

# The Death of the Messiah

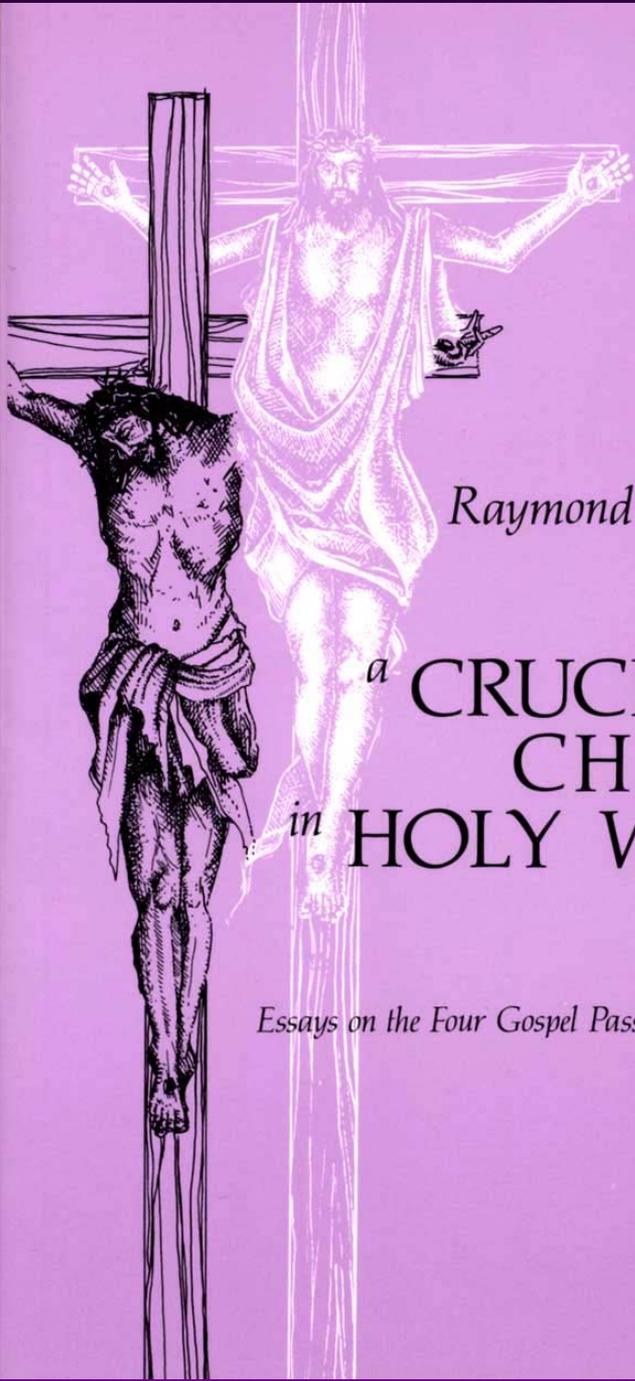
Jesus Prays and Is Arrested in  
Gethsemane

# Series Outline

- 1. Jesus prays and is arrested in Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, Across the Kidron
  - Mark 14:26-52; Matt 26:30-56; Luke 22:39-53; John 18:1-11
- 2. Jesus Before the Jewish Authorities
  - Mark 14:53—15:1; Matt 26:57—27:10; Luke 22:54—23:1; John 18:12-28a

# Series Outline

- 3. Jesus before Pilate, the Roman Governor
  - Mark 15:2-20a; Matt 27:11-31a; Luke 23:2-25; John 18:28b—19:16a
- 4. Jesus is crucified and dies on Golgotha. He is buried nearby
  - Mark 15:20b-47; Matt 27:31b-66; Luke 23:26-56; John 19:16b-42



*Raymond E. Brown*

*a* **CRUCIFIED  
CHRIST**  
*in* **HOLY WEEK**

*Essays on the Four Gospel Passion Narratives*

Each year during Holy Week the Church reads two different accounts of Jesus' passion. On Palm (Passion) Sunday the account is from one of the first three Gospels (Matthew, Mark, or Luke), while on Good Friday it is always from John. Thus the liturgy makes it possible to note how very different the Gospel passions are, each one offering a unique vantage point from which to see and understand a crucified Christ.

We have all heard of the seven words of Jesus on the cross. In fact, however, Jesus says only one "word" in Matthew and Mark, three other "words" of very different import in Luke, and still three more different "words" in John. Separating these words as the evangelists intended rather than gluing them together offers Christians a much richer way to understand the demands of the cross in their own lives.

Fr. Raymond E. Brown, S.S., (1928–1998) was the Auburn Distinguished Professor of Biblical Studies at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Author of some twenty-five books on the Bible and past president of three of the most important biblical societies in the world, by appointment of two popes (Paul VI in 1972, John Paul II in 1996) he was a member of the Roman Pontifical Biblical Commission. *Time* magazine has called him "probably the premier Catholic Scripture scholar in the U.S."

# THE DEATH of the MESSIAH

From Gethsemane to the Grave:  
A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels

RAYMOND E. BROWN



VOLUME 1

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# **General Observations on the Passion Narratives**

# Formation of the Gospel Tradition

- The gospel tradition formed “backwards,” starting from Jesus’ resurrection, working towards his birth
  - Early Christians focused on the *crucifixion* and *resurrection*
  - Accounts of Jesus’ public ministry emerged after reflection on the career of the *crucified one*
  - Finally, accounts of his *birth* emerged (in Luke and Matthew)

# Narrative and Plot

- Order of events led to a real narrative and plot
  - Arrest had to precede trial, which had to precede sentence and execution
  - We read of the actions of Jesus, as well as surrounding characters
    - Peter, Judas, Pilate, Barabbas, the Roman soldier who recognizes Jesus as the Son of God
  - Encourages the acting out of the Passion narratives as drama and film

# Audience Participation

- Where would we have stood as part of the Passion narratives?
  - With the disciples who fled from danger, abandoning Jesus?
  - With Peter, denying Jesus?
  - With Judas, betraying Jesus?
  - With the Pilate of John, trying to avoid a decision between good and evil?

# Audience Participation

- With the Pilate of Matthew, washing our hands of a bad decision so to appear blameless?
- With the religious leaders who condemned Jesus?
  - Many were sincerely religious people with a deep attachment to their tradition, which Jesus had challenged

# Coloring Factors

- Apologetic motives likely colored the Gospels
- Desire to justify Jesus' innocence before Roman hearers of the gospel
  - Tacitus, Roman historian: Jesus was a criminal put to death by the procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate
  - Mark → Matthew → Luke → John: Pilate portrayed increasingly as a fair judge who recognized Jesus' innocence

# Coloring Factors

- Bitter Relationship between early Church and synagogue
  - Attitudes of some Jewish authorities may have been attributed to “all”
  - There likely were corrupt “ecclesiastical” politicians who saw Jesus as a danger to their position
  - Vast majority were likely sincerely religious people who felt they were ridding Israel of a false prophet
    - law in Deuteronomy 13:1-5: false prophets must be put to death lest they seduce Israel from the true God

# Factors in the Death of Jesus

- Involvement of Jewish authorities in Jesus' death is a complicated tissue
- Gospel writers tended to generalize blame onto “all” Jews, influenced by the bitter relationship between early Church and synagogue
- Some famous Christian theologians (Augustine, John Chrysostom, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther) wrote of a Christian duty to hate or punish the Jews because they killed Jesus

# Factors in the Death of Jesus

- Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin 43a*: ~200 AD admits responsibility for “hanging” Jesus on the eve of Passover because “he seduced Israel, leading her astray”
- However, modern Jewish writers reject major Jewish involvement in the crucifixion

# Factors in the Death of Jesus

- Some have argued the Sanhedrin legal proceedings in the Gospels don't follow Jewish law in the *Mishnah*
  - *Mishnah* was a compilation of rabbinic oral law (Rabbis = successors to the Pharisees)
  - However, the Sanhedrin of Jesus' day was dominated by Sadducee priests, who rejected oral law. The trial did not violate written law

# Factors in the Death of Jesus

- Confusion in the accounts of the questioning of Jesus by Jewish authorities (Sanhedrin)
  - *Mark and Matthew*: formal Sanhedrin trial at night
    - Matt. notes high priest was Caiaphas
  - *Luke*: informal Sanhedrin questioning of Jesus in morning
  - *John*: no Sanhedrin questioning, but instead police interrogation by high priest Annas
  - *John*: Jesus' arrest included both Jewish police and Roman soldiers
    - Roman soldiers would only have participated at the command of Pilate

# Factors in the Death of Jesus

- Any hostility between Christian and Jew today over the death of Jesus is wrong and against our fundamental understanding of Christianity
- God has revealed Godself in the *compositions and words of human beings*
  - Therefore some attitudes in the Scripture, colored by the humanity of the authors, may be *wrong* if repeated today

# How did Jesus view his death?

- Roman 4:25: Jesus died for our sins
  - Would Jesus have said this? Did he foresee the manner of his death and victory?
- Apparent predictions in the Gospels may have been written “more exactly” in hindsight
- Jesus may have had only general premonitions about his suffering and death, and a firm trust that God would somehow make him victorious

# How did Jesus view his death?

- Hebrews 5:7-8:

**In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. . . (NRSV)**

# How did Jesus view his death?

- Jesus preached:
  - God's Kingdom requires we acknowledge our dependence on God
  - A model for the Kingdom was the helplessness of the little child
- In facing death, we, in our humanity, feel most deeply our helplessness

# How did Jesus view his death?

- “Did Jesus . . . himself have to experience the vulnerability of dying before the Kingdom could be achieved in and through him?”
- Coming of the Kingdom would involve the ultimate destruction of the power of evil
  - The realization that a confrontation with Satan was imminent may explain Jesus’ anguish
  - His trust in God’s power to defeat Satan may have been his conscious sense of the truth that his death would remove sins

# Early Christian Views of Jesus' Death

- Theology dominated choice of events described
  - Pain and suffering, pathos and emotion did not drive evangelists, who report laconically “They crucified him”
  - Details anticipated in Old Testament described:
    - Division of garments
    - Placement of criminals crucified with him
  - *Emphasis*: through the Scriptures of Israel, God had taught about the Son

# Early Christian Views of Jesus' Death

- Each of the Gospel writers had a distinctive outlook on the Passion

**Jesus prays and is then  
arrested in Gethsemane  
on the Mount of Olives,  
Across the Kidron**

# Mark

- Jesus had come to terms with necessity that he must suffer and die before the Kingdom of God can come
- His disciples had not accepted this
- Jesus tells them: “**You will all become deserters**” (NRSV 14:27)
- Peter claims: “**I will not**” (NRSV 14:20)

# Mark

- The darkness and gloom of this beginning only intensifies until Jesus dies
- He will have *no* support from his followers; he will die *alone*
- He separates himself from the larger body of the disciples; then further separates himself from Peter, James and John
- He confesses in prayer: “**I am deeply grieved, even to death.**” (NRSV 14:34)

# Mark

- The Jesus who had preached **“Whoever would save his life will lose it”** now prays, more poignantly than any other Gospel: **“Abba, Father . . . remove this cup from me . . .”** (NRSV 14:36)
- There is no apparent response from God
- Jesus finally arises, resolved to meet his betrayer

# Mark

- Jesus' resignation to his fate is seen in his lack of response (in contrast to the other 3 gospels) to:
  - Judas' kiss
  - A bystander cutting off the ear of the slave of the High Priest
- **“ . . . Let the scriptures be fulfilled.”**  
(14:49)
- Seeing Jesus' resignation, **“All of them [his disciples] deserted and fled.”** (14:50)

# Mark

- Totality of Jesus' abandonment illustrated in unique story in Mark of a young disciple who seeks to follow:
  - When seized like Jesus, this disciple escapes by slipping out of his clothes and running off naked
  - First disciples left work and family (1:18, 20), everything (10:28) for Jesus; this last disciple leaves everything to get away

# Mark

- Challenges posed by Mark's portrayal of Jesus in Gethsemane:
  - How could a Jesus who so feared to die be divine?
  - How could a Jesus so devoted to God pray to avoid the cross he had proclaimed necessary for others?
  - Contrast with Socrates calm acceptance of death as deliverance from this world of shadows to a better realm

# Mark

- Death in Old and New Testament theology:
  - Human beings meant to enjoy God's presence in this life and not to die
  - Death an evil imposed on Adam and Eve, a distortion of God's original intentions
  - Israelites came to view death as a realm of alienation from God
  - New Testament (1 Cor 15:26): **“The last enemy to be destroyed is death”** (NRSV)

# Mark

- Death is not a welcome deliverance, but an enemy – one that cannot conquer because of Jesus' victory – but still an enemy

# Matthew

- Matthew's Passion narrative is very close to Mark's
- Unlike Mark, in Matthew, Jesus' disciples had already professed Jesus was the Son of God
  - Thus their flight from Gethsemane all the more shocking
- Unlike Mark, in Matthew, Peter had declared Jesus as the "the Messiah, Son of the Living God."
  - Thus his later repeated denials all the more scandalous

# Matthew

- Matthew's gospel was intended for Jewish readers and frequently cites the Old Testament
- Hymn sang by the apostles possibly a hymn of the Passover liturgy
- Mount of Olives in the Old Testament:
  - Zechariah 14:4ff: site where God will judge the world
  - 2 Samuel 15:30-31: David flees to Mount of Olives to weep after betrayal by his trusted advisor Ahitophel

# Matthew

- Jesus prays alone, sorrowful (“**I am deeply grieved. . .**” NRSV 26:38) like the Psalmist in Ps 42:6 (“**My soul is cast down within me. . .**” NRSV)
- Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane in Matthew especially has echoes of the Lord’s Prayer:
  - **“My Father”** (26:39)
  - **“pray that you may not come into the time of trial”** (26:41)
  - **“your will be done”** (26:42)

# Matthew

- Three times Jesus withdraws to pray and returns to find his disciples sleeping
  - Literary pattern of “**the three**”: stories effective and balance if 3 characters or 3 incidents included
  - Underlines the disciples’ continued obliviousness to Jesus’ suffering
- Jesus’ prayer seemingly effective: he arises, ready to face his betrayer

# Matthew

- Unique in Matthew, Jesus addresses Judas as “Friend” or “Companion” (26:50)
  - Highlights his betrayal by one who had been a intimate and follower
- Assailant who cuts off the ear of the high priest’s slave identified as a “one of those with Jesus” = disciple
  - Mark: “one of those who stood near” = bystander
  - Luke: “one of those around him” = disciple
  - John: Simon Peter

# Matthew

- Unique in Matthew is Jesus' rebuke: **“Put your sword back into its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.”** (NRSV 26:52)
- Jesus seems helpless against those arresting him: only in Matthew does Jesus explain: **“Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels. But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?”** (NRSV 26:53-54)

# Luke

- Luke's version of the Passion is significantly different from Mark / Matthew
  - Provides a “bridge” between Mark / Matthew and the John's version
- Luke describes the disciples with great delicacy during Jesus' ministry and Passion (unlike Mark, who dwells on their failings)
  - Does not mention they flee when Jesus is arrested
  - Places male acquaintance of Jesus at Calvary

# Luke

- Jesus leads the disciples to a customary place in the Mount of Olives
  - So Judas will have no problem finding him
  - Luke is writing for Gentiles, and avoids Semitisms like “Gethsemane” and “Golgotha”
- There are *no* words of rebuke about the disciples becoming deserters. Jesus had just praised them at the Last Supper: **“You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you ... a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on the thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”** (NRSV 22:28-30)

# Luke

- Unlike Mark/Matthew, Jesus does not withdraw from the large group of disciples, and then still further from the three, but simply moves a “stone’s throw” (22:41) away
- He returns to find them sleeping only once, and they sleep “because of grief” (22:45)

# Luke

- Jesus is *not* portrayed as grieving, even unto death. His prayer begins and ends by submission to God's will (NRSV 22:42)
  - Preface: **“Father, if you are willing”**
  - Conclusion: **“yet, not my will but yours be done”**
- Unlike Mark/Matthew, God answers his prayer by sending an angel to strengthen him
- **“In his anguish he prayed more earnestly...”** (NRSV 22:44)
  - “Anguish” here is Greek *agonia*: the supreme tension of the athlete covered with sweat at the start of a contest

# Luke

- Perverse kiss of Judas prevented with Jesus saying: **“Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?”** (NRSV 22:48)
  - Only time Judas addressed by name
  - Shows a foreknowledge of Judas’ strategy
- Unique to Luke: Jesus heals the ear of the high priest’s slave
  - As he had so often healed during his ministry, he heals an opponent in the midst of his own peril

# Luke

- Figures arresting Jesus not a crowd (Mark/Matthew) or police (John) sent *by* the chief priests, scribes and elders, but the chief priest, Temple officers and elders *themselves* (22:52)
- Scene ends with the dramatic announcement “... **this is your hour, and the power of darkness!**” (NRSV 22:53)

# John

- Johannine portrait of Jesus dramatically different from Mark / Matthew / Luke (“Synoptics”)
  - He is conscious of his pre-existence
  - In death, he is returning to the state he temporarily left for this world
  - He is not a victim at anyone’s mercy; he has freely chosen to lay down his life
  - Satan has no power over him (14:30)
  - He is *omniscient*; he cannot be caught off guard by what will happen next

# John

- There is no prayer at Gethsemane that this hour and cup might pass from him. Such human indecision inconceivable in the Johannine Jesus
  - He and the Father are one (10:30)
  - He is eager to drink the cup the Father has given (18:11)

# John

- Jesus uses the divine name “I AM” (18:6) at this arrest: no one can take his life unless he permits it
  - At his words, those trying to arrest him step back and fall to the ground
- The Roman soldiers and Temple police still have power over Jesus’ followers who remain in this world (17:15), so Jesus requests they be let go (18:8)