

“WHO IS IT THAT STRUCK YOU?”

by *DAVID FLUSSER*

We sometimes find a gap between a speculative theological approach and the serious study of historical reality. I do not wish to determine how often faith is strengthened precisely by the knowledge of reality, or when a theological consideration fosters religious progress. My experience has shown me that, at least with regard to Jesus and what he said and did, and what happened to him, the knowledge of “secular” reality is far from being a bad ally of faith. The Christian faith can evidently gain from scholarly scrutiny of Jesus’ biography.

The parodistic ceremony of Jesus’ acclamation by the Roman soldiers, and possibly even by Pilate himself, was a kind of royal game.¹ The macabre connotations of imprisonment and execution serve as an appropriate stimulus to grotesque rituals; an atmosphere of sadism is an apt breeding-place for fitting games. In Jesus’ case, the humiliating show of his coronation as the King of the Jews was preceded in the house of the high priest by another cruel game. “The men who were guarding Jesus mocked at him. They beat him, they blindfolded him and they asked him: ‘Prophecy, who is it that struck you?’” (Luke 22:63–64).²

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1. See my article, “What Was the Original Meaning of *Ecce Homo*?” *Immanuel* 19 (1985), p. 29–30, to which the present study is a companion-piece.

2. Cf. Mt. 26:67–68 and Mark 14:65. Luke preserved all the elements of the event. Matthew has forgotten to say that Jesus was then blindfolded, while in Mark the men only cried out: “Prophecy!” hence the decisive question, “Who is it that struck you?” does not appear there. The words, “to cover his face,” are lacking in some witnesses of Mark 14:65, among them the important Codex Bezae. On the textual problems of Mark 14:65, see Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London, 1957), p. 571.

Before drawing our main conclusions, however, we must attempt to understand the significance of the ignoble game recounted in the synoptic gospels. The sequence of events in Luke is clear enough: after his arrest, Jesus was brought by night into the high priest's house; Peter followed him and denied his master three times (Luke 22:56–62). In the high priest's house, the men guarding Jesus played this humiliating game with him (*Ibid.*, 63–65). When day came, Jesus was taken out of detention to appear before the council (v. 66–71) and finally was turned over to the Romans (*Ibid.*, 23:1–5).

Mark (and Matthew, who follows him) displays a reversed order of events: after having been arrested (Mark 14:43–52), Jesus was led to “the high priest, where all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes were assembled” (*Ibid.*, 53). Peter followed him from a distance (v. 54). There follows the night session of the council in the high priest's house: “they all condemned him as deserving death” (*Ibid.*, 55–64). Some of them then humiliated Jesus by asking him to prophesy, “and the guards received him with blows” (v. 65). We again meet Peter in the courtyard and hear of his threefold denial of Jesus (v. 66–72). Finally, “as soon as it was morning,” the whole council again held a consultation and turned him over to Pilate (Mark 15:1).

As we have already noted, the sequence of events during that awful night given in Luke makes sense, while in Mark (and Matthew) the description is at the very least strange and confused. After Jesus had been arrested, the assembly was gathered in the same house; after this Peter is mentioned; then Jesus is condemned by the council and some persons humiliate Jesus; then Peter reappears in order to deny his master three times. And, “as soon as it was morning,” the whole council met again with the exclusive purpose of turning Jesus over to the Romans, after he had already been condemned to death in the session held during the night. My experience has taught me that this is by no means the only case in which Mark deliberately changes the wording and order of his *Vorlage*. I would guess that he did so here because the night following Jesus' arrest was almost uneventful: the prisoner was held under guard in the high priest's house, Peter approached from outside and thrice denied Jesus, and the men who guarded him performed a humiliating game. Mark was here misled by his feeling of *horror vacui* and by his natural inclination to multiply the number of episodes in order to evoke the impression that the events are connected and follow one another in continuous action. He also often dramatizes by means of chiasmus. All this Mark has done here and so he even created a night session of the Sanhedrin, which is rightly seen by most scholars as highly improbable.

But Mark's literary ambition led him to make a blatant blunder. His penchant for accumulation of simultaneous events prevented him from writing at the proper moment: “*Exeunt* members of the Sanhedrin.” Thus they are made to be

present when the prisoner Jesus was mocked. In Mark's account, among those who struck Jesus with their fists are also evidently some of the members of the Sanhedrin. But Mark had read in his source who these mockers actually were, and so his bad conscience led him to add in colloquial Greek, "and the guards set upon him with blows" (Mark 14:65b). Matthew (26:68) does not need this addition, and therefore omitted it. One eminent scholar writes about the episode of Jesus' humiliation in the high priest's house as follows: "The basis of the story is assured by the two independent narratives. Of these, that of Luke stands nearer to the actual facts."³ But why not admit that it was Mark who altered the original account of Jesus' last night, and was thus compelled to distort the episode of the humiliating game of Jesus' guards. As we have also already seen, only Luke cites all the components of the game itself.⁴

Thus, according to the original report, after Jesus was arrested during the night, he was brought into the high priest's house. There, the men guarding him mocked him, beat him, blindfolded him, and asked him, "Prophecy, who is it that struck you?" (Luke 22:63–64). The members of the high-priestly clan and the high priest himself were Sadducees, who denied the existence of angels or spirits (Acts 23:6). It is therefore easy to imagine that they mocked those who believed that men like Jesus possessed the spirit of prophecy. May we assume that the brutal mocking by the guard of the prophet from Galilee betrayed this contempt for the supernatural gift of prophecy, as well as of its master? While this seems probable, we will see shortly that the game was not invented *ad hoc* by the men who were guarding Jesus.⁵

If such a game already existed, it is not without interest to know whether these men were Jews or Gentile slaves. The latter possibility is far more probable. At least one of those who arrested Jesus was a slave of the high-priest (Mt. 26:51; Mk. 14:47; Luke 22:30); according to John 18:10 the slave's name was Malchus (see also John 18:26). From John 18:18, it is clear that those who guarded the

3. V. Taylor, *Ibid.*, pp. 570–571. Cf. I. H. Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1979), p. 845.

4. See above, note 2. Matthew (26:67–68) mostly depends upon Mark 14:65, but an important minor point of agreement with Luke 22:63–64 indicates that, like Luke, the author of Matthew also knew the original account. While in Mark Jesus is only asked to prophecy, Matthew is correct to write: "Prophecy to us, you Christ, who he is it that struck you?" The addition, "to us" and "you Christ" are Matthean mannerisms.

5. W. C. Van Unnik, "Jesu Verhöhnung vor dem Synhedrium," *ZNW* 29 (1930), 310 f., already suggested that the episode reflects a game. See also E. Klostermann, *Das Markusevangelium* (Tübingen, 1971), p. 157.

arrested Jesus were at least part slaves.⁶ We hear from a Rabbinic source⁷ about the brutality of the slaves who composed the private police-force of the leading priestly families in Jerusalem, in which one is warned of their fists, and told that their slaves come and, “beat us with rods.” In a later rabbinic source,⁸ a legendary echo of the Gentile slaves of the priests in Jerusalem is preserved. In Jesus’ time, there were no more Hebrew slaves, so that it is highly probable that the brutal guards of Jesus were Gentile slaves.

It began to seem probable to me that the men guarding Jesus in the high-priestly prison were playing a brutal, already traditional game with him when I read the autobiographical novel *Der Gehülfe* (*The Assistant*), by the Swiss author Robert Walser (1878–1956), who was highly admired by Franz Kafka.⁹ Among other things, Walser refers to his own experience in the military prison in Bern in the year 1904, where he was the involuntary object of a rough game known in German as “Schinkenklopfen” (poking the bacon).¹⁰ The man condemned to be the object of the game is blindfolded and beaten on his bottom. When he succeeds in guessing who struck him, he is freed and the man whose blow was identified becomes his substitute. As far as I know, the game itself, along with its name, is common in German-speaking countries. During the First World War, S. Safrai’s father was compelled to participate in this game in a czarist prison in Poland. There is also an unverified story that in 1923, after the unsuccessful putsch, Hitler and his companions played this game in the prison in Landsberg. Although it later became a children’s game, there is no doubt that the proper *Sitz im Leben* of this kind of brutal sport is and was in prisons. Therefore, it is no wonder that the men who guarded Jesus in the high-priest’s house evidently amused themselves

6. The maid who asked Peter if he was one of Jesus’ disciples was clearly a slave girl (*shifhah*, see Luke 22:58; Mt. 26:68; Mark 14:66) who was on duty at the door (John 18:17).

7. Tosefta Menahot 13:21. German translation in H. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum NT* (München, 1924), II: 570. In Tosefta Pes. 7:14 (see S. Lieberman, *Tosefta ki-feshutah* [New York, 1962], IV: 614–5, and *The Tosefta*, p. 182), we hear of Gentile soldiers who were gatekeepers in Jerusalem — but not of the Temple, because this was the task of the Levites.

8. TB Kiddushin 70b. German translation: *Ibid.*, pp. 70–71.

9. First published in 1908. I quote Walser’s novel according to the edition of 1982, Suhrkamp Taschenbuch. The pertinent passages are on pp. 202, 203–204, 207, 208–209.

10. The game is described on page 204. The description is worth quoting in full, also in order to show the excellent quality of Walser’s style: “Es hieß das «Schinkenklopfen» und bestand in einem ziemlich brutalen Draufloschauen mit der gestreckt flachen Hand auf den Podex desjenigen, der verdammt war, denselben den umbarmherzigen Hieben darzuhalten. Einer der Nichtmitspieler mußte dem Dulder die Augen zudecken, damit er sich nicht die Herkunft der Hiebe und Schläge merken konnte. Erriet er nun aber trotzdem die Person dessen, der ihn gehauen hatte, so war er frei, und der Ertappte hatte sich, willig oder nicht, an die unangenehme Stelle des Erlösten herabzubücken, bis auch ihm das rasch- oder langsam-erkämpfte Glück des richtigen Erratens zufiel.”

with a variation of this cruel game during Jesus' final night. As we have already assumed, these men were the brutal Gentile slaves of the high-priest — who was himself, as far as we know, not exactly a gentleman.

Before bringing further proofs, we must ask two questions, to the first of which I do not know any definite answer. The Gospels refer only in an aside to the brutal joking of those who guarded Jesus,¹¹ so that our knowledge of this game is fragmentary. Jesus seems to have been unwilling to cooperate by giving the obligatory answer to the repeated question as to who it was who struck him, and thus spoiled the fun. It would be more important to know to what extent the men adapted the game to Jesus' person. In other words, was the demand, "*Prophesy*, who is it that struck you?" dictated by the prophetic task of Jesus, or were even other ordinary prisoners addressed in the same way? The answer to this question depends upon whether or not the Hebrew verb "to prophesy" could have been used also in the wider sense of "to guess." This seems to have been a possibility,¹² but our restricted knowledge does not allow us to answer definitely in the affirmative. In any event, in the present case the main purpose of the game was clearly to humiliate the prophet from Galilee.

Until now, I have not found any theological commentator who dared to suggest that what he reads in the gospel can be seen in his own neighborhood.¹³ However, two writers on children's games have interpreted the scene correctly, bringing material which shows that the game already existed in antiquity, probably many centuries before Jesus' time.¹⁴ They cite this game under the name "Stroke the Baby," but it also has other names, and is (and was) played with some variants.

It is almost an axiom that the more insignificant a game appears, the more remarkable is its history. ... [In England, it has been popular] for anyway the past three or four centuries, usually under the name 'Hot Cockles.'... Traditionally, the game was played at Christmas, the guesser being blindfolded and kneeling on the floor, the other players in turn slapping him with some force on his head or back, and hoping that their blow would not be identified... In ancient Greece the game was 'Kollabismos.' Pollux [2nd century C.E.] says that one player covered his eyes with the [stretched] palms of his hands, while another hit him and asked him (as do the children today in Darlington) to identify which hand it was

11. Luke, being a sensitive reader of his source, felt that the description of the mocking in the prison was cursory, and therefore added the following remarks: "And they spoke many other words against him, reviling him."

12. There are three passages in the Babylonian Talmud (Erubin 60b; Baba Bathra 12a; Bekhoroth 45a) in which the words *divrey nevi'uth* (words of prophecy) are used in a derogatory sense — more or less as "mere guess." See W. Bacher, *Die exegetische Terminologie* (Darmstadt, 1965), pt. II, p. 123.

13. But see above, note 4.

14. Iona and Peter Opie, *Children's Games in Street and Playground* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 292–294.

that dealt the blow (*Onomasticon* IX, 129).¹⁵ It seems more than likely that this sport was familiar to the men guarding Jesus, when they blindfolded him and “smote him with the palms of their hands, saying, ‘Prophecy unto us, thou Christ, Who is he that smote thee?’ (Matt. 26:67–68; Mark 14:65; Luke 22:64). Indeed, the game may have already been old then. One of the pictures on the wall of the tomb at Beni Hassan, c. 2000 B.C., shows a player on his knees while two others, unseen by him, thump or pretend to thump his back with their fists.¹⁶ It is difficult to think what kind of game they are playing if it is not one like “Kollabismos” or “Stroke the Baby.”

Jesus’ life and death is paradigmatic precisely because of its human concreteness. It was during his Passion that he was mocked and humiliated in two brutal and grotesque plays: the first time on his last night, in the high priest’s house, when the men who were guarding him tried to compel him to play the prophet, and the next day, when Roman soldiers acclaimed him as king. It became clear that the first incident was an already old-time game. Because of its brutal aspect, this game fits the atmosphere of prisons, but it is also until today a children’s game. The discovery of the secular background to this episode is helpful, not only for academic research but, it seems to me, also for the concreteness of the faith. But the results of our inquiry also have broader implications: we have found further evidence for the great value of the Gospel of Luke, and I also hope to have shown that in fact no night-session in the high priest’s home took place.¹⁷ The correct sequence of events, from Jesus’ arrest to the point at which he was turned over to the Romans, was that given by Luke.

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15. I adapted the Greek text of the quotation.

16. J.G. Wilkinson, *Ancient Egyptians* (1878), vol II, p. 61.

17. In his book *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (SCM Press, 1985), Martin Hengel argues that “more recent investigations have again disclosed how marvellously Mark has arranged his Gospel” (p. 34). He even goes so far as to claim, “Almost every pericope and every logion has its well-considered place and its paradigmatic character” (p. 37). Hengel stressed, “*However, this strictness in his overall plan does not simply dispense with historicity: Mark only reports history which has undergone the deliberate reflection of faith*” (p. 38). The texts examined in the present study demonstrate quite clearly that it is not so easy to make such exalted praises of Mark fit the content of his gospel. John (28:22–23) reinterpreted the cruel game, evidently under the impact of Acts 23:2–4. There the high priest is Ananias while in John the high priest’s name is Annas.