

Mark 15:25-16:8

Introductory Comments

1. One of the biggest differences between the ancient world and our contemporary one concerns assumptions about the basic nature of language. For the ancients, language was understood “as a force acting on the world,” a source of real power. In contrast, for readers in the modern world language is mostly conceived “as a series of signs to be deciphered.” Our contemporary obsession is with the *meaning* of a text, whether we choose to locate that meaning in the text itself or in the reader or somewhere in between. What it *means*, rather than what it *does*, is the concern of modern critics and exegetes, requiring them always to be involved in the task of interpretation.
2. From an ancient perspective, “The text as an object of study or contemplation has no importance... for literature is thought of as existing primarily in order to produce results and not as an end in itself. A literary work is not so much an object, therefore, as a unit of force whose power is exerted upon the world in a particular direction.” If we are to truly understand the gospel of Mark, we must apprehend it according to this ancient perspective.
3. In ancient literature (in concert with Aristotle’s analysis of tragedy in the *Poetics*), one of the best and most common strategies for stimulating a response on the part of any audience was the depiction of a reversal of fortune from good to bad. What the authors understood was this: we humans are more aroused if raised expectations are dashed than if no expectations had been raised in the first place. Consider, for example, the disciples, whose final failure is made all the more painful because of the initial promise they showed.
4. In light of the disciples’ failure and absence, Mark introduces us to a previously unknown group: “women looking on from afar... who, when he was in Galilee, followed him, and ministered to him” (15:40-41). In fact, with the exception of Pilate and the centurion (15:43-45), all the actors in the epilogue (15:40-16:8) are new to the gospel story, and their newness permits a renewal of hope in human fruition just when it appears that all such hope was lost. The question remains – will that hope be rewarded?
5. Outline of 15:25-16:8
 - A. Crucifixion of Jesus
 1. 15:25-27 – 3rd hour – King of Jews
 2. 15:29-32 – ironic mocking
 3. 15:33 – 6th to 9th hour – darkness
 4. 15:34 – Jesus’ cry to God
 5. 15:35 – bystanders think he calls Elijah
 6. 15:36 – offer vinegar
 7. 15:37 – dies with great cry
 8. 15:38 – temple curtain torn
 9. 15:39 – centurion says Jesus is “Son of God”

- B. 15:40-16:8 – Epilogue
1. 15:40-41 – introduction of women followers
 2. 15:42-47 – time reference; burial
 - a. vv. 42-43 – Joseph asks for corpse
 - b. vv. 44-45 – Pilate checks on death
 - c. v. 46 – Joseph buries corpse
 - d. v. 47 – women witness burial
 3. 16:1-8 – time reference; women go to empty tomb to anoint Jesus

Questions and read Mark 15:25-16:8 aloud

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Mark includes the detail about Jesus being crucified with bandits on either side of him in 15:27? *It harkens back to when the disciples asked to be seated on his right and left in glory (10:37). They wanted seats of glory, but discipleship requires seats on the cross first.*

2. What is the narrative effect of 15:29-34? *Jesus is now totally alone. All have deserted. Even God. How do we as an audience respond to the mocking of this section? It's a classic example of verbal irony. What these characters call out to Jesus in derision, the audience knows to be true, and thus their mockery falls on their own heads. How is 15:34 both tragic and hopeful?* *Jesus is praying to the God he feels has abandoned him. He still acknowledges God's presence. Also, there has been much debate about this passage and its meaning. It is a close translation of the first line of Psalm 22, which many scholars note starts off despairing and ends on a hopeful note. Mark may have been calling to mind this whole psalm, as he refers to other parts of it in his narrative (i.e. Mk 15:24 = Ps. 22:18).*

3. What is the nature of Jesus' suffering? *Unlike most modern interpretations of the Passion, Mark provides very few details about physical pain and suffering. And a six-hour crucifixion was relatively short (and not the apex of physical agony). His deeper suffering, and that which Mark focuses on, was that of abandonment. For Mark, the most profound agony of the human spirit is not that engendered by the enmity of one's opponents but rather that caused by the betrayal and hatred of one's intimates. As Jesus declared early in his ministry, those who speak out for God are not despised except in their own homeland, among their own kin, and in their own houses (6:4). And by facing the alienation head on, Jesus is showing those to come how they can endure even the worst desolation faithfully.*

4. What is the symbolism of the Temple curtain tearing? *When the temple curtain is split, the barrier between the human world and the divine is symbolically removed. The tearing also symbolizes Jesus' movement from the earthly realm to being with God. The verb for "tear" is used only one other time in Mark, when the heavens tear open in 1:10 for the Spirit to descend on Jesus at his baptism. The Greek word for "curtain" is literally "something spread out down", and is a culmination of a whole series of plays on the word "down" (cf. 15:30, 32, 36). In the blind view of Jesus' human opponents, for him to be saved would require that he come down from the cross to rejoin the human world. But that is not the way it works.*

5. Who are the women in 15:40-41? *Followers/disciples that didn't run away. What is Mark's initial evaluation of these women?* *Positive. They are all new characters, and Mark's almost always presents women as good soil. In fact, in the entire Gospel there are only two negative female characters – Herodias and her daughter. Does the fact that these women are named lead us to anticipate anything about them?* *Usually, to be named as a disciple is not a good thing. Mark is creating tension with this apparent collection of positive followers who appear to be different soil, and then recalling some of the original disciples' pitfalls.*

6. What were the women expecting to see at the tomb? *A body to be anointed. What does this say about their soil?* *Casts a shadow... maybe they weren't paying attention to Jesus after all. Because he told them in three days he would rise... Perhaps they are rocky after all. And, of course, their final reaction confirms it.*

7. Remembering that Mark is a rhetorical piece, it is important to examine the narrative based on what it “does” more than what it “means.” What does ending the Gospel at 16:8 do? *Frustrated by all the desertion and failings of those close to him, we are left wondering “Is there anyone else who has heard Jesus' teachings, seen his miracles, witnessed his transfiguration, understood his conception of being disciples, listened to his predictions about the Son of Man, stayed awake at Gethsemane, followed him through his trial, stood by him on the cross, watched him at his burial, and experienced the joy of the empty tomb? Is there anyone left? OF COURSE THERE IS - THE AUDIENCE!*

The final questions are: What kind of earth will I be? Will I go and tell?

8. Read Mark 16:9-20 aloud. The additional portions of Mark were added at a later date to bring “closure” to the Gospel. Having just read up to 16:8, does it need closure? How do the additional verses change the message of Mark? How do they change what the gospel “does”?

****That completes the Gospel of Mark. Thank you for participating in this study! Stay tuned for more bible studies to come.*