

The Function of the Charge of Blasphemy in Mk. 14:64.

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At Mark 14:64, at the conclusion of Jesus' "trial" before the Sanhedrin, Mark has Jesus' chief interrogator and judge, the (here unnamed) High Priest, proclaim that Jesus has committed the crime of βλασφημία, the wilful and arrogant derision of the power and majesty of the God of Israel.¹ The judgment, which secures a death sentence for Jesus from the rest of the Sanhedrin,² is issued after, and in direct response to, Jesus' announcement in Mk. 14:62 that he is indeed "the Christ, the Son of the Blessed" whom his interrogator and all the Sanhedrin will eventually "see" being exalted by the God of Israel to this God's "right hand" and (if καὶ ἐρχόμενον μετὰ τῶν νεφελῶν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ is a separate claim -- see below, note 8) also as one invested and acting with the authority to judge Israel and the world.³

Of the many questions that surround the interpretation of this passage, the one that I wish to deal with here is one that has not only long intrigued interpreters, but which (if I judge things aright) has recently received renewed attention due to the publication in 2000 of Darrell Bock's *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism*.⁴ Why it is that Mark presents the High Priest and the Sanhedrin as responding in the way they do to Jesus' declaration? What, according to Mark, is the reason the High Priest and those gathered with him pronounce Jesus a blasphemer and worthy of death?

One answer that has long been given (and which Bock's work on blasphemy and exaltation in Judaism ultimately attempts to show, if not to prove, is a real possibility) is, of course, that *historically this is exactly what the High Priest did*. Jesus was actually pronounced guilty of the crime of blasphemy during a "trial" before the Sanhedrin and Mark is here simply passing on historical tradition.⁵

But critical scholarship has tended to reject this answer for a variety of reasons, among which (and for our purposes, perhaps the most crucial) is the observation, grounded in both narrow and wide studies of the idea of "blasphemy" in first century Judaism, that nothing that Mark reports Jesus as saying at Mk. 14:62 would or could have been characterized as Mark says it was. As Raymond Brown and others have argued, the claim to be Christ/Messiah (or Son of God -- if a separate title here⁶) was never considered blasphemous.⁷ And given that (as Bock himself has demonstrated) Judaism recognized that certain human figures, including the Messiah and the one designated by Daniel and Enoch as "(the) Son of Man," had been or could be divinely called "to sit" at God's right hand and to exercise judgement over Israel and the nations, neither was a claim such as we find Jesus apparently making about his heavenly enthronement.⁸

Given this, it would seem that if we are to answer the question I wish to deal with here, we must move away from historical investigation about what was and was not considered blasphemous in Judaism in the first century and how this does or does not square with what Mark says is the occasion and cause of

the charge leveled against Jesus, and adopt some other approach.

The one that I will explore here involves following the lead given us when we take into consideration what Ernst Lohmeyer, Vincent Taylor, and other scholars have noted is indicated by the fact that the question from the High Priest which begins the portion of Jesus' interrogation that culminates in the blasphemy charge (i.e., εἰ ὁ Χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ εὐλογητοῦ) is fronted with an unnecessary σου. According to Lohmeyer and Taylor, this σου is "emphatic and contemptuous," and since εἰ by itself in this interrogative context would mean "are you", the sense of the question Mark has the High Priest ask is not "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed", but "Are *you* of all people [God forbid!] the Christ ...?".⁹ If so, then, for Mark, what lies at the heart of the blasphemy charge -- what offends the High Priest's and the Sanhedrin's sensibilities and makes them feel that the God of Israel has been denigrated and insulted -- is not *what* Jesus claims about himself, but that it is *Jesus* who is making Messianic claims.

But why, according to Mark, would the High Priest and the Sanhedrin feel so strongly not only that Jesus of all people is not someone whom God would ever ordain as his Messiah (or make judge of Israel and the nations), but that the claim on the part of Jesus to the contrary convicts Jesus of blasphemy? The answer lies, I think, in establishing six things.

1. Who, according to Mark, God was in the eyes of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin judgement that Jesus is a blasphemer means, after all, that Jesus has offended their conception of who God is.
2. What, according to Mark, the Temple -- the edifice whose destruction the Markan Jesus, claiming divine warrant, symbolically enacted in Mk. 11:15-17 before astonished and enraged Sanhedrinists¹⁰ -- represented to the members of the Sanhedrin.
3. What, if anything, the Christology of the Sanhedrin was -- that is to say, who and what in Mark's eyes the Temple Aristocracy believed the Messiah was to be, what the God of Israel has called him to do, and what the means were that this God had ordained as fitting for the accomplishment of the Messianic task.
4. Who it is, according to the Sanhedrin, who gets to do what Jesus apparently claims is his right to do, namely, to sit at God's right hand.
5. What, if anything, the Markan Sanhedrin thought to be the case with respect to the question of what period in Israel's remembered and anticipated national history they and the rest of Israel now stood.
6. Who or what, at the point of Jesus' "trial", the Markan Sanhedrin know Jesus to be.

God in the Eyes of the Sanhedrin

There seems little reason to doubt that with respect to their vision of God, Mark intends us to see that those who condemn Jesus as a blasphemer accept and profess what is asserted in the most famous of all Jewish prayers, the Shema:

Hear O Israel, Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one (Deut 6:4)

as well as in the Psalms that are derived from or grounded in it, such as Ps. 96, which note that

*... great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be revered above all gods
For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the LORD made the heavens ...
Say among the nations "The LORD is King!" (NRSV)*

That is to say, the Markan Sanhedrinists believe that the God of Israel, the creator God, was alone Lord of the universe and that he had entered into covenant with Israel, electing her to be his people for the express purpose of making his name known among the nations who were in rebellion against him.¹¹

There is also little doubt that Mark intends us to see that for the Sanhedrinists, Yahweh was one who had not only chosen to dwell among his people on the mount named Zion where the Temple in which they worshiped their god now stood and that he would defend this hill against all attackers and usurpers; he was also was irrevocably committed to defending and vindicating his people when they were rendered desolate by the nations who refused to accept his sovereignty.¹²

Perhaps most important of all was their belief that Yahweh had called Israel to announce and sustain her identity as his people through obedience to a code of "purity" -- or, as Marcus Borg has labeled it, a "politics of holiness" -- that stressed (a) "separation", first from "the polutions of the nations" and then from those Jews who had rendered themselves as "sinners" by going over to the ways of the nations, and (b) the necessity of strict adherence to, observation of, and zeal for certain practices and institutions which marked off Jew from Gentile, especially Temple, Sabbath, fasts, food laws, and "cleanliness".¹³

The Temple in the Eyes of the Sanhedrin

Our main source for understanding what, according to Mark, the Temple represented to the members of the body which condemns Jesus as a blasphemer is the statement that Mark has Jesus utter immediately

following, and as the justification of, what has traditionally but wrongly (at least for Mark) been called the “cleansing of the Temple”. As is well known, the statement is a composite quotation, the elements of which are taken from Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11, which charges the Temple aristocracy with turning the Temple from its divinely intended and final purpose of being a “house” where the outcasts of Israel and all the nations will join together in prayer and worship with those whom the God of Israel has already gathered to be joyful in his presence¹⁴ into a “den of thieves”.

Contrary to a long standing view that is still frequently mooted¹⁵, for Mark the target of the statement is not some real or imagined economic exploitation on the part of the Temple aristocracy of those who bought sacrificial animals from the Temple stock or who traded foreign currency for the coinage acceptable for the payment of temple taxes, let alone the Temple’s commercialization.¹⁶ Rather, the target, in Mark’s presentation of things, is the fact that, as in Jeremiah’s day, the Temple had been made over by those responsible for insuring that it would fulfil the purpose for which God had intended it – to bring blessings to the nations -- into a focal point of the hope of national liberation *from* those nations and was now being put forward as a symbol both of a divine guarantee of security against Israel’s enemies when Israel was beset by them and of God’s ultimate subjugation of the nations to Israel.¹⁷ It is the ground of the claim, against which the elect must guard themselves, that at Mk. 13:6, 21-22 the Markan Jesus notes will come from false Christs and false prophets, that flight from Jerusalem and the Temple is not necessary even when the “abomination of desolation” appears and Jerusalem is on the verge of being laid waste.

For the Sanhedrin, then, the Temple represents a warrant for pursuing a path of religious exclusivism and revolutionary zeal.

The Christ and his work according to the Sanhedrin.

There are at least three places in Mark’s Gospel where Sanhedrinist Christology is revealed: (1) in the notice of the Chief Priests mocking Jesus on the cross at Mk. 15:24-32; and (2) in the story of Peter’s “confession” at Caesarea Philippi (Mk. 8:27-31) where, according to Mark, Peter gives voice to the Christological views of “men”; and (3) in Jesus’ question about the Son of David at Mk. 12:35-37.

1. The Chief Priests’ mockery

Within the larger story of Jesus’ crucifixion -- a story linked inextricably with Mark’s accounts of Jesus’ Sanhedrin “trial” through the repetition there of this “trial’s” major motifs of Temple charge, mockery, Jesus as Messiah, and blasphemy¹⁸ -- Mark presents members of the Sanhedrin as moved, when seeing Jesus upon a Roman cross where he is openly proclaimed as Israel’s King, to exchange among themselves a particular jibe against him. This jibe both takes up and follows on from the public recrimination derisive passers-by have just hurled at Jesus after noting that he was one who supposedly claimed the ability to destroy and

rebuild the Temple.¹⁹ It also extends that recrimination to include both a taunt over the fact that “this Christ, this King of Israel”

... saved others ... but he can't save himself!

and a call to Jesus to provide for them a display of power which would both reverse and repudiate as unfitting for him the fortune he is suffering at the hands of the enemies of Israel and show him to be God's Christ.

Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.²⁰

It is unlikely, as is sometimes thought, that what is expressed in all of this, especially in the adversative contrast between “he saved others” and “he cannot save himself,” is a sense on the part of the Sanhedrinists of how ironic it is that one who has been able to heal others and restore their physical well being, cannot preserve his own life. For Mark not only casts the wording of the taunt in terms of themes found in his story of Jesus' “trial” and in scenes paralleling the cross mockery (Jesus as Messiah and as judge of the nations, Jesus as King); he likens the taunt's origin and character to the vindictive and sarcastic remarks of the passers-by,²¹ the substance of which is rooted in and calls to mind the Temple charge of Mk. 14:58.²² By this he makes clear that the claims that the Sanhedrinists here focus on, react to, and are intent to skewer and deride are those made by or about Jesus during his Sanhedrin “trial”. Notably, neither Jesus' healings nor his role as a miracle worker were ever taken up or mentioned as an issue in that “trial” (or even in the mockery which followed it), let alone seized upon as things which laid the ground for any charge or insult made against him.²³ Rather, what we have here is an inverse expression of a fundamental belief of the Sanhedrinists -- that a God-sent “deliverer” who cannot or will not secure his own survival, and even more importantly, who allows himself to be subjected to humiliation and defeat by the nations, and who will not rule over them, cannot be God's Χριστος.²⁴

This is noteworthy. For its implication is that what Markan Sanhedrinists do believe about God's Christ is that he is one who will reveal himself in might and that he will be both divinely enjoined to resist those who stand against him and God's elect and divinely empowered to rule as a king who defeats the nations when they attempt to subjugate him to their power.

2. The “confession” at Caesarea Philippi

In his story of Peter's “confession” at Caesarea Philippi, Mark presents Jesus and Peter as engaged in a

heated dispute over the question of the means by which Jesus as Messiah is to achieve the fulfillment of his Messianic vocation.²⁵ In Mk 8.31 Jesus declares in the first of three passion predictions, or, to use the phraseology of C. Myers, “death portents”,²⁶ that in accordance with his understanding of the will of God in this regard, the Messianic task (which is portrayed by Mark as the decisive victory of God's sovereignty over the world)²⁷ is to be accomplished only through suffering and a willingness to be subjected to death (πολλὰ παθεῖν καὶ ἀποδοκιμασθῆναι) at the hands of enemies.²⁸ But at Mk 8.32 Peter disdains this declaration. In his demeanour towards Jesus and in his reaction to Jesus' announcement, he [Peter] not only vociferously asserts that, on the contrary, suffering and death are *not* God's plans for his Messiah. He also implicitly proposes that Jesus *as Messiah* should deny what he has just said and adopt some other means to execute his divine commission²⁹ -- which, as I have argued elsewhere, Mark goes on in Mk. 8:34-9:1 and in Mk. 9:30-37 and Mk. 10:32-45 to explicate as involving the Messiah acting as a triumphalistic warrior king who saves Israel and brings it to its destiny by waging wars of deliverance.³⁰ Then, as is well known, Mark has Jesus declare that the Christology that Peter shows himself believing in and holding to, the Christology out of which his rebuke of Jesus arises, is specifically that “of men” (τῶν ἀνθρώπων, Mk. 8:33). In doing this, Mark not only labels Peter's Christology as false and misguided and in opposition to God's own decree. *He, through Jesus, identifies it with the Christology held and espoused by the Sanhedrin.* For, as Mark's use of the expression τῶν ἀνθρώπων his readers to the fact that, when used as it is here as an antonym for “of God”³¹ and in a context of debate about God's will, the phrase stands as a cipher for positions held by the Jewish religious authorities who stand in opposition to Jesus.³²

Here then the Christology of the Markan Sanhedrin is revealed as one grounded in a triumphalist vision of the Messiah and the Messianic task.

3. *The Question about the Son of David*

Mark reports that at the end of a series of debates with the Temple aristocracy and their retainers that arises out of Jesus' explicit challenge to their Zion ideology, Jesus asks a question that notes not only that the Sanhedrin has a Christology, but that this Christology is explicit. The Messiah is υἱὸς Δαυίδ, the Son of David.

Now, as Lohse and others have demonstrated, in Mark's time Son of David Christology was rooted in a set of Messianic expectations that finds its preeminent expression in such texts as Ps. Solomon 17 and 4 Ezr. 12 in which the work that the υἱὸς Δαυίδ, the “Lord's anointed”, would do on the commission of the God of Israel is centered in three things:

(a) in gathering a people from among ethnic Israel and leading them in the ways of righteousness;

(b) in ensuring that there was among them none of the “arrogance” displayed by the children of the covenant who, when persecuted by one who “did in Jerusalem all the things the gentiles do for their god in their cities” for obedience to the practices which kept Israel distinct from the nations and ensured deliverance from oppression, went over to the Gentiles and adopted their ways; and

(c) in “shattering unrighteous rulers,” “purging Jerusalem from nations that trample (her) down to destruction” by “destroying them with a rod of iron”.³³

Accordingly, what Jesus’ declaration that the Sanhedrin believes the Messiah to be David’s Son shows us regarding Mark’s presentation of Sanhedrinist Christology is that it is one that is grounded in the view that the Messiah is to be a warrior king of Israel who is to be raised up and elected by God for a particular dual purpose: (1) to maintain and reinforce the traditional ethnic and ultimately national boundaries between Israel and the nations by enforcing, ruthlessly if necessary, obedience on the part of Jews to the practices and institutions by which her god-ordained separateness had historically been announced and sustained, and (2) to purge the land of Israel, and especially Jerusalem and the Temple, of Gentiles through holy war.

The Sanhedrinist View of Who Gets to “Sit at God’s Right Hand”?

At first glance, given the data available to us, it appears that the only answer that we can give to the question of who the Markan Sanhedrinists believe gets to “sit” in God’s presence is a negative one: *not Jesus*. But is this really all that can be said? Before we come to any conclusion on the matter, let us first take note of the answer to our present question that, as Bock has shown, was given in the Judaism of Mark’s day. Besides certain angelic figures, those who were perceived as having the right and authority to “sit at the right hand of God” were first and foremost the major luminaries of Israel’s history (Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, and Ezra) who were remembered either as those who had been instrumental in bringing Israel into existence or who had helped to maintain Israel as faithful people by calling it to be obedient to the Law and to uphold its distinctiveness among the nations. But this group also included, notably, the Maccabean martyrs who “consecrated themselves for the sake of God” in order to bring about punishment of the enemies of Israel and the purification of the land from the pollution of the nations, the Enochian Son of Man who comes to the rescue of the righteous, and the Davidic deliverer who is dedicated to giving to the Sons of Light “rest from all the sons of Belial who will seek to cause them to stumble that they may destroy them

and swallow them up” [4Q174. 7-8].³⁴ Is this catalogue something the Markan Sanhedrin would endorse? Are these figures the ones who, in their eyes, would be enthroned with God? To a large extent, the final answer to these questions depends on whether or not these figures are in any way the antitheses of who, according to Mark, the Sanhedrin knows Jesus to be. But since, as we have seen, Mark presents the Sanhedrin as believing that the Messiah was to be one of the figures which Judaism perceived as ultimately having the right and authority to “sit” in the presence of Israel’s God, then we may state preliminarily that the answer is yes.

Where Israel Was according to the Sanhedrin

Notably it is Mark’s presentation of the Christological beliefs of the Markan Sanhedrin which allows us to pinpoint where, according to Mark, the Sanhedrin viewed Israel within the scheme of its remembered and anticipated history. Since no one hopes, as the Markan Sanhedrin obviously does, for a deliver from national oppression unless one is under it, or for a king who will free his nation from Gentile domination unless it is subjected to it, or for a ruler who leads his people into a land purged of the pollution of profane enemies unless they are deprived of it, the Markan Sanhedrin believes, as apparently many Jews of Mark’s period actually did³⁵, that (to use Tom Wright’s summation of things) the nation was (still) “in exile”. But it is not only here that Mark shows us this. That the Markan Sanhedrinists hold to this belief is also what Mark indicates, if not underscores, in his notice at 1:5 that “all the people from the region of Judea, *including all the inhabitants of Jerusalem*”, traveled out to and accepted, while confessing their sins,” the “the baptism of repentance” being administered by one whom Mark specifically portrays as announcing the end of Israel’s exile and the beginning of a new exodus.

We should not miss the import of this last point. For it signals that, according to Mark, the Sanhedrinists believed that the God of Israel was now setting things in motion to liberate his people from their present bondage.

Jesus according to the Sanhedrin

Who is Jesus in the view of the Markan Sanhedrinists? He is -- and this Mark shows the Sanhedrinists knew *before* Jesus’ open declaration of his identity at his “trial” -- one who has claimed to be authorized and empowered by the God of Israel to act and speak on his behalf specifically with respect to the question of the divine plan for the liberation of Israel from its exile. More importantly, he is, according to Mark, one whose claim to act on God’s behalf and speak in his name they were initially convinced was true. We see this in Mark’s notice at Mk. 2:12 that constituent and representative members of the Markan Sanhedrin, give “glory to god” after Jesus proves through a “sign” that he does not, as they first think, engage in blasphemy when he claims the right and ability to forgive sins, but is, as he claims, God’s agent, appointed and

empowered to heal and restore.

But, as is shown in their (and their retainers') expressions of concern over what Jesus says and does subsequent to their initial acceptance of him as God's agent, he is also one *who does not go on to do what they think one so appointed and empowered should do*. Rather than enforce the boundary markers by which Israel's distinctiveness is maintained, he breaks them down. Rather than maintain the practices by which Israel announces its determination to remain separate (food laws, not eating with the "unclean," purity) and shields itself from becoming polluted by the nations, he abandons them and goes so far as to proclaim that they are no longer in force (Mk. 7). Rather than support the Temple and the Zion ideology behind it, he declares that the Temple is now superfluous and that reliance on it as surety against Israel's destruction is the very thing that will bring its destruction about. Rather than proclaim that the Gentiles are doomed, he declares that they are the object of God's favour. Rather than call Israel to engage in holy war, he calls it to the cross. And most notable of all, he does all of this in the name of Israel's God.

The Reason for the Charge

With all of this before us, we are now in a position to answer the question of why it was, according to Mark, that Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin accuse Jesus of the crime of blasphemy. It is because in stating that *he* is Messiah, the Son of the Blessed, *Jesus deprives God of his righteousness*. By affirming that *he* has been elected to sit at God's right hand, Jesus claims that God has no intention, as the Sanhedrinists believe God has, of fulfilling his covenant promises to Israel to restore her fortunes, to bring her home, and to make her renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth by "turning away her enemies," repaying them in kind for their oppressions against his people, and establishing her as ruler and judge over them. For by their lights, the path that Jesus advocates as divinely mandated for Israel is not only one that God does not endorse. It is one that, if followed, will bring his elect to ruin and make God's name a mockery among the Gentiles.

II.

But why does Mark tell us this? It is, I contend, because Mark wished to present those who brought Jesus to his death as fellow travelers with, if not actually members, of the faction within Judaism which fermented and fostered the Jewish rebellion against Rome.

Several considerations favour this contention. First, the views on God, the election of Israel, on how God would demonstrate his covenant faithfulness to Israel, and on the nature and work of the Messiah that, in Mark's eyes, were held by the Sanhedrin are those of the Zealots. Second, the Temple ideology that Mark identifies as that of the Sanhedrin is that which was propounded by the Zealots.³⁶ Third, those whom the

Sanhedrin regard as worthy of sitting at God's right hand are figures who for the Zealots were the embodiment of their ideal of zeal.³⁷ Fourth, the display of disdain and hostility that the Markan Sanhedrin shows towards those who hold the view that God does not wish the triumph of his people was something for which the Zealots were known and which they placarded as a badge of their zeal.³⁸

But what most strongly indicates Mark's intent to identify those who condemn Jesus to death with the Zealots is the fact that at an astounding number of points, Mark's narrative of the trial of Jesus recalls an event that occurred at the beginning of the War, and notably, shortly after the victory over Cestius Gallus, whose defeat was interpreted not only by the Zealots, but also by many who until then had stood against the war, as a sign that God fully endorsed the Zealot cause and sanctioned the newly begun holy war. This was the trial of Zacharias, the son of Baris, by a Zealot Sanhedrin. According to the report of Josephus,

... the Zealots set up sham courts and faked trials. They had decided to liquidate one of the most distinguished citizens, Zachariah, son of Baruch, as they were annoyed by his burning hatred of wrong and love of freedom, and his wealth made them hope not only to plunder his property but also to get rid of a man capable of destroying them. They therefore issued a categorical order, summoning seventy men in public positions to the Temple, where they turned them into a stage jury with no authority. Then they charged Zachariah with trying to betray their country to Rome and sending an offer of treason to Vespasian. There was no proof of the charges, no evidence at all, but they said that they themselves were quite convinced of his guilt and claimed that that should satisfy anyone. Zachariah realized that his fate was sealed: he had been treacherously summoned to a prison, not a court. But certain death was not going to deprive him of free speech - he stood up, scoffed at the incredibility of the charges, and in a few words disposed of the whole indictment. Then, turning the tables on his accusers, he methodically detailed all their illegalities and mercilessly exposed their mismanagement of affairs. The Zealots howled with rage and could hardly keep their hands off their swords, determined as they were to play out this farce, this sham trial to the end, and eager also, to find out whether the jurors would risk their own lives in the cause of justice. But the seventy brought in a unanimous verdict of Not Guilty, choosing to die with the defendant rather than bear the responsibility for his destruction. The Zealots greeted his acquittal with shouts of indignation, and were all enraged with the jury for not realizing that the authority bestowed on them was a mere sham. Two of the most unscrupulous fell upon Zachariah, murdered him in the middle of the Temple, and jested over his dead body: 'Now you have got our verdict too, and your trials are over.' With that they threw him out of the Temple and into the valley beneath. Then they showed their contempt for the jurors by belabouring them with the backs of their swords and driving them from the precincts. For one purpose only they refrained from murdering them - that they might go into every part of the City and let all the citizens know that they were slaves (B.J. 4.334-344).³⁹

Here, as in Mk 14:54-63, we have a capital trial before a hastily summoned Sanhedrin. Here, as in Mk. 14:54-63, the trial occurs in the Temple precincts and in an atmosphere not only of crisis but of eschatological expectation centering in the God of Israel's imminent deliverance of his people from oppression and the destruction of Israel's enemies. Here, as in Mk. 14:54-63, those who convene the trial believe in holy war. Here, as in Mark, we have the appearance of false witnesses and the sounding of the theme of a predetermined verdict. Here, as in Mark, the one brought into court is a figure who is known and identified as standing in opposition to the ideology of those who have convened his trial. Here, as in Mark, the accused speaks out forcefully against the ideology of those who would condemn him. Here, as in Mark, the remarks of the accused evoke from his accusers both physical and verbal expressions of rage and indignation. Here, as in Mark, we find an outworking of a theme that standing on the side of the accused creates risks for those who might do so. And here, as in Mark, the one accused is handed over to mockery and an ignominious death.

In the light of these parallels, it seems difficult to escape the conclusion that Mark has cast his story of Jesus' Sanhedrin "trial" and condemnation so as to call to mind the Zealot trial and condemnation of Zacharias. If so, then another conclusion follows: Mark wishes to identify those who tried and condemned Jesus with those who tried and condemned Zacharias.

III

But why would Mark wish to make such an identification? One answer seems obvious: to account for the rejection of Jesus by the representatives of his own people by laying bare the ideology that was that rejection's ground and motivation. But I think there is more to it than this. As I have argued elsewhere⁴⁰ -- assuming with Joel Marcus and others that the *Sitz-im-Leben* of Mark's Gospel was the Jewish War,⁴¹ and working from clues given in Mk. 13 in Jesus' warnings about being led astray by false Christs and false prophets who, on the basis of Dan. 9:26-27 and 11:31-35 (with their notices that those who are loyal to God shall not flee but stand firm and take action when a pagan ruler begins to set up in the Temple the abomination that makes desolate), proclaim that divine deliverance of Jerusalem from its enemies was imminent -- there is a very strong case for seeing that the occasion for the Gospel of Mark was Mark's perception that those for whom he writes were being seduced into thinking that God authorized his faithful to disdain as foolishness the way of the cross that Jesus had demanded of them and to join with the Zealot cause, embracing as "of God" the ideology and the praxis of holy war. If this is so, then Mark's identification of the Sanhedrin with the Zealots and his portrayal of why it was that the Sanhedrin viewed as blasphemous Jesus' claim to be the one whom God would vindicate as his true Christ, was to make plain something that the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews says his readers would become guilty of should they

deny their original confession -- “crucifying the Son of God for themselves all over again and holding him up to contempt”.

Notes

¹ On the nature of the crime of βλασφημία, “blasphemy”, see H.W. Beyer, ‘βλασφημῶ, βλασφημία, βλασφημῶς’, *TDNT* Vol. 1 (1964) 621-625. R. A. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, Vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 520-523; E.P. Sanders, *Jewish Law From Jesus to the Mishnah* (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990) 67-80; C. A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20* (Thomas Nelson & Sons: Nashville, 2001) 453-455.

² ἤκούσατε τῆς βλασφημίας: τί ὑμῖν φαίνεται; οἱ δὲ πάντες κατέκριναν αὐτὸν ἔνοχον εἶναι θανάτου.

³ Mk. 14:63 - Ἐγὼ εἰμι, καὶ ὄψεσθε τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐκ δεξιῶν καθήμενον τῆς δυνάμεως καὶ ἐρχόμενον μετὰ τῶν νεφελῶν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ. This is given in reply to the High Priest’s question Σὺ εἶ ὁ Χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ εὐλογητοῦ;

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism: The Charge against Jesus in Mark:14:43* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

⁵ Cf. *Blasphemy and Exaltation*, 3, 209-233. Bock’s recent book is not the only place where he has set out to explore and attempt to defend the historicity of this charge. See his earlier studies “The Son of Man Seated at God’s Right Hand and the Debate of Jesus’ ‘Blasphemy’” in *Jesus of Nazareth Lord and Christ: Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology*, J.B. Green and M. Turner, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994) 182-191; and especially “Key Texts on Blasphemy and Exaltation in the Jewish Examination of Jesus,” *SBL 1997 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997) 115-160. It was within the 1997 SBL Session devoted to discussing this second essay, and in a private conversation with Darrell immediately afterwards, that the thesis of this present essay was germinated.

⁶ On “the Son of the Blessed (God)” as a separate title in Mk. 14.61, see David Catchpole, *The Trial of Jesus: A Study in the Gospels and Jewish Historiography from 1770 to the Present Day* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971) 143-148; 200.

⁷ Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 1: 534-536; Sanders, *Jewish Law*, 67-80; Pace J.C. O’Neill, *Who Did Jesus Think He Was* (London: E.J. Brill, 1995) who argues that Jewish Law stipulated that it was forbidden for the Messiah to announce himself.

⁸ Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*. See also Donald Juel, *Messiah and Temple*, 97-102. I say “apparently” here because there is some reason to believe that in Mark’s eyes, καὶ ὄψεσθε τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐκ δεξιῶν καθήμενον τῆς δυνάμεως κτλ. is not actually a claim but only a declaration on Jesus’ part of his certainty that he will be vindicated by God as “the Christ, the Son of the Blessed”. As Juel notes (*Messiah and Temple*, 104-105), “From the remainder of the passion story it is clear that for Mark, the titles “the Christ, the Son of the Blessed” [and not “the Son of Man”] are decisive. Jesus is tried, rejected, mocked, and executed as “the King of the Jews,” “the Christ, the King of Israel” [not as “the Son of Man”]. ... And if the centrality of the messianic imagery in the passion story indicates that this is where the evangelist intends to place the emphasis in 14:61-62,” it is reasonable to infer [not only that the charge [of blasphemy] is to be related to the messianic claim,” but that the Son of Man saying does not function “as an independent source of information or a separate claim”.

⁹ Ernst Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Markus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963) 328; Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to Mark* (London: MacMillan, 1952) 567. See also C.A. Evans, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Vol 2 (Dallas: Word, 2001) 448; R. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 886.

¹⁰ Cf. Mk. 11:18. On Mark's portrayal of Jesus' action in Mk. 11:15-17 as an action symbolizing the destruction by God of the Temple, see M. D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (London: A & C Black, 1991) 266; R. E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 318-332.

¹¹ That Mark presents the Sanhedrinists as accepting and professing what is said about the God of Israel in the Shema is clear from the fact that Mark has members of the Sanhedrin not only allude to the Shema at Mk. 2:5, but ground their initial critique of Jesus's claim to be able to forgive sins within the theology about God that the Shema expresses. On this, see R. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26* (Dallas: Word, 1988) 87; Joel Markus, *Mark 1-8* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 222. It is also clear in Mark's story of the Question on the Greatest Commandment (Mk. 12:28-34).

¹² This, I would argue, is implied in Mark's story of the Sanhedrin's questioning of Jesus's authority for his Temple action (Mk. 11:27) and Jesus' Parable of the Wicked Vineyard Tenants (Mk. 12:1-12), both of which are set in the Temple and occur after Jesus, claiming divine warrant, has engaged in an action the target of which is the truth of this belief. On Mark's view of the significance of Jesus' Temple action, see below.

¹³ This, I maintain, is evident from the fact that it is over perceived violations of their definitions of purity and their (or their retainers') strictures on fasting, Sabbath observance, eating with sinners, food laws, and the sanctity and fate of the Temple that Mark has the members of the Sanhedrin speak out. See further J.H. Neyrey, "The Idea of Purity in Mark's Gospel," *Semeia* 35 (1986) 91-128.

¹⁴ Cf. Isaiah 56:6-8.

¹⁵ See, e.g. James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Leicester: Apollos Press, 2002) 343.

¹⁶ As Marcus Borg has shown (*Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* [Harrisburgh: Trinity Press International, 1998] 186-187), this view is excluded both by the language of the statement, as well as the fact that there is little evidence for economic trickery or the fleecing of Temple pilgrims in exactly this period. See, too, N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 419-421; R. E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 326-330.

¹⁷ On this, see Borg, *Conflict*, 186; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 420-421.

¹⁸ On this, see R.T. France, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Carlisle, Paternoster, 2002) 648

¹⁹ The Sanhedrinists are described as mocking Jesus "in like manner" (ὁμοίως).

²⁰ Ἄλλους ἔσωσεν, ἑαυτὸν οὐ δύναται σῶσαι: ὁ Χριστὸς ὁ βασιλεὺς Ἰσραὴλ καταβάτω νῦν ἀπὸ τοῦ σταυροῦ, ἵνα ἴδωμεν καὶ πιστεύσωμεν. On this jibe as something rooted in, and developed out of, the derision heaped on Jesus by the passers-by, see Taylor, *Mark*, 592.

²¹ Cf. Mk. 15:31. ὁμοίως καὶ οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς ἐμπαίζοντες πρὸς ἀλλήλους μετὰ τῶν γραμματέων ἔλεγον.

²² This is easily seen when we compare the words of the taunt -- Οὐὰ ὁ καταλύων τὸν ναὸν καὶ οἰκοδομῶν ἐν τρισὶν ἡμέραις σῶσον σεαυτὸν καταβὰς ἀπὸ τοῦ σταυροῦ the Temple charge in Mk. 14:58 -- Ἡμεῖς ἠκούσαμεν αὐτοῦ λέγοντος ὅτι Ἐγὼ καταλύσω τὸν ναὸν τοῦτον τὸν χειροποίητον καὶ διὰ τριῶν ἡμερῶν ἄλλον ἀχειροποίητον οἰκοδομήσω.

²³ Cf. France, *Mark*, 648.

²⁴ France, *Mark*, 648.

²⁵ See J. L. Mayes, "An Exposition of Mark 8:27-9.1", *Interpretation* 30 (1976) 174.

²⁶ Cf. C. Myers, *Binding the Strong Man* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), p. 238. The two other passion predictions/death portents appear at Mk 9.31 and Mk 10.33-34.

²⁷ On this, see W. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 304; T.A. Burkill, *Mysterious Revelation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963) 154.

²⁸ That the Markan Jesus' perception of the path he is to follow in accomplishing the Messianic task is rooted in his understanding of God's will on this matter is apparent from his description at Mk. 8.31a of that path as something he *must* do (Καὶ ἤρξατο διδάσκειν αὐτοῦς ὅτι δεῖ). For, as W.J. Bennett Jr. has noted ("The Son of Man Must ...", *NovTest* 17 [1975], pp. 113-29, esp. p. 128), δεῖ here corresponds to, but in meaning is more pregnant than, γέγραπται ("it is written") and refers to a perception of particular compulsion or constraint, behind which stands the will of God. See, too, H. Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark* (London: Oliphants, 1976), p. 217.

²⁹ Peter takes Jesus aside (προσλαβόμενος) and rebukes him (ἐπιτιμᾶν). The gesture described by προσλαβόμενος implies a presumptuous and patronizing sense of superiority on the part of Peter, and his employment of the strong vocable, used throughout the Gospel in connection with the silencing of demons, expresses the heightened degree of his opposition to Jesus' declaration.

³⁰ See J.B. Gibson, *The Temptations of Jesus in Early Christianity* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1995) 220-237.

³¹ Cf. Mk. 8:33.

³² On this, see C. Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness* (Naperville: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1963) 131, n. 1. That Mark sees Peter's Christology and that of the Sanhedrin as one and the same is also indicated in the fact that Mark frames and sets up Peter's rejection of Jesus' views on the nature of Messiahship and the Messianic task with a notice from Jesus of how he as Messiah will be rejected by the "Elders and Chief Priests and Scribes" (i.e., the Sanhedrin in Mark), and thus intimates not only that there is a formal similarity between the two rejections, but that the occasion and cause of the one is the same as the occasion and cause of the other.

³³ See E. Lohse, "υἱὸς Δαυὶδ" *TDNT* 8 (1972) 480-82.

³⁴ See Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation*, 113-162.

³⁵ See N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 268-272.

³⁶ On this, see M. Hengel, *The Zealots* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989) 206-224

³⁷ Hengel, *The Zealots*, 149-171.

³⁸ See Josephus, *B.J.* 2.274-76 ; 2.406-07; 2.418; 2.562; 4.138-46; 4.208-333; 4.334-44 (on which, more below); 7.263-266; *Vita* 17-22.

³⁹ Translation is that of G.A Williamson, *The Jewish War* (Hamondsworth: Penguin, 1970) 261-262.

⁴⁰ In an unpublished paper entitled “Mk. 14:38 as a Key to the Markan Audience” prepared for The Mark Group of the Society of Biblical Literature for the 2002 SBL Annual Meeting in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁴¹ J. Marcus, “The Jewish War and the *Sitz im Leben* of Mark”, *JBL* 111 (1992) 441-462. See also A. Y. Collins, *The Beginning of the Gospel: Probing of Mark in Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992) 73-91; G. Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) 264-284.