

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY



Volume 83:3-4

July/October 2019

Table of Contents

After Canons, Councils, and Popes: The Implications of Luther's Leipzig Debate for Lutheran Ecclesiology	
Richard J. Serina Jr.	195
The Leipzig Debate and Theological Method	
Roland F. Ziegler	213
Luther and Liberalism: A Tale of Two Tales (Or, A Lutheran Showdown Worth Having)	
Korey D. Maas	229
Scripture as Philosophy in Origen's <i>Contra Celsum</i>	
Adam C. Koontz	237
Passion and Persecution in the Gospels	
Peter J. Scaer	251
Reclaiming Moral Reasoning: Wisdom as the Scriptural Conception of Natural Law	
Gifford A. Grobien	267
Anthropology: A Brief Discourse	
David P. Scaer	287

Reclaiming the Easter Vigil and Reclaiming Our Real Story	
Randy K. Asbury	325
Theological Observer	341
“What Can We Learn From Them?”	
Teaching Elementary Greek	
Using <i>Fundamental Greek Grammar</i> to Teach Greek at the Seminary	
Book Reviews	355
Books Received	371
Indices to Volume 83 (2019)	373

Editors’ Note

The year 2019 marks the 500th anniversary of the Leipzig Debate (or Leipzig Disputation). In Leipzig at the Pleissenburg Castle, Luther's colleague Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt debated John Eck from June 27 to July 3 on grace, free will, and justification. From July 4 to 8, Luther took Karlstadt's place and debated with Eck especially on the question of whether the pope was established by God as head of the Church. Our first two articles commemorate this debate. They were presented originally at the Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions at CTSFW, which was held Jan. 16–18, 2019. They remind us of what was at stake, and what we still joyfully affirm: Christ as the head of the Church, and God's Word as the sole infallible authority.

Passion and Persecution in the Gospels

Peter J. Scaer

The four Gospels are each distinct. John is a breed apart, as are Johannine scholars. While the man, lion, and ox walk the earth, the eagle soars high above. The question arises, is John's a solo flight? If we were to play the desert island game, Matthew would win the prize. The first Gospel alone offers us all the essentials: the virgin birth and resurrection, the Lord's Prayer in full, the Words of Institution, as well as the trinitarian name spelled out for baptismal posterity. Luke strikes this reader as supplemental, beautifully illustrating what our Lord teaches, propelling us into the life of the church, where Christ's work continues. Mark has seldom received much love. As Papias notes, Mark wrote accurately, though not in order.¹ Scholars tend to think that Luke and Matthew made use of Mark, but then, as Helmut Koester notes, "There is no certain quotation from Mark before Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria."² But Mark's lion is a dark horse; its strange landscape rewards the reader who does not rush past the quirky and odd phrases that reveal and mask greater mysteries.³

The joy and difficulty of John's Gospel is that it can be a sphinx. John is the most sacramental, or not sacramental at all. It's the simplest linguistically, but as rich and dense as Mackinac fudge. There is something distinctly eastern about it, difficult to outline, a swirl that takes you deeper and higher. It's also the most personal of the Gospels. There are not as many crowds, or even large classrooms. John takes us behind closed doors, to hidden rooms and intimate conversations. Soliloquies and dialogues are the day.

Not only in the telling, but in the stories themselves, John sets himself apart. John includes no exorcisms. He has miracles, but only seven, and calls them signs. The Synoptics tell us that Christ raises some from the dead, and yet the raising of Lazarus is nowhere in sight. The one and only miracle common to all four

¹ Eusebius, "The Writings of Papias" in *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 3.39.15.

² Helmut Koester, "History and Development of Mark's Gospel," in Bruce Corley, ed. *Colloquy on New Testament Studies: A Time for Reappraisal and Fresh Approaches* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983), 37.

³ For a wonderful work on Mark's reception in the early church, see C. Clifton Black, *Mark: Images of an Apostolic Interpreter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

Peter J. Scaer is Professor of Exegetical Theology and the Supervisor of the Master of Arts Program at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana. He can be contacted at peter.scaer@ctsfw.edu.

Gospels is the feeding of the five thousand, which might tell us something about its significance.

Where do the Gospels come most closely into line? The passion narrative. In all four Gospels, we find the betrayal of Judas, an arrest, the denial of Peter, a trial, mockery, and crucifixion under Pontius Pilate. This hardly means that the passion narratives are interchangeable or easily harmonized. In Matthew and Mark, Christ is the forsaken one, whose drinking of the cup is both stark and profound. In Luke, Jesus appears as one ready and willing, acting according to the will of his Father and in accordance with the Scriptures. He teaches how to die, and there is a Greco-Roman flavor to what appears a noble death.⁴ John is another matter altogether. Here we see the Messiah in full divinity, one who lays down his life and takes it back up, the one whose very presence causes others to fall, and whose death itself is an exaltation. So it is, each Gospel comes to a climax in the cross, but in a way symphonic, each playing its part in the Lamb's song.

And the Gospels share something else. In all four, the suffering of Christ serves as a preview for what his disciples must endure. As Christ must die according to the words of Scripture, so also the disciples must face persecution in fulfillment of Christ's word. In this study, I will look briefly at the passion narratives as a kind of template for Christian persecution. In what way does the cross of Christ shape the lives of those who follow in his footsteps?

I. Passion and Persecution in the Gospel of Matthew

Martin Kähler famously said that the Gospels are passion narratives with long introductions.⁵ One might say that Matthew's passion story begins with the nativity. In a dream, Joseph is told to name the child Jesus, which means "He will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21).⁶ So simple a proclamation leads us to the meal of the atonement, where we receive the blood that was shed "for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:28). Ironically, the taunters are right: "He saved others; he cannot save himself" (Matt 27:42). This is the necessity of Christ's atoning death, the price of forgiveness, the cost of absolution.

Fittingly, the Gospel of Matthew begins with a sense of foreboding. At the birth of Jesus, "Herod is disturbed, and all of Jerusalem with him" (Matt 2:3). As Joel Green and John Carroll note, "Jerusalem—including the religious leaders and the

⁴ To see how Luke makes use of the noble death tradition, Greco-Roman rhetoric, and the story of Socrates, see Peter J. Scaer, *The Lukan Passion and the Praiseworthy Death* (Sheffield, United Kingdom: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005).

⁵ Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 80.

⁶ All Scripture quotations are the author's translation.

whole people—already at the onset of the story deeply etched in the readers' imagination a menacing place where the divinely named ruler of the people receives none of the honor due him and where, in fact, his life is endangered.”⁷ This sense of dread drives the holy family into Egypt, and ends in the slaughter of the Holy Innocents. Clearly, the holy city is not so holy. Our Lord must go up to Jerusalem, and there he must die (Matt 16:21).

Jesus knew what was coming. When rejected at Nazareth, he wryly observes, “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his household” (Matt 13:57). More than a prophet, he saw himself as the Son of the vineyard owner, the heir whom the evil tenants would kill that they might take the inheritance for themselves (21:39). In accordance with the Scriptures, he sees himself as the stone that the builders rejected (21:42).

From early on, Jesus' opponents build a case for his trial, a list of charges. For forgiveness, he is accused of blasphemy (Matt 9:3). For dining at the home of Matthew, he is censured for eating with tax collectors and sinners (9:11). For empowering a mute man to speak, he is accused of casting out demons by the power of the prince of demons (9:34). When he heals a man on the Sabbath, the Pharisees judge it blasphemous and conspire about how to destroy him (12:14). Of course, the charges have more to do with jealousy than justice.

Yet at a deeper level, justice is served. He is forsaken, that we might be brought into the divine embrace. As we see in the Lord's Prayer, sin is a debt owed to God, and paid by Christ on our behalf. This is the Son of Man who came not to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for all (Matt 20:28).

But then, what of his disciples? Are we too involved in the passion? In the suffering? The slaughter of the Holy Innocents is not simply a one-off, a case of mistaken identity. Instead, it is foreshadowing. Those who are associated with the Messiah will pay a heavy price. Raymond Brown calls this “the double necessity for the Son of Man to suffer and for his disciples to take up the cross to follow him.”⁸

It is instructive to note that almost immediately after calling his first disciples (Matt 4:18–22), Jesus offers poetic words of proclamation: Blessed are the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek and merciful, the pure in heart and the peacemakers (5:3–9). But the lofty beauty of the Beatitudes crashes into harsher realities: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake” (v. 10). Pointedly, the third person plural is quickly replaced with the second: “Blessed are *you* when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you

⁷ John T. Carroll and Joel B. Green, *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 40.

⁸ Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), I.27.

falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (5:11–12).

Our Lord adds, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (5:44). Oh, and be under no illusion that this love will be requited. The life of discipleship will not be easy; he sends out his messengers as sheep in the midst of wolves (10:16). In a strikingly sweeping word of warning, our Lord says, “Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to the courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles” (10:17–18).

But this persecution begins closer to home, and it will touch every Christian, for it will cut through the heart of earthly families: “Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death” (10:21). In case we missed it, our Lord goes further: “A person’s enemies will be those of his own household” (10:36). Discipleship has consequences, both now and in eternity: “Whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (10:38–39).

When and where does this persecution take place? The first warnings, offered up in the missionary discourse (Matt 9:35–11:1), seem to concentrate on the lives of the apostles and the early church. But this early persecution will set the pattern until Christ returns. Servants who hand out invitations to the wedding feast will be “seized, treated shamefully, and killed” (22:6). This is not simply a matter of persecution in Jerusalem, nor is it a case of Romaphobia. What happened to Christ in Jerusalem will happen to his ambassadors in every nation.

In the temptation scene, we see how both the Gospel and persecution will extend throughout the nations. Satan takes Jesus to a high mountain, offering up “all the kingdoms of the world and their glory” (Matt 4:8). Christ’s kingdom will indeed spread to all nations, but not according to Satan’s easy promise. Christ also leads his disciples to a mountain, telling them to go to all nations (Matt 28:18–20). People will hear, but others will reject. “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake” (24:9). As such, Matthew may be the most universal Gospel, thinking of the big picture for the years to come. Neither Jerusalem nor Rome is ultimate. As Joel Willitts puts it, “It is a story that encompasses *all* the kingdoms and nations of the world.”⁹ As

⁹ John Willitts, “Matthew,” in *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies*, ed. Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 97.

Matthew envisions a gospel for all nations, he sees that persecution will accompany Christ's disciples wherever they go.

II. Passion and Persecution in Mark

The passion narrative of Mark matches that of Matthew very closely. Both Matthew and Mark present Jesus' death as a payment for sin. The Son of Man has come not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for the many (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45). Mark understandably omits Matthew's apocalyptic description of the earth shaking, the rocks splitting, and the saints rising. But Mark's telling of the Mount of Olives scene is quite similar to Matthew. Likewise, both Gospels include but one word from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). As Raymond Brown notes, "These two gospels present a Jesus who is abandoned by his followers and has to face his hour alone, thus enduring the cross in a particularly agonizing way."¹⁰

Even as Christ must suffer, so also his followers. Indeed, Joel Marcus observes what he calls "a preoccupation with persecution in the very structure" of Mark's Gospel.¹¹ In the parable of the sower, Jesus speaks of "tribulation and persecution" (Mark 4:17; Matt 13:21). In his Olivet discourse, Christ again warns that his disciples will be delivered over to councils and beaten in synagogues, which will result in a witness to governors and kings (Mark 13:9). Likewise, he tells his disciples that they will be betrayed by their family members and hated by all for his name's sake (Mark 13:12–13). The disciples' persecution is closely linked to Christ's own passion. Jesus must go to the cross (Mark 8:31–33), and so also his disciples must be willing to lose their lives for his sake (Mark 8:35).

Yet, there may be one key difference between Matthew and Mark's portrayal of persecution in their Gospels. For Mark, persecution is not merely predicted as a future event, but is already felt as a present reality. Consider the story of the rich young man, found in all three Synoptic Gospels. In Jesus' response to a question by Peter, Matthew and Luke speak of blessings for those who follow Christ. Mark alone adds, as if it were the most natural thing, that these blessings would come "along with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life" (Mark 10:30). Persecution is not so much prophesied as taken for granted.

Again, while Matthew offers a broader perspective, according to which persecution will come from all nations, Mark seems to be written to a group that is facing persecution more particularly in Rome. As James Voelz notes, evidence

¹⁰ Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 26.

¹¹ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 28.

would point to “Christians in Rome who were concerned about maintaining the faith in the face of impending death,” in the late 50’s or early 60’s in Rome.¹²

Martin Hengel, followed by many others, has observed the Roman character of the second Gospel. As Hengel notes, Roman provenance is supported not only by ecclesiastical tradition, but “by the astonishing number of Latinisms, which are unique in Greek narrative prose.”¹³ In Mark, a Roman centurion is called simply a “centurion,” rather than a “hekatontarchēs.” Matthew’s audience would not need an explanation concerning the Pharisees’ washing of cups, pots, copper vessels, and couches (Mark 7:4). But Mark’s Roman audience would.

Brendan Byrne, following Hengel, notes that Mark’s apocalyptic warnings in the thirteenth chapter could well fit “the atrocities perpetrated against Christians in Rome in the year 64 C.E.”¹⁴ Indeed, Tacitus describes Christians as “hated for their abominations,” and speaks of Christians becoming informants against their fellow Christians,¹⁵ matching closely Christ’s warning that family members would betray one another, and that Christians would be hated by all (Mark 13:12–13).

Mark’s Gospel may point specifically to the martyrdom of Peter. As Hengel notes, Mark is concerned with something more than “a generalized invitation to be ready for suffering.”¹⁶ Consider Peter’s confession. In Matthew, Jesus uses the occasion to speak of the necessity of his own suffering. In Mark’s account of Peter’s confession, the spotlight is turned on the disciples, who themselves must take up the cross (Mark 8:34). Such words would be especially fitting in the case of Peter, who would face his own crucifixion. Thus, the evangelist would seem to be crafting his story in sober recognition of Peter’s martyrdom during the Neronian persecution.

Indeed, Roman persecution may be hinted at in the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. In Matthew, Jesus is led by the Spirit (Matt 4:1). In Luke, Jesus is full of the Spirit, thus anticipating the Pentecost church (Luke 4:1). Mark’s story is unnerving. Jarringly, we are told that the Spirit threw Jesus out (*ἐξβάλλει*) in the desert, where he was with the wild beasts (Mark 1:12–13). Some see this as a fulfillment of Isaiah’s messianic vision of David’s Son upon whom the Spirit rests. In the new world, “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie

¹² James Voelz, *Mark 1:1–8:26* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 79.

¹³ See Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Collection and Origin of the Canonical Gospels*, trans. John Bowden (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2000), 78.

¹⁴ Brendan Byrne, *A Costly Freedom: A Theological Reading of Mark’s Gospel* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2008), xviii.

¹⁵ Tacitus *Annales*, 15.44.

¹⁶ Hengel, *The Four Gospels*, 79.

down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them” (Isa 11:6).¹⁷

But Mark’s wild beasts are neither tame nor housebroken. The one in whom the Spirit entered at Baptism is violently cast out into the desert, in much the same way that Adam was cast out of the garden, or Jesus will cast out the demons. And indeed, there may well be a connection between the beasts and the demons. As Brendan Byrne puts it, “The wilderness is the habitat of wild and dangerous animals, as well as evil spirits.”¹⁸ Now is the time of danger and conflict, with Satan nipping at his heels. Joel Marcus wonders whether the Gospel of Mark could be written in response to Neronian persecution, but then asks, “Would we not expect it to focus more, as Daniel and Revelation do, on a bestial, anti-God figure?”¹⁹ The desert story may well be the answer to Marcus’s query. Here are the beasts, who in their ferocity are decidedly anti-Christ. Ched Myers sees the temptation scene as a trial or contest, in which each side has its supporters: “Jesus has help from the angels while surviving among wild beasts.”²⁰ If this is true, then the Markan beasts may be of the same genus, if not species, as those found in Revelation 11:7 and 13:11.

The Antichrist, as we know, appears as a son of light. When the fight is fierce, bystanders find it difficult to tell good from evil, one combatant from another. So also in Mark’s Gospel. Jesus’ own family is confused. Thinking that he is out of his mind, they try to seize him (Mark 3:21). This leads to the charge that Jesus is possessed by Beelzebub, and that he casts out (ἐκβάλλει) demons by the prince of demons. Jesus then rises to the charge, asking “How can Satan cast out Satan?” (Mark 3:23). He then proceeds to compare himself to a strong man who has come to defeat another strong man. These mysterious stories tell us that Christ is engaged in an apocalyptic battle with Satan, one that began with forty days of desert warfare.

The temptation story also anticipates Ignatius’s martyrdom in Rome. To the Ephesians, Ignatius speaks of his impending martyrdom in the Roman Coliseum as “fighting with the wild beasts” (Ephesians I.2). To the Romans, Ignatius says, “Let there come on me fire, and cross and struggles with wild beasts, cutting, and tearing asunder, racking of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil, may I but attain to Jesus Christ!” (Romans V.3). Thus, Ignatius knows that Satan keeps good company with the wild beast. Yet, Ignatius also knew that in being thrown to the beasts, he was approaching God. “And why have I given myself to death, to fire, to the sword, to wild beasts? Because near the sword is near

¹⁷ See Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 168–171, as well as Charles Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

¹⁸ Brendan Byrne, *A Costly Freedom*, 35.

¹⁹ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 33.

²⁰ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 130.

to God, with the wild beasts is with God” (Smyrnaeans IV.2). The Romans were masters of the arena, unleashing the beasts and setting the fires. As M. Eugene Boring observes, the knowledge that Jesus had faced demonic forces in the guise of beasts would have been of great comfort to early Christians who were “condemned to the beasts” in Nero’s arena.²¹ These were not the friendly beasts of Daniel, but their jaws opened up the path to communion with God.

The other place where Mark’s vision of a persecuted church comes through is in the boat stories. In all four Gospels, the boat serves as a picture of the church, especially having to do with evangelism. In Matthew, Christ calls his first disciples to be fishers of men (Matt 4:19). In Luke, this story is punctuated with the miraculous draught of fish, a picture of the apostolic ministry in which they will be “catching men alive” (Luke 5:9–10). In John, the miraculous catch of fish is saved for a climactic ending (John 21:1–14). But Mark takes the motif further. Indeed, the boat is mentioned more in Mark than in any Gospel. It is a place of danger as well as Christ’s presence. Christ invites all disciples aboard, saying, “Let us go to the other side” (Mark 4:35).

Consider Christ’s calming of the storm (Mark 4:35–41). The boat fills with water. Jesus, sleeping in the stern, seems not to care. As Joel Marcus notes, this scene may well prefigure the coming tribulation “with the storm of civil war and persecution breaking upon them from all sides.”²² In response, the disciples cry out, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” (v. 38). The cry of the first disciples would become the cry of the early church. Mark writes his Gospel with his congregation well in mind. It is noteworthy that Jesus rebukes his disciples for being cowardly and faithless, saying, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” (v. 40). This question, both a rebuke and a comfort, is matched by a warning found in the Book of Revelation. The one who conquers will receive a spring of living water, but not so the one who is “cowardly and faithless,” whose future is marked by a lake that burns with fire and sulfur (Rev 21:8).

Consider also the story of Jesus walking on the water. The disciples are forced to go it alone, while Jesus ascends a high mountain to pray. In a sense, the disciples are taking part in a training exercise for life in a church where Christ is no longer visibly present. We are told that Christ watched his disciples, as if to monitor their progress: “And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them” (Mark 6:48). The Markan phrase “making headway painfully” is the language of persecution, also found in the Book of Revelation. In Revelation 9:5, the locusts are given authority “to torment them for five months, but not to kill them,

²¹ M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster Knox, 2006), 48.

²² Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 337.

and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone.” So also, Revelation depicts the church as a woman giving birth: “She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony [that is, torture] of giving birth” (Rev 12:2). Again, Marcus notes that this tortuous rowing “would remind the Markan community of the eschatological affliction and bewilderment they themselves were experiencing in the wake of persecutions.”²³ So indeed, there may be more in common between Mark and the Roman persecution described in Revelation than has been previously thought. Persecution is not something to prepare for, but a present reality to be endured.

III. Passion and Persecution in Luke

Luke’s passion narrative depicts Jesus as one who willingly sets his face toward Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). Jesus enters the Mount of Olives fully in control of himself. There is no mention of sorrow or being at a loss. He expresses readiness to die, and has in fact prepared himself for the cross. Not simply a victim, Jesus shows courage. And at his death he is declared a righteous man, in the same language used to describe Socrates in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* (4.8.2) and Plato’s *Phaedo* (118). For good reason, scholars have seen parallels between Luke’s depiction of Jesus’ death and the Greco-Roman noble death tradition.²⁴ Indeed, Christ’s death becomes a model for Christians to follow. We see this clearly in the martyrdom of Stephen, who, as F. F. Bruce puts it, “had learned his lesson in the school of Him who, as He was being fixed to the cross, prayed, ‘Father, forgive them; they know not what they do’ (Luke 23:34).”²⁵

Like Mark, the Gospel of Luke is written with the Roman Empire in mind. Christ is born during the days of Caesar Augustus, and his birth in Bethlehem is the result of a decree from Rome. Likewise, John the Baptist’s ministry is placed “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea” (Luke 3:1). In a certain sense, when Luke and Acts are viewed together, the entire work has a Roman trajectory, answering the question of how a Jewish religion came upon the world stage.²⁶ One might go so far as to say that the entirety of Luke’s Gospel anticipates Paul’s epic voyage to Rome. Luke-Acts follows in the train of the

²³ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 431.

²⁴ For more on the noble death tradition, see David Seeley, *The Noble Death: Graeco-Roman Martyrology and Paul’s Concept of Salvation*, Library of New Testament Studies 28, (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989).

²⁵ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 172.

²⁶ For a helpful exposition of this view, see Gregory Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition: Josephus, Luke-Acts and Apologetic Historiography*, SNT 64 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992).

Iliad, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid*, in what Marianne Palmer Bonz calls “A Foundational Epic for the Early Christian Church.”²⁷

As such, Jerusalem is not the final destination, but a springboard to Rome. As our Lord says, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all the nations *beginning* from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46–47). The apostles are called then to be witnesses “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The earth’s end is evidently not Spain, as we might guess from Paul’s epistle to the Romans. In the spirit of the *Aeneid*, the Book of Acts turns into an epic tale, with mention of pagan gods Zeus and Hermes, shipwrecks, and miracles. Near the story’s end, Luke offers a kind of understated yet majestic summary, “And so we came to Rome” (Acts 28:14).

But Luke’s Rome looks nothing like Mark’s. To be sure, there is a competition between Christ and Rome, but it is asymmetrical. As C. Kavin Rowe puts it, “Luke narrates the movement of the Christian mission into the gentile world as a collision with culture-constructing aspects of that world,” and yet, “Luke narrates the threat of the Christian mission in such a way as to eliminate the possibility of conceiving it as in direct competition with the Roman government.”²⁸ Christ has come to bring the true and lasting peace, but not in competition with Caesar Augustus’s Pax Romana. Christ’s kingdom is not of this world. Christ heals a soldier’s ear, even as he commands to give unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s (Luke 20:20–26; 22:50–51).

The Roman government is involved in Christ’s death, but it is not motivated by great malice or evil intent. As Pilate himself says, “I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him” (Luke 23:14–15). Christ may have been crucified under Pontius Pilate, but not because of any malice on the governor’s part.

In Luke-Acts, the Romans appear open to the Way of Christ. As Dean Pinter notes, “In Acts 10, the Roman centurion is open to the apostle Peter. Asiarchs can be friendly to Paul (Acts 19:31), and even a proconsul like Sergius Paulus can believe in the gospel (Acts 13:12).”²⁹

Paul’s imprisonment seems to have more to do with his desire to spread the gospel than with anything to do with Roman animosity. Claudius Lysias, a tribune,

²⁷ Marianne Palmer Bonz, *The Past as Legacy: Luke-Acts and Ancient Epic* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 25.

²⁸ C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 91.

²⁹ Dean Pinter, “The Gospel of Luke and the Roman Empire,” in *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies*, ed. Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 113.

wrote to Felix, “I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment” (Acts 23:29). After Paul had appeared before Agrippa, we are told, “Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them. And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, ‘This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.’ And Agrippa said to Festus, ‘This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar’” (Acts 26:30–32).

As Paul said to his fellow Jews in Rome, “When they [the Romans] had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case” (Acts 28:18). Remarkably, though Acts ends with Paul under house arrest, he continued to welcome visitors and proclaim the gospel: “He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:30–31).

Thus, the Book of Acts records a more hopeful time, a period before Roman persecution began in earnest. As such, Luke-Acts is notable for public and bold witness in the public square, with the hope that hearers might be converted, enemies won over. So, the apostles prayed, “And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness” (Acts 4:29). And indeed, having prayed, “they continued to speak the word of God with boldness” (4:31). Barnabas reported that Paul preached “boldly” (Acts 9:28). Likewise, Paul and Barnabas spoke boldly at Iconium (Acts 14:3) and Paul spoke boldly in Ephesus (Acts 19:8).

Nevertheless, Luke, while optimistic, was not blind to the price that Christians would pay, especially as it touched on family relationships. Matthew warns that a person’s enemies will be of his own household (Matt 10:36). The Gospel of Luke heightens this tension: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). All three of the Synoptics tell us that Christ will pit parents against children. Luke, however, personalizes it, saying, “*You* will be handed over/betrayed by parents and brothers and relatives and friends.” And again, “They will put to death some of *you*” (Luke 21:16). So what shall we do? In Matthew, we are told that the one who endures to the end will be saved (Matt 24:13). Likewise, Mark (Mark 13:13). But Luke’s Gospel again personalizes it, “By your endurance, you will gain [acquire or buy] your souls” (Luke 21:19).

IV. Passion and Persecution in John

John and Matthew are attributed to the church's foundational apostles. Both struggle with the fact that the Messiah was rejected by his own people. Yet their passion narratives represent opposite ends of the spectrum. Matthew tells us that upon death, Jesus' soul was troubled, sorrowful even unto death, so much so that he fell upon his face to pray (Matt 26:37–39). John likewise records the words of Jesus "Now is my soul troubled." But quickly Jesus answers his own question, "And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name" (John 12:27–28). John omits any such agony in the garden. Instead, the Messiah appears as the great "I am." He remains standing; his enemies fall to the ground (John 18:6).

Throughout the fourth Gospel, Jesus views his death as glorification, and the cross as an exaltation. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3:14). As William Weinrich puts it, "the crucifixion is not the first step on the way to glory nor in any way a transition to glory," but is instead the very exaltation of the Son of Man.³⁰ The cross then becomes the focal point, even magnet of humanity: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32).

Not only does Christ view his death as glorification, but he preaches this boldly. As Heinrich Schlier notes, in John's Gospel "parresia" (*παρρησία*) is distinctly linked with the work of Jesus and has a place in the Johannine dialectic of the revelation of Jesus. A mark of Jesus as Revealer is that he works publicly.³¹ Thus, upon his arrest, Jesus says, "I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in the synagogues and temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret" (John 18:20). When the crowds notice that the Jewish leaders seek to kill Jesus, they say, "And here he is, speaking openly, and they say nothing to him!" (John 7:26). Again, concerning Lazarus's death, John says that "Jesus told them plainly" (John 11:14), that is openly (*παρρησία*) and without fear or hiding. Indeed, this bold Christ makes a whip of cords, and knows how to use it (John 2:13–22).

And yet, this outward boldness is only half of the story. The Gospel of John evidences a kind of interiority. The gospel spreads in inner rooms, beyond locked doors, away from the world's prying eyes. Indeed, while telling a cosmic story, John can give the reader a feeling of claustrophobia; the characters appear agoraphobic.

Christ's interactions are often on a personal level. In Samaria, Jesus speaks alone to a woman at the well. Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, comes to Jesus alone by night

³⁰ William Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 405.

³¹ Heinrich Schlier, "*παρουσία, παρρησιάζομαι*," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964–1976), 5:879.

(John 3:2). Was Nicodemus acting in fear or prudence, or a healthy combination of both? Either way, as Herman Ridderbos notes, the fact that “he wanted to speak with Jesus without being noticed is obvious.”³² Or consider the story of the man born blind. When his parents were approached concerning their son’s healing, they replied, “Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” Then John adds in a parenthetical remark, “(His parents said these things, because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be the Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue)” (John 9:21–22). Perhaps, this is more fear than prudence. The leaders then came to the man born blind and told him to give glory to God, but condemn Jesus as a sinner. But the man refused, and we are told, “They cast him out” (9:34). After that, Jesus came to speak to him, one on one.

All four Gospels teach that while persecution is inevitable, it is not to be sought out. In Matthew, disciples were called to be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves (Matt 10:16). Our Lord adds, “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next” (Matt 10:23). In the Gospel of Luke, the people of Nazareth nearly pushed Jesus over a cliff, only to be frustrated when he mysteriously passed through their midst (Luke 4:30).

So also in the Gospel of John, we see Jesus acting in a way nothing less than shrewd and evasive. The Feast of Booths is a prime and mysterious example. The brothers of Jesus beg him to make his ministry more public, saying, “‘For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.’ For not even his brothers believed in him” (John 7:4–5). Jesus responds, “You go up to the feast. I am not going up to the feast, for my time has not fully come” (John 7:8). Only two verses later, however, we read, “But after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up, not publicly but in private” (John 7:10). This is part of a pattern that Jerome Neyrey calls a “sociology of secrecy.”³³ If this were a football game, we might call it the Statue of Liberty, a fake punt, or the Jerusalem shuffle. A game of spies.

Yes, Jesus spoke boldly and in the open, except when he did not. When Jesus claimed, “Before Abraham was, I am,” the people rose to pick up stones to throw at him, but “Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple” (John 8:58–59). Again, he told his disciples to become sons of light, but “when Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them” (12:36). Indeed, even his own disciples wondered why Jesus did not speak more openly to the world. “Judas, (not Iscariot)

³² Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 123.

³³ Jerome Neyrey, “The Sociology of Secrecy and the Fourth Gospel,” in *What is John? Volume II: Literary and Social Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 79–109.

said to him, ‘Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?’” (14:22).

And indeed, the followers of Jesus often kept themselves hidden. Sometimes, this was faith destroying. So we are told, “Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God” (John 12:42–43). But then we happen upon a more prudential fear: “After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission” (John 19:38). Joseph of Arimathea demonstrated his faith, while maintaining secrecy.

One gets the feeling that our Lord does much of his teaching while in hiding. In the Last Supper, which takes place over five full chapters, our Lord speaks about the world as an ominous place. The world will hate Christ’s disciples, as they hated Jesus. “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you,” he adds (John 15:20). The disciples seem to heed the Lord’s words of caution. When the risen Christ appears to his disciples, “the doors were locked for fear of the Jews” (20:19). A week later, the Lord appears to Thomas (20:26) The evangelist describes the closed room, but Jesus does not admonish the disciples for locking the doors. Perhaps, this is a reflection of the church persecuted in Jerusalem, where prudence was the order of the day. The scene may be a preview of the early church, especially during its infancy in Jerusalem. When Peter, having been released from prison, tried to join the worshipping community at Mary’s house, he could not do so, for the door of the gateway was locked (Acts 12:12–16). And for good reason. As Stephen was put to death, “There arose a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles” (Acts 8:1).

There are many good reasons to think that John was written at an earlier time period, in Jerusalem itself. While Mark and Luke think of Rome, John can’t seem to get out of Jerusalem. Jesus enters Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles (John 7:2), Dedication (10:22), and Passover (12:12). We are told that many from the Sanhedrin believed in him (John 12:42). And many times, we are told often about the “fear of the Jews” especially as it is concentrated in Jerusalem. As Weinrich notes, “John’s Gospel informs us that the ministry of Jesus may well have centered in and around Jerusalem and not so much in Galilee as the Synoptics suggest.”³⁴ If the Gospel were indeed written in Jerusalem, and at an early date, that would help to explain the claustrophobic nature of its depiction of persecution, as well as its

³⁴ Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1*, 27.

intensity. As such, the Gospel of John may well present persecution at its earliest and most intense.

Finally, John is the only Gospel to prophesy explicitly the suffering of one person in particular. The risen Lord says to Peter, “Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go” (John 21:18). John then tells us that this death has meaning. “This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God” (21:19). A remarkable statement. Jesus had said, “I do not receive my glory from people” (5:41). And he told his disciples to seek glory only from God (5:44). But this is never a self-seeking glory. The Son glorifies the Father, the Father the Son, and now in his death, Peter will join in the mutual trinitarian self-giving, bringing glory to God through his death.

V. Preparing for Persecution: A Few Concluding Thoughts

While much has been done on the passion of Christ, we must think more deeply about how that passion is related to suffering, and more specifically, the persecution of Christians. The Gospels offer plenty of warnings to prepare. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. Our Lord never sugarcoats the Christian life. He tells us the cost up front. Do not say Christ did not warn you. What, then, are the repercussions of following him? Persecution. Suffering. Persecution will mean rejection. At times, we must take a stand, though it can be smarter, at times, to run away (Matt 10). Christ’s message will divide households, a phenomenon that is on the rise in our own land even now. The height of persecution may include great pain, a feeling of abandonment, and even death, as we see in Mark’s Gospel.

Perhaps, though, the juxtaposition of Luke and John may be the most intriguing. For now, there is still time to preach in the public square. To speak boldly. Luke exhibits the hopefulness of such an approach. In doing so, we pray for the wisdom of serpents. But the times may soon change; John’s Gospel may become our model. Consider the church in the twentieth century under communism, today in Islamic lands and China, and perhaps soon in our own nation. How we navigate these waters will be tricky. This may become a church behind closed doors. It will take courage and shrewdness, but it cannot be avoided. The way of the cross is the way of salvation, no matter what particular choices we make. But in the four Gospels, at least, we have the words of the Lord that will help to guide us along the way through persecution, and in the age to come, eternal life.