Aramaic terms occur, as we've seen, in the contexts of healing. Aramaic words lead a dead child to life and a deaf man to hearing. Perhaps the Aramaic sounded to Greek-attuned ears like a magical incantation. One reputed origin of "hocus pocus" is that it comes from the Latin Mass, when the priest recites, *Hoc est enim corpus meum* ("This is my body"). I've also read that "abracadabra" comes from an Aramaic (!) expression meaning "I create like the word." Consequently, Jesus's Aramaic cry reminds us that when Jesus spoke Aramaic earlier, death and silence are not the end of the story; those who have ears to hear will hear the good news.

The verse Jesus cites is the opening of Psalm 22. Had the witnesses at the cross heard those words correctly, they would have recognized Jesus's ongoing relationship with God. Psalm 22 is conventional; it is one of several "psalms of the lament of an individual"—another is Psalm 69, which also informs the report of the Crucifixion—and it follows a typical pattern: the lamenter expresses the problem ("Why have you forsaken me?"); praises God and reminds God of past actions of salvation ("You are holy"; you saved our ancestors); engages in self-deprecation to gain God's sympathy ("I am a worm"; other people mock me); asks God to help ("save me"; "deliver me"); and offers God an incentive ("I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters"; "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD"). To pray a "lament" is to be in communication with the divine; faith and hope are not lost. To the contrary, lament psalms reinforce faith, hope, and relationship.

A lament means that even though the divine presence feels absent, we know that God is listening. To lament is a way of arguing with God, of saying, "What is happening is not right; what is

happening is a sign not of your justice but of the triumph of sin, or Satan.” Abraham argued with God, Moses argued with God, Job argued with God, and numerous psalms have the form of lament. I’ve had my moments, and you may have too. There is nothing sinful or shameful in speaking out about pain or injustice. There is nothing sinful or shameful in lamenting to God, “I am weary with my crying, / my throat is parched. / My eyes grow dim / with waiting for my God” (Psalm 69:3).

Often, it helps.

Jesus prays, “*My God, my God.*” The possessive reinforces the relationship rather than questions it. Jesus prays, “*My God, my God,*” whereas earlier he had addressed God as “Father” (for example, the address to Abba, “Father,” in Gethsemane). The terms “Father” and “God” have different connotations. The former seems more imminent, the latter more transcendent. How we address the divine will depend on our needs, and we have multiple addresses to use.

Perhaps this sense of distance, in the shift from “Father” to “God,” is one of the reasons why Luke’s Gospel omits the cry of dereliction. Instead, in reference to the soldiers if not to all the witnesses at the cross, Jesus prays, “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34; the verse is absent from some early manuscripts and it may be a scribal import from Acts 7:60, Stephen’s speech). Further, only in Luke does Jesus die with the words “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). In Luke’s version, Jesus dies supported by the loving Father. We can imagine Jesus dying alone, hoping against hope that death is not the end, with a lament psalm on his lips. Or we can imagine him, dying, and knowing that friends are near him, knowing that his messages have not gone unheard or unheeded.

Concerning Mark’s narrative: whether Jesus had any hope left depends on how we readers understand his death. Many commentators insist that Jesus felt abandoned. Jesus knew he was going

to die. Jesus had pleaded with God, “Remove this cup from me” (Mark 14:36). He has been flagellated, force-marched in a state so weakened he could not carry the crossbeam, stripped naked, nailed to a cross, and exposed to the elements even as everyone around him tormented him. His breathing is increasingly difficult, and each breath causes more pain. He is dying. The words of the psalm, for all their connotations of faith, are real words. He feels deserted. He feels abandoned.

And yet, he did say, more than once, that his death was not the end of his story. In his first Passion prediction, Jesus teaches his disciples “that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31). Luke similarly has Jesus describe how “after they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again” (Luke 18:33); how “the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again” (Luke 24:7); and how “the Messiah [Greek: *christos*] is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day” (Luke 24:46). (By the way, there is no text from the Scriptures of Israel that makes this explicit prediction. Luke gives the impression that Jesus’s own statements have scriptural authority.)

We can have numerous assurances of life after death, of resurrection, of peace. When the time comes between life and death, will we believe them, or will we doubt? Is the opening verse of Psalm 22 the end of the story, or the beginning? The Jewish and Christian traditions insist, with assurance and in various ways, that death is not the end of the story.

The Cup of Sour Wine

After describing how the soldiers brought Jesus to Golgotha, Mark mentions that “they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it” (Mark 15:23). This drink might have been

an analgesic for dulling the pain he would endure. Jesus refuses. Perhaps Mark wants us to think of his comment at the Last Supper, “Truly [Greek: *amen*] I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God” (Mark 14:25). Here again Jesus gives his disciples, and Mark gives readers, the assurance that the cross is not the end of the story.

In Matthew’s rewrite, the drink is wine mixed with “gall” or “bile”; Jesus tastes it and then refuses to drink (Matthew 27:34). Matthew may have replaced an act of mercy with an act of malice. To give a dying man something to ease the pain is a kindness; to suggest kindness but then take one more step to increase the pain is appalling.

As the minutes tick on, Mark reports that after Jesus’s cry, “someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, ‘Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down’” (Mark 15:36). This cup of wine, like so much else in this scene, has both historical and theological implications. On the historical register: the wine is a vinegary (hence “sour”) mix, here likely the soldiers’ drink. The reference to the stick indicates that Jesus is too high up for this unnamed individual (soldier? bystander?) to bring a cup to his lips. He is literally “lifted up.”

The wine may also be an allusion to another lament psalm: Psalm 69:21 reads, “They gave me poison for food, / and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.” There could even be another nod to Psalm 22:15, “My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, / and my tongue sticks to my jaws.” While we can interpret this gesture as one small bit of kindness shown by the people at the cross, given Mark’s insistence that everyone mocked Jesus—the soldiers, the bystanders, the chief priests and elders, the other two men being crucified with him—that conclusion is doubtful. Nor does Jesus drink the wine. He gives a loud cry, and then he dies.

Ironically, I have just spent more time describing the agony of the cross than the Gospels do. For the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, the focus is less on the physical pain than it is on the psychological pain caused by taunting, rejection, helplessness, and inevitable death.

For Mark, Jesus dies mocked, deserted, and defeated. Conversely, for John, Jesus is in control, reigning from the cross on which he is lifted up. After insisting on mutual care between his mother and his Beloved Disciple (see chapters 4 and 5), Jesus prepares for his death.

John tells us, “A jar full of sour wine was standing there” (19:29). Yes, this would be something the soldiers might have had, but for John’s narrative, the jar of wine appears present as if it were a prop waiting to fulfill prophecy. (Alas, the term for this jar is not the same term as the “water jar” that the Samaritan woman leaves at the well [John 4:28], but I do like the connection.) The notice gives another nod to Psalm 69, cited in relation to the vinegary drink. At times, Gospel writers take a verse out of context; at other times, we do well to look at the full section from which the verse derives. Just as all of Psalm 22 underlies the Crucifixion narrative, so does all of Psalm 69, another psalm of the lament of an individual. This psalm begins, “Save me, O God” (69:1). The psalmist details the enmity of others: “More in number than the hairs of my head / are those who hate me without cause . . . / my enemies who accuse me falsely” (69:4). He pleads on behalf of others in a way that Jesus’s early followers could see themselves, “Do not let those who hope in you be put to shame because of me” (69:6), and so on. When we review this psalm, we find another familiar verse, as if John were saying, “I told you this psalm was important.” Psalm 69:9 reads, “It is zeal for your house that has consumed me”: John cited this verse, in chapter 2, in relation to the Temple scene. John 2:17 reads, “His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’”

John continues, “So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth” (John 19:29). The reference to a hyssop branch sends us to Exodus 12:22a, the directions on what the Israelite slaves should do with the blood of the lamb they had sacrificed on the eve of their escape from Egypt. Moses instructs, “Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood in the basin.” In John’s Gospel, Jesus is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29; cf. 1:36), and he dies, in John’s chronology, when the Passover lambs are being sacrificed in the Temple.

Jesus is the Fourth Gospel’s new temple. John had already told us this. To the Samaritan woman’s question about the proper site of worship, Mount Gerizim in Samaria or Mount Zion in Jerusalem, Jesus responds, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.” He continues, “But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him” (John 4:21, 23).

At this point, you may well be getting the impression that every word in John sends us to another text, and another nuance, and another theological insight. You would be correct.

John reports, “When Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the Scripture), ‘I am thirsty’” (John 19:28). In the Synoptics, while Jesus says nothing about his thirst, the bystanders or soldiers offer him sour wine, which he refuses. Here in John, Jesus says, “I am thirsty,” “I thirst.” This single word in Greek is his penultimate statement in the Gospel.

“I thirst” first echoes several psalms: “My soul thirsts for God, / for the living God” (Psalm 42:2); “O God, you are my God, I seek you, / my soul thirsts for you” (Psalm 63:1). Along with these theological concerns, there are also anthropological ones,

for Jesus, as the divine incarnate, thirsts to be in connection with humanity and to draw humanity to himself. When he says to the Samaritan woman, “Give me a drink” (John 4:7), he is speaking about more than running water; he is wanting to be in communion with her and to give her living water. “I thirst,” and Jesus shows a life marked by need. He thirsts, and others need to quench that thirst. He wants others to thirst for him. And, unlike in the Synoptic account, Jesus drinks the wine that is given to him. John 19:30 reports, “When Jesus had received the wine, he said, ‘It is finished.’” And then he dies. His last act is receiving the wine that others had given to him.

John’s Gospel works to change the way we understand language and so to change the way we understand our lives. “Wind” becomes “Spirit”; “running water” becomes “living water”; light and dark have cosmic implications; any hour can become *the* hour when time and space become renewed. The next time we feel thirsty, will we think of iced tea or living water? When we think of wine (or, for some, grape juice), will we think of a gift given to another who searches for communion with others? John reshapes our language and so reshapes our world.

At the end of John’s account, after Jesus takes the drink, he utters his final words: “It is finished.” Then “he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (John 19:30). His spirit? His Spirit? Ancient Greek does not distinguish capital from lowercase letters. The spirit could be the Spirit. The Holy Spirit may have been with Jesus the entire time, another witness at the cross. The Spirit, like the wind, is everywhere, although we do not always notice it. Inhale and exhale, breathe, and feel not just your lungs, your *pneuma* (as in pneumonia or pneumatic), but feel the Spirit, which is what the Greek word *pneuma* means. And we also wait, for in the next chapter of John’s Gospel, Jesus will bestow this Spirit on his disciples. But that is another story.

The King of the Jews

Mark 15:26 mentions that the inscription on the *titulus*, the marker that identified the crime for which the victim suffered, read, “The King of the Jews” (see also Matthew 27:37; Luke 23:38). The *titulus* indicates that Jesus dies on the charge of sedition, not blasphemy or speaking against the Temple. Thus, his death is a warning to all passersby—local or from the Diaspora: this is what Rome does to any who challenge, or are perceived to be challenging, the empire.

Only in John’s Gospel does the *titulus* become a controversial matter. According to John’s elaboration, the title is not simply “King of the Jews” but “Jesus of Nazareth [or, Nazorean], the King of the Jews” (19:19). John adds Jesus’s name and hometown. Let there be no mistake: for Pilate, the title is meant to humiliate both Jesus and his fellow Jews. For Pilate, Rome, not popular support, appoints kings. But for John’s readers, Jesus of Nazareth, and Jesus of Nazareth only, is the king of the Jews. The title is correct, although Pilate and his soldiers do not know this. Artistic depictions with the letters I.N.R.I. on the *titulus* follow John’s Gospel. The letters derive from the Latin (Jerome’s Vulgate) translation: *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum*.

John records, “Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek” (John 19:20). With this line, John adds to the list of passersby. The verse gives me pause. The historian in me wonders how many people could read. While the level of literacy among the Jewish population may have been higher than the empire-wide average, it was still not high. We only have good rates of literacy with the rise of public schools.

The politically aware part of me thinks of how in many locations signs appear in more than one language (with English usually included). In other places, people have attempted to

restrict the public use of foreign languages with the cry, “If they want to live here, let them learn . . .” Pontius Pilate thus becomes a representative of multiculturalism and international welcome. Who knew? I once proposed to use this verse regarding multiple translations in support of teaching foreign language in the public school system; my friends suggested that the support would be limited since Pilate is not a great role model.

Other questions surface in reading the Fourth Gospel’s account. We read about “many Jews.” How many Jews saw this sign and lamented that Rome was again executing one of their own people? Did they stop, or did they continue doing whatever they had planned? Do we read a sign—a billboard, or a sign in a person’s hands—and drive on? Do we hear of another death and then go on with our day? Or does one person’s death change everything? When do we notice?

The “chief priests of the Jews” knew about the sign, and they attempted to change the wording. They tell Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’” Pilate denies the request with a terse, “What I have written I have written” (John 19:21-22). The move to change the sign is not a practical one: “many Jews” had already seen it. I am reminded of politicians, athletes, and movie stars who attempt to walk back what they have said or posted. There are enough tapes or screenshots to show their hypocrisy. The chief priests are showing their desperation.

It would not be the first time. When Pilate had asked the chief priests at Jesus’s trial, “Shall I crucify your king?” they respond, “We have no king but the emperor [Greek: *Caesar*]” (John 19:15). With the titulus, Pilate mocks the chief priests. But that earlier scene opens another question: Who is the ultimate, rightful king? The answer “Caesar”—or any political authority—is never the right answer.

Ironically (so much in John's narrative is ironic), Jesus *never claimed* to be "King of the Jews." To the contrary, after Jesus had fed the five thousand (the one miracle story in all four canonical Gospels), in John's account, "When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself" (John 6:15). He could have taken the throne of this world had he wanted it; he did not. His enthronement, his being "lifted up," for John, is his Crucifixion.

To the contrary again, when Pilate asked him about being "King of the Jews" (John 18:33), Jesus responded, "My kingdom is not from this world...my kingdom is not from here" (John 18:36). The statement raises questions about Constantine gaining an empire under the sign of the cross, and of nation-states with crosses on their flags. To what extent should church and state be mutually implicated? If Jesus is not a king in an earthly political sense, why do some of his followers want their political systems to be "Christian" ones? Are disciples to be "in the world but not of it," or are followers to "love the world" as God so did and do their best to create a heaven on earth?

Chief Priests, Scribes, and Elders

Mark's account emphasizes Jesus's utter humiliation and abandonment: passersby, chief priests and scribes, and the two men crucified with him all question, in distinct ways, his messianic status. For the chief priests and scribes, the taunting concerns Jesus's messianic status and the role of belief. After describing the taunts by others, Mark 15:31-32 reports, "In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah [Greek: *christos*], the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.'"

With these lines, Mark brings the hostility Jesus faced from the scribes and chief priests full circle. As early as 2:6-7, Mark records that after Jesus told the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven,” “Some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ‘Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’” This same concern for blasphemy reappears at the Sanhedrin trial, where Jesus acknowledges that he is the “Messiah [Greek: *christos*], the Son of the Blessed One” and the chief priests accuse him of blasphemy (see Mark 14:61-64). The charges, throughout, are false, but a false charge can nevertheless help us to think about actual concerns.

The first false charge is that Jesus forgives the paralyzed man’s sins. Technically, he does not. Rather, using what grammarians call the “divine passive,” he states that the sins were forgiven. Had he done the forgiving himself, he would have said, “I forgive you.”

Second, to call oneself a child of God is not blasphemous. Luke’s genealogy describes Adam as a “son of God” (Luke 3:38), and so, by extension, every one of us can claim the designation. We are all children of God. The high priest’s charge of blasphemy is just as false as the other charges brought against Jesus.

The concern for blasphemy, although a false charge in the Gospel, raises several contemporary concerns. In some countries, today, blasphemy is a capital crime, and in many others (you can look these up; you may be surprised) blasphemy is a punishable offense. The first question: Can we recognize blasphemy when we hear it? For example, to talk about the “angry, wrathful, tribal God of the Old Testament” versus the “merciful, loving, universal God of the New Testament” is blasphemy: that was the view of the second-century heretic Marcion. Yet this image is still common in many a church today. Is using the expression “Jesus Christ” to express exasperation blasphemous? What about “godd---” (or,

the southern spoonerism variant, “dadgum,” which I heard for the first time when I moved to North Carolina to do graduate work at Duke)? Some of us still get concerned with profanity: is blasphemy on the same register as those words that you all know, but that I prefer not to type?

Next, should there be laws against blasphemy? Should there be sanctions against people who use an image of Jesus in an obscene way as some cartoonists have done with images of the prophet Muhammad?

The chief priests and scribes, who accused Jesus of blasphemy, now taunt Jesus in a way that shows the limitations of translation. They acknowledge, “He saved others.” With this statement, they confirm their awareness of Jesus’s miracles. This point is clear in the Greek text, but most English translations mask it. When Jairus begs Jesus to heal his daughter, he says, “Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may *be saved* and live” (Mark 5:23), emphasis added, emphasis added; most English translations offer “so that she may be made well.” Similarly, the woman suffering from hemorrhages thinks, “If I but touch his clothes, I will *be saved*” (Mark 5:28); again, English versions offer “be made well.” When Jesus heals this woman, he tells her, “Daughter, your faith has saved you (English: “made you well”); go in peace, and be healed of your disease” (Mark 5:34).

The taunts of the chief priests and elders help us to see the varied meanings of the term *saved*. We may think of salvation as something that happens after we die or following the final judgment. For Jesus and his early followers, that’s one possible meaning. In Israel’s Scriptures, being “saved” usually means not an end-of-life or end-of-time situation; it means being rescued from whatever ills beset us today: slavery in Egypt, exile in Babylon, famine or plague, threats of war, death from disease. The act of saving can be the entry of the divine into history, but it can also be a human act: of healing, of protection, of economic support,

of peacemaking. Saving is something that is not restricted to the divine; saving is something we can do.

Saving is something also that we can feel: recovery from an illness, safety after an accident. I have heard students say more than once, “That extra study session saved me from failing,” or, for me, less celebratory, “She was going to ask me to translate this sentence, but I was saved by the bell.”

The chief priests and scribes say, “He cannot save himself. . . . come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.” They are thinking of salvation in terms of rescue from death. They have missed the fact that in the Gospels, salvation is not simply a rescue from present danger; it is also the state of a right relationship between humanity and divinity. The first time the Greek word meaning “saved” appears in the New Testament is Matthew 1:21, the angel’s message to Joseph concerning Mary’s pregnancy: “She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” The name *Jesus* derives from a Hebrew root that means “salvation.” To sin is to create alienation, whether between people (you sin against me; I sin against you) or between humanity and divinity (we sin against God).

Jewish teaching recognizes that people will sin; the Torah provides several mechanisms for restoring relationship: atonement by individuals and by the community, restitution, sacrifice, and so on. Jesus, for his followers, not only prompts people to atone—hence his meals with tax collectors and sinners; he’s not at the table just for gourmet dining—but also offers his life as a mechanism for that atonement. Matthew and Mark state that he dies as “a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28 // Mark 10:45).

To restrict the idea of salvation to a personal postmortem status means to ignore the role of salvation in relation to slavery, sickness, exile, or despair; such restriction of meaning is to fail to acknowledge human need for help and human gratitude when it

comes. Salvation cannot just be eschatological. But to ignore the need humanity has for reconciliation is to ignore the importance of community and, in the Christian tradition, of the cross. Indeed, the chief priests and scribes, in their taunting, preclude both community and reconciliation. Mark (15:31) tells us that they “were also mocking him among themselves”—among themselves. They do not talk to Jesus, and they do not talk to the passersby. They have isolated themselves from community rather than promoted reconciliation.

Jesus states, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mark 8:35). When the chief priests and scribes say, “Let the Messiah [Greek: *christos*], the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe” (Mark 15:32), they are misreading Jesus’s message. To “see and believe” requires seeing the death of Jesus and believing that this death is not the end of the story. Jesus must lose his life to gain it, for himself and, according to the Gospels, for everyone else.

Finally, when the chief priests and scribes taunt Jesus to come down so that they may see and believe, they get Mark’s Christology—the understanding of who the Christ is and what he does—backward. In Mark’s Gospel, belief is not based on seeing a miracle. To the contrary, Mark states flatly that in Nazareth, Jesus’s hometown, Jesus “could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them” (Mark 6:5). The point is understated since I’d take healing the sick to be a fine deed of power. For Mark, belief comes before the miracle, not after. More, belief for Mark is to be based not in the witnessing of mighty works but in the witnessing of the Crucifixion. Mark’s Christology is not about miracles; it is about suffering and dying as a ransom. To go to church for the show, for the deeds of power, is to miss Mark’s point.

The chief priests and scribes, who have clearly missed the point (missed the Mark?), ironically fulfill one more prophetic statement. They tell Jesus to escape the nails fixing him to the cross so that they will see and believe. The comment echoes Jesus's statement about why he teaches in parables, "in order that they may indeed look, but not perceive" (Mark 4:12), a citation from Isaiah 6:9-10. The parable, the mystery of the life and death of Jesus, is opaque to them.

And Now?

The chief priests, elders, scribes, and leaders are absent from John's Gospel. Only in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew does Jesus cry the first line of Psalm 22, and only in these two Gospels do the people at the cross think he is calling Elijah. In Matthew and Mark, the bystanders taunt Jesus; in Luke some are his supporters; in John, they are absent. Our major concern is not to question the historicity of the events (although I admit that the historian in me does have questions). The major concern is sorting what the Evangelists prompt us to notice, urge us to question, and suggest that we learn. Elijah has already come, twice: first in the figure of John the Baptist and second at the Transfiguration. Would we recognize him if we saw him? What tells us that the messianic age is beginning?