

Tuesday is a busy day. Mark's narrative of the day's events covers almost three chapters; a total of 115 verses. The next longest days are Thursday (60 verses) and Friday (47 verses). Tuesday is thus the longest day in Mark's story of Jesus's final week.

About two-thirds of Tuesday consists of conflict with temple authorities and their associates. The remaining third (chap. 13) warns of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and speaks of the coming of the Son of Man, all in the near future.

GOD OF THE DEAD OR OF THE LIVING?

MARK 12:18-27

Some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus and asked him a question, saying, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no child, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. There were seven brothers; the first married and, when he died, left no children; and the second married her and died, leaving no children; and the third likewise; none of the seven left children. Last of all the woman herself died. In the resurrection whose wife will she be? For the seven had married her."

Jesus said to them, "Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is God not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong."

The Sadducees were part of the aristocracy. Wealthy and powerful, they included high-priestly families as well as lay nobility. As a group, they overlap but are not identical to the "chief priests, elders, and scribes" who have been central to Tuesday's stories thus far. Their religious convictions differed in two significant ways from those of most of their Jewish contemporaries. First, they accepted only the "law" ("the five books of Moses," also called the Torah) as sacred scripture, whereas most Jews also saw "the prophets" as sacred. Their non-acceptance of the prophets reflected their position in society, for the books of the prophets emphasize God's justice over against the human injustice of social systems dominated by the wealthy and powerful. Second, as Mark's story tells us, the Sadducees did not believe in an afterlife. That is, in Jewish terms, they did not believe there would be a resurrection of the dead. Within Judaism, the belief in a life after death was a relatively recent development. It emerged some two centuries earlier with the martyrdom of faithful Jews who resisted the Hellenistic emperor Antiochus Epiphanes IV. Its purpose was to redress human injustice: Jews who were faithful to God were being executed, and Jews who were willing to collaborate with Antiochus were being spared. Thus belief in a resurrection was a way of defending God's justice: the martyrs would receive a blessed afterlife. By the time of Jesus, a majority of Jews (including deeply committed groups like the Pharisees and Essenes) affirmed a life after death. So apparently did Jesus, even though life after death was not the focus of his message.

But the Sadducees did not. Their privileged place in society meant that they had little or no awareness of any serious injustice that needed to be rectified. As one of our graduate school professors put it, "If you're rich and powerful, who needs an afterlife?"

The afterlife is the subject of the question they bring to Jesus. Given that they didn't believe in one, their purpose is obviously not a desire for information about what it will be like. Rather, as with the previous interrogators, their purpose is to discredit Jesus in the presence of the crowd. So they pose a conundrum to which they imagine no intelligent response is possible. They begin by referring to a Jewish practice known as levirate marriage, in which, if a man dies before his wife has a child then the man's brother shall marry the widow and conceive an heir for the brother who died. A child conceived under these conditions is understood to be the offspring of the dead brother. The practice flowed out of the primary purposes of patriarchal marriage: progeny and property. The concern is the transmission of the man's genetic material, name, and property, and the wife is handed on from brother to brother to serve this purpose. Then they tell a story about seven brothers each of whom marries a woman in succession. They want to know whose wife she will be in the afterlife. For those who think of life after death as more or less a continuation or restoration of this life, including the relationships we have in this life, it was (and continues to be) a reasonable question. Does personal identity continue in a life after death, and do our relationships continue? Are families reunited? If so, whose wife will she be?

Jesus's response is threefold. His first response is a broad indictment of the Sadducees. He charges them with a deficient understanding of scripture and God: "*You know neither the scriptures nor the power of God*" (12:24).

His second response addresses the specific question they have asked about whose wife she will be. Jesus says, "*When they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven*" (12:25).

It is unclear to us what to make of this response. Is it intended (by Jesus or Mark) as an informative statement about the after-life—namely, that there will be no marriage there, for we will be "like angels"? If so, what does this mean? What does it mean to be "like angels," and how does this connect to absence of marriage? Is the life of the age to come sexless, perhaps even gender-less? Or does being "like angels" mean that procreation and property—the primary purposes of patriarchal and levirate marriage—are irrelevant there? Or does it mean even more—namely, that conditions in the resurrected life will be radically different from what life is like on earth? And how radical is the discontinuity? Will we still be "us"?

Or is the attempt to discern an informative meaning basically a mistake? Is Jesus's response, as in some of the previous stories, intended primarily as a skillful evasion of a question intended to entrap him? Is it perhaps intended not to inform, but to confound? In his third response, Jesus refers to a passage from the book of Exodus, one of the books the Sadducees did regard as sacred scripture. He quotes the voice of God in the story about Moses's experience of God in the burning bush: "*I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*" (Exod. 3:6). Then Jesus adds, "*God is God not of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong.*" (12:27). As with Jesus's second response, we are puzzled about what to make of this. Is it meant to be a substantial claim about the afterlife—not only that there is one, but that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are still alive? Or, within this series of challenge and riposte stories, are we to hear this statement as another example of brilliant repartee, a provocative "nonresponse"?

Against the first possibility, we note that the story of Moses at the bush was never used within Judaism as an argument for an afterlife, and we cannot imagine that Jesus thought his opponents would be impressed with it. Moreover, if we hear Jesus's words about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as a substantial claim about an afterlife, it would mean that Jesus thought they were already in an afterlife, despite the fact that Jewish belief in the resurrection of the dead saw it as a future happening in time, quite different from Greek notions of immortality in a beyond that is above time.

So we are inclined to see his response as yet another example of Jesus's fending off his opponents' attacks with a debating skill that confounded them even as it delighted the crowd. And perhaps there is a bit more as well. Jesus's concluding words, "*God is God not of the dead, but of the living,*" are tantalizingly evocative. His words suggest that God's concern is the living and not the dead. To think that Jesus's message and passion were about what happens to the dead, and to ask questions about the fate of the dead, is to miss the point. For Jesus, the kingdom of God is not primarily about the dead, but about the living, not primarily about life after death, but about life in this world.