CHAPTER SIX

JESUS’ DEATH IN MARK’S GOSPEL

INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapters have shown that in his Gospel Mark intends to make clear to his readers that Jesus, although rightly called ‘Christ,’ never had any political ambitions. This Markan message seems to be an attempt to forestall the criticism the Christian use of the title ‘Christ’ for Jesus might elicit, i.e. that the Christians were the followers of someone who had been an anti-Roman rebel. Accordingly, my assumption that the reason for the persecution of the Markan Christians lay in their alleged subversiveness\(^1\) seems to be borne out by the thrust of Mark’s Gospel.

It was argued above that another possible reason that the Christian community might be regarded as a subversive Jewish movement was the tradition concerning Jesus’ crucifixion.\(^2\) Crucifixion was a punishment applied primarily to non-Roman inhabitants of the Roman Empire who were tried for serious offences such as banditry or social insubordination.\(^3\) The tradition concerning Jesus’ crucifixion, then, might lead people to consider the Christians the followers of a revolutionary. Therefore, if we are right in supposing that the Jewish leaders persecuted the Markan Christian community because they feared that the Romans would regard and treat it as a rebellious movement, Jesus’ crucifixion was another issue Mark had to deal with in his Gospel.

I intend to argue presently that the evangelist does indeed try to allay the suspicion that might rise against the Christians in consequence of their remaining faithful to someone who had been cruci-

\(^1\) See Part One, Evaluation of the Results, pp. 139-142.
\(^2\) See Part One, Evaluation of the Results, pp. 141-142.
\(^3\) See Part One, Evaluation of the Results, p. 141, and note 4.
fied. First, I will examine Jesus’ encounters with his opponents, the leading Jews, which eventually lead to his arrest and execution. I will show that Mark presents Jesus’ crucifixion as the result not of any subversive behaviour or ideas on his part, but of the ill will of the Jewish leaders. Subsequently, I will discuss Mark’s portrayal of Jesus in Mk 14-15. I argue that in these chapters Mark intends to convey the message that Jesus, although arrested, tried, and executed as an insurrectionist, was in fact a righteous man, who accepted suffering and even death as a consequence of his faithfulness to God.

1. THE REASON FOR JESUS’ CRUCIFIXION IN MARK’S GOSPEL

It is generally agreed that Mark shows a remarkable interest in Jesus’ arrest, trial, and execution. Mark has Jesus predict these events no less than three times (Mk 8:31; 9:30-31; 10:32-34), and describes them in great detail in the final part of his Gospel (Mk 14-15). In these final chapters Mark relates how Jesus is arrested by order of the chief priests, scribes, and elders (Mk 14:43-52), questioned before the Jewish Sanhedrin (Mk 14:53-65), and subsequently handed over to the Roman prefect Pilate, who has him crucified (Mk 15:1-15).

It should be noted that the Jewish leaders play a crucial role in Jesus’ execution. What interests us now is why, according to Mark, the leading Jews ordered Jesus to be arrested and delivered him up to the Romans. Therefore I will analyse Mark’s depiction of the events which led to Jesus’ execution, concentrating on the motive of the Jewish leaders for having Jesus put to death, and the charge they bring against Jesus openly in Mk 15:1-15.

Already during his ministry in Galilee, Mark’s Jesus meets with serious opposition on the part of the local scribes and Pharisees. In Mk 3:6 the evangelist tells his readers that after the healing of a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, the Pharisees conspire with the Herodians against Jesus and decide ‘that they will kill him.’ Why do the Galilean Pharisees in Mk 3:6 wish to kill Jesus?

4 The word Ἰρωνεῖοι is not found outside Mark and Markan tradition in other authors; it occurs in Mk 3:6, Mk 12:13 and its parallel Mt 22:16, and in Mk 8:15 v.1. There is no group or organization known to us to which it could refer. Probably it designates the political supporters of Herod Antipas. In any case, Mark’s intention in Mk 3:6 is clear: the Pharisees seek the help