

**Exegesis – Mark 15:33-39**

(Maximum 2000 words)

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## **Introduction**

Each of the four Gospels gives a portrait of Jesus Christ and his works. The writers used different styles and emphases—the message however is the same in each writing: the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ.

In this paper a closer look is exerted to the Gospel of Mark with a strong emphasis on chapter 15 verses 33-39. In this passage the writer describes the last minutes of Jesus' life on the cross. These last minutes are described in a very detailed way and, as the reader will discover, they are very significant for the way the church has approached the gospel ever since.

Within these verses several references to the Old Testament (OT) will be explored more closely—and they will be briefly examined in context with the writer's purpose with these references.

## **The writer of Mark**

According to the oldest tradition it was Mark, also called 'John Mark' (cf. Acts 12:12), who wrote this Gospel. According to Healy (2008:18) he was a disciple of Simon Peter and he based his writing on Peter's preaching. Eusebius (1833:124-127,234) states that this tradition has been documented by Papias (ca. AD 60-140) and confirmed by Clement of Alexandria (ca. AD 150-215).

## **Place and audience**

Although there are some different hypotheses most scholars will agree that Mark is probably the oldest gospel of the four (cf. Evans 2003:1064). Carmody (2010:1) states that the Gospel connotes that the Christians suffered, or were suffering persecution (cf. Mark 8:34-38, 10:38, 13:9-13). This could well be placed in the period when Nero persecuted the Christians. Considering this—together with the observation of Hengel (1985:29) that Mark 7:24-30 annotates about a woman who was called a 'Syrophenician', a term primarily used in Rome—makes it plausible that Mark wrote his Gospel around 62-64 AD in Rome.

There is no internal, direct evidence for the intended readership. There is, however, some internal, indirect evidence. For example Mark often explains Jewish terms and customs for the benefit of non-Jews (eg. Mark 7:3-4, 11:13, 12:42). Furthermore, translations of Aramaic words are provided (eg. Mark 3:17, 5:41, 7:11, 7:34, 10:46, 15:22, 15:34). Considering this, it is very feasible to assume that at least a part of the intentional readers would be non-Jewish.

## **Context of Mark 15:33-39**

Many things happened in a very short time. After Jesus' arrest in 14:43-50 he is taken to the high priest, and all the chief priests, elders and scribes are assembled. After interrogation and hearing false witnesses they condemn Jesus to death. In 15:6-15, Pilate releases Barabbas at the request of a mob. The mob shouts for Jesus' crucifixion. From verses 16 and further Mark narrates about the Roman soldiers who mock Jesus by dressing him in a purple robe and a crown of thorns, hailing him derisively as the king of the Jews. Jesus is crucified, and the titulus reads 'King of the Jews'.

## **Mark 15:33**

Mark notes that the people, who wanted to watch how Jesus would die, mocked him. The description given by Mark shows a man who is going through an agonizing and humiliating time.

Except from his mother and three women along with John (John 19:25-27), Jesus was deserted by every other friend. If Mark was indeed writing for a persecuted audience this would be a recognisable scenario. Christians who had to face hungry lions or boiling oil where indeed deserted like their master on the cross.

Mark used the Jewish system for his time scale. Jews reckoned from 6:00 to 18:00. This would mean that the sixth hour was noon, and the ninth hour 15:00 (cf. Wiersbe 2007:132). Lockyer (1961:243) states that the darkness from noon to three o'clock could be an allusion to Amos 8:9. It can be seen as an eschatological sign, signifying the judgement of God on the whole earth. Darkness is a commonly used metaphor for God's judgement against nations for sin (eg. Exodus 10:22-23; Isaiah 5:30). Lane (1974:571) suggests that even the gentiles understood that darkness was a sign of impending disaster because

“Philo spoke of a supernatural eclipse of the sun or moon as signifying ‘either the death of kings or the destruction of cities’ (De Providential II. 50).”

Donahue and Harrington (2002:447) state however, that it was the cosmos itself which was mourning about the death of Jesus. They came to this conclusion for in Amos 8:10<sup>b</sup> it is God who states:

“I will make it as the mourning of an only son, and the end thereof as a bitter day.”

If the darkness is indeed an allusion to Amos 8:9 then this explanation gives more justice to the context of these verses.

### **Mark 15:34**

One of the consequences of sin is the total separation from God. Jesus, who carried the sin of the world, was the substitute for the human-race. He laid down his divinity and as a human went through the horrific pains and agony of the burden of sin. It was at that moment that he felt the separation from God. That is why he prayed out the first words of Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” A psalm that is at the same time the lament of a righteous sufferer and his confident hope of vindication. Weber (1979:39) argues that Jesus only had to mention the first verse of a Psalm because, in synagogue liturgies and later Rabbanic Judaism, that was enough to imply the whole Psalm. Weber could have made his argument stronger by noting that Jesus himself in Mark 14:49 said that this all must happen to fulfill the Scriptures. In contrast to Weber's argument it must be said that there is no proof within the specific text. Mark does not state that Jesus cried these words 'to fulfill the Scriptures'. In addition to this, it is thought that Justin the Martyr (ca. 100-165 AD.) was the first who attributed this Psalm as a whole to Jesus (cf. Ulmer 2011:109). Looking at the specific text, the Greek word that is used for 'cried' is 'βοάó', which means 'shouting with intense feeling' or 'to make an urgent distress-call' (Biblos.com<sup>a</sup> 2011). To stay closer to the written text, it is more convincing that Jesus cried out in despair to God his Father without referring to the complete Psalm.

Mark uses the Aramaic words: “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” Mark did not describe a mythical hero who always reacts victoriously. Mark showed his audience what terrible price Jesus paid to deliver them from sin and eternal separation from God. Why Mark used the Aramaic words is not known, but one can imagine that, if it was indeed Simon Peter who dictates this story, he had never forgotten the words, spoken by his Master, in times of need, sorrow and despair.

### **Mark 15:35-36**

Spectators either misunderstood Jesus' words, or decided to re-interpret his words to 'Elijah' in order to ridicule Jesus even more. Many Jews believed that Elijah had not died, but ascended into heaven (2 Kings 2:11). Malachi 4:5-6 expounds a promise that Elijah would return as teacher and helper of those in need. Jesus had associated the coming Elijah with John the Baptist (Mark 9:13). In other words: the voice of second Isaiah “that crieth in the wilderness” (Isaiah 40:3) proclaimed the forthcoming of Elijah through John the Baptist (Mark 1:3). For the Jews this must have been a strange thought, since John the Baptist was killed by king Herod (Mark 6:27) and Elijah would not suffer persecution. Hughes (2004:56) states that the murder of John the Baptist, alias Elijah, and the crucifixion of Jesus indicate a new emerging Christian interpretation. Hughes continues by stating that “the persecution may be understood as being treated with contempt, following the foe-lament section of Psalm 22:7.” What Hughes means to say is, just as the second Isaiah had undergone severe persecution, now Mark creates an ongoing line of persecution from the second Isaiah through Elijah, John the Baptist, and Jesus. Hughes makes a reasonable assumption, as it was Jesus who said in Matthew 23:29-39 that the Israelites had murdered and persecuted the prophets throughout the ages.

In verse 36<sup>a</sup>, again it is not clear whether people wanted to ridicule and mock Jesus repeatedly, or if they were really waiting to see what would happen. A sponge of sour wine could be intended either to ease Jesus' discomfort or to torment him even more. Youssef (2012) states that, according to Mark 15:23, this sour wine, or 'vinegar', is probably a combination of myrrh or gall with sour wine, which would become an anaesthetic herb that could be utilized indisputably to lessen the pain. If this passage alludes to Psalm 69:21-22, where the vinegar is associated with poison, one can conclude that it was indeed an endeavour to ridicule Jesus. Furthermore, Luke 23:36-37 mentions that it was one of the soldiers, who also mocked Jesus, who offered him the drink, “and saying, if thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself.” The statement in verse 36<sup>b</sup>, about Elijah, could indicate a combination of the two—maybe the people wanted to discomfort Jesus more to see if Elijah would come to help him.

### **Mark 15:37**

Jesus' death is described as sudden and crimson. Normally a victim of a crucifixion did not die that fast, sometimes it could take days. Jesus, however was in control all the time. The text suggests that he was still rather strong at the moment of his death. Mark notes that Jesus “...cried with a loud voice, and gave up the ghost.” The word 'loud' (Greek: megas) can be translated as 'large' or 'great' (Biblos.com<sup>b</sup> 2011). John 19:30 adds the words “...It is finished...”, and Jesus bowed his head and died voluntarily and deliberately.

This last cry again evokes Psalm 22: “O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not...”. Luke 23:46 adds the following words: “...Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit...”. Jesus gave his breath, his life, back to his father (cf. Genesis 2:7).

### **Mark 15:38-39**

Right after Jesus' death two important aspects of Christology can be found in the text. Firstly, Mark narrates the tearing of the temple's veil. This is most likely the veil between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies (Exodus 26:33; Hebrews 9:3-4). This tearing of the veil signals that the death of Jesus has taken away the barrier between God and humanity (cf. Ephesians 2:14-15; Hebrews 10:19-22). Healy states that it was God himself who tore the veil, because the veil was ripped from

top to bottom. Healy continues by noting that the ripped veil indicates the end of the old covenant worship. Healy explains this by referring Mark 14:58 (cf. John 2:19)—the earthly temple would be exchanged with a new temple “...made without hands”, and with the Christ as the cornerstone (Healy 2008:322; cf. Mark 12:10). Donahue and Harrington (2002:452) annotate that for Mark's readers, the tearing of the veil would help to explicate the (real or impending) destruction of the Temple.

Secondly, there is the centurion who proclaimed that Jesus was truly the son of God. This is the first such confession of faith in this Gospel. Furthermore, it portrays what was to come—the possibility for Gentiles to accept the Gospel. Witherington (2001:400) notes that the Greek allows a slightly different translation: *truly this was a divine man*—which can be “a conclusion drawn from Jesus' bravery even on the cross”. Mark's readers would, however, attribute this proclamation to the fact that the Gospel was not only to be accepted by a Jewish community, but by the Gentiles as well (cf. Mark 13:10).

### **Conclusion**

In this short passage of Mark's Gospel the reader is taken to the horrific moment of Jesus' death. Mark did not 'spare' his audience by narrating a romantic scene. He testifies very closely of the most important event in human history.

Although the reader could almost link the events around Jesus' death in detail with several Psalms (22 and 69) and other OT references, it must be said that there is no direct evidence that Jesus himself used the words on the cross to accomplish this. The only reference in the gospel of Mark to such an exertion by Jesus can be found in Mark 14:49. In contrast to this one can argue that Mark, who wrote his Gospel at least three decades after Jesus' death, came to an understanding that these parallels to the OT were very significant and helpful to make people understand that Jesus *is the* fulfilment of the old covenant.

The crucifixion and death of Jesus are crucial to understand God's holiness. Sin can not prevail in the presence of God. God is righteousness and thus needs to punish sin. In order to restore the relationship between sinful humans and God, Jesus voluntarily died as perfect human substitute. Laurie (2009:26) gives the following summary:

“Jesus accomplished in six hours what would have taken us the rest of eternity to never complete: The forgiveness of our sins!”

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