

## 17. The Patrons

Mark 15:40-41

*During his lifetime, Jesus went about Galilee preaching and healing, nearly always accompanied by three disciples (Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, Jacob and John) out of the five he called individually.<sup>1</sup> We see them in a series of vignettes in Mark, with no hint how they got from one healing or preaching to the next. A worldly-wise person might think of asking, Who paid the bills? That can be answered by following up a hint in a passage in Mark, the one which introduces the later Empty Tomb scene:*

And there were also women beholding from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of Jacob the less and of Joses, and Salome, who, when he was in Galilee, followed him and ministered unto him, and many other women that came up with him unto Jerusalem.



<sup>1</sup>Mk 1:16-20 (Peter and Andrew and the Zebedees) and 2:14 (Levi of Alphaeus). The Twelve are a later development (passages mentioning them are interpolated in Mark), and reflect a later time, a few years after Jesus' death, when the administrative needs of the movement required larger forces. Even after that expansion, there remained an inner administrative core of five at Jerusalem (see Chapter 26).

*Reflections*

The key here is the word “ministered.” They not only accompanied Jesus, they took care of things, including the overnight expenses. That they were able to do so comes out if we consider what else we know about the three.

Of Mary Magdalene, Mark gives us no details.<sup>2</sup> Jacob the Less would be someone other than Jacob of Zebedee; most likely Jacob of Alphaeus, the younger brother of Levi of Alphaeus. Levi died not too long after Jesus’ death,<sup>3</sup> and was succeeded by Jacob.<sup>4</sup> For “Salome,” Matthew in Mt 27:56 substitutes “the mother of the sons of Zebedee.” Zebedee and his sons had a prosperous fishing business, not only with a boat, but even with hired hands (Mk 1:19-20). The latter women may thus be confirmed as women of means, with the capacity to “minister” in practical ways to Jesus’ Galilee preaching and healing.

Peter and Andrew had no boat; they cast their nets from shore (Mk 1:16). But Peter’s wife’s mother (the first person Jesus heals in Mark) had a house, in which he (and his brother) seem to have lived; if we are to trust Paul, Peter’s wife could afford to go on mission with him (1 Cor 9:5). She was a woman of means, and so must her mother have been: it was the mother’s house that was Jesus’ headquarters in Capernaum, even as Mark’s mother Mary’s house was the meeting place for Jesus followers in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12-17).<sup>5</sup>

It thus develops that not only were the original five disciples connected with people of means, they were probably known to each other: four were in the fishing trade, which provided the chief export from Galilee; Levi was engaged in assessing tolls on dried fish and other products passing through Capernaum.

The presence of the well-provided among the first Jesus circle suggests a higher economic level than is customarily attributed to the Jesus movement. The mixture of these with the less affluent was to cause tension, even division, in some of the early Christian communities.

It was perhaps not so much the poor who were natural followers of Jesus; as those who resented the economic burden of the Roman occupation.

<sup>2</sup>I exclude Mk 16:9, part of a passage (Mk 16:9-20) which was added later to replace the lost ending of Mark.

<sup>3</sup>Levi figures in the apocryphal literature, but only in stories which take place shortly after Jesus’ death. In the Gospel of Mary, he defends Mary Magdalene against Peter, who is reluctant to believe that Mary knows more of Jesus’ thought than he and the rest, that she was, in effect, Jesus’ favorite disciple.

<sup>4</sup>The good Greek of the Epistle of Jacob makes Jacob the Lord’s Brother (though he is most often favored by the commentators) impossible as its author. Far more likely, and assumed in this book, is Jacob of Alphaeus. Like his older brother, who held a post of importance (toll collector) under the Romans, Jacob probably had a Greek education.

<sup>5</sup>See again Chapter 26.