

Who Was Simon of Cyrene?

By

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At one point in the Order of the Temple ritual, a scriptural reference is read regarding the subject of this article, and afterward his memory is honored in an appropriate manner, but what do we know about this man, and why is he important to us as Templars?

As a starting point, let's see what the gospels say regarding him. He is only mentioned in the three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). It is interesting that John makes no mention of him in his gospel, the last to come into written form and the one most imbued with highly developed theological reflection. Here is what we read in the three gospels where he is mentioned:

"As they went out, they came upon a man of Cyrene, Simon by name; this man they compelled to carry his cross."
(Matthew 27:32).

"And they compelled a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross."
(Mark 15:2)

"And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross to carry behind Jesus."
(Luke 23:26).

An interesting question arises here: Why would the three gospel authors consider it important to include mentioning an act that was involuntary and apparently performed under duress by a sojourner from another country? I will attempt to answer this question later in this article.

His home town, Cyrene, was located in northern Africa in the eastern part of what is now Libya. At that time, Libya was part of the Roman province of Cyrenaica. Cyrene, a former Greek colony and the capital of Cyrenaica at the time of Jesus' crucifixion, also had a Jewish community where one hundred thousand Judean Jews had settled following the diaspora created by Nebuchadnezzar's conquest, and the city was an early center of Christianity.

The Cyrenaic Jews had a synagogue in Jerusalem where many went for annual feasts. This would explain why Simon happened to be coming to the city at that time. He would have had no other reason to have been "coming in from the country" to Jerusalem at the time of the Passover. It was a great distance from Jerusalem (nearly 900 miles), and the journey by land took a month or more and was potentially dangerous. It is possible that Simon had heard of Jesus before coming to Jerusalem. With Cyrene



near the coastline, ships of merchants often brought with them news from distant lands. The teachings and miracles of Jesus may well have been topics of discussion and debate, but what may have intrigued Simon the most was the chance that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Or he may simply have chosen that particular time to fulfill a religious duty of celebrating the Passover festival at Jerusalem.

Barclay tells us that: "Simon was 'compelled' to carry Jesus' cross. The Greek word for such compulsion was *ag-gareuein*. In the end the word came to signify any kind of forced impressment into the service of the occupying power. In an occupied country, citizens could be compelled to supply food, to provide billets, and to carry baggage. Sometimes the occupying power exercised this right of compulsion in the most tyrannical and unsympathetic way. Always this threat of compulsion hung over the citizens. Palestine was an occupied country. At any moment, a Jew might feel the touch of the flat of a Roman spear on his shoulder and know that he was compelled to serve the Romans; it might be in the most menial way. That in fact is what happened to Simon of Cyrene when he was compelled (*aggareuein*) to bear the cross of Jesus."

On his arrival at the city, angry mobs thronged the streets with some of them yelling and others weeping. It would have been difficult for anyone to move through the frenzied streets to see what all the commotion was about. Perhaps someone told Simon that Jesus was going to be crucified. Pushing his way through the crowds, possibly he wanted to catch a glimpse of the young rabbi condemned to die as a criminal.

Then it happened. Suddenly a Roman soldier pulled him from the crowd, ordering him to carry the cross. As a devout Jew, Simon knew that to carry it would render him unclean and thus unfit to eat the Passover meal. All those miles he had traveled would have been for naught. Surely anger and fear stirred within him. Anger over a Roman's authority to ask him to do such a thing and thus defile himself and fear of what would be done to him if he refused to obey.

Had this been the end of it, there would have been no reason for the synoptic gospel writers to mention him by name. They could simply have stated something like "a stranger from Cyrene" was compelled to bear the cross. Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* film portrays Simon as a Jew being forced by the Romans to carry the cross, who at first is unwilling, but as the journey to Mount Calvary continues, shows compassion to Jesus and helps him make it to the top. Thus, Simon bearing the cross that day would find the king he would serve for the rest of his life, and this day would change Simon forever. So Simon, converted to discipleship by this chance encounter with Jesus, was no longer just a stranger but became known to the followers of Jesus as one of their own and thus was mentioned by name by in the synoptic gospels.

Mark is the first of the Evangelists whose gospel came into written form. Simon of Cyrene is identified there as "the father of Alexander and Rufus" as though the writer expected readers to know of them. Mark directed his gospel to the early Jewish-Christian community, so Alexander and Rufus were likely known to him and to those who first read or heard

his gospel. There would be no other reason to include their names than a belief that they would be familiar to Mark's readers. People from Cyrene were among the first Christian believers at the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10). Perhaps Simon and his sons, Alexander and Rufus, were among those who heard and believed. In addition, some believers from Cyrene fled Jerusalem following the death of Stephen (Acts 7) and began sharing their faith in Antioch. Acts 13:1 mentions Lucius of Cyrene as one of the teachers of the Christians at Antioch.

It has been suggested that the Rufus mentioned by Mark may be the same man Paul greets in his letter to Rome whom he calls "chosen in the Lord" and whose mother "has been a mother to me, too" (Romans 16:13). Paul's knowledge of Rufus' family indicates that at some point they lived further east, possibly Antioch.

Finally, it is of interest that a burial cave in Kidron Valley discovered in 1941 by E. L. Sukenik, belonging to Cyrenaic Jews and dating before A.D. 70, was found to have an ossuary inscribed twice in Greek "Alexander Son of Simon." It cannot, however, be certain that this refers to the same person mentioned by Mark in his gospel.

The symbolic importance and relevance of Simon of Cyrene to us as modern day Templars and Christian Masons

is perhaps best expressed by Dr. Maurice C. Taylor; "...Rather, the significance of the story of Simon of Cyrene is that the most important crosses that we will bear in our lives belong to someone else. Thus, how well we bear our personal crosses, whether of our own making or an accident of birth, is much less of a story than how well we carry the crosses of family, friends, and perhaps most importantly, the crosses of strangers. Like Simon, we rarely have an opportunity to select the crosses that we are compelled to carry. Frequently we are merely happy bystanders to the lives of family, friends, and strangers when it becomes clear that their cross is now ours to carry. We often feel exceedingly sorrowful for ourselves at the injustice and unfairness of having to bear crosses that are not our own. Yet, like Simon of Cyrene, it is typically the case that the most important thing that we will do in our lives is carry someone else's cross, if only for a little while, until they are able to pick up their cross and resume their journey."

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- <http://www.gotquestions.org/Simon-of-Cyrene.html>