THE CROWD AND THE CRUCIFIXION

“Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified.”
—Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 18.63-64

“Christus … had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus.”
—Tacitus, Annals 15.44

JOSEPHUS AND TACITUS. It is as sure as historical events can ever be that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate. At the end of the first century, the Jewish historian Josephus, and, at the start of the second century, the Roman historian Tacitus, agreed on four details concerning that execution. There was a movement over there in Judea. It resulted in the execution of its founder, Jesus or Christ. What followed was not cessation but continuation. And, more than that, what followed was expansion. You can see the core of that double witness in the epigraphs to this section.

That emphatically does not mean that all the details of the “he said” and “he did” or the “they said” and “they did” were intended historically rather than parabolically in the gospel versions. But, granted the historicity of that execution, we are constrained to work backwards to explain what led up to it. And, in general, the broad outline of Mark’s account is the closest reconstruction presently possible. In it and by it we can see clearly how Jesus almost got away with his twin demonstrations, even or especially at Pentecost.

THE FIRST CROWD. Mark emphasizes clearly the sequence of events from day to day, and we do the same using our modern terms for those days. Watch, then, what he underlines about “the crowd” from Sunday through Wednesday of Jesus’ last week in Jerusalem:

Sunday. As we saw already, “many people” acclaimed Jesus on that anti-triumphal entry-demonstration on Palm Sunday. That support continued on the next three days. The “crowd” forms, as it were, an impermeable ring around Jesus. And that is how we know he did not go to die but—despite what had happened to John the Baptist—to get away with his double demonstration.

Monday. After the Temple-demonstration, there was a clear separation between the high-priestly authority and the crowd: “when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching” (Mark 11:18).

Tuesday. Mark repeats that distinction three times. First, concerning John the Baptist, “they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet” (11:32).

Second, after the parable of the Tenants: when “the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders … realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away” (11:27 & 12:12).

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Finally, Jesus challenges “the scribes” on how the Messiah can be both David’s Son and David’s Lord at the same time, “and the large crowd was listening to him with delight” (12:37).

**Wednesday.** That morning, the high-priestly authorities finally give up. “It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; for they said, ‘Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people’” (14:1-2). That, of course, is why Judas becomes so important in 14:10-11. He promises to locate Jesus for them at night and apart from the protective screen of the crowd.

In other words, and despite an undoubted awareness of the dangers involved, Jesus expected the collective security of “the crowd” to suffice as his protection—and, until Judas, he had succeeded.

Recall, by the way, that for over a hundred years Judeans had been immigrating into Galilee so that, as archaeology has shown from material continuities, extended families were linked between those two regions. Do not think of Jesus all alone or even alone with his female and male Galilean companions. He may well have been invited or even challenged to take his message to Jerusalem (recall John 7:3-4). Furthermore, notice that—as Mark emphasizes in 11:1,11,12 & 14:3—Jesus stays in Bethany around the Mount of Olives out of sight of city and Temple—among his extended family, such as Mary, Martha, and Lazarus?

**THE SECOND CROWD.** It is clear from Mark—the earliest of the four New Testament accounts of Jesus’ death and the source, *most probably*, for that of Matthew and Luke, and, *possibly*, for that of John as well—that we must distinguish that “crowd” on Sunday through Wednesday from the one on Friday. Watch very carefully, therefore, the sequence of verses as Mark introduces this second crowd:

[1] “At the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked.

[2] Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection.

[3] So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom.

[4] Then he answered them, ‘Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?’”

In the logic of that narrative: [1] there is an open Paschal amnesty; [2] Barabbas—freedom fighter for some, murderous brigand for others—is in jail; [3] the “crowd” come up to get him out under that amnesty; [4] Pilate tries to give them the non-violent revolutionary Jesus instead of the violent revolutionary Barabbas. In other words, that “crowd” come up for Barabbas and are only against Jesus in so far as he becomes a threat to that purpose.

The term “crowd” is always relative to time, place, and situation. How big, then, should we imagine that “crowd” before Pilate on Friday? Our best historical judgment is that the Friday crowd was *between a half dozen and a dozen*...
people. Our conclusion derives from three reasons: the situation of Passover, the volatile character of Pilate, and the nature of their request.

First, Pilate transferred his pretorium from Caesarea Maritima to Jerusalem for Passover, a festival in which large numbers of Jews in a confined space celebrated deliverance from Egypt then, while, under Rome now. There were two riots in the Temple during Passover, according to Josephus, one in 4 BCE in which “three thousand” were killed (Jewish Antiquities 17.213-218 = Jewish War 2.10-13) and another around 50 CE in which either “twenty thousand” (Jewish Antiquities 20.105-112) or “thirty thousand” (Jewish War 2.223-47) were killed. Passover meant a tinder-box and zero-tolerance atmosphere for any large-scale crowd approaching the governor.

Second, we know more about Pilate than about any other governor in that first-century Jewish homeland—and all of it is bad. Josephus actually focuses specifically on his brutal way with crowds: against two protesting but unarmed Jewish crowds (Jewish War 169-77 = Jewish Antiquities 18.55-62) and one—probably also unarmed—Samaritan crowd (Jewish Antiquities 18.85-89) for which he was finally dismissed from office.

The contemporary Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, makes Pilate a poster-boy for a bad governor. In his treatise On the Embassy to Gaius, he describes him as “a man of very inflexible disposition, and very merciless as well as obstinate.” He cites “his corruption, and his acts of insolence, and his rapine, and his habit of insulting people, and his cruelty, and his continued murders of people untried and uncondemned, and his never ending, and gratuitous, and most grievous inhumanity ... being at all times a man of most ferocious passions” (38.301-302).

Finally, that “crowd” was asking Pilate for the release of somebody who was—from the Roman point of view—a murderous rebel. What if Pilate decided to grab that crowd as, at least, sympathizers if not more of the same? Better keep the group very small, with arms outside their cloaks, and a lot of bowing and scraping. All in all, therefore, imagine something like a very small delegation before Pilate that Friday. So much, then, for the history of that execution; what about its theological interpretation?

A SACRIFICE FOR SINS? First of all, Jesus died as a martyr. His life incarnated the non-violent justice of God, and he was executed by the violent injustice of Rome. It took neither prophetic insight nor divine foreknowledge for him to have known—especially after John’s fate—that his life was in permanent danger. The integrity of his life might well involve his death. That is not, emphatically not, the same as wanting or seeking martyrdom which can never be done since every martyr needs a murderer.

But, even granted all that, how is Jesus’ martyrdom a sacrifice or sacrificial atonement for the sins (or better: Sin) of the world? Can “sacrifice
for sin(s)” be understood and should it be understood totally apart from any form of substitutionary atonement or vicarious satisfaction for sin(s)? It can and should, but it helps if, before we continue, you shift the focal meaning of sins from sex unto violence.

Recall, for example, that once we left Eden our inaugural sins in Genesis 4 were not fornication and adultery but murder and fratricide. Thereafter, we scarcely improved at all in our capacities for sex but we have exponentially developed—as, from Cain to Lamech, that chapter warned—our capacities for violence.

Think about that magnificently parabolic scene in John’s gospel where Pilate and Jesus climactically confronted one another, where the Kingdom of Rome embodied in Pilate finally faced the Kingdom of God incarnated in Jesus. “My kingdom,” said Jesus in the King James Version of the incident, “is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.” (18:36) No violence ever, says Jesus, not even to release or save me.

First, the crucial difference—and the only one mentioned—between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Rome is Jesus’ non-violence versus Pilate’s violence. Without violence it could not hold its empire against external and internal threats. Without violence it could neither attain nor proclaim its mantra of peace through victory.

Second, Jesus does not even mention Pilate or Rome by name. The violence of Roman imperialism was but an incarnation at that first-century time and in that Mediterranean place of “this world,” that is, of the violent normalcy of civilization itself. Empires come and go, imperialism stays as the veneer of civilization we have overlaid upon God’s creation. Human sin is the normalcy of civilization’s violence which now threatens not only our species, but even our world, that is, all of God’s global creation.

Inside Christian faith, Jesus died from that sin of human violence and in atonement for that sin of human violence. His non-violent resistance incarnated the character of God, the Kingdom of God, and the collaborative eschatology he had announced as open to all. He gave his life crowned by that death as a gift, that is a sacrifice (a sacrum-facere) both to God and to the world. That religious vision offers salvation to the creation-world which “God so loved” (John 3:16).

Outside Christian faith, human evolution has created an animal constrained from killing its own species not by instinct and chemistry but by—at best—law and morality. The cosmic race between justice and violence is now approaching the finishing line. And the ultimate question is whether we are—like the saber-toothed tiger—a magnificent but doomed species. What political vision offers salvation from that escalatory-violence which has been, since the Neolithic Revolution over 6,000 years ago, our global drug of global choice?