

**DID JESUS FORESEE HIS DEATH?**  
**(The Historicity of the Passion Predictions in Mark and Some Pastoral Implications)**

*Fr. Harold Anthony S. Parilla, A.B., S.T.B., M.A.*  
*Immaculate Heart of Mary Seminary*  
*Taloto District, Tagbilaran City*

**INTRODUCTION**

A quick scan through the Synoptic Gospels would yield a fairly considerable number of allusive predictions of Jesus' death.<sup>1</sup> In Mark 2:20, Jesus says, "... the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day." Mark 10:38 has Jesus asking James and John whether they can drink the cup which he must drink. After being told that Herod wants to kill him, Jesus, in Luke 13:33 says, "...it is impossible that a prophet should die outside of Jerusalem." The parable of the wicked husbandmen who murder the vineyard-owners' messengers first and eventually his son is also another allusion to Jesus' death (Cf. Mark 12:7-8; Luke 20: 14-15; Matthew 21:38-39). In affirmation, C. S. Mann acknowledges the existence of "a whole series of 'suffering' saying of considerable importance."<sup>2</sup>

Although the above texts do refer to Jesus' death, they are at best vague allusions only to what precisely happened to Jesus. In more explicit terms, the passion predictions in the Synoptic Gospels provide us more than what the other allusive sayings merely suggest. Noticeably, the third prediction (Cf. Mark 10:33-34; Matthew 20:18-19; Luke 18: 31-33) even provides the details of how it allegedly took place. It mentions the condemnation of Jesus by the chief priests and the scribes and his being handed over to the Gentiles "who will mock him, spit upon him, scourge him, and put him to death."<sup>3</sup>

**STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The authenticity of the passion predictions, however, has been the object of heated controversy among exegetes.<sup>4</sup> Some quarters have claimed that these are merely formulations of the early church retrojected into the very person of Jesus himself.<sup>5</sup>

In view of the issue in question, this paper shall attempt, first of all, to examine and make observations of the passion predictions, particularly those which are contained in the Gospel according to Mark (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34) and identify the common affirmations and also the variations among the three. Secondly, we shall delve on the question of historicity, that is, whether these texts, in any way, can be traced back to the historical Jesus. Without claiming to be exhaustive, we shall make use here of the commentaries and opinions of exegetes and theologians who may be considered representatives of the various positions.

Within the discussion, we shall also tackle in passing the issue concerning the extent of Jesus' knowledge which can be the object of a wholly separate study but may also be of relevance here. Finally, after having seen what may be a tentative response to

the main matter in question, this paper shall try to point out some pastoral implications and challenges related to the historicity of the passion predictions. Here, we shall pose the questions, “If Jesus indeed knew he was going to die, how did his knowledge affect his proclamation of the Reign of God? What has it got to do, if any, with our own preaching of the same message in the Philippine Church today?”

## **THE TEXT AND SOME OBSERVATIONS**

### **The First Prediction – *Mark 8:31***

“He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days.”

### **The Second Prediction – *Mark 9:31***

“He was teaching his disciples and telling them, “The Son of Man is to be handed over to men and they will kill him, and three days after his death, he will rise.”

### **The Third Prediction – *Mark 10:33-34***

“Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and hand him over to the Gentiles who will mock him, spit upon him, scourge him, and put him to death, but after three days he will rise.”

## **Context**

The first of the passion predictions is located at the first section of the second part of Mark’s gospel. It is immediately preceded by the scene in which Jesus asked his disciples about people’s various opinions about his person (Cf. Mark 8:27). The disciples in reply said, “John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others one of the prophets.” When Jesus turned to question the disciples regarding their own idea of who he was, Peter made the confession that Jesus indeed was the Messiah (Cf. Mark 8:29). Wilfred Harrington identifies this as the “unit in which Mark’s *theologia crucis*, his central theological preoccupation, is most evident.”<sup>6</sup>

The verse which follows the first prediction has Peter rebuking Jesus (Cf. Mark 8:32). Peter protested strongly against the earlier statement of Jesus regarding his suffering, rejection and death. Jesus in response returned to Peter his rebuke calling him “Satan” in the verbal exchange (Cf. Mark 8:33).

The second passion prediction is preceded by a verse describing Jesus and his disciples leaving the scene of the healing of the boy with a demon (Cf. Mark 9:14-29,

30). They were said to have “left from there and began a journey through Galilee.” The prediction is then followed by a verse indicating the failure of the disciples to understand the meaning of what Jesus was saying, although this time, nobody dared to ask Jesus anymore. (Cf. Mark 9:32).

The scene within which the final passion prediction in Mark took place presents Jesus and his disciples on the way to Jerusalem (Cf. Mark 10:32). Jesus is said to have taken the twelve aside, and “began to tell them what was going to happen to him.” C.S. Mann comments, “... there is an air of finality about the narrative... [indicating] that all intents and purposes the ministry in Galilee had ended.”<sup>7</sup>

The third prediction is obviously the richest in detail. It mentions “mocking,” “spitting,” and “scourging” – explicit terms not found in the first two predictions. “Here what Jesus expects is predicted feature by feature... this corresponds so exactly with the course of the passion narrative and the Easter story, even to the details....”<sup>8</sup>

What follows immediately after this final prediction is the conversation between Jesus and the sons of Zebedee (Cf. Mark 10:35 ff). Here, James and John requested that they “sit one at your right and the other at your left.” The section ends with Jesus saying to the disciples, “... whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Cf. Mark 10:43-45).

Looking at these specific locations of the three passion predictions in Mark, one can deduce the general context within which these texts should be understood. As Wilfrid Harrington rightly points out, every passion prediction is followed by the incomprehension of the disciples.<sup>9</sup> In the first case it was Peter who articulated the disciples’ failure to understand the divine plan. He is said to be “thinking the thoughts of man and not the thoughts of God.” In the second case, it was the disciples altogether who did not understand the words of Jesus but with no one standing to voice it out. Finally, in the third instance, it was James and John who proved to have misunderstood the concepts of service and discipleship. Against this background then, “Jesus stresses the demands of discipleship – Mark makes the point that discipleship involves following the Crucified One, that it is an *imitatio Christi* [italics mine].”<sup>10</sup> Along this line, Hooker observes that here the theme of the inevitability of the cross is linked with that of the meaning of discipleship.<sup>11</sup> “Jesus attempts to teach his disciples that following him involves accepting the same path themselves.”<sup>12</sup> The predictions then seemed to occasion Jesus’ instructions on the ideals of discipleship.

### **Common Affirmations and Variations**

The expression “Son of Man” is clearly present in all three predictions.<sup>13</sup> The Son of Man being “handed over” appears only in the second and third while the reference to the resurrection “three days after” is also stated in all the predictions. The antagonists – the chief priests and scribes – are mentioned in both the first and last predictions while

the second seems to name them only in a general term (“men”). Obviously, the affirmation about Jesus’ impending death is explicitly mentioned in all three.

The variations are chiefly in the way the single idea of suffering is expressed. The first prediction speaks of Jesus suffering greatly and being rejected. The second simply says that he will be “handed over” without giving particular descriptions of how it would go about. The third, as we have said earlier, contains very precise terms – “mocking,” “spitting,” “scourging” – which coincide exactly with the passion narrative.<sup>14</sup> A final variation in the text is the mention of “elders” only in the first prediction.

After a comparison of the texts in question, what emerges as the common elements are found in the second prediction (Mark 9:31):

1. “The Son of Man;”
2. “Will suffer/be handed over and be killed;” and
3. “But will rise after three days.”<sup>15</sup>

Being the vaguest regarding details, the second prediction is also vouched for by scholars like Fuller, Jeremias, Lindars, and Todt, among others, as the more original<sup>16</sup> with the other two as mere variants of it. In such a case, it would probably be the “closest” we can get and trace back to the historical Jesus.

## **THE QUESTION OF HISTORICITY**

We have so far tried to locate the texts within the context that Mark places them into. We said that Mark has used the passion predictions always within the larger issue of the nature of true discipleship. Whenever a prediction is uttered in Mark, it is always followed by a misunderstanding of the disciples and an attempt by Jesus to correct it. We have also tried, through a comparison of the elements in the Markan prediction texts, to come up with the most basic assertion contained in all three.

At this point, we shall now probe into the question of historicity. Here we shall try to address the questions: Did Jesus in any way predict his own death? If so, how was it possible? How did Jesus foresee his coming fate? Was there anything extraordinary involved in the process?

Scholars have grappled with the aforementioned questions in various ways. For our purposes here, we shall do the exposition of the different opinions under three general headings:

### **Jesus knew everything, including his death**

As a deduction from the hypostatic union, Scholastic and Neo-scholastic theologians are of the opinion that Jesus more or less possessed unlimited knowledge.<sup>17</sup> He had knowledge of all past, present and future reality from the moment of his conception.<sup>18</sup> This meant he had access to “precise information about everything...

including his violent death and all its saving consequences.”<sup>19</sup> Quoting Ferdinand Prat, Gerald O’Collins presents how proponents of this position poetically describe the extent of Jesus’ knowledge:

He sees heaping up in the course of the centuries the inequities of men, those men for whom he is about to shed all his blood. How many souls, through negligence or malice, in every case through their own fault, will still hold aloof from the fruits of this redeeming death! Even in the Church, how many schisms, how many heresies, what scandals and apostasies and sacrileges!<sup>20</sup>

This understanding of the knowledge of Jesus as unlimited can even be traced back to as early as the time of the Church Fathers.<sup>21</sup> Appollinarius for instance refused to accept that Jesus could be in some way limited in his knowledge. He proposed the idea that while Jesus had a real human body, his psychology on the inside was divine.<sup>22</sup>

Proponents of this paradigm about Jesus’ knowledge would naturally go for the authenticity of the passion predictions. With Jesus having knowledge of all things, it would not be surprising that he did foresee his death even to the details.

Recent scholars, however, reject this viewpoint. Enda Lyons writes, “...the conclusion that Jesus had access to unlimited knowledge, is one which simply cannot be accepted... if we accept that Jesus had access to this kind of knowledge, then we have to let go... the ‘truly human Christ’ of the faith of the Church.”<sup>23</sup> Gerard O’Collins agrees. He says,

Being limited in knowledge and foreknowledge is precisely part of being human, and not an ugly imperfection from which Jesus must be miraculously freed. Among other things, some limitation in knowledge makes it possible for human beings to act freely... Hence, in the name of Jesus’ true humanity and genuine liberty, theologians defend real limitations in his knowledge and foreknowledge.<sup>24</sup>

Karl Rahner for his part had earlier proposed a consciousness of Jesus which was radically in the direct presence of God right at the outset yet had to historically develop on the level of conceptualization and objectification.<sup>25</sup> It is a consciousness which “includes implicit knowledge of everything connected with his mission and soteriological task... without having to suppose that Jesus possessed a permanent, reflex and fully formed propositional knowledge of everything after a manner of an encyclopedia or of a huge, actually completed world-history.”<sup>26</sup>

## **The Passion Predictions are Later Formulations by the Early church; Jesus did not Pronounce them**

The second position holds that the gospels, being riddled with faith interpretations by and of the early Church, cannot be a reliable source of information about Jesus' foreknowledge about his death. Using this argument, Rudolf Bultmann contends that it is practically impossible to get back to the historical Jesus.<sup>27</sup> The passion predictions for him are *vaticinia ex eventu* and therefore later Christian formulations.<sup>28</sup>

Recently, some people are reviving the same opinion. A controversial group called *Jesus Seminar* founded by Robert Funk and which counts among its members John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg decided against the authenticity of the passion predictions.<sup>29</sup> Again, the predictions are creations of the early Church and thus cannot be ascribed to the historical Jesus. A consistent feature among members of this group is described in part by Luke Timothy Johnson:

To a remarkable extent, they reject the canonical gospels as reliable sources for our knowledge of Jesus. The New Testament Gospels must be purified of 'later accretions' or the 'distortions of faith,' or they must be put in competition with apocryphal gospels, or a more important source must be excavated from within them, or they must be read as an elaborate allegory. In short, if the 'real Jesus' is to be found, he must be found somewhere other than in the Gospels as they are read Christians.<sup>30</sup>

## **Jesus Predicted his Passion on the Basis of Human Knowledge**

The third position answers the question regarding the historicity of the predictions in the affirmative. Exegetes like Heinz Schurmann and Rudolf Pesch comment that it is highly likely that Jesus recognized the possibility of and even anticipated his death.<sup>31</sup>

The passion predictions themselves are said to be written from a post-resurrection perspective.<sup>32</sup> They are in their present form influenced by the events that transpired, although the extent of which is difficult to ascertain.<sup>33</sup> This does not mean, however, that they are purely *vaticinia ex eventu*.

### *Vaticinia Ex Eventu*

Despite all possible editing, it is reasonable to contend that the predictions have some historical basis.<sup>34</sup> In agreement, Hans Kung writes: "We cannot deny a historical core to what is perhaps the shortest, most vague and linguistically the oldest variant of the prophecies of the passion: that Jesus will be delivered up to men."<sup>35</sup>

Granting that Jesus did predict his rejection and death, the logical question would be: "How did he arrive at such an impression?"

First, Jesus must have seen himself as following the fate of his mentor, John the Baptist. It is not unlikely for Jesus to have anticipated an end similar to that of John since to a certain extent, the beginning of Jesus' ministry of public preaching was bound up with the end of the career of John.<sup>36</sup>

Second, Jesus must have been aware of the fate of the prophets in the Old Testament.<sup>37</sup> Anyone who had access to the Hebrew Scriptures would have recognized that even in the days of old, those who spoke against the religious-political status quo in the name of God often experienced rejection.<sup>38</sup> It is also quite possible that Jesus could have seen himself according to image of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah [e.g. Is 53:5] who had to suffer despite his innocence.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, and perhaps in proximate connection with the other two, Jesus must have been aware that his kingdom proclamation made him enemies and provoked a hostile reaction from segments of Jewish society and Roman authorities.<sup>40</sup> His radical message questioned the traditional religious system as a whole and caused serious conflicts among both the religious and political authorities.<sup>41</sup> His questioned attitude regarding the Sabbath, his perceived contempt for the law and the accusations of blasphemy against him must have come to the attention of Jesus himself. In the face of all these factors, it is reasonable then to hold, as Hans Kung does, that on the part of Jesus "no supernatural knowledge was required to recognize the danger of a violent end, only a sober view of reality."<sup>42</sup>

In sum, this paper started with a presentation and observation of the passion predictions in Mark 8:31, Mark 9:31, Mark 10:33-34. We tried, first of all, to locate these texts within the larger context in Mark's Gospel. We have pointed out that whenever Jesus seeks to teach the Twelve the meaning of discipleship in Mark, he does so by the use of the passion predictions. We have also looked closely into the commonalities and variations within the texts themselves and have come up with their most basic assertion.

The second part of this paper attempted to address the question of the historicity of the passion predictions. We tried to make a systematic presentation of the three general positions which respond to our main question. At this point, perhaps, it can be said that the third position enjoys the greater consensus among authorities on the issue, and is more reasonable to hold over the other two. After a consideration of the various arguments presented, we can say at the least that Jesus probably did predict or speak about his passion and death as a realistic possibility given the nature and impact of his kingdom proclamation. Although the three passion predictions may have been stylistically formulated by the early Church, they nevertheless have a historical basis, the core of which probably comes from our Lord Himself.

After having seen that Jesus read death as the direction to which he is drawn by his kingdom proclamation, it might be in place to recall the questions raised at the introduction of this paper: "How did this realization on the part of Jesus affect his

ministry? What has this attitude of Jesus got to do with our own proclamation of the Reign of God?"

It is a historical fact that Jesus indeed died. It is also historically proven that such death occurred with much violence and humiliation, with great honor and scandal. When we come to reflect more deeply on these facts, we are led to think that Jesus could have toned down a little bit to avoid the ire of authorities and could have died peacefully of old age. Yet the gospels tell us that he went on to Jerusalem, never changing nor compromising his message and consequently meeting his violent end. As Jon Sobrino puts it, "Jesus was killed because of his kind of life, because of what he said and did."<sup>43</sup>

Being deeply rooted in and influenced by interpersonal ties, our Philippine culture can be an unfriendly ground for a non-compromising stance like that of Jesus. *Utang-na-loog*, *hiya* and *pakikisama* are highly operative norms in our social milieu.<sup>44</sup> In our efforts to maintain smooth interpersonal relations, there is an ever present temptation to *soften*, as it were, the proclamation of the gospel in the name of *utang-na-loob*, *hiya* and *pakikisama*. Being Filipinos, we are always inclined to avoid the sometimes confrontational dimension of the Word of God for the sake of good social image and practical relations. In cases involving close relatives and friends, we are likely to remain blind, deaf and mute before blatant transgressions against the gospel ideals.

There are, therefore, very clear challenges for us. First, as proclaimers of the Word, we must be aware of the difficulties involved in Christian discipleship. To be a disciple entails risks. In more ways than one, we may disturb and jolt others from their comfort zones and earn their repugnance. Williamson says, "Discipleship will mean more trouble, not less... Anyone who contemplates following Jesus without fear and trembling has not understood true discipleship...."<sup>45</sup>

Second, we are all being called to unwavering fidelity to the Word of God. Like Jesus, we are being invited to stand firm by the message of the Gospel and to proclaim it despite all possibilities of rejection. If in the process we meet mockery and persecution like Jesus, there is at least a consolation in the knowledge that we accept and endure them in good company.

---

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, Vol. II, (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1496-1470.

<sup>2</sup>C.S. Mann, *Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1986), 345.

---

<sup>3</sup>All biblical texts in this paper are taken from the New American Bible translation.

<sup>4</sup>Marna Hooker, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 204-205. See also Brian O. McDermott, *Word Become Flesh: Dimensions of Christology* (Philippines: St. Pauls, 1997), 80.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. J. Galvin, "Jesus" Approach to Death: An Examination of Some Recent Studies," *Theological Studies* 41 (1980), 713-744. Here Galvin looks into the works of Heinz Schurmann, Rudolf Pesch, Anton Vogtle and those of Walter Kasper, Edward Schillebeeckx and Karl Rahner on the problem of how Jesus approached death. This subject inevitably touches also on the question of the authenticity of the passion predictions.

<sup>6</sup>Wilfrid Harrington, *Mark* (Dublin: Veritas Publication, 1979), 127.

<sup>7</sup>Mann, *Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 372.

<sup>8</sup>Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (Great Britain: W & J Mackay & Co Ltd, 1971), 277.

<sup>9</sup>Harrington, *Mark*, 127.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>Hooker, *The Gospel According to Mark*. 204.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>"Son of Man" is a title which Jesus usually used to refer to himself. It is an ambiguous expression which may designate, on the one hand, an ordinary human being (cf. Psalms, Ezekiel) and, on the other, a heavenly savior in Jewish apocalyptic literature (cf. Daniel 7). In the gospels, it was preferred by Jesus over the title "Messiah" which was too closely associated with the temporal aspect of Jewish tradition. For a fuller treatment, cf. Jean Delorme, "Son of Man" in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. by Xavier Leon-Dufour (Philippines: Paulines, 1996), 563-565.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, 277.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Mann, *Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 344-345. Here Mann affirms the contention that the core of the predictions would seem to be that which is contained in Mark 9:31.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, Vol. II, 1477, 1485. Brown, however, has raised the question of the placement of what's supposed to be "original" in the

---

middle. His proposal is that “on a preGospel level there was already a collection of three sayings predicting the death and resurrection of the Son of Man.”

<sup>17</sup> John Galvin, *Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 293, footnote 89.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Gerald O’ Collins, *Interpreting Jesus* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), 80.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Consider Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 36.

<sup>23</sup> Enda Lyons, *Jesus: Self-Portrait by God* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1994), 69.

<sup>24</sup> O’Collins, *Interpreting Jesus*, 81.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. V (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1966), 213. For a fuller treatment, read the whole section on the “Dogmatic Reflections on the Knowledge and Self-Consciousness of Christ,” 193-215.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 213-214.

<sup>27</sup> William Loewe, *An Introduction to Christology: Rethinking Jesus’ Religious Significance Today* (Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1997), 34.

<sup>28</sup> O’Collins, *Interpreting Jesus*, 82.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, Vol. II, 1468.

<sup>30</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (New York: HaperCollins Publishers, 1996), 54. This book provides a telling and provocative critique of the methods and claims of Jesus Seminar.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Galvin, *Theological Studies* 41 (1980), 713-744.

<sup>32</sup> John Donahue, “Mark” in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, ed. by J. Mays et al. (San Francisco: Harper and Raw Publishers, 1988), 994.

---

<sup>33</sup>Daniel Harrington, “The Gospel According to Mark” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. by R. Brown, J. Fitzmyer and R. Muphy (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), 614.

<sup>34</sup>Joseph Fitzmyer, *A Christological Catechism: New Testament Answers* (Philippines: St Pauls, 1993), 101f.

<sup>35</sup>Hans Kung, *On Being A Christian* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976), 320.

<sup>36</sup>Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, Vol. II, 1486.

<sup>37</sup> Brian McDermott, *Word Become Flesh: Dimensions of Christology* (Philippines: St. Pauls, 1997), 80.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup>Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, Vol. II, 1480.

<sup>40</sup> Donald Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait* (Philippines: St. Pauls, 1997), 134.

<sup>41</sup>Kung, *On Being A Christian*, 320.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup>Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* (New York: Urbis Books, 1993), 209.

<sup>44</sup>Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), “Pastoral Exhortation on Philippine Culture,” *Landas* 13, no. 1 (1999): 13.

<sup>45</sup>Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983), 195.