

# History and Prophecy in the Marcan Passion Narrative

D. H. MILLING

My subject is the relationship between history and Old Testament prophecy in the Gospels, with special reference to the Marcan Passion narrative. This is one aspect of a much wider problem, namely the relationship between history and theological interpretation in the Gospel narratives. C. H. Dodd speaks of the Christian use of the Old Testament as providing 'the substructure of New Testament theology'; he says that the Gospel or *kerygma* 'consists of the announcement of certain historical events in a setting which displays the significance of those events'.<sup>1</sup> Then, having briefly outlined the historical events of Christ's birth, death and resurrection, Dodd goes on to say, 'The significance attached to these events is mainly indicated by reference to the Old Testament'.<sup>2</sup> He refers to the passage, I Corinthians 15:3-5, as a good example of the relationship between event and significance; there St. Paul says that 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures', and again that 'He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures'. The facts of Christ's death and resurrection gain their meaning and significance by reference to the Old Testament; thus the Old Testament gives us the key to the understanding of the New Testament. It does not seem to be possible to get behind the New Testament evidence, to a period when the events of the Gospel were not described in terms of the Old Testament. It is true that many nineteenth-century theologians, particularly in Germany, tried to separate the events of the Gospel from the significance which the Gospel writers attached to those events; they sought to reconstruct a picture of Jesus of Nazareth free from all theological presuppositions. This 'Quest for the Historical Jesus' was open to some serious criticisms.

First, it involved a very superficial and inadequate idea of what history itself was: as J. M. Robinson says, 'The nineteenth century saw the reality of the "historical facts" as consisting

---

<sup>1</sup> C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures*, Nisbet, 1961, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 12.

largely in names; places, dates, occurrences, sequences, causes, effects—things which fall far short of being the actuality of history, if one understands by history the distinctively human, creative, unique, purposeful, which distinguishes man from nature'.<sup>3</sup> It is just not possible to have completely objective history; all history involves some kind of interpretation of the evidence, as having a certain meaning or significance. As C. H. Dodd says, 'Before we can speak of history, even in the most rudimentary sense, there must be events which possess an interest and a meaning for at least a group of individuals, who for the sake of that interest and meaning remember them, recall them in conversation, hand them on by oral tradition, and finally record them for a wider circle'.<sup>4</sup> Dodd therefore defines a historical event as 'an occurrence plus the interest and meaning which the occurrence possessed for the persons involved in it';<sup>5</sup> he goes on to say, 'We may describe the events of the Gospel as a narrative of events whose meaning is eschatological, that is to say, events in which is to be discerned the mighty act of the transcendent God which brings history to its fulfilment'.<sup>6</sup>

A second criticism of the nineteenth-century 'Quest of the Historical Jesus' is that the historians of that period simply portrayed Jesus in the image of their own ideal; as Albert Schweitzer said, 'The so-called historical Jesus of the nineteenth-century biographies is really a modernization, in which Jesus is painted in the colours of modern bourgeois respectability and neo-Kantian moralism'. C. S. Lewis was even more scathing in his criticisms of the subjective character of these reinterpretations of the 'historical Jesus'; he pictures the infernal powers as saying, 'In the last generation we promoted the construction of a "historical Jesus" on liberal and humanitarian lines; we are now putting forward a new "historical Jesus" on Marxian, catastrophic and revolutionary lines; . . . each "historical Jesus" is unhistorical. The documents say what they say, and cannot be added to; each new "historical Jesus" therefore has to be got out of them by suppression at one point and exaggeration at another'.<sup>7</sup> All attempts to reach a 'historically objective' picture of the events of the Gospels face the same problem; they tend to replace the interpretation of the Gospel writers by the interpretation of a modern historian or biographer.

It is wiser to try to see the events of the Gospel in the light of the interpretation which the Gospels themselves provide, in so far as we are able to discover what that interpretation is. It is at this point that the Old Testament quotations found in

---

<sup>3</sup> J. M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus*, S.C.M. Press, 1963, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> C. H. Dodd, *History and the Gospel*, Nisbet, 1960, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, Bles, 1946, p. 117.

the Gospels are of vital importance, though they must be understood in terms of Judaism in the time of Jesus, with its variety of sects and parties. Barnabas Lindars points out how limited is the range of Old Testament books referred to in the Passion narratives of the Gospels; he says, 'It is significant that the quotations used in Passion apologetic are drawn from a narrow range of Scripture, i.e. the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, certain Psalms and the prophecy of Zechariah. The Prophets and Psalms were largely interpreted in an eschatological sense in late Judaism, as also by the Qumran Covenanters . . . the thought of the early Church was rooted in eschatological expectations'.<sup>8</sup> These Old Testament passages are concerned with the coming Day of the Lord, when God will establish his kingdom in history, and pronounce final judgement on the forces of evil; as C. H. Dodd says, 'The employment of these scriptures as testimonies to the *kerygma* indicates that the crisis out of which the Christian movement arose is regarded as the realization of the prophetic vision of judgement and redemption. The passages to which reference is made are in general couched in the symbolic language characteristic of apocalyptic literature'.<sup>9</sup> Yet the New Testament writers are very selective, even within the prophetic and apocalyptic tradition; they only choose what suits their purpose. As C. H. Dodd observes, 'The New Testament writers do not attempt to exploit the whole corpus of Messianic prediction. There are whole sections of it which are not represented. It is not only the purely supernatural traits . . . that are missing from the Gospel story. The whole conception of the Messiah as king, warrior and judge, the ruthless vindicator of the righteousness of God, is absent from the Church's presentation of the Jesus of history . . . there has been some principle of selection at work, by which certain sides of the Messianic idea are to be fulfilled, and others are to be set aside. What was that principle of selection? Surely the simplest explanation is that a true historical memory controlled the selection of prophecies'.<sup>10</sup> The early Church therefore adapted Old Testament prophecy and apocalyptic to serve its own ends; it did not allow the prophetic tradition to distort the record of the Gospel events. Of course, the Church could not ignore the main emphasis of the prophets and apocalyptists, which stressed the glory and triumph of the Messiah; but this type of prophecy was not used in describing the Jesus of history. Instead, it was applied to the Christian hope of the Second Coming of Christ. As C. H. Dodd remarks, 'By retaining a residue of the futurist eschatology of Judaism, the Church kept its historical tradition from being completely transformed

---

<sup>8</sup> B. Lindars, S.S.F., *New Testament Apologetic*, S.C.M. Press, 1961, p. 77.

<sup>9</sup> C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures*, pp. 72-73.

<sup>10</sup> C. H. Dodd, *History and the Gospel*, p. 61.

by eschatological ideas, since there was always a repository for unfulfilled expectations, in the hope of the Second Advent'.<sup>11</sup> It seems that the main use of Old Testament prophecy was to confirm the events of the Gospel narratives, not to fabricate imaginary occurrences; C. F. D. Moule is therefore right in saying, 'When it is claimed that whole sections in the Gospels were spun out of Old Testament material, this is far outrunning the evidence. In the main, the evidence points to the Gospel events as the controlling and decisive factor, to which the Old Testament material is almost always subordinate. Here and there an Old Testament passage may have contributed some circumstantial detail in the recounting of a tradition about Jesus . . . but it is questionable whether any story of Jesus in the New Testament has been generated, from start to finish by nothing but an Old Testament passage. On the contrary, the fact is rather that the choice of Old Testament passages is determined by the Christian events, and their interpretation is dictated by Christian tradition'.<sup>12</sup>

There is, however, one gap in this claim that the selection of Old Testament prophecies is governed by the events of the Gospel; C. F. D. Moule allows that 'Here and there an Old Testament passage may have contributed some circumstantial detail in the recounting of a tradition about Jesus'.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, C. H. Dodd admits, 'It is probable that in detail the search for fulfilments of prophecy has modified the story of Jesus in its developed form'.<sup>14</sup> If more conservative scholars like C. H. Dodd and C. F. D. Moule admit the possibility of some influence of Old Testament quotations upon the details of the Gospel narrative, it is not surprising that more radical scholars are somewhat sceptical about the authenticity of the Gospel narratives. John Knox, for example, says, 'We must allow for some influences from the Old Testament texts which were found to be fulfilled in various details of the Passion drama. It would be a mistake to suppose that the texts were always suggested by the incidents and circumstances, and that the incidents and circumstances were never suggested by the texts . . . when we remember that the only scripture for the Christians of the Gospel-making period was what we call the Old Testament, and that it would have been incredible to them that an event so significant as the crucifixion of Jesus should not have been described in it, we are bound to allow for *some* influence of the Old Testament texts upon the tradition'.<sup>15</sup> D. E. Nineham points out that it was essential for the early Christians to prove that Jesus was innocent both of rebellion against the Roman government and of blasphemy

---

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>12</sup> C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament*, A. & C. Black, 1962, pp. 84-85.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>14</sup> C. H. Dodd, *History and the Gospel*, p. 63.

<sup>15</sup> John Knox, *The Death of Christ*, Collins, 1959, p. 20.

against the Jewish religion ; they therefore had to show that it was God's will and purpose that his Son should complete his redemptive work by means of suffering. 'If, however, God had revealed his intentions for the saving of the world in detail in the Old Testament, it followed that Jesus' innocent sufferings must be predicted there. Accordingly, the early Christians diligently searched the Old Testament for such predictions'.<sup>16</sup> Nineham goes on to suggest that many of the details of the Passion narrative were read out of the Old Testament prophecies ; such predictions would help to fill a gap in the Passion narrative itself. What God predicted, he would certainly have brought to pass ; of that the early Christians had no doubt. If, therefore, an Old Testament passage referred to the Passion of Christ, the things it predicted must have happened to Jesus, even if there was no other evidence that they had happened. Old Testament predictions thus became, to some extent, a historical source, and, as Lightfoot says, 'They would be of much greater value than the fragmentary stories of escaping young men or fearful women ; for these Old Testament Passion narratives were divinely granted and attested ; it stood so written'.<sup>17</sup> Nineham's conclusion is that 'The account of Jesus' end, on which our Gospel narratives are based, was derived from historical reminiscences and Old Testament predictions, in a proportion which cannot now be exactly determined'.<sup>18</sup>

Let us now examine the influence of Old Testament prophecy upon the Marcan Passion narrative. Rudolf Bultmann would regard many of the details of the Marcan Passion narrative as having been borrowed from the Old Testament ; he says, 'Mark derives the lottery for the garments (Mark 15:24) from Psalm 22:18 . . . the mocking of the passers-by (Mark 15:29) from Psalm 22:7 ; the interpretation of Jesus' last cry (Mark 15:34) from Psalm 22:1 ; the drinking of vinegar (Mark 15:36) from Psalm 69:21'.<sup>19</sup> More conservative theologians, however, regard these parallels as mere coincidence ; for example, Sherman Johnson, in his commentary on St. Mark's Gospel, says, 'The most probable explanation is that Jesus in his cry from the cross, actually used the words of Psalm 22, his garments were divided, and he was offered wine. This, of course, suggested Old Testament prophecies to the disciples, with the result that the references were included'.<sup>20</sup> Where the judgements of scholars diverge so widely, is it possible to discover any objective criteria, by which we may decide whether

<sup>16</sup> D. E. Nineham, *Saint Mark*, Penguin Books, 1963, p. 367.

<sup>17</sup> Quoting R. H. Lightfoot, *History and Interpretation in the Gospels*, p. 156, *ibid.*, p. 367.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> R. Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, Blackwell, 1963, p. 281.

<sup>20</sup> S. E. Johnson, *A Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Mark*, A. & C. Black, 1960, p. 254.

any particular incident in the Marcan Passion narrative is drawn directly from the Old Testament or not? I should like to suggest two main criteria for deciding this question. First, does the Gospel narrative describe an event in language which is unmistakably derived from the Old Testament, and from no other source? What matters here is not so much the quantity of Old Testament material quoted, but rather the proportion of Old Testament in each incident, compared with the proportion from other sources. Secondly, is the event described in the Gospel narrative in itself probable or improbable, from the historical point of view? Let us examine part of the Marcan Passion narrative, with these two criteria in mind; the passage we shall study is Mark 15:21-41, which describes the crucifixion of Jesus. It is worth noting that St. Mark rarely gives direct and explicit quotations from the Old Testament, such as we find in St. John's Passion narrative (John 19:24, 28, 36, 37). Mark prefers to interweave Old Testament language into his Passion narrative, without any conscious acknowledgement of his sources. It is therefore a more delicate task to dissect the Marcan Passion narrative, and to distinguish clearly between history and prophecy in Mark's account of the crucifixion.

The first passage to be examined is Mark 15:23, where Jesus is offered 'wine mingled with myrrh' (*ἐσμυρνησιμένον οἶνον*). The offering of wine is historically quite probable; we know that drugged wine was given to condemned criminals, to alleviate their sufferings. 'He who goes forth to be executed is given a grain of frankincense in a cup of wine, that his senses should become numbed . . . gracious women in Jerusalem used to provide this portion voluntarily; but if they failed to provide it, it was supplied from the funds of the community'.<sup>21</sup> The Rabbis quoted Proverbs 31:6-7, as an authority for this practice; 'Give strong drink to him who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress; let them drink, and forget their poverty, and remember their misery no more'. There is, however, no evidence that wine mingled with myrrh would have the effect of dulling pain; the mixture was given as a refreshing drink, and no more.<sup>22</sup> In the Old Testament, myrrh is only referred to as a perfume. Mark's mention of 'wine mingled with myrrh' may indicate a reference to Proverbs 31:6-7, especially as in Proverbs 31:4, it says, 'It is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink', which might explain why Jesus 'would not receive it' (Mark 15:23). Neither the historical nor the literary arguments are really decisive here.

The second passage is Mark 15:24, where it reads, 'They parted his garments among them, and cast lots upon them' (*διαμερίζονται τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ, βάλλοντες κλῆρον ἐπ'αὐτὰ*). This

<sup>21</sup> *Mishnah, Sanhedrin 43a*. For other Rabbinic parallels see Strack-Billerbeck, I.1037. b.

<sup>22</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, 14.

is a quotation from Psalm 22:18: 'They divide my garments among them, and for my raiment they cast lots' (*διεμερίσαντο τὰ ἱμάτιά μου ἑαυτοῖς, καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν ἱματισμὸν μου ἔβαλον κλῆρον*). The two passages are practically identical in the Greek, and it looks as if the whole incident has been lifted from the Old Testament. There was, however, a Roman custom that criminals were stripped of their clothing, which was given to their executioners; Roman soldiers frequently played at dice, and other gambling games, and may well have done so to decide who should win the victim's clothes. The incident is therefore historically quite probable; but the Old Testament reference was perhaps the reason for including it here.

The third passage is Mark 15:27: 'With him they crucify two robbers'. Some commentators have seen in this a reference to Isaiah 53:12: 'He was numbered with the transgressors', which is quoted, with the formula, 'The scripture was fulfilled', in the next verse (Mark 15:28) by the Caesarean manuscripts.<sup>23</sup> This quotation formula is not characteristic of Mark's style, and the whole of verse 28 is probably taken from Luke 22:37, where it is quoted in connection with the disciples being urged to buy a sword, just before the arrest of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. The crucifixion of the two robbers is historically quite probable, in view of the incident about Barabbas, who was condemned to death for 'committing murder in a rebellion' (Mark 15:7). The link with the Old Testament passage is not strong enough to suggest that the 'two robbers' were derived from that source.

The fourth passage is Mark 15:29: 'They that passed by railed on him, wagging their heads' (*οἱ παραπορευόμενοι ἐβλασφήμουν αὐτον, κινούντες τὰς κεφαλὰς αὐτῶν*). The Old Testament evidence here is rather complex; the nearest parallel is Lamentations 2:15: 'All that pass by (*πάντες οἱ παραπορευόμενοι*) clap their hands at you; they hiss and wag their heads (*ἐκίνησαν τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτῶν*)'. Another close parallel is Jeremiah 18:16: 'All who pass by (*πάντες οἱ διαπορευόμενοι*) are horrified and shake their heads (*κινήσουσιν τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτῶν*)'. None of the Old Testament parallels has the word 'βλασφημεῖν', but several passages have similar words, coupled with 'κινεῖν τὴν κεφαλὴν'; for example, Psalm 22:7 has 'All who see me mock at me (*ἐξεμυκτήρισαν*); they make mouths at me, and wag their heads (*ἐκίνησαν κεφαλὴν*)'. 2 Kings 19:21 and Isaiah 37:22 read 'She despises you, she mocks you (*ἐμυκτήρησεν*) . . . she wags her head at you (*κεφαλὴν ἐκίνησεν*)'. Job 16:4 reads 'I could join words together against you (*ἐναλοῦμαι ὑμῖν ῥήμασιν*), and shake my head at you (*κινήσω καθ' ὑμῶν κεφαλὴν*)'. Ecclesiasticus 12:18 and 13:7 also use the phrase 'κινεῖν τὴν κεφαλὴν'. The verbal parallels with the Old Testament are clearly very strong, in the case of the verbs 'pass by' and 'wag the head'; yet the substance of the taunts in

<sup>23</sup> D. E. Nineham, *op. cit.*, p. 424.

Mark 15:29-32 is not derived from the Old Testament, and may well be genuine and authentic.

The fifth passage is Mark 15:32: 'Those who were crucified with him reproached him' (*ὠνειδίζον*). This may be an echo of Psalm 69:9: 'The reproaches (*ὀνειδισμοί*) of those who reproached you (*ὀνειδίζόντων σε*) have fallen on me'. The same verse of Psalm 69 has the words, 'Zeal for your house has consumed me', an expression of devotion to the Temple, which is referred to in Mark 15:29: 'You who would destroy the Temple, and build it in three days'. The phrase about 'Zeal for your house' is quoted in John 2:17, in close connection with the prophecy of Jesus, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up' in John 2:19. Clearly Psalm 69:9 was a standard text of Old Testament apologetic, and this may explain the use of the word '*ὀνειδίζω*' in Mark 15:32. An alternative source is Psalm 42:10: 'My adversaries taunt me (*ὠνειδισάν με*) while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?"' Other verses of Psalm 42 are echoed in the story of the agony in Gethsemane, in Mark 14:34, where Jesus says, 'My soul is very sorrowful (*περίλυπός ἐστιν ἡ ψυχή μου*)', a quotation of Psalm 42:5, 11 (*ἵνα τί περίλυπος εἶ, ἡ ψυχή*). The word '*ὀνειδίζω*' could be either from Psalm 69 or from Psalm 42.

The sixth passage is Mark 15:33: 'When the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour'. The closest parallel to this is Exod. 10:22: 'There was thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days'; here the figure of 'three days' may correspond to the period of three hours, mentioned in Mark. Another interesting parallel is Amos 8:9: 'I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight'. It is possible that the 'sixth hour' (noon) in Mark may be derived from the word 'noon' in Amos. In any case, details about time in the Gospels are not very reliable; St. Mark and St. John give a different timing to the crucifixion. St. Mark says, 'It was the third hour when they crucified him' (Mark 15:25), whereas St. John says, 'It was about the sixth hour' when Pilate was sitting on the judgement-seat (John 19:14). D. E. Nineham observes that the three-hour periods in Mark's account are rather artificial; he says, 'The division may reflect the catechetical interests, or perhaps the liturgical practice, of the Roman church' ('Saint Mark', page 424). It is difficult to know how to interpret the 'darkness at noon' historically; St. Luke understands it as 'an eclipse of the sun' (Luke 23:45: *τοῦ ἡλίου ἐκλιπόντος*), but as Origen observes, this is a physical impossibility at the time of the Paschal full moon. Lagrange suggests a black sirocco or dust-storm, but there is no evidence of such a storm in the Gospel narrative. St. Mark probably regarded the darkness as miraculous, and also as a symbol of the judgement of God upon the powers of evil; the darkening of the sun is an apocalyptic portent of the Day of the Lord and of the divine judgement.



There is evidence for this idea in the Old Testament (Isaiah 13:10; 50:3; Jeremiah 15:9; Ezekiel 32:7; Joel 2:10, 31; 3:15; Amos 5:20), and in the New Testament (Mark 13:24; Matthew 24:29; Revelation 6:12), as well as in the inter-testamental writings (Sibylline Oracles 3:83-89; Testament of Levi 4:1; Assumption of Moses 10:4-6). Similar portents were said to have occurred at the deaths of great rabbis (Strack-Billerbeck 1:1040-1042), and at the deaths of notable rulers like Julius Caesar (Virgil: Georgics 1:463 f.; Diogenes Laertius 4:64; Plutarch Pelop: 295 A). The association of darkness with the powers of evil is seen in the Lucan and Johannine Passion narratives also; at the arrest, Jesus says, 'This is your hour, and the power of darkness' (Luke 22:53), and at the Last Supper the departure of Judas is accompanied by the sinister comment 'And it was night' (John 13:30). It is in terms of this apocalyptic imagery that we should seek for an explanation of the 'darkness at noon' in Mark 15:33.

The seventh passage is Mark 10:34, where Jesus cries out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' This is quoted from Psalm 22:1, in Aramaic and in Greek. There are two problems involved in this quotation. First, are we to understand it as a cry of desolation, or as an expression of faith in God? Secondly, was it said by Jesus himself, or did the early Church put the saying into his mouth? These two questions do not necessarily coincide, though if the saying is taken as a cry of desolation, it is very likely to be an authentic utterance of Jesus, since there would be no motive for inventing such a difficult saying; while if it is understood as an expression of faith in God, it may have been attributed to Jesus by the early Church. It is possible, of course, that Jesus uttered the words as a cry of desolation, and the Church later reinterpreted them as an expression of faith. Vincent Taylor understands the saying as expressing 'a sense of desolation in which Jesus felt the horror of sin so deeply that for a time the closeness of his communion with the Father was obscured'.<sup>24</sup> This would fit in with the paradoxical Pauline phrases 'He was made to be sin' (2 Corinthians 5:21) and 'He became a curse for us' (Galatians 3:13). The saying is found in St. Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 27:46), which closely follows St. Mark's Passion narrative, but it was too difficult for St. Luke and St. John. St. Luke substituted the words, 'Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit' (Luke 23:46), and St. John read 'It is finished' (John 19:30). One Western manuscript in St. Mark's Gospel reads 'Why have you reproached me?' (*εἰς τί ἀνειδίωσάς με;*), no doubt in order to avoid the impression that Jesus felt himself to be abandoned by God. Scholars who regard the Marcan saying as a cry of desolation usually accept it as an authentic utterance of Jesus, since there

<sup>24</sup> V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark*, Macmillan, 1959, p. 594.

would be no obvious motive for inventing such a difficult saying; Schmiedel, for example, accepted the saying as one of his nine 'foundation-pillars'. Other scholars interpret the saying as an expression of faith in God, representing the whole of Psalm 22, which ends on a note of joy and thanksgiving (Psalm 22:19-31). D. E. Nineham says, 'There is some evidence that among the ancient Jews the opening words of the Psalm were interpreted in the light of the rest of it, and recognized as an effective form of prayer for help in time of trouble'.<sup>25</sup> R. H. Lightfoot thinks that St. Mark would never have recorded the saying, unless he had understood it as an expression of faith in God's deliverance; 'the Passion narrative was written for the strengthening and edification of the Christian communities, not for their bewilderment . . . by dwelling on the misunderstanding of the saying by the hearers (in verses 35-36) the evangelist knows that the readers of it—the initiated—will not fail to grasp its purport and significance'.<sup>26</sup> Lightfoot is probably right in thinking that St. Mark understood the cry of Jesus as implying faith in God's salvation; yet it does also express a sense of spiritual anguish, which is in keeping with the whole Marcan picture of Jesus in the Passion narrative as betrayed, denied and forsaken by his friends, mocked and derided by his enemies; like the Suffering Servant, he was 'despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief' (Isaiah 53:3). It is for us to decide whether the cry 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani', misunderstood by the hearers as a call for the help of Elijah, is a brilliant piece of improvisation by St. Mark or by his sources, or whether the whole section (Mark 15:34-36) is derived from the recollection of eye-witnesses who were present at the crucifixion. I think that the quotation of the saying in the original Aramaic is strong evidence for its authenticity; I believe it was uttered by Jesus himself, and that it expresses both his personal feeling of desolation, and his faith in the purpose of God, as expressed in the words of the Old Testament.

The eighth passage is Mark 15:36: 'One ran, and filling a sponge with vinegar (*ὄξους*), put it on a reed, and gave him to drink (*ἐπόρευεν*)'. This is clearly an echo of Psalm 69:21: 'They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink (*ἐπόρισάν με ὄξος*)'. There was a custom that Roman soldiers on execution duty were given a drink of water, vinegar and egg, known as 'posca' (Plautus *Mil.* 3.2.25; *Trucul.* 2.7.48; Plutarch: *Cato Maior*, page 336). If this incident was historical, it would imply that a Roman soldier offered Jesus a drink out of his own cup, as an act of kindness; this was later misinterpreted by the early Church as an act of cruel mockery, in

<sup>25</sup> D. E. Nineham, *op. cit.*, p. 428.

<sup>26</sup> R. H. Lightfoot, *History and Interpretation in the Gospels*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1935, pp. 158-159.

the light of Psalm 69:21, with its harsh references to 'vinegar' and 'poison'. It is not very likely, however, that a Roman soldier would know about Elijah; perhaps the remarks about Elijah were made by a hostile Jew, while the kind action was done by a friendly Roman. The references to the 'sponge' and the 'reed' may indicate that the incident is historically authentic.

The ninth passage is Mark 15:40: 'There were women beholding from afar (*ἀπὸ μακρόθεν θεωροῦσαι*)'. It is historically more likely that the women stood at a distance from the cross, and not near the cross, as in John 19:25; as C. K. Barrett says: 'It is intrinsically improbable that friends and relations of Jesus would be allowed to stand near the cross'.<sup>27</sup> Yet the phrase 'from afar' may be derived from the Old Testament; Psalm 38:11 reads 'My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my kinsmen stand afar off' (*μακρόθεν ἔστησαν*). In St. Luke's account the parallel with the Psalm is more obvious; Luke says, 'All his acquaintance, and the women that followed him from Galilee, stood far off, seeing these things' (*εἰσῆκεισαν . . . ἀπὸ μακρόθεν*) (Luke 23:49). Perhaps both Mark and Luke were echoing the sentence in Psalm 38:11, though the motivation in the Psalm is quite different; if the women stood aloof in the Gospel narrative, it was out of fear and timidity, whereas in Psalm 38 the friends and relations stand aloof out of contempt and unfriendliness. The difference of motive may indicate that the incident is historical, and that the reference to the Psalm was introduced later.

Clearly the Marcan narrative of the crucifixion has been strongly influenced by the language of the Old Testament; one cannot help being impressed by the number of Old Testament references or echoes to be traced in the course of twenty-one verses. Yet the question remains as to how far this influence of Old Testament prophecy has affected the historical value of the Gospel narratives. Most of the incidents which are described in Old Testament language are not, in themselves, historically improbable; there is plenty of background evidence for the offering of wine (15:23) or of vinegar (15:36), the dividing of a condemned man's clothes among his executioners (15:24), the crucifixion of rebels against the Roman Government (15:27), the mockery and reproaches of the Jews against their opponents (15:29, 32), and the timid 'watching from afar' of friends and relatives (15:40). Even the mysterious cry of desolation (15:34) is psychologically understandable, as well as having a deeper theological significance. The only incident which is in itself improbable is the 'darkness at noon' (15:33), which is best understood as an apocalyptic portent, rather than as a historical fact. In some incidents, for example, the 'wine mingled with myrrh' (15:23), the 'giving of vinegar to drink' (15:36), and the women

---

<sup>27</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to Saint John*, S.P.C.K., 1960, p. 98.

'beholding afar off' (15:40), there seems to be a conflict of motives between authentic historical events and the Old Testament references which are used to illustrate them; this may indicate that the events themselves are historical, and were not derived from Old Testament prophecy. In the one Old Testament passage attributed to Jesus himself (15:34), the motive behind the saying is obscure, and so is the motive of the evangelist in including the saying in his Gospel. It is clear that the Marcan Passion narrative, with its subtle blending of history and Old Testament Prophecy, raises many interesting problems for the theologian and the historian alike.