

## ***Cry of Dereliction or Cry of Judgment? Mark 15:34 in Context***

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*The trinitarian theological implications of Jesus' cry from the cross have sidetracked scholars from the context. The theme of judgment against the Jews is strong in the surrounding verses, and the Gospel repeatedly follows rejection on the part of the Jews with reception on the part of Gentiles. Psalm 22, to which allusion is common elsewhere in chapter 15, expresses judgment issuing in universality. The centurion confirms this, functioning as a symbolic recipient of the gospel following the judgment sign of the veil-rending. In the cry from the cross, Jesus the sufferer prophesies as the representative of the Jews, pronouncing their rejection and the hope of the gospel for all people.*

*Key words: Mark 15:34, Passion Narrative, Ps 22, Cross, Cry of Dereliction*

Interest in the psychological and doctrinal implications of Jesus' cry, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" has left unexplored the idea of judgment as the unifying theme of Mark 15:33-39.<sup>1</sup>

1. Recent monographs on Mark's passion narrative include D. Dormeyer, *Der Sinn des Leidens Jesu. Historisch-kritische und textpragmatische Analysen zur Markuspassion* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1979); D. Mann, *Mein Gott, mein Gott, warum hast du mich verlassen? Eine Auslegung der Passiongeschichte nach Markus* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1980); T. A. Mohr, *Markus- und Johannespassion* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1982); D. Senior, *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1984); J. Schreiber, *Der Kreuzigungsbericht des Markusevangeliums. Mk 15,20b-41* (Berlin: W de Gruyter, 1986); U. Sommer, *Die Passiongeschichte des Markusevangeliums* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1991).

On 15:34 itself, see G. Rossé, *The Cry of Jesus from the Cross* (New York: Paulist, 1987) and (unavailable to me except through citations in other sources) W. Hasenzahl, *Die Gottverlassenheit des Christus nach dem Kreuzeswort bei Matthäus und Markus und das christologische Verstandnis des griechischen Psalters. Eine exegetische Studie* (1938).

Recent literary analyses include F. J. Matera, *Passion Narratives and Gospel Theologies* (New York: Paulist, 1986); B. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); M. A. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective*

Consideration of these verses as a unit reveals much more than a series of statements and events commonly treated to various degrees in isolation from one another. When these subunits are considered as sequential or even consequential, the passage yields important insights regarding Mark's purpose.

The quotation of Ps 22:1 itself, preceded by allusions to the same Psalm in 15:24 (Ps 22:18) and 15:31 (Ps 22:8), demonstrates Mark's purpose here to show Jesus as the righteous innocent whose death is part of a plan prefigured in the Scriptures.<sup>2</sup> This is simple and entirely consistent with Mark's larger theme. Unfortunately, commentators from the patristic period onward leave Mark's well-marked trail at this point to speculate about the implications of the cry for trinitarian theology and the precise nature of Jesus' feelings and experience. This non-Markan path is now so well-beaten that it is difficult to recognize it as a detour. Yet a direction straight ahead affords a view that takes the passage as the thematic destination of the entire Gospel narrative. The purpose of this article is to call attention to details of Mark 15:33-39 that evince the judgment theme and in particular to show that "me" in the cry of Jesus refers to the Jewish nation.

### *Darkness and Judgment*

A small step back to v. 33 is necessary to begin a critical journey forward to a view of the passage as a unit. The portent of darkness has been identified as a sign of judgment,<sup>3</sup> but its relation to v. 34 has not been stressed. The unusual repetition of "the ninth hour" at the end of v. 33 and the beginning of v. 34 encourages a perception of a link between the darkness and the cry from the cross.<sup>4</sup> Matera strengthens the connection by noting the similarity to 13:24, where the judgment

(Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1989); B. L. Mack and V. K. Robbins, *Patterns of Persuasion in the Gospels* (Foundations and Facets: Literary Facets; Sonoma: Polebridge, 1989); R. M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

2. L. W. Hurtado, in my estimation, makes this point more clearly and succinctly than any other commentator (*Mark* [New York: Harper & Row, 1983] 256). E. Lohmeyer, similarly, summarizes his treatment by focusing on this statement as the culmination of OT prophetic proclamation and as the clue to the paradoxical meaning of Son of Man as both sufferer and eschatological conqueror (*Das Evangelium des Markus* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck Ruprecht, 1937] 345).

3. E. Best, *The Temptation and the Passion: The Markan Soteriology* (SNTSMS 2; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965) 97-98.

4. Matera cites a number of doublets in Mark—not including this one—and remarks that the phenomenon signals a development of the motif in the second statement: (*The Kingship of Jesus* [SBLDS 66; Chico: Scholars Press, 1982] 42-43).

of darkness announces the coming of the Son of Man.<sup>5</sup> It is inconsistent with this parallel for the cry to be a despairing response to God's judgment on the Son.<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, there is evidence to suggest that the cry is instead a powerful elucidation of the sign of darkness.

The precision of the timing (at the ninth hour, which culminates a series of three tri-hour periods) suggests that the events are divinely planned.<sup>7</sup> Mark employs scriptural allusion or citation by Jesus at other crucial points in the passion narrative to show Jesus' self-awareness as the divine plan works itself out (14:48-49, 62). Nor should Jesus be understood as now passive or no longer party to the divine plan; the "loud cry" and the active (i.e., voluntary) ἐξέπνευσεν of 15:37 may be understood together as an act of power.<sup>8</sup> Both independently and conjointly, these factors encourage a view of v. 34 as explicative. In other words, Jesus does not cry out because he perceives abandonment in the darkness; rather, his cry culminates the darkness with a pronouncement of its meaning—that is, judgment.

### *Mockery and Confusion*

The first item to consider following the cry is the function of vv. 35-36, the misunderstanding of the bystanders. Commentators often move further afield here with remarks about the language of the cry, the relation of the Elijah reference to John the Baptist, and the nature of the liquid offered to Jesus. These and other concerns address the *what* question but neglect the *why* question. Without a logical link to something else in the passage or in the Gospel, the incident is only an anecdotal distraction from the flow of the narrative. Indeed, most scholars regard v. 34 as an editorial expansion of the "loud cry" of v. 37, and the cry directly followed by the death would seem to constitute a natural narrative sequence.<sup>9</sup> Why the seemingly trivial interruption?

Viewed from the perspective of Mark's larger purpose, vv. 35-36 are not an interruption but an important commentary on v. 34. Jesus has been portrayed up to this point as having prophetic powers and

5. Ibid., 133. Matera asserts that "darkness announces the great cry and the events which result from it." He regards the cry itself as a cry of victory (pp. 132-35).

6. So E. Best, *The Temptation and the Passion* (2d edition; SNTSMS 2; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) lxi-lxviii.

7. So Matera (*Passion*, 42) and J. Gnllka (*Das Evangelium nach Markus* [Zurich: Benziger/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978-79] 317-18).

8. See H. M. Jackson, "The Death of Jesus in Mark and the Miracle from the Cross," *NTS* 33 (1987) 27-32 and R. H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 947-49, 970-71. I will take up later the relation of the final cry to the rending of the temple veil.

9. E.g., Matera, *Kingship*, 125-27.

as innocent. For Mark, the cry is the ultimate prophetic pronouncement of Jesus as the righteous innocent. It is appropriate, therefore, for Mark to depict the Jews as misunderstanding and mocking. In terms of the Greek drama to which Mark's style is often compared, the bystanders and mockers take the role of the antiphonal chorus, as in the latter part of Euripides' *Cyclops*, where the chorus mocks the monster as he dies. Occurring at this crucial juncture, such misconstrual establishes conclusively the rejection of the gospel by those for whom it was chosen first to be received.

### *Rejection as a Markan Theme*

This is of course not the first confused response on the part of Jesus' audiences to prophetic statements, and it is continuous with the theme established in 4:11-12: "to those outside" the message is confusing and objectionable.<sup>10</sup> More specifically, Mark includes as a subtheme the rejection of Jesus by the Jews and their anticipated judgment. Significantly, in several of these passages, rejection of the Jews or their religious leaders is closely followed by indicators of gentile inclusion. Before resuming the considerations of 15:33-39, it may be useful to survey this theme in Mark's Gospel.

In response to the accusation of working by Satan's power, Jesus pronounces the fall of a house divided and the unforgivability of the accusation (3:19-30). Whether or not the house metaphor applies to his critics, the curse could hardly be worded more strongly. The next paragraph rejects the racial view of God's people by defining the family of Jesus as those who obey the will of God (3:31-35; cf. 10:29-30). The progression of these two paragraphs can be understood and may be intended to signal the transition of the community of faith from Jew to gentile. This connection and its implication may be repeated in 6:4, where Jesus laments rejection by his own *kin* and *house*. Chapter 7 moves from a denunciation of legalism (note the generalization of "all Jews," v. 3) to a gentile location (Tyre) and the account of the persistent faith of the Syrophenecian woman. The common terminology pertains to food, and the woman clearly functions as a foil to the Jews: the "children" have worried their food with legalism, and now it is given to the "dogs."

In the passion narrative, these ideas become more pronounced. The fig tree of 11:12-14 is a type of the nation, cursed never to bear fruit again (and soon to die, v. 20). Then, in 11:17 (Isa 56:7), the

10. See 2:6-7; 6:51-52; 8:15-21; 9:31-32; 11:27-33; 14:62-64. I include in this list not only Jesus' obvious opponents among the Jewish religious establishment but also his disciples, who appear to function similarly in response to prophetic or authoritative utterances and events.

temple is to be "a house of prayer *for all the nations*." The italicized words (omitted by Matthew and Luke), following the pronouncement of the fig tree's fruitlessness (v. 14) and the active judgment on the temple (v. 15), may constitute a subtle indication of the transfer of blessing to the gentiles. In the parable of the wicked tenants (12:1-12), the owner of the vineyard "will come and destroy the tenants, and give the vineyard to others" (v. 9). This parable inaugurates a series of encounters in which the Jewish religious leaders are repeatedly and summarily silenced, including the potent "you are greatly deceived" (πολὺ πλανᾶσθε, 12:27). Judgment is made explicit in 12:40: "they will receive the greater condemnation" (οἵτοι λήμψονται περισσότερον κρίμα). Directly on the heels of these denunciations is the forecast of the destruction of Jerusalem (13:1-2). A few verses later, synagogues become the anticipated scene of persecution, whereas "governors and kings" receive "testimony" (13:9). This contrast leads into the preaching of the gospel "to all nations" (13:10), and the elect ultimately are gathered not from Israel but "from the four winds" (13:26-27). Significantly, from this point on, the Jews and their leaders are generalized as hostile (14:1, 31-43, 53-65), even to the point that "the crowd" prefers the release of a murderer to the release of the innocent Jesus (14:6-15). The gentile procurator resists but finally relents, not because he finds Jesus guilty but "to satisfy the *crowd*" (14:15). These latter references (cf. 15:29, 35) may signify a broadening of the rejection from the Jewish leadership to the people in general. This is not of course to suggest a comprehensive *exclusion* of the Jews but only a decisive transfer of the locus of divine favor.

### *Psalm 22 and Universality*

Resuming the consideration of 15:33-39, it is necessary to consider the possibility that the judgment theme may inhere in the cry of v. 34 itself. A few commentators have speculated that since Psalm 22 ends in a proclamation of triumph, and since the Jews sometimes cited an opening line to represent an entire psalm, the cry is actually a cry of victory.<sup>11</sup> This interpretation appears to stretch the bounds of credibility in the interest of protecting Jesus from an apparent lapse in divinity. It does, however, draw attention to the psalm itself, which Mark obviously plumbs for correspondences to the crucifixion scene.<sup>12</sup> What is less obvious, and what is to my knowledge heretofore

11. E.g., J. Blinzler, *Die Prozess Jesu* (4th ed.; Regensburg: Pustet, 1969) 373, and supporting authors in n. 64; D. E. Nineham, *The Gospel of Mark* (New York: Seabury, 1963) 428-29; Matera, *Kingship*, 127-45.

12. Explicit references are Mark 15:29 (Ps 22:8); 15:24 (Ps 22:19); and of course 15:34 (Ps 22:1).

neglected by commentators, is that Psalm 22 reinforces the theme of judgment issuing in universality perhaps more clearly than any other OT passage.<sup>13</sup> In Psalm 22, the Afflicted One moves from death to life (vv. 15-26), and the psalm concludes (vv. 27-31):

All the ends of the earth shall remember  
and turn to the LORD;  
and all the families of the nations  
shall worship before him.  
For dominion belongs to the LORD,  
and he rules over the nations.  
To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;  
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,  
and I shall live for him.  
Posterity will serve him;  
future generations will be told about the LORD,  
and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,  
saying that he has done it.

Did Mark conceive of Psalm 22 in its entirety? The evidence is suggestive. We know that Mark used the psalm without ever employing a citation formula.<sup>14</sup> We know that he employed Scripture and terminology similar to Ps 22:27-31 in 11:17, 13:10, 13:26/14:62,<sup>15</sup> and 13:27. We note Mark's special interest in the *kingship* of Jesus in the immediate context.<sup>16</sup> We observe the thought of Psalm 22 itself moving from death to life to proclamation and parousia—an obvious text for early Christian explication.<sup>17</sup> If 15:33-39 does reflect the theme outlined above, of movement from Jewish rejection to gentile reception, the case is strong that for Mark Psalm 22 signifies not the end of hope for the Afflicted One but the beginning of hope for the nations.

13. A few commentators acknowledge the connection between the centurion's exclamation and the universality theme in Ps 22 but do not explore the relation of this to the judgment theme: see Matera, *Kingship*, 127-37; H. Gese, "Psalm 22 und das Neue Testament: Der älteste Bericht vom Tode Jesu und die Entstehung des Herrenmahles,," *ZTK* 65 (1968) 17; J. von Oswald, "Die Beziehungen zwischen Psalm 22 und dem vormarkinischen Passionbericht," *ZKT* 101 (1979) 58.

14. Matera (*Kingship*, 129) lists as non-explicit possibilities 15:27 (Ps 22:13, 17); 15:31b (Ps 22:9); 15:32 (Ps 22:7); 15:36 (Ps 22:16); 15:39 (Ps 22:28-29).

15. The twice-cited Daniel 7:13 (13:26; 14:62) is followed in v. 14 by these words, "and to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him." The connection to Ps 22 could point to an early messianic *florilegium* that included Ps 22.

16. Six times in chap. 15 and nowhere else occur references to Jesus as king (15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26, 32). For a detailed discussion, see Matera, *Kingship*, *passim*, esp. 129-31, 134.

17. Oswald contends that the pre-Markan passion narrative is based on Psalm 22 ("Psalm 22"); cf. Matera, *Kingship*, 127-30.

*Veil Rending as Judgment*

The portent described in v. 38, the rending of the temple veil, has been widely regarded as at least in part a prefigurement of the destruction of the temple.<sup>18</sup> This takes on consequential significance when placed in its context on the heels of the blindness and mockery of the Jews in vv. 35-36. The conjunction of these events led the eleventh-century scholastic Theophylact to comment that the cry of v. 34 itself denotes the forsaking not of Jesus as Son but of the Jewish people.<sup>19</sup> Theophylact is of course motivated by doctrinal discomfort with the notion of abandonment of the divine Son, but his statement may reflect Mark's true purpose. The conjunction of pronouncement and event is contiguous with patterns already observed: denunciation followed by a move toward gentiles (chap. 7), the fig tree curse followed by the temple disruption (chap. 11), and denunciation followed by the destruction prophecy (chaps. 12-13). In chap. 15 the connection is more obviously consequential. As we noted earlier, the cry of v. 34 is probably an expansion of the cry of v. 37 (note the identical words  $\phi\omega\nu\hat{\eta}$   $\mu\epsilon\gamma\acute{\alpha}\lambda\eta$  in both verses), moved ahead to allow for the placement of the mockery before the veil rending and the centurion's comment. The result is that the final loud exhalation and the veil rending are continuous in the narrative, which leaves the impression that the cry *effects* the portent. True, the only grammatical connection is the conjunction

18. E.g., J. D. Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 132. There may be an allusion in *b. Yoma* 39a: "Our rabbis taught: during the last forty years before the destruction of the Temple . . . the doors of the sanctuary would open by themselves, until R. Johanan b. Zakkai rebuked them, saying: Sanctuary, Sanctuary, why wilt thou be the alarmer thyself? I know that thou wilt be destroyed" (cf. *y. Yoma* vi 43c). Josephus records along with other portents of the destruction of the temple that "the eastern gate of the inner court . . . opened of its own accord" (*J.W.* 6.5.3 §293-94). There are two references to the rending of the temple veil as a sign of judgment in *T 12 Patr.*, *T Levi* 10:3 and *T Benj.* 9:4. As probable Christian interpolations (H. C. Kee, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983] 1:792), these passages strengthen the notion of an early judgment tradition associated with the veil rending. On temple destruction in Mark, see 13:2; 14:58; 15:29; on 11:1-25, see Matera, *Kingship*, 66-68.

19. "What is [thou hast forsaken] me, but the Jewish nation? In other words, why hast thou forsaken them in order that they might crucify thy Son? . . . we must understand thou hast forsaken me to mean my human nature; that is, the Jewish people" (my translation). The Greek text with Latin translation may be found in *Patrologiae Graecae* (vol. 123; ed. J. P. Migne; Paris, 1864) 671. My attention was drawn to the passage by its citation in T. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Four Gospels [Catena Aurea]* (Oxford: J. H. Parker, 1842) 2.325. It is surprising that the passage was not employed in anti-Jewish polemics by the Fathers, but this may only reflect the overriding attention given to the christological difficulties posed by the passage. The earliest reference I have been able to find to judgment on the Jews in relation to the passage (or more commonly, the parallel passage in Matthew 27:35-54) is Eusebius, *Dem. Evang.* 10.6.5.

καὶ. But to an audience familiar with either the spirit-wind notion or the stories of portents consequent upon the deaths of the great, the sequence here would be apparent.<sup>20</sup>

Thus we observe two judgment signs, the darkness and the veil rending, which are so closely linked to the cry as to be explained by it. Theophylact's statement, whatever its motivation, is very near the mark. As at the beginning (1:9-13), so now at the end (14:22-24), Jesus is portrayed as representative of the nation. So here. That is, rather than to view the quotation of Ps 22:1 as an individual appropriation of a national psalm of lament, Mark understands that the psalm applies to the nation through the experience of the nation's representative. This focus on the cry as prophetic pronouncement does not diminish Jesus' suffering, but it suggests that his individual experience, his sense of personal loss, is not Mark's point. Jesus speaks for the nation, and the nation pronounces its own doom in rejecting him. It is a house divided, it has blasphemed the Spirit, and now the Spirit wind blows from him to destroy the house symbolically by rending the temple veil.

### *The Function of the Centurion*

The final step in the logical progression of the passage is the response of the centurion. This figure functions as a sort of anti-chorus, and there is subtlety and irony here at several levels. Most obviously, the centurion is a gentile, and as such the sequence of vv. 35-39 prefigures the acceptance of the gospel by gentiles following its rejection by the Jews.<sup>21</sup> The fact that he is a centurion brings him closer to familiarity (if not nationality) with Mark's immediate audience in Rome. He expresses *wonder* in contrast to the *mockery* of the Jews. And in the most subtle touch, he expresses *insight* in contrast to the *blindness* of the Jews. This is delicately conveyed by the double entendre of his appellation of Jesus as "a son of God," the significance of which was unfathomable to a gentile centurion but unfathomably rich to Mark's audience. Thus those who should have been enlightened make stupid remarks in the darkness, and one who we should expect to be in the dark receives a nascent ray of enlightenment. Indeed, for a gentile soldier to be given the privilege of christological pronouncement antici-

20. For examples signalling divinity in particular, see Dio Cass. 56.29.3-4; Plut. *Caes.* 69.3-4; Suet. *Iul.* 88; *Claud.* 46; *Vesp.* 23.4. For similar portents generally, see Dio Cass. 44.17.2; 51.17.4-5; Lucian *Peregr* 39; Paus. *Ach.* 25.3; Ov. *Met.* 7.200-206; Verg. *G.* 1.475.

21. Hurtado, *Mark*, 258. Matera understands the centurion generally as a spokesman for the Markan community standing on the other side of the veil rending (*Kingship*, 136; citing Gese, *Psalms* 22, 17).

pates the soon-to-be-realized hope of God's Spirit being poured out on all flesh. The fact that he is given, quite literally, the last word—that is, the last human pronouncement—in Mark's Gospel is all the more significant in that he is the first to use the title given to Jesus in 1:1.<sup>22</sup>

### *Summary*

In terms of the general purpose of Mark's Gospel, the passage brings together several important subthemes: the Son as predetermined sufferer and judge, rejection both by and of the Jews, and acceptance both of and by the gentiles. Various commentators have isolated elements of these themes in 15:33-39, and this article attempts to join these elements into a coherent whole patterned after the progression of Psalm 22.

The cry from the cross itself as the last statement of Jesus to his people stands in bitter contrast to his first words, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (1:15). Now the time is up and judgment has come. The nation has aligned itself with its misaligned religious leadership. As true representative of the nation, Jesus articulates his own doom, which is in reality the doom of the nation, confirmed by their misunderstanding and by portents of judgment. Nevertheless, apparent tragedy immediately turns to high comedy. The climax, as it turns out, is not the cry from the cross but the gleam of hope dawning through the uplifted helmet of a Roman soldier. Thus in an exquisitely crafted narrative Mark encapsulates the triumph of the cross, that the passion is but the end of the beginning.

22. Many commentators have noted this connection: e.g., Gundry, *Mark*, 951; Taylor, *The Gospel According to Mark* (2d ed.; New York: St. Martin's, 1966) 597.