

*THE LIFE OF CHRIST ACCORDING TO ST. MARK.*<sup>1</sup>  
 XLVI. THE TRIAL BEFORE THE SANHEDRIM, XIV. 53,  
 55-64.

JESUS was led back to the city and taken to the palace of the High Priest. Meanwhile His judges were assembling; time pressed; a popular rising in His favour might be imminent, and the sooner He was disposed of the better. With this added anxiety at a critical season, the Sanhedrim, the supreme council of the Jews, would be ready to meet at short notice; and a meeting would be summoned as soon as the arrangements had been made for the arrest.

The question now arose as to the charge to be brought against the prisoner, and the evidence by which it would be sustained. At first sight everything seemed straightforward. In official circles it was notorious that Jesus was in the habit of breaking the Law, and of inciting others to follow His example. He was a disturber of public order, a usurper of authority, and an impious impostor who claimed to be the Messiah. No doubt much else to His discredit was implicitly believed by the priests and scribes and their followers.

Obviously, however, many of these charges could not be supported by honest evidence. Even as to the Messiahship. Jesus had made no formal public claim. His work had been chiefly in Galilee, and it was difficult at a moment's notice to obtain testimony as to the obnoxious teaching of Jesus. The priests desired to justify a sentence of death; it would not be sufficient to prove some trivial offence.

Abundance of evidence was offered—witnesses are easily

<sup>1</sup> These studies do not profess to be an adequate historical or dogmatic account of Christ; they simply attempt to state the impression which the Second Gospel would make upon a reader who had no other sources of information as to Jesus, and was unacquainted with Christian doctrine.

obtained by the authorities of an Oriental State ; but there was not time to train the witnesses in a consistent story. At last it seemed as if a charge of intending to destroy the Temple could be substantiated, and everything appeared to be arranged satisfactorily. The court was formally opened, and Jesus was charged with this heinous crime. After the necessary preliminaries the witnesses alleged :

“ We heard Him saying, ‘ I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days I will build another not made with hands.’ ”

But somehow even this testimony broke down when it was produced in open court. The Sanhedrim was a large body, some seventy members, and amongst them there may have been sympathizers with Jesus. At any rate there would be upright men present, anxious to do justice, and shrewd enough to discern and expose flimsy evidence. Something fairly plausible must be adduced if it were in any way possible. So far nothing had been found ; and the authorities felt that there was danger lest a notorious criminal should escape for want of formal proof. But could not this be extracted from the prisoner Himself ? Ancient courts did not hesitate to extort confessions by torture, but this practice does not seem to have obtained in any purely Jewish court,<sup>1</sup> but moral suasion would be legitimate.

Till now nothing has been said of the bearing of Jesus or of any words of His since His arrest. He had soon seen that He need not fear secret assassination ; He would be accorded public trial and execution ; and men would know that He had sealed His testimony with His blood. Now He was called upon to plead before the supreme tribunal of His people. Whatever formal authority was left to the Jews was concentrated in the Sanhedrim ; the

<sup>1</sup> Torture, however, was used by the Herods.

official sanctity and dignity of the High Priest and his most distinguished colleagues ; the learning of the scribes ; and the pious zeal of the Pharisees. They, if any one, had the right to speak for Israel. He had brought His claims to the final court of appeal.

But as He had long foreseen, He had only brought them there to be contemptuously rejected. As He looked round at His judges He knew that His condemnation was a foregone conclusion. He might find sympathy in a minority, but no support earnest enough to secure an acquittal. Indeed, in all probability those who were most friendly to Him were least disposed to take Him seriously. His enemies regarded Him with some trepidation ; their hatred was in proportion to their fear. He had the reputation of a wonder-worker ; the Pharisees themselves had declared that He cast out devils by the help of the arch-fiend Beelzebub ; no one knew what supernatural power He might possess ; He might blast the Sanhedrim and the Temple, or even the whole city by evil magic. His sympathizers, on the other hand, may have regarded Him as an innocent fanatic, whom they would have been glad to spare, though they were not prepared to sacrifice themselves on His behalf.

Jesus had an impossible cause to maintain as far as that or indeed any earthly tribunal was concerned. Whether His teaching had been a danger to public order ; whether it could be reconciled to the Law—as to such matters He was comparatively indifferent. Nor was He anxious about His personal fate, there was no longer any uncertainty about that. Nor did He greatly care about the judgment of the Sanhedrim on His character and work. But it was necessary that the faith of His followers should survive the condemnation and execution of their Master ; that they should continue so to believe in Him as to be able to kindle

a like faith in others, and thus bring in the Kingdom of God. His Divine commission and His unique status as God's representative among men, His Messiahship, these were essential elements of His message. He knew that He could not win recognition from the men who sat to judge Him ; but could He so bear Himself in His last hours that He might still be the Christ, the Son of God, to Peter and his companions ? He was weary in mind and body through the continued strain of the previous week, and through the sleeplessness of the night that was now giving place to day ; through the alternate depression and exaltation of His wrestling with God in Gethsemane ; and through the inevitable reaction when the blow had at last fallen. For the moment, at any rate, there was nothing to be done or suffered. In His weariness a strange peace fell upon Him. He stood silent amidst the formal bustle of the court, and the noisy outcry of accusers and hostile witnesses. He made no reply, but let opportunities for protest pass unheeded, and challenges to speak go unanswered. But now the High Priest, the President of the Court, rose from his seat, and addressed the prisoner :

“ Why dost thou make no answer ? What hast thou to say in reply to this evidence against thee ? ”

The words seemed to fall upon deaf ears ; Jesus might have been wrapped in fellowship with beings of another world—God and the angels, Beelzebub and demons, according to the sympathies or antipathies of the spectators. Again the High Priest addressed Him :

“ Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed ? ”

At last Jesus was roused and turned to answer, and men leaned forward to catch His words. Hitherto He had never expressly claimed to be the Messiah, though He had accepted Messianic titles from others ; even now if He avowed Himself Messiah, it would not be a spontaneous

utterance. He had sought that recognition should come without His asking ; not because of His claims, but through the influence of the Spirit of God upon the hearts of men. Now He must either claim the title for Himself, or deny His mission. On the other hand both Jesus and the whole assembly that was waiting for His answer knew that His only chance of escape lay in His disavowing Messiahship. Then perhaps He might be dismissed as discredited and harmless. Would He purchase His life at such a price ? The High Priest had asked, " Art thou the Christ," and now He answered plainly.

" I am. Ye shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power <sup>1</sup> and coming with the clouds of heaven."

The assembly listened, some indignant, some with contemptuous pity, almost all incredulous. Those who feared some terrible exertion of the magic gifts of Jesus were relieved to learn that the manifestation of His power was deferred to a future time. The authorities were gratified because they had obtained from His own mouth the evidence which they needed. The High Priest rent his garments in official horror.

" What further need," said he, " is there of witnesses ? You have heard His blasphemy. What is your judgment ? "

No one proposed to investigate the claim of Jesus to be the Messiah ; it seemed as mad as if some one nowadays were to declare himself Christ appearing again at the Second Coming. " They all condemned Him as guilty on a capital charge "—a general statement that does not exclude the possibility of silence on the part of some members of the court.

The verdict and the trial over, the councillors went their way to prepare for the observances of the sacred season, some congratulating themselves on having done good service

<sup>1</sup> Used as a Divine Name.

by helping to expose and suppress a dangerous impostor ; others relieved that a disagreeable task was over ; some dismissing the whole affair from their minds as mere routine, throwing all responsibility on the officials, and turning to discuss indifferent matters. Perhaps there were a few who sympathized with Jesus ; they had not ventured on any open protest, but they cherished vague hopes of saving Him before the execution could be carried out.

#### XLVII. PETER'S DENIAL, XIV. 54, 66-72.

Meanwhile Jesus had not been entirely forsaken by His disciples. After the first panic Peter had recovered his self-possession. When he had gone some little way, and found he had made his escape for the time being, he was relieved of the sense of immediate danger, and plucked up courage to turn back and follow at a safe distance. When the company had gone in to the High Priest's palace, Peter mingled with the bystanders, and finding himself unnoticed made his way in, and sat and warmed himself at a fire amongst the followers of the High Priest. Perhaps Jesus had not yet been brought before the court, and was awaiting His trial somewhere else. Peter, however, would choose a place where he might have some view of Jesus and His judges, or at any rate hear how matters were going on, without making himself conspicuous.

But soon a woman of the priestly household joined the circle by the fire ; her fellow-servants were well known to her, and she noticed that there was a stranger among them, and took a good look at him. She had seen Jesus and His disciples in the Temple or watched them passing through the city. Peter's dress and air suggested the Galilean, and reminded her of the men she had seen with Jesus.

"You, too," said she, "were with that Nazarene Jesus." Probably in the comfortable warmth of the fire Peter was

half asleep again ; and only partially awoke to become conscious that he was the object of dangerous attention, because he was suspected of being an adherent of Jesus.

“ I don't know,” he faltered out, “ I don't understand what you mean.”

St. Mark calls it a denial, and doubtless Peter thought of it in after times as a denial, but it reads like a confused prevarication that would deceive no one. However, he was not interfered with, but he withdrew into the forecourt, where he would be less likely to attract attention. As he went he heard the cock crow.

But even here he was not left in peace ; the woman who had noticed him before seems to have been coming and going on various errands about the palace, and as she passed through the forecourt, she again caught sight of Peter. She had no doubt now as to Peter's connexion with Jesus. “ This is one of them,” she cried for the benefit of all and sundry, and Peter again denied his Master.

Something distracted the attention of the crowd for the moment, but after a while men began to look at him again, and recall his words and his accent, and compare notes, Then they turned upon him :

“ It is quite true ; you *are* one of them, for you are a Galilean.”

Peter, divided between fear and anger, broke out into the loud volubility of the excited Oriental, and declared with oaths and curses :

“ I have nothing to do with the man you are talking about.”

Just then the cock crowed for the second time, and the shrill, insistent noise checked Peter in his torrent of words, brought him to himself, and he remembered how Jesus had said that before the second cockcrowing he would thrice deny Him. Peter's impetuous nature, excited and over-

wrought, passed readily from cursing to weeping, and he burst into tears. We are not told the sequel, but the silence of St. Mark as to Peter's subsequent doings suggests that he fled from the scene of his fall and left Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the final clause of xiv. 72, *καὶ ἐπιβαλὼν ἔκλαιεν*, R.V., "And when he thought thereon, he wept," R.V. mg., "And he began to weep," the *ἐπιβαλὼν* is unintelligible in its present context. It may be an unidiomatic rendering of some Aramaic phrase meaning, "He wept bitterly," cf. A.V. mg. "He wept abundantly."