The Passion Narrative before and after Mark

Adela Yarbro Collins

Yale University

Where should we begin in thinking about the origin of the passion narrative? The earliest passion narrative was composed to interpret an event, the crucifixion of Jesus. The death of Jesus was an event that represented the Roman response to the public life of Jesus. So the place to begin is the perceived character of the public life of Jesus.

Why Was Jesus Executed?

Several recent studies have argued persuasively that the earliest recoverable traditions about Jesus indicate that he was an apocalyptic or eschatological prophet.[1] Why would the Roman governor execute such a prophet? The execution may have been prompted simply by the desire to keep order in reaction to the crowds that surrounded Jesus, especially in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover. The motive may have been similar to that attributed by Josephus to Antipas, when he executed John the Baptist. As John Meier has put it, Antipas decided "that an ounce of prevention by way of execution was worth a pound of cure by way of military action."[2] The Roman governor Fadus may have had a similar motivation for sending a cavalry unit to attack Theudas. This man was a popular prophet who led a crowd to the Jordan, claiming that he could divide the river to provide them with an easy crossing. They soldiers captured the prophet, cut off his head, and carried it to Jerusalem.[3]

---

[1] Dale C. Allison talks about Jesus' eschatological language but labels him "a millenarian prophet" in order to approach him in a comparative context using sociological and anthropological methods; *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998); Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 125-39; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 3, *Companions and Competitors* (New York: Doubleday, 2001) 622-626.

[2] Meier, 3.625.

[3] Josephus *Ant.* 20.97-98;Richard A. Horsley and John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements in the Time of Jesus* (Seabury/Winston: Minneapolis,

Public perception may not have distinguished sharply between popular prophets with an eschatological message and messianic pretenders. In both the *Antiquities* and the *Jewish War*, Josephus discusses a certain Egyptian prophet. In the *Antiquities* he says that this man brought a crowd to the walls of Jerusalem claiming that, at his command, the walls of the city would fall down. In the *War* he says that this Egyptian “false prophet” brought about 30,000 people to the Mount of Olives, intending to force an entry into Jerusalem, overpower the Roman garrison, and become ruler of the citizen body (tou~ dh&mou turannei=n, to rule autocratically or despotically). With this pejorative language, Josephus may be masking a messianic claim. According to both accounts, the Roman governor, Felix, sent troops against him. They killed some of his followers and captured others, but he himself escaped.[4]

It is generally agreed that Jesus proclaimed the nearness of the kingdom of God and, at least implicitly, claimed a high degree of authority for himself. These features of his public life may well have led some people to think that he was the Son of David, the royal messiah. He need not have raised an army or promised to drive out the Romans to evoke such ideas. Among those who hoped for the restoration of an autonomous kingdom of Israel and the Davidic line, the proclamation of the kingdom and the authoritative stance of Jesus may have been enough to convince them that he was the messiah designate who would bring in the kingdom soon with the help of divine power.

What Was the Earliest Interpretation of the Death of Jesus?

If such was the case, Mark’s portrayal of the execution of Jesus as “king of the Jews” may be an interpretation of Pilate’s reason for having Jesus crucified, rather than a purely inventive retrojection of later belief. Such a scenario would also explain the fact that the bedrock of Paul’s interpretations of the significance of Jesus is the conviction that

---

1985) 164. Fadus ruled from about 44 to 46 CE. See Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.—A.D. 135)* (rev. ed. Geza Vermes and Fergus Millar; 3 vols. in 4; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973-87) 1.455.

[4] Josephus *Ant.* 20.169-72; *Bell.* 2.261-63; Horsley and Hanson, 168. Felix ruled from about 52-60 CE. See Schürer, *History*, 1.460.

he is the Christ, that is, the Messiah.[5] Thus the idea that Jesus was the Davidic Messiah may have been current during his lifetime. In that case, the visions of the risen Jesus would have provided *confirmation* of his Messiahship rather than constituting the beginning point of such a belief.[6]

These appearances would also have provided the occasion for a reinterpretation of the Davidic Messiah in heavenly terms. In other words Jesus, the hoped for royal messiah, was indeed crucified but then vindicated and exalted. The Son of David is also the heavenly Son of Man prophesied by Daniel. As Paul implies in 1 Corinthians 15, Jesus began to reign at the time of his resurrection, and the consummation will come when he has put all his enemies under his feet.[7]

I do not intend to minimize the extent to which the crucifixion of Jesus was experienced as an apparent disconfirmation of his Messiahship by those who hoped that he would play such a role. Most of them probably gave up the idea, just as the supporters of Simon, son of Giora, concluded that he was not the Messiah after all, when the Romans won the war and took him to Rome to be humiliated in the Flavian triumph. Some of the disciples of Jesus, however, did not give up the idea of the Messiahship of Jesus.

The Earliest Passion Narrative

This line of interpretation has an enormous impact on how one reconstructs and interprets the earliest passion narrative. In my view, this narrative included allusions to the psalms of individual lament.[8] Bultmann argued that the earliest passion narrative was

---

[5] Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008) 101-22.

[6] Contra Philipp Vielhauer, “Gottesreich und Menschensohn in der Verkündigung Jesu,” in idem, *Aufsätze zum Neuen Testament* (Theologische Bücherei 31; Munich: Kaiser, 1965) 92-140.

[7] 1 Cor 15:20-25.

[8] The source of Mark 14:34a alluded to Pss 41-42 LXX (42-43 MT and English); see Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007) 676. The source of Mark 15:24 alluded to Ps 21:19 LXX (22:18); Yarbro Collins,

a historical report and that any passage alluding to Scripture is a secondary expansion.[9] If, however, as seems likely, the earliest narrative was designed to overcome the apparently disconfirming impact of the crucifixion, allusions to Scripture would have played a role from the beginning. In other words, messianic exegesis of the psalms of individual lament is an early phenomenon. There is thus no need to posit an interpretation of these psalms based on an alleged concept of the suffering just one.[10]

There is no consensus about the extent of the pre-Markan passion narrative and its social setting. In 1 Cor 11:23-25, Paul describes actions and words of Jesus performed and spoken "on the night on which he was handed over." Ellen Aitken infers that this account already belonged "to an existing narrative of Jesus' passion" at the time Paul wrote.[11] If this passage were part of an early, written, passion narrative, its inclusion would support the hypothesis of a cultic setting for such a narrative, for example, a weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper.[12]

I doubt, however, that the tradition about the sayings over the bread and the cup was part of the earliest, pre-Markan passion narrative. Ludger Schenke has made a

---

Mark, 745. The source of Mark 15:29-32 alluded to Ps 21:8-9 (22:7-8); Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 749.

[9] Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (trans. John Marsh from the 2nd German ed. 1931; New York: Harper & Row, 1963; rev. ed. 1968) 273, 275-79, 281; Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 621, 732. Karl Ludwig Schmidt and Martin Dibelius also took this position; for discussion see Ellen Bradshaw Aitken, *Jesus' Death in Early Christian Memory: The Poetics of the Passion* (NTOA 53; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; Fribourg: Academic Press, 2004) 12.

[10] Donald Juel, *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll, *The Psalms of Lament in Mark's Passion: Jesus' Davidic Suffering* (SNTSMS 142; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[11] Ellen Bradshaw Aitken, "ta_ drw&mena kai\ ta_ lego&mena: The Eucharistic Memory of Jesus' Words in First Corinthians," *HTR* 90:4 (1997) 359-70, here 368. See also eadem, *Jesus' Death*, 50.

[12] Aitken argues that "the formation of a narrative of Jesus' death took place in relation to the community's practice of renewing the covenant" ("Eucharistic Memory," 369). In another context she relates this "making or reaffirming of a covenant" with the cultic narrative expressed in a hymn, taking Pliny's account of a meeting before dawn on a fixed day as a starting point (*Jesus' Death*, 165-66).

persuasive case for the conclusion that Mark composed 14:1-31 by combining brief traditional units.[13] It is only with the story in Gethsemane that one can begin to discern a coherent narrative source as the basis of Mark's passion narrative. Thus, the tradition about the last supper was probably not part of the source Mark used in constructing his passion narrative. Rather, at the time Paul and Mark wrote, it still belonged to oral tradition.

The command, "Do this in remembrance of me," found in 1 Corinthians and Luke, links the tradition about the last supper directly to the cultic practice of the Lord's Supper.[14] This command is lacking in Mark and Matthew.[15] The most likely hypothesis is that Mark omitted the command in adapting the last supper tradition to a narrative context in which the sayings about the bread and the cup serve to interpret the death of Jesus beforehand. Less likely is the argument that the version of Paul represents a re-oralization of a part of an early, written passion narrative.[16]

Mark's Expansion of the Passion Narrative

As suggested already, Mark elaborated the depiction of Jesus as the crucified Messiah expressed in the source he used in constructing his own passion narrative. Developing the distress of Jesus in Gethsemane, evoked by allusion to Psalms 42-43 in his source, Mark has Jesus speak the language of another psalm of individual lament, Psalm 22, in his last words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"[17] Mark thus portrayed Jesus as a suffering Messiah who shared the weakness and fear of most ordinary human beings in the face of death.

[13] Ludger Schenke, *Studien zur Passionsgeschichte des Markus: Tradition und Redaktion in Markus 14, 1-42* (FB 4; Würzburg: Echter Verlag; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1971); Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 621-22.
[14] The command occurs twice in 1 Cor 11:24-25, once in relation to the bread and once to the cup; it occurs only in relation to the bread in Luke 22:19.
[15] Mark 14:22-25; Matt 26:26-29. The Johannine Jesus commands the disciples to follow his example by washing one another's feet (John 13:14-15). It is unlikely that such washing was part of any cultic ritual, such as the Lord's Supper.
[16] Thus the portrayal of Jesus as the initiator of the reenactment of the cult legend pointed out by Aitken ("Eucharistic Memory," 369) belongs not to the narrative version of the tradition but to the oral version. Luke seems to combine the two.
[17] Mark 15:34. Mark's source had already alluded to Psalm 22 (21 LXX) twice; see note 8 above.

Another elaboration is the attempt by a bystander to give Jesus sour wine to drink.[18] This gesture evokes another psalm of individual lament, in which the speaker complains, "And they gave me gall for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink."[19] The audience of Mark would understand that sour wine is not a fit drink for Jesus, the king of the Jews, that is, the Messiah. Jesus shares in the humiliation of David, the traditional author of the psalms, who challenges God to deliver him.[20]

The most dramatic change Mark made with regard to his source was to add the saying of the centurion to the climactic rending of the veil.[21] In the source Jesus is vindicated by the mysterious theophany expressed in the account of the rending of the veil of the temple. The splitting of the veil also suggests the ascent of Jesus to heaven and the access to God that the death of Jesus makes possible.[22] In its new context as part of Mark as a whole, the rending of the veil creates a contrast with the splitting of the heavens at the baptism of Jesus. At the baptism God is present and reveals Godself in speech. At the cross, however, God is absent and does not speak. The tearing of the veil is thus an ironic theophany. The death of Jesus on the cross is accompanied by a real but ambiguous and mysterious theophany, which suggests that the will of God is fulfilled in the apparently shameful death of Jesus on the cross.[23] The saying of the centurion is the climax of Mark's theme of Jesus as the Son of God. Here that Sonship is linked with his suffering on the cross. Mark thus continues, in an ironic and powerful way, the passion apologetic of his source: the crucifixion of Jesus verifies rather than falsifies the affirmation that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

The Relation of Mark and John

I will forgo discussion of Matthew and Luke since the majority of New Testament scholars agree that the two evangelists in question used Mark's passion narrative as a source.[24] No consensus has emerged, however, on the issue of the relationship between the passion narratives of Mark and John. My position is that the author of John knew Mark but did not use that Gospel as a literary source. The similarities between the two passion narratives can be explained by the hypothesis that Mark's written text became

---

[18] Mark 15:36.

[19] Ps 68:22 LXX (69:21).

[20] Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 759; Ahearne-Kroll, *Psalms of Lament*, 212.

[21] Mark 15:38-39.

[22] Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 626-27, 760-61.

[23] Ibid., 763-64.

[24] Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress) 301. François Bovon leaves open the possibility that Luke used Mark and "a competing account;" *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1-9:50* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002) 7. Calvin K. Katter has argued that Luke had no source but Mark for 22:14-38 in "Luke 22:14-38: A Farewell Address" (Ph.d. diss., University of Chicago, 1993).

oral and was known to John in that form.[25] Ernst Haenchen concluded that John may have used a source in composing his passion narrative, but “the part played by the evangelist may be estimated rather highly.”[26]

The Gospel of Peter

In the first edition of his *Introduction to the New Testament*, Helmut Koester took the position that “there was certainly a written form of the Passion Narrative at an early date.” He believed that Mark and John used it independently and thought it “possible that the apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* employed a very similar source.” The latter hypothesis would best explain the agreements of these three Gospels in the sequence of events in the passion and their use of passages from the Jewish scriptures in their narratives.[27] He suggests that circles under the authority of Peter produced this early passion narrative.[28]

John Dominic Crossan devoted a book-length study to the relationship of the *Gospel of Peter* to the canonical Gospels.[29] He posited three major stages in the composition of the present *Gospel of Peter*.[30] The first and earliest stage is what he calls the *Cross Gospel*.[31] This work is equivalent to the early passion narrative that Koester argues was written under the authority of Peter. The second stage involves the use of this source by all four canonical Gospels.[32] Mark used this source alone in composing his passion narrative. Matthew and Luke used both this source and Mark in writing theirs. John used the early passion narrative along with the other three canonical Gospels. The third and final stage involves the expansion of the *Cross Gospel* into the present *Gospel*

---

[25] Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 625.
[26] Ernst Haenchen, *John 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapters 1-6* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 78.
[27] Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 2, *History and Literature of Early Christianity* (New York: de Gruyter, 1982; German ed. 1980) 49, 163.
[28] Ibid., 183.
[29] John Dominic Crossan, *The Cross That Spoke: The Origins of the Passion Narrative* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1988).
[30] Ibid., xiii-xiv.
[31] Ibid., 16: *Gospel of Peter* 1:1-2 and 2:5b-6:22 (crucifixion and deposition); 7:25 and 8:28-9:34 (tomb and guards); 9:35-10:42 and 11:45-49 (resurrection and confession).
[32] Ibid., 17-20.

of Peter. This expansion involved the addition of passages from the canonical Gospels[33] and editorial links between the latter and the original parts of the *Cross Gospel*.[34]

In his work on *Ancient Christian Gospels*, Koester assessed Crossan's book and elaborated his own views on the relationship between the *Gospel of Peter* and the canonical Gospels.[35] He found three major problems with Crossan's thesis. The most telling is the third: the account of the passion of Jesus is early because of the similarities among the five Gospels. Except for the story of the empty tomb, however, the various accounts of appearances of the risen Jesus cannot derive from a single source, due to the major differences among them.[36] Koester himself maintained that the "earliest stage and, at the same time, the best example" of the allegorical interpretation of Scripture used in creating the earliest passion narrative
"is preserved in the *Epistle of Barnabas*."[37] "The *Gospel of Peter* reveals a very close relationship especially to the exegetical/scapegoat tradition, often closer than that of the canonical parallels."[38] He concluded, "the *Gospel of Peter* has preserved the most original narrative version of the tradition of scriptural interpretation. In this instance, a dependence of the *Gospel of Peter* upon any of the canonical Gospels is excluded. It is unlikely that such a dependence exists with respect to any other features of the passion narrative of this gospel."[39]

In the second edition of his *Introduction*, Koester refined and supplemented but continued to affirm the views expressed in the first edition on the relationship of the *Gospel of Peter* to the early, written passion narrative and to the canonical Gospels. The basis of the *Gospel of Peter* is an older text, the story of

---

[33] Ibid., 20: *Gospel of Peter* 6:23-24 (Joseph and burial); 12:50-13:57 (women and youth); 14:60 . . . (Disciples and [?] Apparition).
[34] Ibid., 21: *Gospel of Peter* 2:3-5a (request for burial); 7:26-27 and 14:58-59 (action of disciples); 11:43-44 (arrival of youth). See also the Appendix of Crossan's book, which includes a translation of the whole work with stage one in ordinary text, stage two in italics, and stage three underlined (409-13).
[35] Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International; London: SCM, 1990) 216-30.
[36] Ibid., 219-20.
[37] Ibid., 224.
[38] Ibid., 225-26.
[39] Ibid., 230.

the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus first written down under Peter's authority. This older text was not dependent on the canonical Gospels.[40]

In the first volume of his magisterial study of the historical Jesus, John P. Meier concluded that Crossan's study, although impressive, fails to meet his own criterion that the simplest theory that explains the most data is to be preferred.[41] In contrast to Crossan's "baroque construct," Léon Vaganay and Jerry McCant have demonstrated simply and clearly that the *Gospel of Peter* is a second century "pastiche of traditions from the canonical Gospels recycled through the memory and lively imagination of Christians who have heard the Gospels read and preached upon many a time."[42]

As noted already, Koester argues that the use of Scripture in speaking about the suffering of Jesus in the *Epistle of Barnabas* reflects the earliest stage of the process by which Scripture was used to tell the story of the passion. This judgment seems to me to be rather subjective. It could well be that the hermeneutic of *Barnabas* belongs to the early second century. In that case little evidence remains for dating the base-text of the *Gospel of Peter* to the first century.

With regard to Crossan's thesis, without repeating the detailed analyses of Vaganay and McCant, I would like to point out some features of the allegedly early material that suggest dependence on the Synoptic Gospels. The narrative involves both Pilate and Herod as having authority over Jesus.[43] This dual portrayal of authority is unique to Luke.[44] It seems likely that it was deliberately taken over from Luke. In Mark, Matthew, and John, the soldiers in the service of Pilate mock Jesus as "the king of the

---

[40] Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 2, *History of Literature of Early Christianity* (2nd ed.; New York/Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000) 5, 7, 49, 166-68, 189.
[41] John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 116.
[42] Ibid., 117-118.
[43] See the translation of the *Gospel of Peter* (the Akhmim fragment) by Christian Maurer in Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha* (2 vols; rev. ed.; trans. R. McL. Wilson; Cambridge, UK: James Clarke; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991-1992; German ed. 1989-1990) 1.223-27: 1.1-2.5 on p. 223.
[44] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *The Gospel according to Luke (X-XXIV)* (Anchor Bible 28A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985) 1478.

Jews."[45] In the *Gospel of Peter*, "the people" mock him as "King of Israel" and "Son of God."[46] These epithets apparently fit the ideas of the second century author and audience of the *Gospel of Peter* better than the historically more accurate "King of the Jews." Similarly, in the *Gospel of Peter* the writing placed on the cross reads, "This is the King of Israel," rather than "the king of the Jews," the reading of all four canonical Gospels.[47] These seem to be deliberate changes, not independent differences.

One of the more striking differences between Mark and Matthew, on the one hand, and the *Gospel of Peter*, on the other, concerns the last words of Jesus. According to the two canonical Gospels, he cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"[48] In the *Gospel of Peter*, he says, "My power, O power, you have forsaken me!" The text goes on to say, "And having said this he was taken up."[49] This passage is more similar to the late second or early third century *Acts of John* than to Mark and Matthew.[50] According to that work, John saw Jesus suffer but fled to a cave on the Mount of Olives and wept. While Jesus was hanging on the cross, the Lord stood in the middle of the cave and shone light upon John and said, "John, for the people below in Jerusalem I am being crucified and pierced with lances and reeds and given vinegar and gall to drink. But to you I am speaking, and listen to what I speak."[51]

The Lord then shows John a Cross of Light and explains, "it is the delimitation of all things and the strong uplifting of what is firmly fixed out of what is unstable, and the harmony of wisdom."[52] He also says, "This Cross then, which has made all things stable through the Logos and separated off what is transitory and inferior, and then has poured

---

[45] Mark 15:18; Matt 27:29; John 19:3. In Luke it is only the men in the service of the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who mock Jesus, and they mock him as a prophet, not a king (Luke 22:52, 63-65).
[46] *Gospel of Peter* 2.5-3.9; Maurer, 223.
[47] Mark 15:26; Matt 27:37; Luke 23:38; John 19:19; *Gospel of Peter* 4.11; Maurer, 223.
[48] Mark 15:34; Matt 27:46.
[49] *Gospel of Peter* 5.19; Maurer, 224.
[50] On the date of the Acts of John, see Knut Schäferdiek, "The Acts of John," in Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2.152-209: 166-67.
[51] *Acts of John* 97; Schäferdiek, 184.
[52] *Acts of John* 98; Schäferdiek, 185.

itself (?) into everything, is not that wooden Cross [that] you will see when you go down from here; nor am I the (man) who is on the [c]ross." He says further, "So then I have suffered none of those things [that] they will say of me."[53] Some such philosophical or theological speculation provides a likely context for the brief passage in the *Gospel of Peter* about Jesus' last words and also for the portrayal of the cross that follows the three men coming out of the sepulcher and speaks.[54]

These observations lead our attention to the most striking difference between the canonical Gospels and the *Gospel of Peter*. All the canonical Gospels narrate the discovery of the empty tomb. Matthew, Luke, and John narrate, in addition, appearances of the risen Jesus. The *Gospel of Peter* is unique in that it narrates the actual resurrection itself. There is a loud voice in heaven, the heavens open, and two men, that is, angels, "come down from there in a great brightness and draw nigh to the sepulchre."[55] The stone rolls away of itself, and the two men enter the tomb. Then *three* men come out of the tomb, the two angels and the rising Jesus, "two of them sustaining the other, and a cross following them." The heads of the angels reach to heaven, and the head of the rising Jesus is even higher than the heavens. A voice out of the heavens asks, "[Have you] preached to them that sleep?" The cross answers affirmatively.[56]

The narration of the resurrection itself seems to be a legendary development of the accounts of the discovery of the empty tomb in the Gospels. The question "Have you preached to them that sleep?" seems to presuppose the legend of Christ's descent into hell.[57] The texts that attest this legend, however, focus on the defeat of Satan and Hades and the resurrection of the righteous dead. According to the Greek version of the legend,

---

[53] *Acts of John* 99, 101; Schäferdiek, 185.
[54] *Gospel of Peter* 10.35-42; Maurer, 224-25.
[55] On the use of terms like "men" for angels, see Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 795.
[56] *Gospel of Peter* 10.35-42; Maurer, 224-25.
[57] See Felix Scheidweiler and A. de Santos Otero, "The Gospel of Nicodemus, Acts of Pilate, and Christ's Descent into Hell," in Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1.501-36, especially 521-30.

it is John the Baptist who preaches to the dead.[58] So this aspect of the *Gospel of Peter* may be a related, legendary elaboration of the statement in 1 Peter that Christ, after he was made alive in the spirit, went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison.[59]

Conclusion

Helmut Koester is certainly right that whatever was written down by early Christians "was still part of the realm of oral communication in preaching, instruction, and common celebration." When such writings were read aloud they became, in a sense, "oral literature."[60] The social setting of the earliest passion narrative may have been cultic. I am now inclined to conclude, however, that it was written primarily as a basis for preaching and teaching. If its purpose was to persuade, to make the case that Jesus was the Messiah in spite of his crucifixion, it was probably addressed to outsiders and wavering insiders. Settings of proclamation and instruction would fit this purpose well.

The authors of the canonical Gospels continued this literary activity in adapting the traditional passion narrative to their own multiple and various rhetorical purposes. Mark adapted and expanded the earliest written account in writing his Gospel. The work of Matthew and Luke was also, in large part, a matter of literary adaptation. The author of the Gospel of John probably made use of the passion narrative of Mark in its role as part of early Christian oral literature. The author of the *Gospel of Peter* probably knew all four of the canonical Gospels, perhaps primarily in their re-oralized forms.

---

[58] Scheidweiler and de Santos Otero, 522.

[59] 1 Peter 3:18-19; a connection between these two texts is suggested by Maurer, 227, n. 32.

[60] Koester, *Introduction*, vol. 2 (2nd ed.), 2.