

prayer. All this suggests that fairly early in his writing life, at least as early as his confinement in the Toledo monastery of the unreformed friars (1577—1578), he had the three poems, *Noche*, *Cántico*, *Llama* and their respective commentaries, more or less in place in his mind and intention. If that implies an intellectual power that is found surprising, then we must revise our idea of Juan de Yepes—not only a great contemplative and poet, but thinker too.

- 1 By far the best account of the *Cántico espiritual*, its dependence on the *Song of Songs* and other aspects of the poem is to be found in *The Poet and the Mystic: A Study of the Cántico Espiritual of San Juan de la Cruz*, by the Revd. Dr. Colin P. Thompson (Oxford University Press, 1977).
- 2 It is just possible that *almena* is a reminiscence of St. Teresa's *Interior Castle*. She began writing this book on Trinity Sunday (June 2nd) 1577. At the time St. John was confessor to the Convent of the Encarnación in Avila where she wrote the *Castle*.
- 3 The idea of dance, a formal patterned, significant movement, conveyed in both *Noche* and *Cántico*, is in fact present in the biblical text at VI, 13 and VII, 1 but is obscured by the Vulgate. Modern translations (*Jerusalem*, the Paoline Italian, Schonfield, for example) make it explicit. Fray Luis de León in his translation and commentary of the *Song of Songs* did not understand it so, though he was undoubtedly working from the Hebrew as well as the Vulgate. St. John of the Cross certainly knew León's commentary (in Latin, 1582), and quite possibly the Spanish translation in manuscript.
- 4 There are two versions of the *Cántico*, differing mainly in the order of stanzas and in the addition of one stanza. For a detailed and lucid account of the matter see Chapter 3 of Dr. Thompson's book *The Poet and the Mystic*, cf. note 1, above.

## The Seven Sayings of Jesus from the Cross:

### Observations on Order and Presentation in the New Testament, Literature and Cinema

Larry Kreitzer

Ever since Tatian's *Diatessaron* (c. 150 CE) there has been a tradition within the Christian Church of harmonizing the life of Jesus and blend together the four gospel accounts so as to compose a biography of the Lord. Perhaps nowhere is this tendency to harmonization more clearly demonstrated than in the sayings of Jesus from the cross. In fact, there

are seven so-called 'sayings from the cross' recorded within our New Testament, but it sometimes comes as a surprise to discover just *how* these seven sayings are distributed. We note the following table:

### 1. The Sayings of Jesus from the Cross

- §1.) 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?'  
(Mark 15:33/Matthew 27:46)
- §2.) 'Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing.'  
(Luke 23:34)
- §3.) 'Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.'  
(Luke 23:43)
- §4.) 'Father into your hands I commit my spirit.'  
(Luke 23:46)
- §5.) 'Woman behold your son ... Behold your mother.'  
(John 19:26—27)
- §6.) 'I am thirsty.'  
(John 19:28)
- §7.) 'It is finished!'  
(John 19:30)

### 2. Distinctives in Presentation within the Gospels

The first thing to notice about the distribution of the sayings is that the sole saying recorded in both Matthew and Mark is the same, probably due to Matthew's reliance upon Mark for the passion narratives in his gospel. This means that if the only gospel we had was Mark, we would have quite a distinctive picture of the crucifixion. Here, the only statement of Jesus is one of extreme dereliction, of forsakenness and isolation. The effect is to heighten the theological meaning of the gospel story, emphasizing Jesus's cross as the place where the cost of human sinfulness comes to reckoning.

The sayings that Luke records for us give us a *slightly different picture* of the crucifixion. Here we see Jesus demonstrating his compassion to the criminal on the cross next to him, pausing in the midst of his own pain and anguish to offer some words of comfort to a fellow victim. Jesus also prays for those responsible for his death, both Jewish leaders and Roman officials alike, in another noble act of selfless love. In contrast to the cry of dereliction in Matthew and Mark, here in Luke it is a cry of submission and supreme trust that comes from Jesus's lips. Again, a rather different assessment of the cross is provided by Luke's narrative.

In John, however, an even more interesting picture emerges. There is, as in Luke, a characteristic concentration of Jesus upon others with the statements made to Mary and 'the disciple' (presumably the Beloved Disciple) about mutual responsibility. The second saying from the cross

recorded in John is usually taken to reflect John's fight against a Docetic interpretation of the gospel story which tried to deny the full humanity of Jesus. John, so the argument goes, wishes to stress that Jesus had real human needs and physical desires including thirst. Perhaps there is something to be said for this, but it is important to note that all of the Synoptic gospels record the offer of wine on a sponge, although none of them record John's saying about Jesus' thirst (Matthew 27:48; Mark 15:36; Luke 23:36). Most revealing in John's account is the cry of Jesus, 'It is finished!'. This can be taken as a triumphant cry of victory that God's saving plan is accomplished with the death of Jesus. It is also readily integrated with another prominent theme in the gospel, namely, the divine control of the events of Jesus's life which are described.

Commenting on the impossibility of deciding which of the sayings are the actual words of Jesus, and the difficulty of determining in which order they were uttered, the Catholic scholar Pierre Benoit has wisely remarked:

We have to take the gospels as they are, each with its own traditions and its own plausibility, and be grateful, even if we do not see any way to combine them and have to forego the hope of doing so. All these different words, guaranteed by the inspiration of the sacred writers have their part in giving us different aspects and glimpses of the depths of Jesus' soul.<sup>1</sup>

While this is undoubtedly true, it is nevertheless interesting to note some of the ways in which attempts at harmonization have been made over the years. In the course of presenting the life of Jesus various writers and film makers arrange their account of the crucifixion to a specific end. Inevitably each integrates some, or all, of Jesus's sayings from the cross within the story. This in itself often reveals the intention of the writer or film director and parallels the redactional considerations of the individual gospel writers.

### 3. Literary Attempts at Presenting Jesus's Utterances

Tatian, the earliest harmonizer of the literary sources of the life of Jesus presented his account of Jesus's crucifixion in this way: keeping the above numbering system, he worked six of the seven sayings into his narrative in the order: §2, §3, §5, §1, §6, §4. He omitted the seventh saying, 'It is finished', although he conflated the description of John 19:30 with the final declaration on Jesus's lips recorded in Luke 23:46.

The Reformation leader John Calvin (1509—1564) did not, strictly speaking, compose a harmony by weaving together the various gospel narratives into a single version, but treated the individual *synoptic* gospel texts from the standpoint of their contribution to a logical, chronological order of events. Calvin's order of discussion for the sayings of Jesus from the cross is §2, §3, §1, §4. In short, the only issue for Calvin (given the fact that he did not try to include John's sayings in his

harmonization) was where to insert the cry of dereliction (Mark 15:33/Matthew 27:46) within the Lucan narrative. In the end he chose what is probably the most logical place, just before the saying 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' recorded in Luke 23:46.

Several modern attempts at presenting a coherent picture are also worth noting. The Baptist New Testament scholar A.T. Robinson typified the approach of many by arranging the seven sayings of Jesus from the cross in this way.<sup>2</sup> The order is: §2, §3, §5, §1, §6, §7, §4. Arthur W. Pink,<sup>3</sup> popular author and evangelical preacher, followed Robertson's order, as did Freeman Wills Croft in *The Four Gospels in One Story*, an attempt at a modern biography of Jesus.<sup>4</sup> Donald Guthrie, another conservative New Testament scholar, discussed the sayings in the order §2, §3, §1, §6, §5, §7, §4.<sup>5</sup> Although recognizing the individual gospel emphases in the course of his treatment, Guthrie seemed to assume a recoverable chronological sequence underlying the gospel narrative.

The popular novel *The Day Christ Died* by Jim Bishop attempted an hour-by-hour reconstruction of the events surrounding the crucifixion. Bishop, whose book carries the Imprimatur of Cardinal Spellman of New York, gave the seven sayings in the order §2, §3, §5, §1, §6, §4 and §7.<sup>6</sup> Peter Marshall, Chaplain to the United States Senate, in his famous sermon 'Were You There?' gave the order as §2, §3, §5, §7 §4; omitting the cry of dereliction and Jesus's cry of thirst.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4. Cinematic Attempts at Presenting Jesus's Utterances

One of the most interesting illustrations of the tendency to present the sayings of Jesus from the cross appears in popular films. It is revealing to note the number and order of these sayings in various film adaptations of the crucifixion of Jesus. Not all films attempt to harmonize the gospel accounts on this score, and an interesting redactional or editorial study could be made about which sayings are included and why.

Some films which portray the crucifixion of Jesus do not actually contain *any* of the sayings from the cross. A good example is *Barabbas*, the 1962 film directed by Richard Fleisher, based on Pär Lagerkvist's novel by the same name. It is easy to understand why the sayings from the cross are omitted in this version since the story concentrates on the relationship between Barabbas and Jesus who died in his place.<sup>8</sup> Any dialogue involving Jesus would only distract from the psychological study of the haunted man Barabbas, who has to live with the fact that his life was spared at the expense of another's. By *not* having Jesus say anything the sense of brooding isolation that Barabbas experienced is heightened. The 1959 production of Lew Wallace's novel *Ben Hur* by director William Wyler follows the same approach: Jesus makes no utterance from the cross, and Wyler thereby directs attention *away from* Jesus himself and enhances the audience's identification with the title

character.

Some film adaptations concentrate on one specific gospel. The 1979 film *Jesus*, directed by Peter Sykes and John Kirsh, is actually based on the gospel according to Luke and, quite understandably, only gives us sayings §2, §3 and §4 (the Lucan sayings). A comparable approach, based on Matthew, is the 1964 film by Pier Paolo Pasolini: *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*. No doubt Matthew and Luke, and *not* Mark or John have been individually adapted for the screen because these two gospels give us birth and infancy accounts of Jesus's life, necessary features in any essentially biographical portrayal.

Some film adaptations do not attempt to give all seven, or even a majority of the seven, sayings of Jesus. A good example of this is the 1953 film *The Robe*, directed by Henry Koster and based on Lloyd C. Douglas's novel of the same name. In this film the only words of Jesus from the cross are 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!' (§2); an understandable incursion since the main focus of the film is the forgiveness theme. It concentrates on the fictional character of Marcellus Gallio, the Roman tribune who was responsible for the actual crucifixion itself. Director George Stevens's 1965 film, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, gives all of the sayings, presenting them in the order §2, §5, §3, §1, §6, §7, §4. Unfortunately they are presented virtually one after the other, an approach devoid of the dramatic power displayed in *The Robe* which does not sacrifice drama for the sake of a comprehensive presentation of the New Testament accounts.

The 1977 TV-film by Franco Zeffirelli, *Jesus of Nazareth*, offers yet another order: §2, §3, §5, §1, §4, §7, with the statement about Jesus's thirst (§6) omitted in the relation of the story. Anthony Burgess was responsible for the television scripts for the film and in his *Man of Nazareth* (1979), upon which the film was ultimately based, the sayings are given in a completely different order: §3, §6, §1, §2, §5, §4, §7.<sup>9</sup> Another adaptation of this same TV-film story, the short book by William Barclay entitled *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), which was itself based on the television scripts of Anthony Burgess, gives the sayings of Jesus from the cross in the order §2, §5, §1, §4 (the other three are omitted).<sup>10</sup>

Finally, Martin Scorsese's 1988 adaptation of Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation*, first published in (1955), faithfully follows the novel in giving us only two of the seven sayings of Jesus from the cross, §1 and §7. They are interrupted by the crucifixion-vision of temptation which gives the novel its name, a vision about the way life which might have been had Jesus not pursued the path he had. This is an interesting juxtaposition of dominical sayings which brings together the cry of dereliction and the declaration 'It is finished' in such a way that it transforms the meaning of the (so-called) cry of triumph into an utterance which heightens the sense of despair that the crucifixion brings. Kazantzakis's main concern of presenting a very human Jesus is brought out all the more forcefully as a result.

## Conclusion

As we celebrate the Easter season and consider afresh the meaning of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection for us, it is good to be reminded of how personalized every attempt at expressing the meaning of Easter is. The gospel accounts, as well as the literary and cinematic interpretations based upon them, are all illustrative of this. Each effort is an interpretative act. As we are bombarded by a host of Easter films on TV, let us examine them more critically, to assess them as vehicles of a two-fold encounter—an encounter with the subject matter, Jesus the Risen Lord, to be sure, but also as a means of encountering another's experience of Him. In examining such cinematic interpretations of the life of Jesus we do well to consider what film director Zeffirelli has said about his own work, generally considered to be one of the most faithful and reverential of all such films:

*Jesus of Nazareth* is not a story where one can throw in too much personal conjecture or bring too much fantasy and imagination. Of course, it's obvious that any author or director, whether he is mediocre, modest or a genius, ends up giving a personal point of view just through his very reaction and sensitivity to the material at hand. How he treats it and what he selects, reflects his opinions.<sup>11</sup>

- 1 The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, (DLT: London, 1969), p. 198.
- 2 *A Harmony of the Gospels for Students of the Life of Christ*, (Hodder & Stoughton: London, 1922), pp 228—234. Robertson notes that the precise order of the sayings is difficult to determine but attempts to reconstruct a chronology of the crucifixion based on Mark's account.
- 3 *The Seven Sayings of the Saviour on the Cross*, (Summit Books: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1976). Pink associates each of these sayings with a particular noun which he feels describes the meaning of the utterance ('The Word ...'). Thus, the seven sayings, in his proposed order, communicate: forgiveness, salvation, affection, anguish, suffering, victory and contentment.
- 4 (Longmans, Green & Co: London, 1949).
- 5 *Jesus the Messiah: An Illustrated Life of Christ*, (Pickering & Inglis: London, 1972) pp. 347—352. Dorothy L. Sayers, in her play-cycle on the life of Jesus Christ entitled *The Man Born to be King*, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1943), also adopts this particular order.
- 6 (Harper & Row: New York, 1957). The first two sayings Bishop gives as being uttered between 1:00 and 2:00 p.m.; the next three as being uttered between 2:00 and 3:00 p.m.; and the last two as being uttered after 3.00 p.m.
- 7 In *Mr. Jones, Meet the Master*, Peter Marshall, (Fontana Books: London, 1954,) pp. 89—99.
- 8 Although Lagerkvist (quite appropriately for his purposes in the novel) does have one saying of Jesus related, the cry of dereliction recorded by Matthew and Mark.
- 9 (Magnum Books: London, 1979), pp. 322—325. Burgess puts several extra-biblical sayings on the lips of Jesus during the crucifixion.
- 10 (Ballantine Books: New York, 1977), pp. 121—122.
- 11 Quotation taken from the promotional materials accompanying the boxed set of videos of the film.