CHAPTER FOUR

THE INFLUENCE OF A PRE-MARKAN PASSION TRADITION ON MARK'S TREATMENT OF JEWISH LEADERSHIP GROUPS

The two proposed pre-Markan controversy collections both fall entirely within Chapters 1-13. But we believe Mark arranged Chapters 1-13 in the light of his early Passion tradition. Accordingly, it is vital that the controversy collections be studied in connection with the Passion tradition. The failure of scholars to follow this procedure explains many of the shortcomings in earlier studies of the Jewish authorities in Mark.

Jewish Leadership Groups in the Pre-Markan Passion Tradition

The Passion narrative in Mark is widely understood as an expansion of an underlying written source. 1 An account of Jesus' last days was presumably already available to Mark even before he composed Chapters 1-13. His Gospel, therefore, is a "passion story with an extended introduction," 2 "written in A.D. 70 or soon afterwards by a person who composed the first thirteen chapters to provide what might be termed a propaedeutic to a suitably adapted form of the traditional passion narrative." 3 Mark's task was to fashion these opening chapters in such a way that they would dovetail perfectly with his predetermined conclusion. Accordingly, the contents and sequence of some episodes in Chapters 1-13 reflect literary needs rather than historical realities:

It is of crucial importance... that we should recognize the nature of the purpose behind evangelical presentations of the order of various events in Jesus' life. The setting forth of earlier stages of this life

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3 Burkill, New Light, 264; also 221, and "St. Mark's Philosophy of the Passion," NovT 2 (1958), 245-271, on 245; cf. also Winter, Trial, 113ff.; W. Marxsen, Der Evangelist Markus, Göttingen, 1956, 17; Grant, Earliest Gospel, 70-71. See additional listings in Donahue, "Introduction...;" in Kelber, 8ff., and especially notes 29 and 63.
was controlled by the notion of them as phases in the development of a literary plan which finds its culmination in the crucifixion. The end was there before the beginning had been thought of.... Traditional elements of the story concerning "earlier events" are so arranged as to supply the reader with a reasonable explanation of the Passion.... Hence no historical or biographical information can be gleaned from the order of the items used concerning the chronological sequence of events in the life of Jesus. 4

If we accept the theory of a pre-Markan Passion narrative, clearly the responsibility for Jesus' capture and execution was assigned by that source to three Jewish authority groups: chief priests + scribes + elders. In prefacing other chapters to the Passion story, therefore, it would have been incumbent upon Mark to prepare his readers for the predetermined dénouement; that is to say, the Passion narrative triad—chief priests + scribes + elders—had to make an appearance in Chapters 1-13. Only if the reader could trace the escalation of their hostility toward Jesus prior to 14:1 could their actions against him be rendered sufficiently intelligible.

Scholars accepting the theory of a pre-Markan narrative are certain that this source actually mentioned these leadership groups. Mark himself did not introduce them along with his other revisions of that source. M. Dibelius, R. Bultmann and G. Sloyan are three scholars whose analyses 5 strip Mark 14-15 down to its barest minimum so as to isolate the antecedent core. While their full reconstructions vary considerably from one another, they yet concur that at least the following verses must be pre-Markan: Mk. 14:1-2 represents the opening of the original narrative; 14:43 and 15:1, 3-5, 15b are also primary; so also 15:21, 26, 34, 37. By stringing together the first eight verses, we find the following:

Mk. 14:1-2 It was now two days before the Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth, and kill him; for they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be a tumult of the people."

14:43 And immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders.

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4 Winter, Trial, 111; italics Winter's.
5 Dibelius, op. cit., 178ff.; Bultmann, op. cit., 262ff.; Sloyan, op. cit., 43 n. 11.