THE
REFORMED
THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

Vol. 60 APRIL, 2001 No. 1

Feeling the Cross: Mark's Message of Atonement

Mark's major interest in the crucifixion has earned his work the title 'the Gospel of the cross'.[1] Despite this focus, when discussing the meaning of the cross in Mark many are reluctant to allow Mark an 'atonement' theology. Rather than a 'salvific' function to the cross, such interpreters prefer other functions, such as an 'exemplary' function,[2] or a 'revelatory' function.[3] For my own part, in a previous article in this journal I argued that Mark's narrative shows a major interest in the forgiveness of sins, which was a necessary preparation for the coming kingdom of God. I also suggested that, according to Mark 10:45, 'Jesus' death was to be the means to the forgiveness of sins which prepares the way for entrance to the kingdom of God'.[4] In other words,

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[1] J.D. Kingsbury, 'The Significance of the Cross Within Mark's Story', in J.D. Kingsbury (ed.), *Gospel Interpretation: Narrative Critical & Social-Scientific Approaches* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997), pp.95–105 [originally published in *Int.* 47 (1993), pp.370–379], p.95.

[2] For example, E. Brandenburger, 'Cross', in C. Brown (ed.), *NIDNTT*, p.396: 'The saviour leads the way as *an obligatory pattern of suffering* for his followers. This is how the narrative of the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus is understood, even though its soteriological character is not immediately apparent' (my emphasis).

[3] J.B. Green, & M.D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross. Atonement in New Testament & Contemporary Contexts* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 2000), pp.17, 106. This view goes back as far as Wrede. See also, J.J. Kilgallen, 'The Messianic Secret and Mark's Purpose', *BTB* 7 (1977), pp.60–65; Kingsbury, 'Significance', p.95.

[4] See P.G. Bolt, '"With a View to the Forgiveness of Sins": Jesus and Forgiveness in Mark's Gospel', *RTR* 57.2 (1998), pp.53–69, quotation from p.68. Cf. the opinion that Mark 2:1-12 demonstrates that God can freely forgive 'without reference to the

contrary to the views of others,[5] I believe that Mark does have an 'atonement' theology; he has a salvific view of the cross. This present article provides another contribution to the understanding of the atonement in Mark.

Although still more can certainly be said to demonstrate the content of Mark's atoning view of the cross, the aim of this article is — perhaps jumping ahead somewhat — to seek to explain the *rhetoric* of Mark's presentation of the crucifixion. I will argue that the rhetoric of Mark moves towards making an impact on the readers such that they experience Mark's view of the atonement. The ideal readers of Mark should 'feel' the cross; they should feel that the Christ died 'because of' them, but also 'with' them, 'instead of' them, and 'for' them.

1. Mark's preparation for the cross

Although still not widely utilised in Marcan studies, Seymour Chatman's distinction between 'story' and 'discourse' greatly assists the analysis of the impact of a narrative upon the reader.[6] The 'story' concerns what actually happens in the narrative, but the 'discourse' deals with how the narrative communicates to the reader.[7] If we wish to understand the meaning of the cross to Mark, the 'discourse' will be especially important, for it is here that a narrative drives home its meaning for the reader. But Mark's narrative prepares for the crucifixion at both levels — and well before the passion narrative begins. As I have previously stated, 'by the time the final section comes

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sacrifice of any animal and without reference to his own, still-future death,' Green & Baker, *Recovering the Scandal*, p.202. For a similar view, see R.A. Culpepper, 'The Passion and Resurrection in Mark', *RevExp* 75 (1978), pp.583–600, p.587 (referring to Mark 1:4-5).

[5] For example, Brandenburger, 'Cross', p.396, 'the soteriological character is not immediately apparent'; and Green & Baker, *Recovering the Scandal*, pp.17,38,46,70.

[6] The distinction is drawn by S. Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp.10,19, who deals with Story in chs. 2 & 3, and Discourse in chs. 4 & 5. R.M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), p.256, complains that a failure to distinguish these two levels often troubles literary analyses of Mark. Fowler's work represents the only sustained treatment of Mark at the level of 'discourse' so far.

[7] R.M. Fowler, 'The Rhetoric of Direction and Indirection in the Gospel of Mark', *Semeia* 48 (1989), p.116, summarizes Chatman's distinction as the *what* and the *how* of a narrative.

along (Section 5: Mk. 14-16), the meaning of the events is already well-known; they simply have to be played out unto the end'.[8]

a. The story

At the 'story' level, Jesus' ministry begins with an enigmatic reference to 'the handing over' (τὸ παραδοθῆναι, 1:14), which is later explained to be his arrest, imprisonment, and death in the hands of Herod (6:14-29). Not long after Jesus began in Galilee, the Pharisees and Herodians plot together 'in order that they might destroy him' (ὅπως αὐτὸν ἀπολέσωσιν, 3:6). Just prior to this event, Jesus had warned by way of a parable that he would be snatched away (2:20), and the religious leaders now put plans in place that will make this happen. The basic conflict of the story that will eventually lead to the crucifixion is thereby introduced.

In the central section of the Gospel (8:27-10:52), after the turning-point recognition of Jesus as the Christ (8:29), Jesus gives three predictions of his passion (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34), which actually serve to structure the plot of the forthcoming passion narrative.[9] Jesus also draws a parallel between John's death and his own, as the Son of Man (9:11-13), and places the suffering of John, the Son of Man, and the coming kingdom in divinely appointed eschatological sequence. The disciples ask why the scribes (with Malachi 3:23 LXX) say Elijah must come 'first' (9:11), that is, before the coming of the resurrection from the dead (9:10)[10] and the kingdom of God (9:1). Jesus firstly adds to the sequence by saying that the Son of Man must suffer in kind (9:12), before revealing that Elijah (John) has already come (9:13). Thus, in terms of the plot of the story, the only thing left to occur in the divine sequence

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[8] Bolt, 'Forgiveness', pp.68–69.

[9] T.E. Boomershine, 'Mark, the Storyteller: A Rhetorical-Critical Investigation of Mark's Passion and Resurrection Narrative' (Unpublished PhD thesis, Union Theological Seminary, New York, 1974), pp.314,316.

[10] Verse 10 has suffered in translation and explanation. Interpretations (Swete, *Mark*, p.192; Taylor, *Mark*, p.394) and translations (RV, RSV, NIV, NRSV) which suggest the disciples 'kept the matter in mind' miss the force of κρατέω, wrongly construe πρὸς ἑαυτούς with the preceding verb rather than the following participle (with Victor; Syr^{sin}) — for which there is no analogous usage, Swete, *Mark*, p.192 —, and create a contradiction between the two halves of the verse. The resurrection in view ought to be taken as the general resurrection. The sense of the verse should therefore be rendered: 'and they seized upon the word, debating amongst themselves what rising from the dead will mean'.

before the coming of the resurrection and the kingdom is the suffering of the Son of Man. The central section ends with another important reference to Jesus' death. Dealing a second time (cf. 9:33-34) with the disciples' interest in greatness, Jesus contrasts the supposed greatness of those holding positions of power in the world with his own servant rule (10:41-45). He ends the discussion with his famous saying about the Son of Man giving his life as a ransom for many.

After Jesus arrives in Jerusalem (11:1-11), he quickly gets into conflict with the religious authorities (11:15-19; 27-12:12), who are still itching to kill him (11:18). In answer to their question about his authority, he tells them the parable of the tenants, in which they recognize themselves as the ones who kill the son (12:7-8), and then seek to do so (12:12). Their first attempt, by way of trapping him in his words (12:13; cf. 12:13-17; 18-27; 24-34), fails when one of their number capitulates before Jesus' superior wisdom (12:28-34).[11] As they seek another way to destroy him (14:1-2), Judas hands them a scheme on a platter (14:10-11), and the events of the passion narrative then relentlessly take their course.

b. The discourse

The reading of a narrative occurs in time, in that the earlier parts are read before the later. As this temporal reading experience occurs, at the discourse level the narrative is 'educating' the reader so that they read the events of the story 'correctly', to ensure that the narrative makes its maximum impact.[12] When this is applied to Mark's narrative, it becomes clear that Mark's reader has been well-prepared to understand the meaning of the cross before the events of the crucifixion are narrated. Mark's previous 'discourse', that is, his manner of telling the story, has been educating the reader as to the meaning of Jesus' death, well before Jesus' death occurs.

It is not the intention of this article to explore at length this preparatory education of the reader. Nevertheless, before turning to the rhetoric of the passion account, it is important to simply list some of the main features of the

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[11] For further discussion, see S.H. Smith, 'The Literary Structure of Mark 11:1–12:40', *NovT* 31 (1989), pp.104–124.

[12] For the temporal nature of reading and its importance for interpretation, see W. Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', *New Literary History* 3 (1972), pp.272-99; and 'Interaction between Text and Reader', in S. R. Suleiman & I. Crosman (eds.), *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp.106-119.

previous narrative which have informed the reader already. Each of these texts could bear a more thorough discussion, but for my purposes they will be dealt with briefly. This cursory treatment should not be allowed to diminish the importance of these texts for constructing the meaning of the crucifixion in Mark. As each one is read in the context of Mark's story, it is adding to the 'repertoire'[13] which the readers will bring to the passion narrative.

The story has already portrayed Jesus as the one who is the Servant of the LORD, who comes bringing healing and forgiveness of sins to the land of Israel in preparation for the arrival of the long-expected resurrection from the dead and the kingdom of God.[14] Since Mark uses Isaiah to invite the reader to understand the story of Jesus by means of these 'intertextual relations', the Isaianic material relating to the Servant already suggests to the informed reader that Jesus' ministry will end in his horrendous death, which will prove to be sacrificial and on behalf of others (cf. Isa. 52:13-53:12).

Eschatological overtones are imported through John's death prefiguring that of Jesus, for, according to the intertextual relations with Malachi, he was the last days Elijah figure who would prepare for the arrival of the LORD himself and the coming judgement day. Jesus' parabolic warning of the bridegroom being snatched away is another allusion to the eschatological day of judgement (cf. 'on that day', ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ, 2:20), this time imported through intertextuality with Amos 8:9-10. Here the informed reader may hear an allusion completely apposite to Jesus' parable and Mark's story, that when Israel's feasts are turned into mourning, it will be 'like the mourning for an only son' (Amos 8:10). This passage in Amos also stands in the background of the cross itself:

> On that day, says the Lord GOD, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight.
>
> καὶ ἔσται ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ λέγει κύριος ὁ θεός καὶ δύσεται ὁ ἥλιος μεσημβρίας καὶ συσκοτάσει ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἐν ἡμέρᾳ τὸ φῶς
>
> (Amos 8:9)

> When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.
> Καὶ γενομένης ὥρας ἕκτης σκότος ἐγένετο ἐφ' ὅλην τὴν γῆν ἕως ὥρας ἐνάτης.
> (Mark 15:33)

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[13] The notion of a reader's 'repertoire' refers to the prior understandings that already exist in the reader's mind before he or she reads a narrative, or a portion of a narrative. This repertoire is the 'mental baggage' by which sense is made of the narrative.

[14] I have argued this at length in Bolt, 'Forgiveness'.

In Jesus' passion predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34), the mention of resurrection following hard on the heels of the death of the Son of Man, especially in the context of the coming kingdom of God, also imports an eschatological context. It is most probable that the disciples would have heard a reference to the general resurrection expected by Israel for centuries.[15] When read as a preparation for the passion narrative,[16] Jesus' apocalyptic discourse continues to establish the expectation that Jesus' death will be the great eschatological day. It will be the great time of distress Daniel expected before the resurrection day (13:19-20; Dan. 12:1-2), and the 'desolating sacrilege' (13:14), after which the end will come with the cosmic signs of a darkened sun and heavenly disturbances (13:24-25), and then the Son of Man will come to the Ancient of Days to receive the kingdom (13:26; cf. Dan. 7:13-14).

The death of Jesus is clearly essential in God's divine plans. The Son of Man *must* suffer (8:31), and his sufferings are the only thing remaining in the cosmic timetable before the resurrection day (9:9-13). The Servant was to die (Isa. 52:13-53:12) in order to bring about the forgiveness of sins (Isa. 40:1-2) which would bring about the new deal not only for the nation, but also for the whole world (Isaiah 54-66). The forgiveness of sins is an essential component in the bringing in of God's new creation, the kingdom of God. In the flow of this central section, Jesus calls upon people to follow him on the 'way' which is the way to the cross followed by resurrection and into the kingdom. The question of how a person enters the kingdom — or how they are saved, or how they inherit eternal life, for these are equivalent terms — is on the agenda, and it becomes clear that it is impossible for human beings to enter on their own resources; but God can make the impossible possible (10:27). This raises the expectation that the narrative will show what this 'impossible possibility' will consist of, and it is revealed in the ransom saying.

The ransom saying is one of several references which help to clarify the meaning of Jesus' death even further.[17] As the central section draws to an end, Jesus issues the famous statement that the Son of Man's death will be the death of the Servant, giving his life as a ransom for many (10:45). His sin-bearing death (cf. Isaiah 53) will be the ransom, λύτρον, that redeems 'the

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[15] See H.C. Cavallin, 'Tod und Auferstehung der Weisheitslehrer. Ein Beitrag zur Zeichnung des *frame of reference* Jesu', *SNTU* 5 (1980), pp.107–121. Cf. Jane Schaberg, 'Daniel 7, 12 and the New Testament Passion-Resurrection Predictions', *NTS* 31 (1985), pp.208–222.

[16] See the argument summarized in my 'Mark 13: An Apocalyptic Precursor to the Passion Narrative', *RTR* 54.1 (1995), pp.10–32.

many' from the effects and consequences of the world's sin. The usage of this word in the ancient world shows great variety, including contexts of expiation/propitiation.

> The confessional inscriptions describe and presuppose interactions between human beings and the gods. In this complex of ideas, the λύτρον word group has several layers of meaning, including: ransom from slavery, ransom from captivity, and release from hidden bonds that cause misfortune.[18]

The person offering the λυτρόν does so to remove some bad situation they have fallen into, in order to restore better relations with the gods. Collins, noticing that, at least in some of the inscriptions, λυτρόν is a synonym of ἱλαστήριον, 'expiation' or 'propitiation',[19] concludes:

> The significance of the confessional inscriptions and the related texts that I have discussed lies in their demonstration that, in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the word group λύω served to speak of transactions between human beings and gods in which sins were forgiven and offenses expiated, and thus, not only in the contexts of the manumission of slaves and the ransoming of captives. The evidence suggests that the notion of the Son of Man giving his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45) belongs to the same complex of ideas as the saying over the cup (Mark 14:24), according to which the blood of Jesus was poured out for many. At least from the point of view of their reception among Gentiles familiar with Hellenistic cults, both sayings interpret the death of Jesus by describing it in a metaphorical way as a ritual expiation of the offenses of many.[20]

In the ransom saying Jesus speaks of his death as that of the Servant[21] of the

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[17] Green & Baker, *Recovering the Scandal*, p.70, are not alone in minimizing Mark's atoning understanding of the cross by simply counting verses and claiming that Mark has only two explanations of Jesus' death (10:45; 14:22–24). Given how narratives work, this 'argument from frequency' tells us next to nothing. If something is said at a key narrative position, this would be enough to make it immensely significant for constructing the narrative framework within which the reader reads subsequent portions of the narrative (e.g. 1:1; 1:14–15; 8:27–31), even if it is said only once. As it happens, not only do the two texts identified by Green and Baker occupy such key narrative positions, but they also draw upon several other themes of Mark's narrative, as well as being informed by significant expectations erected by the OT.

[18] A.Y. Collins, 'The Signification of Mark 10:45 among Gentile Christians', *HTR* 90.4 (1997), [pp.371–382], p.381.

[19] *Ibid.*, p.381.

[20] *Ibid.*, p.382.

[21] The use of the διακον- word group rather than παῖς (Isa. 42:1; 43:10; 49:6; 50:10; 52:13; cf. Acts 3:13, 26) or δοῦλος (Isa. 49:3; 53:11) may not present a serious problem, as it may reflect the more general move amongst Hellenistic Jewish authors away

Lord who dies a sacrificial (cf. δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ),[22] substitutionary (cf. ἀντὶ πολλῶν) death, and so as a representative of the many.

In the same passage, Jesus refers to his death as 'the cup' that he must drink (10:38), an image that is picked up in concrete form at the last supper (14:23-25), and in the highly emotion-filled account of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane (14:36). The metaphor can be used for receiving salvation from the LORD (Ps. 116:13), but it is also an image for receiving God's judgement (Jer. 49:12; 51:17). Given the importance of the Isaianic background to Mark, and the Servant's ministry, here it is probably correct to see Isaiah 51:17-23 in the background, especially since there is a reference to drinking it no more (v.22; cf. Mk 14:36). Jerusalem has drunk the cup of God's wrath (vv. 17, 22), and they have drunk it to the dregs. Therefore God will make them drink it no longer; the time of salvation has come. The very next chapter of Isaiah contains the final servant song (52:13-53:12). Jerusalem will not drink the cup of wrath anymore, because there is one who dies for the sins of many; who offers up a sacrifice on behalf of many; who goes to a God-forsaken death, so that others can be justified.

During the last supper, Jesus reinterprets the Passover meal in terms of his death, saying that the cup is his blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many (14:24). Once again, his death is representative, and especially, given the intertextual relations with the Passover and the Servant, salvific. And just as the Servant's death would bring about a new covenant (Isa. 54), so too would Jesus' death. The Servant's new covenant spilled over to the world,

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from using παῖς as a word for slave at all, towards a more differentiated vocabulary for the various types of slavery found in the first-century Graeco-Roman world. For a discussion of this shift, see B.G. Wright, 'Δοῦλος and Παῖς as Translations of עבד: Lexical Equivalences and Conceptual Transformations', in B.A. Taylor (ed.), *IX Congress of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies. Cambridge, 1995* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), 263–277.

[22] Heroic deaths, although rare (cf. Rom 5:7), can be parallelled. See, for example, the saying attributed to Otho (Caesar, briefly, in AD 69) by Dio Cass: 'I shall free myself [that is, take my own life], that all may learn from the deed that you chose for your emperor, one who would not give you up to save himself, but rather himself to save you (ὅστις οὐχ ὑμᾶς ἑαυτοῦ ἀλλ' ἑαυτὸν ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν δέδωκε)' (Dio Cass. 63.13). The Servant's death is 'sacrificial' in a more than heroic way; it has overtones drawn from the cultic sense of sacrifice. Collins, 'Signification', 371 n.1, notes that Otho's death 'is portrayed as a noble and honorable death' but with none of the cultic and expiatory connotations expressed through the use of λύτρον in Mk 10:45.

and issued in a whole new creation (cf. Isa. 65:17ff.), so it is little surprise that the future kingdom of God is very much on the horizon at Jesus' last supper (14:25).

On the Mount of Olives after the supper — the eschatological mountain — Jesus quotes Zechariah 13:7 that the striking of the shepherd will lead to the scattering of the sheep. This is a prophetic forecast of the desertion that will occur in the following episodes, casting it as part of the eschatological troubles to fall upon the land. The shepherd/sheep language draws upon notions of leadership that were clearly associated with the Christ in the Old Testament, and so here we have notions of messianic representation as well. The shepherd's demise will have an impact upon those he represents, and yet, the promised reunion hints at their restoration after the resurrection (14:28).

Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane is the most emotional scene in the narrative so far. The emotion serves to increase the sympathy of the reader for Jesus, and to enable him to gain a deep understanding of Jesus' motives and of the gravity of the task he has at hand. As he contemplates his death the reader learns that it causes Jesus great distress (14:33-34), and a longing for another way to fulfil God's plans (14:36). His death was a time of great eschatological testing (14:38) that tests the flesh, that is, humanity in its fallen weakness. When the moment of his betrayal arrives, he pronounces that the great eschatological hour that was previously unknown has now arrived (14:41; cf. 13:32).[23]

Each of the passages discussed in this section could receive much more attention in order to explain their importance for the content of Mark's atonement theology. But, in the interests of this article, sufficient has been said to make the point that, by the time Mark brings us to the crucifixion account, much has already been said in story and discourse that helps the reader to understand the meaning of the cross. This is no mere 'paradigm of christian discipleship' being set before the reader, nor is it simply the moment of revelation of the Son of God. The expectations that the narrative has already erected help the reader to see the crucifixion as the great eschatological event; the judgement day; the moment when the Servant drinks the cup of God's wrath to the dregs; the event which is a ransom for many; when blood is poured out for many to introduce the new covenant; and the like. This is the 'baggage' that the Gospel has already loaded into the readers' repertoire by the time the crucifixion account is narrated.

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[23] Once again, I am drawing upon Bolt, 'Mark 13'.

2. Feeling the cross: The Atonement and Mark's Reader

The crucifixion account itself adds to the 'content' of Mark's 'atonement theology', as it progresses through the trial before Pilate and the soldiers' mockery which followed, the crucifixion itself and the mockery which followed, and then the death of Jesus, preceded by the darkness at noon and the cry of dereliction. Each of these episodes has a rich Old Testament intertextuality which adds to the understanding of the meaning of the cross. But instead of exploring the details of the crucifixion account,[24] the final section of this article switches to the rhetoric of the cross. Here I will argue that the rhetoric of the narrative — in other words, the text's operation at the discourse level — so works on the readers that their reading experience is one that duplicates the meaning of the cross. The rhetoric makes them 'feel' the cross. Through Mark's narrative art the reader is drawn into the crucifixion account in such a way as to feel the key elements of Mark's atonement theology: Jesus dies because of our sin; the one for the many; a ransom in our place.

It has often been noticed that the passion narrative 'engages' the reader and draws them into the account. Boomershine noted that 'the storyteller asks the listeners to recognize *our* corporate involvement in Jesus' death'.[25] The horrors of the crucifixion account makes us aware of the problem in which we dwell, for the foremost of the connections with the story is 'awareness of human captivity to the powers of sin and death.'[26]

> The primal connections of our experience with this story are experiences of consciousness and confession of personal and corporate sinfulness and experiences of abandonment in suffering and death.[27]

But, at one and the same time, there is a connectedness with Jesus in the midst of this human captivity:

> The other primal connection with this story is with Jesus as a human being who suffers as we do. There is a deep congruence between Jesus' feelings of being abandoned by God on the cross and our experience of suffering and death.[28]

Boomershine thus identifies that Jesus is 'with us' in the human predicament. This has often been noted, especially in comments upon the 'cry of dereliction'.

But there is more to Mark's account. The fact that Jesus is not only 'with

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[24] I hope to do this in a future article.

[25] T.E. Boomershine, *Story Journey. An Introduction to the Gospel as Storytelling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), p.167.

[26] *Ibid.*, p.170.

[27] *Ibid.*, p.170.

[28] *Ibid.*, p.173.

us', but also 'for us' has also been 'felt' by readers of the Gospel. Barnabas Lindars, for example, noticed that Mark draws us into the number of 'the many':

> Mark wishes his readers to approach the story of the passion with some idea of its sacrificial meaning. They are intended to see themselves in the "many" for whom Jesus gives his life.[29]

The earlier narrative has already shown Jesus as one who is sympathetic to the human situation and who acts for others, especially in the thirteen 'suppliant' stories.[30] These stories of people in need of healing and exorcism present a 'slice-of-life' through this world which labours under human mortality, and which is in great need of a saviour. They show Jesus as the one who not only cares that we are perishing (cf. 4:38), but who is also able to do something about it. He is both 'with us' and 'for us'. He is with us in our human suffering, but he acts for us, so that the hope of the kingdom might be ours. Both these aspects, like all aspects of Mark's story, come to a climax in the cross.

If it is possible to show *that* the impact of Mark's narrative of the cross has already been felt by the Gospel's readers, it is also possible to show *how* that impact is produced. Although a highly detailed analysis of how the narrative works is possible, it is my intention at this point simply to outline some of the main features of the narrative dynamics.

To demonstrate how the crucifixion account makes its impact, we will pay particular attention to one aspect of Mark's discourse, namely, his 'distance dynamics'. This is a key methodological procedure which, in my view, has not been utilised sufficiently in Markan studies.[31] 'Distance' can be defined as

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[29] B. Lindars, 'Salvation Proclaimed: VII. Mark 10:45: A Ransom for Many', *ExpT* 93 (1982), [pp.292–295] p.295.

[30] That is, the demoniac in Capernaum, Simon's mother in law, the leper, the paralytic, the man with the withered hand, Jairus' daughter, the bleeding woman, the daughter of the Greek woman with a demon, the deaf-mute, the first blind man, the boy with the murderous spirit, the second blind man. I have dealt closely with these characters in '"Do You Not Care That We Are Perishing?" Jesus' Defeat Of Death and Mark's Early Readers' (Unpublished PhD thesis, King's College London, 1997). For dissertation abstract, see *TynBul* 49.1 (1998), pp.175–178.

[31] The theoretical underpinning of 'distance dynamics' derives from Wayne C. Booth; see his 'Distance and Point of View: An Essay in Clarification', in P. Stevick (ed.), *Theory of the Novel* (New York: Free Press, 1967), pp.87–107, which summarizes the discussion in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2nd.

> the degree of sympathy or alienation, involvement, or detachment which occurs in the various relationships established in a narrative. Distance is then a major factor in the narrator's relationship to the audience, the relationship of the narrator to the characters, and therefore, the relations between the audience and the characters.[32]

Paying attention to 'distance dynamics' helps expose the impact the characters — and so the narrative — make upon the readers:

> The analysis of distance in characterizations seeks to describe the factors which influence the dynamics of a character's sympathetic or alienating qualities. These factors establish the perimeters for the range of relationships between a character and the audience.[33]

When we analyse the 'distance dynamics' in relation to Jesus in Mark's passion narrative, three features emerge: a) The narrative creates a high degree of sympathy for Jesus. b) At the same time, it 'pushes' the reader away from Jesus. c) In addition, as the story unfolds, the readers find themselves implicated in Jesus' death.

a. Sympathy for Jesus

As the focus of Mark's story, Jesus is portrayed with complete sympathy from the beginning. However, it is also true to say that as the story draws to a close, sympathy for Jesus increases enormously, especially in the Gethsemane scene, reaching something of a climax in the cry of dereliction (15:34).

Some of the main ways in which this sympathy is produced can be discussed by reference to the main character groupings: Jesus' opponents, his friends, and Jesus himself.

The actions of Jesus' opponents makes them unsympathetic characters. The narrative presents a consistently negative portait of Jesus' opponents, including such things as: their relentless quest to kill him, consisting of plots (3:6), attempted traps (12:13; cf. 18ff., 28ff.), secrecy (11:18; 14:1-2), and treacherous plans (14:1-2); their hard heartedness (3:5) and questionable motives (11:18; 12:15; 15:10; 15:31-32); the miscarriage of justice at their hands (14:53-65; 15:4, 10, 11). The more unsympathetically they are portrayed, the more sympathetic becomes the portrayal of Jesus.

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ed.1983 [1961]). Distance dynamics are utilised by Boomershine, 'Mark, the Storyteller', and see also my 'Jesus' Defeat of Death'.

[32] Boomershine, 'Mark, the Storyteller', p.28.

[33] *Ibid.*, p.284.

The fact that Israel's leadership rejected the Messiah and handed him over to the Gentiles is regarded as an horrific action (9:31; 10:33-34; 15:1). Even Pilate seems surprised that the Jews would release a murderer to kill their king (15:9-14). This was a 'destructive sacrilege' (cf. 13:14) far worse than any other seen in Israel's history. The horror of 'handing him over to the nations' is brought out by the mistreatment of Jesus by Pilate, the mockery from his soldiers, the form of Jesus' death, and the mockery on the cross. Pilate, the one who represented Roman justice, allowed an innocent man to be killed to satisfy a mob. Through their mock enthronement (15:16-19),[34] Pilate's soldiers poured contempt on this innocent man, adding the inhumanity of mocking one about to die, to the injustice of the Jewish and Roman authorities. And then the narrative's depiction of Jesus being killed through crucifixion taps into a deep-seated horror of this form of death that was felt throughout the ancient world, and which made crucifixion something that people shuddered to mention or to write about.[35] Finally, when Jesus was on the cross, his fellow Israelites, their leaders, and those crucified with him, joined together in mockery.[36] It was not only the nations who treated God's Messiah with contempt, but, at this point, Israel had become just like the nations. The ironies of the account make the mockery even more distasteful to the reader, for Jesus is mocked for exactly who he is, and for exactly what he has done. He has done nothing but good, and yet they choose to kill him for exactly that reason (cf. 3:4, 6). It is true that, in order to save others, he cannot save himself (15:31), for, as the reader well knows (cf. 10:45; 14:24), he is giving his life as a ransom for many. The portrayal of such horrendous treatment makes Jesus' opponents despicable to Mark's readers, and, at the same time, increases sympathy for Jesus himself.[37]

The narrative portayal of Jesus' friends also serves to increase sympathy towards him. He was betrayed by Judas, who is repeatedly depicted as 'one of the twelve'. Despite prior protests of loyalty, all his disciples deserted him at his arrest, and the great Peter denied him soon after. Being so contrary to Jesus' teaching on discipleship (cf. 8:34-9:1), their failure questions the very

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[34] The scene is ironically cast as a mock enthronement: he is led into the palace, a king's proper abode; the whole battalion is called; purple cloak, crown, salutes, and homage.

[35] M. Hengel, 'Crucifixion', in *The Cross of the Son of God* (London: SCM Xpress Reprints, 1986 [German: 1976; ET 1977]), pp.93–183.

[36] Boomershine, 'Mark, the Storyteller', pp.226–228.

[37] *Ibid.*, p.214.

success of his own ministry to them. Even the women who remain through to the end, only stand 'at a distance' (15:40). At the crucifixion, after being forsaken by both enemy and friend, the cry of dereliction suggests that Jesus is even forsaken by God. Since he clearly goes to the cross as an innocent man, who did nothing but good, and who walked within the will of God, all of this considerably raises sympathy.

The narrative portrayal of Jesus himself also greatly increases sympathy towards him. He is resolved to do the will of God (1:11; 3:31-35; 8:31; 9:11-13; 9:31-32; 10:33-34; 14:36), no matter what, even though this entails his own death. This is focused in Gethsemane in particular.

> the effect of the prayer is to draw the listener into the deepest sympathy with Jesus' requests that his passion might be avoided ...
>
> the story as a whole has drawn the listener closer to Jesus than at any previous point in the Gospel. His agony, his prayer to God, the failure of his closest friends — all combine to make Jesus supremely sympathetic here ...
>
> The sympathy and respect for Jesus has reached its highest point in the Gethsemane story.[38]

After Gethsemane the enormity of Jesus' task and his absolute necessity of doing God's will ensures the readers' sympathy towards him, so much so that the cry of dereliction comes as a great shock. Has God abandoned one who has so certainly done his will? The fact that the reader can even ask the question shows the degree to which sympathy has been aroused towards Jesus, for the reader is even prepared to stand with Jesus and question God![39] This moment when the apocalyptic darkness descends upon the Son of God brings the pathos of the scene to a crescendo. There was no-one else who could endure this moment, only the Servant of the Lord. Even the readers' response to the desertion of the disciples has been softened deliberately by the narrative[40]

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[38] For the details of the narrative rhetoric that produces these results, see Boomershine, 'Mark, the Storyteller'. These quotations come from pp.149,156 (cf. p.15), and pp.161–162, respectively.

[39] Such questions raised by the narrative are part of the narrative rhetoric, which makes the reader ask what is impossible! The theological questions raised by the cry of derelection must be resolved in a trinitarian framework, such that the Father is not divided from the Son, and the human nature of Jesus is not divided from the divine nature of the Son.

[40] For details, see 'Peter's Denial as Polemic or Confession: The implications of Media Criticism for Biblical Hermeneutics', *Semeia* 39 (1987), pp.47-68. The

in order to bring out the fact that no-one but Jesus himself can go through this terrible time of the greatest distress of all time (cf. 13:19) before the coming of the kingdom.[41] As the sole representative of humanity who 'endures unto the end' (cf. 13:13), he continues to command the readers' sympathy.

b. Distance from Jesus

In terms of the dynamics of distance, sympathy with a character tends to reduce the distance felt by the reader towards the character. But the dynamics of distance operate along a variety of axes and need to be weighed in the complex web of textual relations in which they exist. In the passion narrative, full alignment with Jesus is prevented by another aspect of Mark's dynamics of distance which pushes in the opposite direction. Even though readerly sympathy towards Jesus is at its peak, the relations between the reader and the other characters in the passion narrative work towards increasing the distance between Jesus and the reader. It is as if the readers want to be with Jesus, but at the same time find themselves being pushed away from him. This creates a high degree of tension in Mark's reader.

The crowd has been positively characterised, and yet at the last minute they are the ones implicated as causing the death of Jesus (15:15). This has the effect of surprising the readers, who, because they have been to some degree aligned with them, suddenly find themselves powerfully implicated in bringing about Jesus' death.[42]

Peter and the other disciples are characters that the reader has followed since the beginning. Although they have not always been sympathetic characters, in the passion narrative they certainly start off this way. In their protestations of loyalty (14:29-31) we see their willing spirit, and it is difficult to judge their naivety about the weakness of their flesh (14:32-42) because it

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intertextual allusion to Amos 2:16 in Mark 14:52 greatly assists the reader in seeing that this was the Day of the Lord, and no-one but Jesus could endure it.

[41] The narrator's own personal horror at the events may also protrude into the narrative. According to Boomershine, in the account of the crucifixion the use of the present tense (15:24) and then the aorist (15:25) for 'crucify' provides the perspective of an eyewitness and then that of the story teller some years later looking back. 'The impact of the second report is to express Mark's personal perspective of horror and sorrow in the present moment of the story's recitation.' Boomershine, 'Mark, the Storyteller', p.219. The change in tense alone, however, may not be sufficient warrant for this interpretation.

[42] Boomershine, 'Mark, the Storyteller', pp.209–210, pp.300–301.

is perfectly understandable, given the portrayed circumstances. The high degree of sympathy for Jesus makes the readers agree with the disciples' desires to follow until the end. When the disciples fall, we understand the pressure they were under, and we recognise in their fall the fact that we too suffer from the same weakness of the flesh. In their fall, we see our own.

But at the same time, rather than being judged harshly, the disciples are treated sympathetically. The narrative shows that only Jesus can endure this time of trial, and he must endure it for the sake of the many, lest no-one be saved (cf. 13:20). But this means that, as Jesus' aloneness increases, the readers are pushed even further away.

The portrayal of Jesus' opponents also helps to push the reader away from Jesus. For, from the moment of his arrest, Jesus is given over to his opponents, at a distance from his friends and so from the reader. At the end of the account, even his body has to be requested back from Pilate, before he can be 'given back' to the reader. The opponents seem to be in control and, in the mockery scene, they have their day. The readers watch helplessly as all of this unfolds. They have a high sympathy for Jesus, but they are forced to stand 'at a distance' and watch the crucifixion (cf. 15:40).

c. Implication in Jesus' death

The readerly implication in Jesus' death occurs in two directions. We have already mentioned how the readers finds themselves caught up in the crowd, the explicit cause of Jesus' death (15:15). In addition, the Jewish leaders and Pilate stand as representative figures, for Jew and Gentile respectively. The travesty of justice at their hands was a travesty of justice perpetrated by the official, legal representatives of humanity. The readers are implicated in their crime.

Attention to the stance from which the story is told also implicates the reader at a number of points. Rather than being with Jesus, the story is told so that we stand in the shoes of Pilate, then his mocking soldiers, then the mocking passersby at the cross. We feel the darkness and we hear the cry of dereliction, but at a distance. We stand with those who condemned the Messiah, and so we find ourselves condemned.

But the reader is also implicated in Jesus' death from a second, more positive direction. The narrative has already erected the framework for understanding this event, and so the reader understands that this death was 'for many', and so 'for them'. Even while being implicated as a cause of Jesus' death, the narrative is clear that this death was even for those who caused it.

3. Distance Dynamics and Feeling the Atonement

In terms of distance relations between Jesus and the reader, the passion narrative works to produce two seemingly contradictory outcomes. Unquestionably, as the story proceeds to its tragic climax, it creates an increasing sympathy for Jesus. But it is also clear that, at the same time, the story also opens up an increasing amount of distance between Jesus and the reader. The effect of these dynamics is to create a great desire to be aligned with Jesus, but yet to experience the frustration of being at a distance from him. And it gets worse. We are implicated with the crowd, and the judicial system, and the mocking voices. We are amongst the 'sinners' who caused his death.

But this is where the narrative brings good news to the reader. For it is the 'sinners' that Jesus came to call (2:17), and as Son of Man, has the authority to forgive (2:10). It is the many sinners for whom he died, and his death is the ransom for their lives (10:45). In his death he drank to the dregs the cup of God's wrath that was resting on others (10:38; 14:36), so that forgiveness of sins can be a reality. His death was the great moment of eschatological judgement before the arrival of the resurrection day and the kingdom of God. His death was the ransom that did the impossible by providing the way that sinful human beings can enter the coming kingdom. His is the shed blood that brings the covenant (14:24) that prepares people to enter the coming kingdom.

Thus, the rhetoric of the passion narrative combines with the preparatory material (which educates the reader to understand the meaning of the cross) to help the reader to 'feel' the cross. The reader wants to identify with Jesus, but is prevented: only Jesus can go this path. The readers are implicated in causing his death; they, too, are sinners, but at the same time they are repulsed by those who put Jesus to death, and so they are repulsed by sinners. And the good news is that Jesus' death is 'for us'. The high degree of sympathy with Jesus means that the reader, who has found himself to be implicated with the sinners, has already aligned himself with Jesus. If the narrative impact has been felt, then the reader is well on the way to fulfilling Jesus' command, 'repent and believe the gospel'. To feel the cross, is to believe in the crucified one, who died as a ransom for we many. By his wounds, we are healed.

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