

Exegesis Mark 15:33-41

The Gospel of Mark promotes belief in Jesus that he was the Son of God. I do not believe it is accurate history but it is useful to work out what the hidden meanings of this Gospel seem to be.

The author of the Mark Gospel never writes as an eyewitness to any of the gospel events. The author was not an apostle - one of the twelve authorities appointed by Jesus - but was respected by the twelve apostles as an authorised missionary in the Church. The gospel says the apostles - except one - had not been present at the crucifixion, thus the women who were watching all the events from a distance would have been their prime source of information about what actually happened. The author wrote about the apostles and how they abandoned Jesus when he needed them most as if this helped show that their testimony to the Son of God was reliable and honest. Mark had recorded this testimony in his gospel. The author was writing to show that the Church's faith in Jesus was stronger than we can ever imagine. Christians say that such faith is in itself evidence that what they believed was true.

Sadly for believers, the reasons they believed were rubbish ones. Thus their case shows that it was not their faith that was strong but their capacity for self-deception.

Context

The Gospel of Mark has the following structure. It starts with the baptism of Jesus. Then it deals with the ministry and works of the Lord. Starting with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, it records the events leading up to his death by crucifixion and this is followed by his empty tomb and the declaration that he has risen.

Mark 15:33-41 is a narrative told in such a way that it argues for Jesus being our saviour. This is where the story reaches a climax as we see what Jesus had to do to save sinners.

According to Mark 15:33-41 the land was in darkness, Jesus was abandoned by God and everybody as he suffered on the cross. Jesus cried out to God that he felt that he had abandoned him. Some bystanders heard this and said he was calling Elijah. A man offered him wine to drink. It is not said that Jesus took the wine. Then we read that Jesus breathed his last and he cried out loud. Then the curtain of the temple miraculously ripped in two from top to bottom. The Jews were mocking him, he died alone. Only a Roman centurion saw that his holy death showed he was the Son of God. The centurion stood in front of Jesus and heard his cry and saw how he died said that in truth Jesus was the Son of God. At a distance, women who had been kind to Jesus and been his friends stood watching all this. The passage is very easy to understand.

The main idea of the passage, as we will see, is that Jesus suffered and died completely alone and yet this was somehow redemptive and part of God's plan for saving sinners.

The gospel refers to the Jews as making an experiment out of the suffering of Jesus. They told a man to stop giving Jesus wine to drink so that they could wait and see if the Prophet Elijah would come and take him down from the cross. This indicates that they were not that sure they were doing the right thing by rejecting Jesus. Elijah would not be expected to come and save a false prophet on the cross. The implication is that those who did not believe in Jesus had to deceive themselves in order to be unbelievers.

It is possible that the Jews when they stopped the man from offering Jesus wine did not want him to get any relief at all. Alcohol was used to help numb the agony a bit. This, if correct, again shows how abandoned Jesus was.

The gospel mentions the women who were kind to Jesus and who stood at a distance. It says nothing about any of them having converted. They stood far away. The author forces us to ask ourselves, "These were friends of Jesus but did they accept his offer of forgiveness of sin through his death?" Merely asking the question makes us remember the teaching of the Bible that we can behave very respectably but still not be in a saving relationship with God. It says we need the forgiveness won by the death of Jesus or our good works and respectability will not put us right with him.

The passage speaks only of a pagan, a Roman centurion, coming to realise that Jesus now dead on the cross was the Son of God. This may indicate that the gospel was written with a Roman and pagan readership in mind. Indeed, a centurion with his logical skills and ability to sift through evidence to help find the truth would be a powerful witness to the divine Sonship of Jesus. But what we are not is if the centurion was only stating it as fact and not as a response to faith which is supposed to be a gift from God. If he stated it as fact then he can be taken no more seriously as a historian and not as having any significance in terms of responding to God in such a way that you embrace his gift of faith. Faith in facts is not the same as faith in Jesus as a person.

The presence of the Jews and how they were so blind to Jesus that they couldn't understand even what he said on the cross though it was clear enough makes us wonder how they could be that scripturally illiterate.

The Crucifixion

"The New Testament account of the crucifixion is one of remarkable restraint." 1. There are no gory details given possibly because there was a danger that people would dwell on those rather than on the spiritual message and the salvific meaning of the cross of Christ. It may be the case that Mark didn't want to elaborate for he had the following scripture text in mind: "Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" 2. As we shall see, he records a link between Psalm 22 and the cross – if we want the details we must go to the Psalm.

1 Markquart, E. F. The Passion Story - Gospel Analysis

http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_b_the_passion_story_GA_p5.htm

2 Deuteronomy 21:23, New International Version (©1984)

"Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani?"

Mark likes to rouse a sense of shock in his readers. He writes in a way intended to surprise us. It's a shock to read that Jesus crucified cried, "Eloi Eloi lama sabachthani?" – "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" FF Bruce wrote that it seems certain that the words came from the start of the Old Testament Psalm 22 and that arguments to the contrary are unconvincing 3. He correctly sees it showing that Jesus was not a visitor from another world who keeps his distance from the world and its horrors but somebody that was totally involved 4.

Mark does not tell us why Jesus cried this so that we must figure it out for ourselves. But why would the author want us to do that? First of all, for literary reasons, he wants to make us sense how Jesus felt totally abandoned. That effect would be lost if he explained that the psalm was one of hope. This jolts us to ask ourselves, "Why did the Son of God need to experience that?" The spiritual lessons we can learn from that are the value of sacrifice and we must remember how earlier Mark wrote that Jesus said his death would be a ransom for sin. That will come back to us. The original readers of Mark would have started reading at the top of a scroll so they would have read the gospel from start to finish. Mark is best understood if read from beginning to end. There is a flow in the story.

"Jesus quoted this Psalm in order to draw attention to it and the fact that He was fulfilling it there on the cross" 5. Thus the ancient Psalm was God's word and was a prediction of the sufferings of his crucifixion. "It is the only interpretation which accords with common sense" 6.

For Jesus to make the psalm his own he had to mean what he said. The cry of Jesus was a completely human cry 7.

The gospel does not bother explaining that this was the first line of a psalm of hope. This was primarily for literary reasons to help us grasp how Jesus was distressed and lonely beyond all imagining.

The cry reflected Jesus' sense of being spiritually cut off from God and judged for the sin of others. The passage does not tell us why but it certainly indicates that it was part of God's plan. Mark recorded how Jesus predicted that his death would be a ransom that pays the penalty for our sin. Jesus though innocent took the punishment for our sin.

Jesus is said to have endured God's punishment because he was God. Christians say this was not unfair for Jesus was God and God was paying the debt of punishment due to sin. But Mark never hints that Jesus was God. If Jesus was not God and was punished for our sins then clearly God is unfair and Mark is suffering from true believer syndrome. That is a disorder that prevents a person admitting the truth.

The gospel does not condemn God for abandoning Jesus in his death. It picks out the centurion's conversion and other things to indicate that we should see it as redemptive. God was being just as Jesus suffered. It is sin that put Jesus on the cross not God. So Mark says but reason says different as we have seen.

The author demonstrated how we have to choose when we hear of Jesus. The Jews heard his cry Eloi Eloi lama sabachthani?. The gospel says this cry and the death of Jesus caused the centurion to exclaim that he was the son of God. But the Jews thought he was calling Elijah. It seems the Jews had decided that Jesus was not as godly as he appeared and wasn't even thinking of God in his last few minutes. This tells us that some people can respond to the same event in a way

that is the polar opposite of the way that others respond. It reminds the readership of the power of human perception to sometimes perceive things in a way that is completely wrong because we choose to let our prejudices blind us.

3 Bruce F.F, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1983) p. 249

4 *ibid* p. 250

5 Why did Jesus cry out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?"

<http://carm.org/questions/about-jesus/why-did-jesus-cry-out-my-god-my-god-why-have-you-forsaken-me>

6 Ankerberg, J. *The Case for Jesus the Messiah* (Harvest House, 1989) p.

7 Bolt, P. G., *The Cross from a Distance* (IVP, 2004) p. 130

The Darkness at Noon

The unusual darkness at noon, possibly caused by an eclipse, highlights the darkness Jesus felt. It adds to the sense of total desolation that Jesus experienced from nature, from God and from man. Mark mentions the darkness and specifies that it was dark at noon in order to highlight that effect. The darkness also reminds us that Jesus is being judged for our sins. God promised in Deuteronomy 28:29 that if his people break the covenant they will suffer darkness at noon.

The Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah. That is why the author writes about the Jews as being sceptical and cruel to Jesus on the cross. The darkness can be taken as a divine indication that they were in darkness without faith in Jesus. They can be considered representative of the world at large – of us perhaps?

The Tearing of the Veil

Mark records that the veil of the temple tore in two at that moment Jesus died. "The Jewish historian Josephus said the veil was four inches thick, and that horses tied to each side could not pull the veil apart" 8. This makes it more than likely that the tearing was being claimed to be a miracle.

The veil stands for a barrier 9 and a separation between humankind and God. The tearing of the veil indicated that the division between the perfect God and humankind caused by sin which God cannot tolerate.

The veil is destroyed at the point of Jesus' death to show that the ransom sacrifice for sin has been made thus the barrier has been broken down. Jesus has saved us from sin by his death and now we can be at peace with God. "It [the tearing] signified that now the way into the Holy of Holies was open for all people, for all time, both Jew and Gentile" 10.

8. Pounds, W. *The Veil in the Tabernacle*

<http://www.abideinchrist.com/messages/ex26v31.html>

9 Exodus 26:31-33, NASB 1995

10 What was the significance of the temple veil being torn in two when Jesus died?

<http://www.gotquestions.org/temple-veil-torn.html>

Another meaning of the veil being ripped was that the Jewish religion was "now over" 11. The demands of God's Law given in the Pentateuch have been fulfilled by the death of Jesus who gave his life in atonement for human disobedience to God.

The Centurion recognises Jesus' Divine Sonship

The centurion was so moved by the cry and the death that he said Jesus was the Son of God. "This is the first such confession of faith in this Gospel, and is a portent of things to come — the opening of the Gospel to Gentiles" 12.

It is shocking if a pagan centurion was the first to turn to Jesus and receive his salvation. There are several lessons to be learned from this if he really did convert. One is that the person we think is the worst could be more open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit than those who we would expect to be. Another is that as we have just encountered shock at the horrific death of Jesus and his seeming failure, now we are seeing indications that this death in its ignominy had redemptive power. This attracts us to seeing the spiritual meaning in the death of Jesus and the glory of his sacrifice.

The author does not explain why the things the centurion saw convinced him. "Mark's account suggests that Jesus' death was sudden and violent, that he was still quite strong at the moment of his death, and that he voluntarily and deliberately died with the shout of a victor" 13. Could it be that the Centurion saw that Jesus' death was proof that his claims were true? Was it a death of remarkable holiness and faith to make that impression? It is easier to suppose that the centurion story is a pack of lies.

Some say the reason the miraculous conversion of the centurion takes place after the tearing of the veil is to indicate that the death of Jesus was showing its saving power as the barrier between God and man had been demolished. But the text does not make a definite and clear link.

If it does then the author wants us to deduce that for ourselves.

The centurion seems to have been, as far as we know, the first Christian. The resurrection hasn't happened yet but his faith that Jesus was the Son of God would have by implication agreed with the notion that God could and would raise his Son. Jesus being dead forever after all would imply that he was never the Son of God. The centurion had implicit belief in the resurrection.

The Significance of Mark 15:33-41

The passage had tremendous significance for its first readers. They lived during the events and the passage helped them interpret the death of Jesus as the salvation of sinners. The death of Jesus told them how God regards sin and he will judge and we need to repent. Today, Christians feel they need the passage not only to share their understanding but as a historical record of the death of Jesus and some events that surrounded it. They depend on the gospels, such as Mark for the evidence and to find out what happened. Turning them to them shows us that the death of Jesus not only happened but happened so that we could find salvation from sin and this salvation is the only way to everlasting bliss.

11 The Cross at a Distance, p. 127

12 Sermon Writer, SCRIPTURE: Mark 15:1-47

<http://lectionary.org/EXEG-Concise/NT/ConNT02-Mark/Mark%2015.01-47.htm>

13 ibid

It is believed the gospel was written for the readership of persecuted Christians in Rome. "Tradition represents the Gospel as written primarily for Roman Christians ... and internal evidence, if it does not quite prove the truth of this view, is altogether in accord with it" 14. Mark hoped his gospel would comfort them, for example, when Jesus was at his lowest point and about to die in extreme degradation, the centurion saw this suffering as somehow part of God's plan and rather than being evidence against Jesus being God's Son it was evidence for it.

The centurion became a role model for the Roman readership, one who was crucifying Jesus and still got redeemed and changed his life. He became the sign that membership in the kingdom of God seems to be available to Gentiles and not just Jews. But we know this doctrine of openness to Gentiles was not invented until much later!

The gospel may have different layers of symbolic meaning and it may not. If it does then it becomes less plausible not more. It may be a theological novel that only happens to have biographical attributes.

14 Gospel of Saint Mark

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09674b.htm>

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