

THE MESSIANIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AGONY IN THE GARDEN

The narrative of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane is related in Mt. 26:36-46 ; Mk. 14:32-42 ; and Lk. 22:40-5. Vincent Taylor has remarked that this scene raises a host of questions, in part because in it we are close to 'the bedrock of primitive tradition,' many of whose elements were already obscured by the time Mark wrote his gospel.¹ Our limited aim here is to discuss a few of the many aspects of the agony in the garden from a messianic point of view.

The Texts

The synoptic accounts of the Gethsemane scene are *grosso modo*, in close agreement, as Cullmann has observed.² Mt. and Mk. obviously drew upon the same tradition, but Lk. seems to have followed a somewhat different account. Jn. (18:1-2) merely mentions that Jesus and his disciples retired to a garden across the Cedron where the soldiers arrested him. The variants in Mt. and Mk. are merely in the forms of expression, but Mt.'s use of the phrase *with me* in vv. 38 and 40 stresses the reliance of Jesus upon his disciples.³ Lagrange has described how Lk. differs from the other two synoptics : in Lk. the three apostles are not singled out, the prayer of Jesus is uttered once, the disciples are discovered asleep only once and not three times, and the warning to pray lest they enter into temptation is given twice. Since Mt. and Mk. portray the comings and goings of Jesus, his disappointment and state of soul is stressed, while in Lk. his physical state is emphasised (on the supposition that Lk. 22, 43-4 are proper to Lk.).⁴ We can roughly summarise the differences by saying that Mt. and Mk. stress the disciple-master theme, while Lk. emphasises the father-son theme and the impending temptation.

The historicity of the Gethsemane narrative is well established. Vincent Taylor has surveyed the opinions and found a remarkable agreement on this score among radical and conservative exegetes alike, Bultmann and Goguel being perhaps the only dissenters.⁵ He also argues for the Petrine origin of the tradition, for in no other way could one account for a story so damaging to Peter.

¹ Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London, 1955), p. 551

² Oscar Cullmann, *Immortalité de l'Âme ou Résurrection des Morts ?* (Neuchâtel, 1956), p. 26

³ M.-J. Lagrange, *Evangile selon Saint Matthieu* (Paris, 1923), p. 500

⁴ M.-J. Lagrange, *Evangile selon Saint Luc* (Paris, 1921), p. 558

⁵ Taylor, *Gospel According to St Mark*, p. 551

Only one passage presents a serious difficulty from a textual point of view : Lk. 22:43-4, which relates the appearance of the angel and the bloody sweat. The problem is that these two verses are missing from some of the most ancient manuscripts, while present in others. Many non-Catholic exegetes consider them as a later insertion. However, the textual arguments for their inclusion cannot be lightly dismissed.¹ Furthermore, their canonicity seems to have been settled by the Council of Trent, which, however, left open the question of their Lukan authenticity.² Lagrange presents a strong case for the latter, arguing from the Lukan style and characteristics which they exhibit.³ It is interesting to note that several Protestant authors have recently accepted the two verses along with the Lukan authorship. They seem to follow the same approach as that of Lagrange.⁴

Translators and commentators have had special difficulty in rendering two verses in particular : Mk. 14:34 (paralleled by Mt. 26:38) and Mk. 14:41. In v. 34 Mk. has the phrase : *perilupos estin he psuke mou heôs thanatou*, which J. Héring insists should be translated exactly the same as a similar verse in Jonah 4:9 : *Je suis tellement accablé de tristesse que je désire la mort.*⁵ To sustain this translation Héring is forced to hold that the temptation, the *peirasmos*, is that of Jesus himself (‘ Watch and pray lest I enter into temptation ’) and consisted in dying a peaceful death in the garden, thus avoiding the passion and forfeiting the salvation of all mankind. This interpretation is strained, and has little or no support among exegetes. Usually the verse is taken in a figurative sense, which the American Translation has neatly caught : ‘ My heart is almost breaking.’⁶

Mk. 14:41 presents a knotty problem in *katheudete to loipon kai anapauesthe : apechei, êlthen hê hōra*. In Mt. 26:45 the difficulty is somewhat ameliorated by the absence of *apechei*, so we will consider Mk.’s text only. The hub of the problem lies in the adverb *loipon* and the

¹ Vacant and Mangelot (ed.), *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, I (Paris, 1903), art. ‘ Agonie du Christ,’ col. 615-24. Cf. also G. Jacquemet (ed.), *Catholicisme*, I (Paris, 1948), art. ‘ Agonie,’ col. 226-8.

² L. Pirot (ed.), *Dictionnaire de la Bible, Supplément*, I (Paris, 1928), art. ‘ Authenticité,’ col. 666-76.

³ Lagrange, *Évangile selon Saint Luc*, pp. 561-3

⁴ Karl Heinrich Kengstorf, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (Göttingen, 1952), p. 250. Cf. also the summary of Harmut Aschermann, ‘ Zum Agoniegebet Jesu, Luk 22, 43-44,’ *Theologia Viatorum*, V (1953-54), 143-9 which appears in *Internationale Zeitschriftenschaue für Bibelwissenschaft und Grenzgebiete*, Band III (1954-55), Hef 1-2, 65. Also cf. Wilfred L. Knox, *The Sources of the Synoptic Gospels*, Vol. I, *St Mark* (Cambridge, 1953), p. 127.

⁵ Jean Héring, ‘ Simples Remarques sur la Prière à Gethsémané,’ *Revue d’Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses*, 39 (1959), pp. 97-102.

⁶ J. M. Powis Smith and Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The Complete Bible : An American Translation* (Chicago, 1939). Unless otherwise noted, scripture quotations are from this translation.

verb *apechei*.¹ If *katheudete* is a question ('Still sleeping?'), then *apechei* is easily rendered, 'Enough of it.' But *loipon* is against this solution. On the other hand, if *katheudete* is an imperative, *loipon* is accounted for, but the command must then be ironical. This makes *apechei* almost unintelligible. To compound the confusion, there is an unsettled textual problem about the insertion of *to telos* after *apechei*. While recognising the complexity of the problem and the ingenuity of the innumerable explanations offered, we prefer to understand *katheudete* as a question, since, as Taylor has pointed out, *loipon* can have the rather non-temporal meaning of 'then,' 'therefore,' or 'so.'² Furthermore, *katheudete* as a question can stand whether *to telos* is inserted after *apechei* or not. Also, it seems identical with the question in Lk.'s account (22:46): *ti katheudete?* The translation would then be: 'So you are sleeping and taking your rest? Enough of it! The hour has come.'

The Messianic background

The Messiah is generally considered under a threefold aspect: King, Servant of Yahweh, and Son of Man. The messianic background of the Gethsemane scene will be considered in connection with the latter two.

The role of Jesus as the Suffering Servant of Deutero-Isaiah both in his own thought and in the mind of the primitive church is well attested in the New Testament.³ Furthermore it is in the passion narratives especially that he fulfills the fourth servant song.⁴ Since the Gethsemane narrative is considered an integral part of the passion story,⁵ its very context indicates that the tragic figure pictured there is the messianic Suffering Servant of Yahweh.

But in addition to the context, the text itself offers at least some indirect allusions to him. Going back to the Septuagint, Willaert observes that in Is. 53:6 and 12 the Servant is 'handed over' (*paradidonai*).⁶ These verses are directly referred to by Jesus in his predictions of the passion (Mk. 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-4 and parallels). And in the garden of olives he says (Mt. 26:45 and Mk. 14:41): 'See, the time has come for the Son of Man to be handed over to wicked men (*paradidotai*).' This recalls Is. 53:6: 'And the Lord delivered him for their

¹ cf. Taylor, *Gospel According to St. Mark*, pp. 556-7, and M.-J. Lagrange, *Evangile selon Saint Marc* (Paris, 1911), p. 366.

² Taylor, *Gospel According to St. Mark*, p. 556

³ A. Robert et A. Feuillet, *Introduction à la Bible*, II, (Tourai, 1959), pp. 793-4 and 825-6.

⁴ Herbert Haag (ed.), *Bibel-Lexikon* (Zürich, 1956), art. 'Gottesknecht,' col. 616.

⁵ *ibid.*, art. 'Leidensgeschichte Jesu,' col. 1014

⁶ Benjamin Willaert, 'Jesus as the Suffering Servant,' *Theology Digest*, 9 (1962), p. 28. This is a translation and digest of 'Jezus, de lijdende dienaar Gods,' *Collationes Brugenses et Gandavenses*, 6 (1960), pp. 163-85.

sins.' Willaert remarks that, 'The exact sense is not the same, but the ring is the same.'¹ That much is certain; perhaps one could even consider the *paradidotai* a direct reference to the LXX.

Another messianic overtone is heard in the reference to the cup, which points, not explicitly to the servant songs, but at least to a suffering Messiah. In the Old Testament the cup was used to sprinkle the blood of the sacrificial victims, to renew the covenant between God and His people (Nb. 4:14 and Ex. 24:6). Jesus employed this symbolism at the Last Supper, using the cup of his own blood to ratify the new covenant. Thus the cup refers to the passion, the events in which his blood will be spilled. Here in the garden we see an added dimension of this meaning: that of the cup of wrath.² Old Testament usage pictured the wrath of Yahweh 'poured out' into a cup which His chastened people or His enemies must drink to the dregs (Is. 51:17; Ps. 11:6). During the passion, God's anger was never directed at Jesus, but he took upon himself the penalty for sin which God's just anger demanded. Consequently, Jesus in Gethsemane recoiled before the cup which contained not only the pain of the passion, but also the bitterness of God's wrath. And here we detect an echo of Is. 53: 'We accounted him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted' (Is. 53:4). 'They made his grave with the wicked, his tomb with evildoers' (v. 9). 'Yet the Lord saw fit to crush him with pain' (v. 10).

The messianic significance of the cup is further revealed by his link with the hour. St Mark himself makes the connection. He first reports the prayer of Jesus (Mk. 14:35) indirectly: 'He prayed that if it were possible he might be spared *the hour* of trial,' but then he immediately quotes it directly in v. 36: 'Abba!' that is, Father, 'anything is possible for you! Take *this cup* away from me!' The cup, the hour—different images, but they refer fundamentally to the same thing, the suffering and death of the messiah, a decisive stage in God's unfolding redemptive plan. Each stage emphasises a different detail. Mt. and Mk. both employ the hour in their conclusions of the Gethsemane narrative (Mt. 26:45; Mk. 14:41). Taylor's comment is to the point: 'It is quite inadequate to explain the hour as simply that of the arrest or the betrayal; it is the hour when the Messianic ministry of Jesus reaches its climax, in that he is delivered over into the hands of sinful men.'³ It is the hour of the Suffering Servant.

The second messianic aspect under which Jesus appears in Gethsemane is that of the Son of Man. After his prayer to the Father and

¹ *ibid.*, p. 29

² Xavier Léon-Dufour (ed.), *Vocabulaire de Théologie Biblique* (Paris, 1962), art. 'Coupe,' col. 167-8.

³ Taylor, *Gospel According to St. Mark*, p. 557

just before his arrest, Jesus says to the sleepy disciples : ' See, the time has come for the Son of Man to be handed over to the wicked men ' (Mt. 26:45 ; Mk. 14:41). This certainly is a messianic title, though not current at the time of Jesus, as Lagrange points out.¹ He took the title for himself precisely because it contains an ambiguity. It can mean merely ' man,' stressing the fact of humanity. It can also mean the transcendent, eschatological being of Dan. 7 and the Book of Henoch. The fusion of this messianic theme with that of the Servant of Yahweh is the creative work of Jesus himself. However, the Servant theme is open to this transformation, since the Suffering Servant of Is. 53 is also the Glorified Servant : ' He shall see posterity, shall prolong his life, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. . . . Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and with the strong shall he share the spoil ' (Is. 53:10 and 12). It is in the events of the passion and resurrection that the fusion of these two messianic ideas becomes a living reality. Here in Gethsemane on the threshold of the passion, we behold the utter humanity of the Son of Man. Mark describes his anguish with the words *arxato ekthambeisthai kai adēmonein* (Mk. 14:33). Taylor explains the deep shock connoted by *ekthambeisthai* as follows : ' With every desire to avoid unwarranted psychological interpretations, it is impossible to do any kind of justice to Mark's words without seeing in them something of the astonishment of the Son of Man who knows that He is also the Suffering Servant of Isa. liii.'²

For corroboration of this analysis of the messianic background of the Gethsemane narrative, we turn to Jn. 12:23-28 where Jesus announces his death and glorification. Here the messianic elements are shown in sharp relief. The allusion to the atoning death of the Servant of Is. 53:10-12 is seen in v. 24 : ' I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies, it remains just one grain. But if it dies, it yields a great harvest.' Mention of the Son of Man and the hour is explicitly made in v. 23 : ' The time (hour) has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.' And the relation of the whole pericope to Gethsemane is found in v. 27 : ' Now my heart is troubled ; what can I say ? Father, save me from this trial (hour). And yet it was for this very purpose that I have come to this trial (hour).' We see here the same disturbance of soul before the terrifying imminence of the passion, the same recourse to the Father in this moment of fear, and the same acceptance of the divine will.³

¹ Lagrange, *Evangile selon Saint Marc*, p. cxxxv

² Taylor, *Gospel According to St. Mark*, p. 552

³ *La Bible de Jérusalem* (one volume edition), (Paris, 1961), p. 1417, note d

The cause of the agony

Commentators usually point out Jesus' desire for human companionship in his hour of trial. While this is true, it is worth noting that after describing his tortured state of soul, Jesus *leaves* the disciples. As Taylor observes, 'The intensity of the anguish drives him from them to seek peace before the face of his Father.'¹ Thus two questions must be answered : what is the cause of Jesus' agony, and why does he seek the will of the Father ?

Various reasons have been offered to explain the anguish of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Lagrange presents a minimal opinion in that he simply states, 'The reason for Jesus' sadness is above all his passion and death,' and agrees with Knabenbauer that any other reasons, however pious or dramatic are forcing the text.²

Huby prefers a cumulative explanation in that he gives the general cause as 'the sight of his passion,' which is further specified as 'horror of the torments, sins and ingratitude.' He then presents the view of St Thomas : Jesus' agony is caused by natural repugnance to death, to which is added 'the sadness of a one betrayed by his friend and of the master abandoned by his disciples, of the Messiah rejected by his people, his grief of heart at the shameful, the infamous sins of mankind, whose head and representative Christ had become.'³

Cullmann's position is very different, and is founded upon his view of the primitive Christian notion of death.⁴ He says that Jesus in the garden fears death itself, and not just the crucifixion and its circumstances, for death is the great enemy of God. Death is radical isolation ; it is separation from God. Jesus had to experience total death, of both body and soul, in order to gain the final victory.⁵ Therefore, Jesus felt an intense fear of death and separation from God, precisely because he was so closely united to God.

All these opinions contribute to an understanding of the suffering of Jesus in Gethsemane, though that of Cullmann raises some difficult theological and historical problems. It appears however, that they have not taken sufficiently into account the messianic context of the scene which was discussed above. There is here not merely question of a man facing a painful death. It is a messianic death, which today we tend to take for granted. The Christian conscience is permeated with the notion of vicarious suffering, from the monks of the penitential orders to the children who 'give up' candy for Lent. Our very

¹ Taylor, *Gospel According to St. Mark*, p. 552

² Lagrange, *Évangile selon Saint Marc*, p. 362

³ Joseph Huby, *Évangile selon Saint Marc* (Paris, 1924), pp. 342, 343

⁴ Cullmann, *Immortalité de l'Âme*, pp. 23-35

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 33

familiarity with the nature of Jesus' suffering may blind us to its originality and to the stupefying shock of terror that assailed him when he fully realised that he was to bear the sins of the world, be exposed to the fury of evil, and drink the cup of divine wrath. If the growth of Jesus in his interior life of human intellect and will and emotions is to be realistic and more than just a mechanical registering of knowledge already possessed, then there is room for a 'recognition scene' in which the full import of his messiahship bursts upon him. Therefore we prefer Taylor's approach which stresses the messianic aspect of Jesus' agony and his realisation of it: 'It is alien to the spirit of Jesus that He should ask for the cup to be taken away if it is no more than one of personal suffering and death, and the bewilderment and anguish of *thambeisthai* and *ademonein* show that it is more. The prayer suggests that Jesus had to school Himself to the necessity of redemptive suffering which involves the bearing of sin.'¹

The Gethsemane scene underlines as a prerequisite the humanness of the Messiah, the humanity of the Son of Man in all its splendid weakness. We behold the stark reality of the incarnation which gave Jesus a human soul, body, and emotions delicately responsive to the horror of his messianic death. This point is explicitly made in the Epistle to the Hebrews (Heb. 5:7) where the atoning death of Jesus the high priest is discussed and attention called to his humanity. 'For Jesus in life on earth offered prayers and entreaties, crying aloud with tears, to him who was able to save him from death.' The allusion of the Hebrews' text to the Gethsemane scene is clear, even though the author of Hebrews was not necessarily drawing upon the synoptic tradition of the event.² This text is a further specification of Heb. 4:15: 'For our high priest is not one who is incapable of sympathy with our weaknesses, but he has been tempted in every way just as we have, without committing any sin.' The humanity of Jesus, then, is not the cause of his sufferings, but their necessary condition.

The will of the Father

Now that we have seen the reason why Jesus sought the Father in prayer, the second question to be answered concerns the role of the divine will. The prayer of Gethsemane cannot be understood simply in terms of the submission of Jesus' human will to the divine will. It involves the whole salvific plan of God. Here the suffering Messiah appeals to the fundamental cause behind his imminent passion and death and behind all the events of salvation-history: the will of the

¹ Taylor, *Gospel According to St. Mark*, p. 554

² Héring, art. cit., p. 97

Father. This is, indeed, the ultimate explanation of the messianism of the Bible, for the hopes, desires and expectations of mankind and of nature will be perfectly fulfilled only when the universe has been subject to the will of the Father.¹

This messianic perspective of the will of the Father immediately raises a question : is the prayer of Jesus eschatological ? The question is closely connected with the problem of the parallel between the Gethsemane prayer and the third petition of the Our Father. Commentators frequently point out the allusion, but the reference is valid only if both prayers are either eschatological or non-eschatological. Fr Raymond Brown has recently published a convincing article.² We accept his position and the parallel between the Pater Noster and the Gethsemane prayer. How then explain the eschatology of the latter ?

Eschatology refers to the last days which involve the second coming of Christ, the victory over evil, and the definitive establishment of God's reign.³ The last days and all that they imply are the term of God's salvific design. They are the essential object of His will *ad extra*. These are the concrete realities that Jesus prays may be accomplished ; they are the only things worthy of the price of his passion and death. But though these eschatological realities are in the future, they are in history and so must have a beginning. Their decisive commencement, which is truly the beginning of the end, is his passion and death. Thus we see Jesus, confronted with the terrible realisation of his messianic destiny, follow the fundamental law of human action, *Qui vult finem, vult media*. Jesus willed the will of the Father, the accomplishment of His salvific design, and in so doing willed to accept the cup with all its bitterness.

The submission of Jesus

The next point to be examined is the significance of the submission of the human will of the Messiah. Emphasis on the eschatological dimensions of the Gethsemane prayer must not blind us to the fact that the redemptive drama is performed by an individual in an act of total self-giving. As the hymn in the second chapter of Philippians reminds us, 'When he had assumed human form, he still further humbled himself and carried his obedience so far as to die, and to die upon the cross' (Phil. 2:8). This self-oblation of Jesus finds concrete expression in the physical and mental sufferings of the passion. However, they are not, in themselves, operative of salvation. Willaert observes that 'we run the risk of endowing the passion with a sort of magical power' when

¹ John L. McKenzie, *The Two-Edged Sword* (Milwaukee, 1956), p. 210

² Raymond Brown, 'The Pater Noster as an Eschatological Prayer,' *Theological Studies*, 22 (1961), pp. 175-208

³ *ibid.*, p. 175

we insist too much on its purely physical and human reality. Perhaps this becomes clearer if we recall that one of the aspects of the redemption is that of sacrifice, and that in a sacrifice the most important factor is the interior submission of the will to God, the *affectus sacrificialis*. In this act of the will one renounces oneself in order to give oneself entirely to God. It is an act of subjection which results in union. In his prayer in the garden just before his physical sufferings commence, Jesus underscores the essential element in his act of messianic redemption. Just as he sought the ultimate motive, the salvific will of the Father, for encouragement, so too he reveals the ultimate factor of the redemption, the submission of his will to the Father. In the garden of Gethsemane only ultimates will suffice.

We have approached the agony in the garden from a messianic point of view which is well grounded in the text itself, and in the context too. From this angle we have attempted to penetrate three elements of the Gethsemane narrative : the cause of Jesus' agony, the will of the Father, and the submission of Jesus. Many other points remain to be examined, such as the role of the disciples, their temptation, and the appearance of the angel. To study all of them would have made this essay unduly long, but we feel that the worth and fruitfulness of the messianic point of view have been clearly demonstrated.

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¹ Willaert, art. cit., p. 30