

## Chapter 7

## Section 708

## The Escape of John Mark

We now come to one of the great mysteries of the early Church. Who was John Mark and why was it so important he escaped from Jerusalem?. This is dealt with more fully in section 1900. It was to the house of John Mark's mother that Peter went after he escaped from prison:-

Acts 12: 12-17

*When he realized how things stood, he made for the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where a large company was at prayer. He knocked at the outer door and a maid called Rhoda came to answer it. She recognized Peter's voice and was so overjoyed that instead of opening the door she ran in and announced that Peter was standing outside. 'You are crazy', they told her; but she insisted that it was so. Then they said, 'It must be his guardian angel.'*

*Meanwhile Peter went on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astounded. With a movement of the hand he signed to them to keep quiet, and told them how the Lord had brought him out of prison. 'Report this to James and the members of the church', he said. Then he left the house and went off elsewhere.*

So we learn that Mary's house was a place where Christians gathered and that she had a servant named Rhoda - coincidentally based on the Greek for 'gold' Our other reference to John Mark is when Paul and Barnabus take him with them when they leave Jerusalem.

Acts 12: 24-25

*Meanwhile the word of God continued to grow and spread. Barnabas and Saul, their task fulfilled, returned from Jerusalem, taking John Mark with them.*

This would then indicate that Mary's house was in the Jerusalem area rather than Galilee and one can assume that it was the house at Bethany.

The most straightforward interpretation is that Mary, the wife of Jesus, had a son by him named James Mark, after two of the Apostles. In Jewish eyes Jesus's crime was that he had claimed to be 'king of the Jews' With Jesus dead, Herod could feel safe and continue his rule as a Roman puppet unchallenged.

Another question is - which Herod are we talking about. The most likely is Herod Agrippa I who became king in 39 AD. (see section 1900) However if it became known that Jesus had a son then indeed Herod would have a rival to claim the kingship, and one who was unlikely to be as subservient to Roman rule as Herod had been.

For Paul it was a famous victory - he now had control over Jesus' family and could set about creating a new religion centered not on Jerusalem but on Rome. But did he?

At this point three men from the east turn up at Herod's court. They were probably Zoroastrians from Persia who had heard about the Jesus phenomenon and had come to Palestine to see for themselves. They ask Herod where they can make contact with members of Jesus' sect and especially with his son.

*Matthew Chapter 2 v1-4*

*During the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied.*

This is what Matthew recounts, but did he make a slight change to protect John Mark by referring to Bethlehem rather than Bethany and was the question really about where the new 'king' was to be found. As Jesus' heir and successor he too would have been referred to 'as the annointed one' which is what the original text in Greek said. This news would have come as a terrible shock to Herod who thought he had dealt with the threat with the deaths of John the Baptist and Jesus. Someone at Herod's court would almost certainly have known the town where

John Mark was born but probably not the exact house. Herod sees an opportunity and calls the Magi back:-

*Matthew 2 vv7-11*

*Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.*

*On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.*

The 'star' can be interpreted as the son of Jesus and the news of his existence. It was this visit that alerted the Christians to the threat so they persuaded the Magi to go straight home and not to inform Herod and realised the need to smuggle John Mark out of the country as quickly as possible. Matthew describes the warnings as 'dreams'.

*Matthew 2 v 12*

*And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.*

It was not just John Mark who was in danger, it was Mary as well, so her relative Joseph of Arimathea was asked to get her to Alexandria.

*Matthew 2 vv13-14*

*When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt.*

Herod was furious :-

*Matthew 2 v16*

*When Herod realised that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem [Bethany?] and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.*

This is a much more believable scenario than the version recorded by Matthew in his Gospel and Luke (in Acts), Two slight changes: 'Bethlehem' instead of 'Bethany' and 'just after Jesus death' rather than 'just after his birth'. Again if one remembers the relationship between Luke and Paul and Paul's need to establish the primacy of Rome, he would not have liked it known that Paul did not control Jesus' family.

It also ties in neatly with the numerous myths and legends associating Mary Magdalene with Provence in Southern France. The legend recalls a long and dangerous sea voyage which finally brings the party to what is now the town of Saintes Maries de la Mer in the Camargue region,





