

Mark 15,34 and the *Sitz im Leben* of the Real Reader

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I. INTRODUCTION

Jesus' words ελωι ελωι λεμα σαβαχθανι; ὃ ἐστιν μεθερμηνευόμενον· ὁ θεός μου ὁ θεός μου, εἰς τί ἐγκατέλιπές με; in Mark 15,34 create at least a double tension within the Gospel. The first tension has to do with the global picture of Jesus in Mark's story: is he a divine-like powerful self-assured person who is able to predict in detail his upcoming fate of suffering, death and resurrection (8,31; 9,31; especially 10,32-34), or someone who, during the moment of his death, seems to have doubts concerning his final outcome (14,36; 15,34)? It is not surprising that "the most enigmatic word from the cross in all the Gospels"¹ confounded Markan scholars as well as theologians². How is it possible that the Son of God (Mark 1,1; 1,11; 9,7) cries out that God has abandoned him? "Why would Mark write a 'gospel' ('good news') about a tragic figure whose life ends in total despair? Such a work might qualify as a tragedy or a pathetic biography, but hardly as a gospel"³. Even if one avoids the delicate question whether these words are authentic and pronounced as such by the 'historical' Jesus, it remains a challenge to understand their exact

* The exegetical part of the article (pp. 000-000) was written by Geert Van Oyen; the presentation of the questionnaire and its results is by Patty Van Cappellen.

1. R.A. CULPEPPER, *Mark* (Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary, 20), Macon, GA, Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 2007, p. 557. See M. HALEY, *The Gospel of Mark* (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture), Grand Rapids, MI, Baker, 2008, p. 320: "the most stark, astonishing and scandalous words in the Gospel".

2. Most books on Christology discuss the problem of the death of Jesus. On the role of this particular verse in the works of some theologians, see e.g. F. BIGAQUETTE, *Le cri de dérédiction de Jésus en croix: Densité existentielle et salvifique* (Cogitatio Fidei, 236), Paris, Cerf, 2004 (Part One: discussing J. Moltmann, E. Jüngel, H.U. von Balthasar, et al.).

3. J.R. DONAHUE – D.J. HARRINGTON, *Mark* (SP, 2), Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2002, p. 450. On the use of Mark 15,34 (and Matthew 27,46) in Jewish exegesis as an argument that Jesus neither claimed to be God nor is represented by the New Testament as such, see D.R. CATCHPOLE, *The Trial of Jesus: A Study in the Gospels and Jewish Historiography from 1770 to the Present Day* (Studia Post-biblica, 12), Leiden, Brill, 1971, pp. 73-74, esp. p. 74, n. 7. On Jewish interpretations of this verse, see H.-J. FABRY, *Die Wirkungsgeschichte des Psalms 22*, in J. SCHREINER (ed.), *Beiträge zur Psalmenforschung. Psalm 2 und 22* (FzB, 60), Würzburg, Echter, 1988, 279-317.

meaning and function at the level of Mark's redaction or within the narrative plot. Several authors have given a summary of the most important scholarly positions⁴. These positions are unavoidably linked to the authors' general perspective on the portrayal of Jesus, especially on his relationship to God, and to their interpretation of the meaning of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. Mark 15,34 thus seems to be a key verse in the interpretation of the whole of the "tensions and coherence in Mark's mysterious picture of Jesus"⁵. One almost could say: tell me your interpretation of Jesus' cry on the cross and I will tell you how you interpret Mark's gospel. So the first tension is that the gospel of Mark *as a whole* presents itself as a polysemic texture that creates the possibility for a plurality of understanding. That does not mean that "anything goes", but within the limits of the textual data, more than one possible reading of the text seems possible.

The second tension focuses on Mark 15,34 itself. Scholars have proposed very different interpretations of Jesus' words. One could say that scholars created plural *Jesuses* on the basis of the one verse 15,34. In this sense, from the point of view of reader response, the verse itself witnesses to the tensions in Mark's mysterious picture of Jesus. Is it "a cry of dereliction? or victory?"⁶. Opinions are radically opposed to one another. Some say that the cry is a cry of hope, praise, or victory; others say that it is a cry of dereliction, and while the arguments are known and repeated over and again, the fundamental results do not change⁷. In this article we do not aim at giving a new interpretation of the passage. We rather make a short survey of some of the main tendencies in the interpretation and ask how it is possible that there exist such contradicting opinions about the same text and what are the implications. Exegetes have the ambition of explaining *the* text in a "scientific" way and still they differ in a profound manner about the meaning of the same verse. We would like therefore to explore another possible explanation for the phenomenon of the plurality of Jesus images in Mark 15,34: the diversity of interpretations of the verse is not only due to the polysemy of the text, it is also determined by the context or the *Sitz im Leben* of the individual reader. We all intuitively

4. BIGAOUETTE, *Le cri* (n. 2), pp. 173-260(!); A.C. AVRIL *et al.*, *Mon Dieu, pourquoi m'as-tu abandonné? Psaume 22* (Cahiers Évangile, 121. Supplément), Paris, Cerf, 2002; H.J. CAREY, *Jesus' Cry from the Cross: Towards a First-Century Understanding of the Inter-textual Relationship between Psalm 22 and the Narrative of Mark's Gospel* (LNTS [JSNTS], 398), London – New York, T&T Clark, 2009, pp. 1-26 (only one publication in French is mentioned); on the theological implications of her book, see G.A. ALFARO, *Did God Abandon Jesus at the Cross?*, in *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 53 (2011) 197-207.

5. This was the theme of the SBL Markan Group at the Annual Meeting at San Francisco (November 2011), where we presented a shorter version of this article.

6. L.P. TRUDINGER, "Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?": A Cry of Dereliction? or Victory?," in *JETS* 17 (1974) 235-238.

7. CAREY, *Jesus' Cry* (n. 4), p. 156: "Each group stands at an opposite end of the spectrum [...] and their reactions are as extreme as the positions they hold".

feel that it should be so⁸, but it would be interesting to explore the possibility of having this verified.

Since 15,34 is a key text in Mark's gospel, we were wondering if it would be possible to use it as a test case to find out if and how the personal context of the critical reader plays a role in the interpretation of the verse. In order to do so we created a survey with questions on the possible meanings of the verse and on the context of the actual readers. After sketching the hermeneutical context of our exegesis (2) and the exegetical analysis of Mark 15,34 (3), we will provide the readers with the main conclusions that can be drawn from the survey (4).

II. CHANGING HERMENEUTICS: READING AT THE CENTER OF EXEGESIS

Before entering into the exegetical part of this study, it is useful to mention briefly the changing hermeneutics which are the motivation behind this enquiry. Since the 1970's, the influence of literary theories which created openness for the role of the reader in giving meaning to the text has increased enormously. The methodological shift, which does not at all exclude the importance and the good right of historical criticism, has very well been described by such scholars as Daniel Marguerat⁹ or Kevin J. Vanhoozer¹⁰, although it should be admitted that the respective hermeneutical choices or the theological orientation of these two exegetes

8. One example to illustrate what I mean can be found in M.C. ALBL, "And Scripture Cannot Be Broken": *The Form and Function of the Early Christian Testimonia Collections* (SupplINT, 96), Leiden – Boston, MA – Köln, Brill, 1999, p. 28: "Dodd's biographer, F.W. Dillistone, offers some further insights into the motivation behind Dodd's efforts to delineate the earliest kerygma. He suggests that it was both a reaction to the emphasis of contemporary NT scholarship on the *diversity* of the earliest Christian writings, and an attempt to find an objective expression of Christian truth as a standard to protect against subjective claims that emphasized the truth of individual experience. Moreover, the recovery of the original form of the apostolic preaching satisfied Dodd's dual roles as biblical scholar and preacher: the emphasis on the original unity of the Christian message mirrored Dodd's own ecumenical concerns as a Congregationalist working in the largely Anglican atmosphere of English scholarship. [...] Dodd completely supported the older scholar's theological vision of an early church unified in its appeal to certain core scriptures". The case of C.H. Dodd is interesting since in *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-Structure of New Testament Theology* (London, Nisbet & Co, 1952), he mentions Psalm 22 as a source of "testimonies" for the New Testament adding the following comment: "The intention of New Testament writers is clearly to apply the whole to the sufferings and ultimate triumph of Christ" (p. 97).

9. D. MARGUERAT, *L'exégèse biblique à l'heure du lecteur*, in ID. (ed.), *La Bible en récits: L'exégèse biblique à l'heure du lecteur* (Le monde de la Bible, 48), Genève, Labor et fides, 2003, 13-40, esp. Pp. 13-24. See also ID., *Entrer dans le monde du récit: Une présentation de l'analyse narrative*, in *Transversalités* 59 (1996) 1-17.

10. K.J. VANHOOZER, *The Reader in New Testament Interpretation*, in J.B. GREEN (ed.), *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, Grand Rapids, MI – Cambridge, Eerdmans, 259-288.

are very different. It is not necessary to recall in detail the major representatives in the disciplines of philosophy, semiotics or linguistics, who had an influence on Biblical exegesis¹¹. But perhaps two contributions by Paul Ricoeur, which until today did not lose anything of their value, are worth mentioning. In *The Bible and the Imagination*, Ricoeur formulates the following presupposition of his interpretative work on Biblical texts: “to seek *in* reading itself the key to the heuristic functioning of the productive imagination”. He explains further: “I mean that the act of reading should be seen as the meeting point of the itineraries of meaning offered by the text as a production of fiction [...] and the free course (*parcours*) of meaning brought about by the reader seeking ‘to apply’ the text of life”¹². Of great interest for our purpose is Ricoeur’s collaboration with the biblical scholar André LaCocque in *Thinking Biblically* (1998) in which he has written a chapter entitled “Lamentation as prayer” with some hermeneutical reflections on Ps 22, especially verse 2¹³. By opening the eyes of biblical scholars for hermeneutical questions as well as for the author’s rhetorical strategies and the reader’s reception, Ricoeur and others paved the way for Markan scholars to give the reader his due place in exegesis. Pioneering work on the oldest gospel was done by (the now somewhat forgotten?) Norman Perrin, who between 1970 and 1976 wrote several articles in which he pleads for opening historical-critical exegesis towards the synchronic dimensions of the text (which he called “literary criticism”)¹⁴. In the early 80’s, D. Rhoads and R.M. Fowler¹⁵ – to mention only two out of many – picked up this idea.

11. One may think, for instance, of the contributions by P. Ricoeur, G. Genette, W.C. Booth, W. Iser, U. Eco.

12. *The Bible and the Imagination*, in M.I. WALLACE (ed.), *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*, Minneapolis, MN, Fortress, 1995, 144-166 (French original 1982!). The text is a paper presented at the William Rainey Harper Conference on Biblical Studies held at the University of Chicago (October 3-5, 1979).

13. P. RICŒUR – A. LACOCQUE, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, Chicago, IL – London, University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 211-234.

14. See the chapter on the role of Norman Perrin in G. VAN OYEN, *De studie van de Marcusredactie in de twintigste eeuw* [The Study of Markan Redaction in the Twentieth Century], Brussels, Paleis der Academiën, 1993, pp. 272-280.

15. D. RHOADS – D. MICHIE, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, Minneapolis, MN, Fortress, 1982, revised ²1999 (note the subtitle of the “Conclusion: The Reader”, pp. 137-146); on the influence of this book, see now K. IVERSON – C. SKINNER (eds.), *Mark as Story: Retrospect and Prospect* (SBL Resources for Biblical Study, 65), Atlanta, GA, SBL, 2011. R.M. FOWLER, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark*, Harrisburg, PA, Trinity Press, 1991, 2001; ID., *Reader-Response Criticism*, in J.C. ANDERSON – S.D. MOORE (eds.), *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, Minneapolis, MN, 1992, ²2006, 59-93 (on p. 92, Fowler says his 1981 dissertation on the narrative doublet of the multiplication of the loaves is “the first explicit application of reader-response criticism to a biblical text”). Other scholars could be mentioned: E. Struthers Malbon, J. Dewey, S.D. Moore.

Since those earliest studies on narrative criticism, a huge amount of articles and studies on the *implied* reader (or ideal or model reader) has been published. It was indeed this hypothetical reader that was at the heart of the narrative-critical approach. But the tension between this constructed theoretic reader and the real reader(s) remains nevertheless a debated issue. Two recent exegetical tendencies show each in their own way that the real reader is never far away. We refer here, on the one hand, to the approaches that favour a pragmatic or “applied” exegesis and, on the other, to new branches like performance criticism. First, apart from, for instance, psycho-analytical or feminist readings, especially socio-cultural or political readings (which were already very popular in the sixties and the seventies within a particular political context) are seeing a revival, but now more influenced by hermeneutical and literary concerns. One may cite the recent article by Raimundo Barreto¹⁶ and refer to the different sections on contextual readings of the Bible in the recent SBL meetings. Second, performance criticism is not only trying to put more emphasis on the original oral-aural setting of the “reading” of the gospel, it also shows that the text receives a specific meaning when real persons are performing it for real persons¹⁷. Performing is interpreting. These new approaches are challenging narrative criticism as far as it runs the risk at becoming a pure theoretical model that does not take into account the real readers. Narrative critics become aware that the implied reader they construct might very well be influenced by their personal interpretation. This is how Ira Brent Driggers describes the notion of “implied” author and readers in *Following God through Mark*¹⁸:

I use the categories of “implied” author and readers as *heuristic* tools, as the means of elucidating my own interpretation of the narrative – but without claiming them as actual narrative “structures” residing “in” the text. I do not presume to reconstruct strictly textual personae apart from my own interpretive assumptions, as if the text per se could simply dictate such a reconstruction. Nor do I presume to know fully where my own interpretative assumptions end and the text’s voice begins, assuming that such a distinction can even be made. There is a very blurry line separating ancient from contemporary readers, for

16. R. BARRETO, *How Who I Am Affects What I See: Reading Mark with Latin American Eyes*, in *Review and Expositor* 107 (2010) 395-410. See in the same volume H.J. MUGABE, *Markan Healings through African Eyes* (363-379). Influence of Latin-American readings can be seen in E.C. MALONEY, *Jesus’ Urgent Message for Today: The Kingdom of God in Mark’s Gospel*, New York – London, Continuum, 2004.

17. See, e.g., W. SHINER, *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark*, Harrisburg, PA, Trinity Press, 2003; D. FLEER – D. BLAND (eds.), *Preaching Mark’s Unsettling Messiah*, Saint-Louis, MO, Chalice Press, 2006 (esp. R.F. WARD, *The End Is Performance*, 88-101); A. CLARK WIRE, *The Case for Mark Composed in Performance* (Biblical Performance Criticism, 3), Eugene, OR, Wipf and Stock, 2011, see p. 87 on Mark 15,34.

18. I.B. DRIGGERS, *Following God Through Mark: Theological Tension in the Second Gospel*, Louisville, KY – London, Westminster John Knox, 2007, p. 8.

while historical reconstruction stems from interpretation, interpretation involves the active engagement of a present-day reader.

Another example of the unstable meaning of “implied” reader can be found in Carey’s recent monograph on the citation of Ps 22 in Mark 15,34, where the term is consciously used for Mark’s first-century intended audience¹⁹.

III. MARK 15,34: EXEGETICAL ASPECTS

1. *Authenticity? Community Tradition? Redaction?*

While authors like J. Donahue – D. Harrington²⁰, C. Focant²¹ or H.J. Carey²² consciously refuse to deal with the authenticity or origin of Mark 15,34, others still propose divergent explanations. The following overview is not meant to do away with the work that has been done before by P. Zilonka²³, R.E. Brown²⁴ or S. Ahearne-Kroll²⁵. We just want to take the opportunity to go beyond the mere enumeration of some commentators and to look at the arguments used in the discussion.

Among those defending, the authenticity (or argue that it contains old and reliable tradition) of Mark 15,34, P. Dschulnigg explicitly refutes the possibility that it was a creation of the saying by early Christians and thinks that Ps 22,1 was the cry of the dying Jesus. It gave rise to further allusions to Ps 22 when the Christians told about Jesus’ passion²⁶. R.H. Gundry gives

19. CAREY, *Jesus’ Cry* (n. 4), pp. 23-24: “Although the implied reader here is understood as the reader projected by the narrative, I also envision that reader as one that corresponds in some sense to a historical community of readers and hearers [...]. In other words, Mark is writing his gospel for a specific group whom he thought would be his readers” (24).

20. *Mark* (n. 3), p. 450.

21. C. FOCANT, *L’évangile selon Marc* (Commentaire Biblique. Nouveau Testament, 2), Paris, Cerf, 2006. We will refer to the English translation *The Gospel according to Mark: A Commentary*, Eugene, OR, Wipf and Stock, 2012. I could not find an opinion on this particular point in D. JUEL, *Mark 8–16* (Anchor Yale Bible), New Haven, CT – London, Yale University Press, 2009 (this is not correct: either Juel in Augsburg commentary, or Marcus in AYB: cf. n. 32).

22. CAREY, *Jesus’ Cry* (n. 4), p. 27: “Historical Jesus matters will not be addressed”.

23. P. ZILONKA, *Mark 15,34 in Catholic Exegesis 1911-1965*, Diss. STD, Rome (Gregoriana), 1984.

24. R.E. BROWN, *The Death of the Messiah*, New York, Doubleday, vol. 2, pp. 1083-1088.

25. S.P. AHEARNE-KROLL, *The Psalms of Lament in Mark’s Passion: Jesus’ Davidic Suffering* (Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series, 142), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 207-208.

26. *Das Markusevangelium* (Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, 2), Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 2007, pp. 400-401. There is no real argument in Dschulnigg’s commentary, except for the fact that Jesus’ cry in Mark 15,34 immediately lead to misunderstanding in later tradition, which is shown indirectly by the fact that Luke and John replaced it. Reference for a similar analysis is given to R. PESCH, *Das Markusevangelium* (HTK NT, II,2), Freiburg – Basel – Wien, Herder, 1977, p. 495 (“historisch beglaubigt”) and p. 501

some arguments in favour of an early Jewish-Christian origin and of “the authenticity of the tradition”: the timing of the outcry (ninth hour), the transliterated Aramaic, the unlikelihood of Christians putting a cry of despair on the lips of Jesus²⁷. L. Schenke opines that allusions to scripture are an indication of the oldest (not neutral but polemical and apologetic) account. Thus the Aramaic in verse 34a (including the temporal reference to the ninth hour) belongs to the original Passion Narrative.

It is no surprise that the *Jesus Seminar* considers the variety in Jesus’ last words (Mark 15,34 = Matt 27,46; Luke 23,46; John 19,28,30) as an illustration of the freedom of the individual evangelists²⁸. But their opinion is not at all innovative. According to R. Bultmann, vv. 34-35.36b are later additions because all the scriptural references are redactional additions and indicate a non-historical secondary layer in the text²⁹. A. Yarbro Collins’ idea that “Jesus’ cry of abandonment in v. 34 is probably a secondary elaboration of the wordless or unreported cry in v. 37” is an echo of E. Schweizer’s comment in 1967³⁰. Collins thinks the earliest Passion Narrative ended with the rending of the veil, a sign which implied the vindication of Jesus (not the destruction of the temple). Since the Elijah theme is part of the whole gospel, vv. 34-36 are a Markan composition: “It appears

(“authentisches Wort”); C.E.B. CRANFIELD, *The Gospel according to St Mark: An Introduction and Commentary* (Cambridge Greek Testament Commentaries), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1959, p. 458.

27. R.H. GUNDRY, *Mark: A Commentary for His Apology on the Cross*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1993, pp. 964-966; G. LOHFINK, *Der letzte Tag Jesu: Was bei der Passion wirklich geschah*, Stuttgart, KBW, 2005, 2007, pp. 58-59: “Viel wahrscheinlicher ist, dass Psalm 22 nur deshalb schon so früh ein derart entscheidende Rolle für die theologische Deutung des Sterbens Jesu spielt, weil ihn Jesus tatsächlich am Kreuz gebeten hat”. J.D.G. DUNN, *Jesus Remembered*, Grand Rapids, MI – Cambridge, Eerdmans, 2003, p. 780: “Of the seven ‘last words’, the one with strongest historical claim is certainly the only one attested by Mark/Matthew”. The most important argument is “the great improbability that tradition would have assigned to Jesus such a saying except under the warrant of the best testimony” (V. TAYLOR, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark*, London, Macmillan, 1952, p. 594).

28. R.W. FUNK – R.W. HOOVER – the JESUS SEMINAR, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say? The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, Santa Rosa, CA, Polebridge Press, 1993, p. 126. See also B.L. MACK, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins*, Philadelphia, PA, Fortress, 1988, p. 296: “This [= Mark 15,6-39] is the earliest narrative there is about the crucifixion. It is a Markan fabrication”; M. BORG – J.D. CROSSAN, *The Last Week*, New York, HarperCollins, 2006, p. 158: the references to Ps 22 are seen “as the product of Mark’s use of the psalm as a way of interpreting the death of Jesus”.

29. R. BULTMANN, *Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957, pp. 304, 342.

30. *Mark* (Hermeneia), Minneapolis, MN, Fortress, 2007, p. 753. E. SCHWEIZER, *Markus* (NTD, 1), Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967, p. 203: “Hier liegt die Vermutung nahe, dass die Gemeinde den unartikulierten Schrei Jesu in ihrer alttestamentlichen Passionsdarstellung (vgl. zu V. 24) wiederfand und ihm so Worte verlieh”; = *The Good News According to Mark*, Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox, 1970, p. 351: “We may easily suspect that the church derived the content of Jesus inarticulate cry from the description of the Passion which the church found in the Old Testament (cf. vs. 24) and thus attributed the words to him”.

that the cry of Jesus in v. 34 was added, among other reasons, to prepare for the deliberate misunderstanding and mockery reported in vv. 35–36”³¹.

One of the arguments sometimes used in favour of the authenticity of the verse is the use of Aramaic³². Thus, according to Gundry, “the OT imbued first century Jewish culture so thoroughly (cf. the prominence of OT phraseology in 1QH, for example), that we should regard Jesus’ use of OT phraseology as highly probable. From this standpoint, then, the use of Ps 22:2(1) does not call in question the authenticity of Mark 15:34”³³. But the Aramaic could also be explained at a redactional level. There might be several reasons why the evangelist would have used this version of the Psalm: to give the impression of historical authenticity³⁴ or to show Jesus as a pious Jew praying a Psalm in his native tongue at the moment of crisis³⁵ or to explain the misunderstanding of the bystanders who thought that Jesus was calling Elijah³⁶.

R.E. Brown’s study, which serves for many authors as the reference work for historical research on the Passion, leaves the reader with an enigma. The author thinks there is no possibility, on the basis of the arguments pro and con, to establish the last *ipsissima verba* of Jesus³⁷, but “the best alternative”, “if one is not going to accept that Jesus himself cited Ps 22:2 before he died (a possibility not to be discounted)”, is to suppose that he said something like “My God” (Hebrew *Eli*) or “You are my God” (Hebrew *Eli atta*; cf. Ps 22,11; 63,2)³⁸. However, this hypothesis,

31. *Mark* (n. 30), p. 753.

32. With the majority of scholars we consider 15,34a as an Aramaic text. See for instance CAREY, *Jesus’ Cry* (n. 4), pp. 150–152. This verse is the only quotation in Aramaic in Mark. Other Aramaic words are found in 5,41 (*talita koem*); 7,34 (*effata*); 14,36 (*Abba*). But J. MARCUS, *Mark 8–16* (Anchor Yale Bible), New Haven, CT – London, Yale University Press, 2009, p. 1054: “the original Marcan text may have been a mixture of Hebrew (*lema*) and Aramaic (*Eloï, sabachthani*)”.

33. GUNDRY, *Apology* (n. 27), p. 965.

34. FOCANT, *Mark* (n. 21), p. 641: “as if to suggest its authenticity”.

35. CAREY, *Jesus’ Cry* (n. 4), pp. 154–155.

36. E. STRUTHERS MALBON, *Mark’s Jesus: Characterization as Narrative Christology*, Waco, TX, Baylor University Press, 2014, pp. 186–187, n. 96: “The use of Aramaic perhaps imparts an ‘authentic’ flavor to the story of Jesus [...]. However, the use of Aramaic in the cry from the cross serves another function as well: explaining the misconception of the bystanders”. For Gundry, at the historical Jesus level, it was “in the hubbub surrounding three simultaneous crucifixions” that some thought that Jesus – who was calling *Eloï* – was calling Elijah (*Apology* [n. 27], p. 967).

37. See also YARBRO COLLINS, *Mark* (n. 30), p. 754: “We have no way of knowing what the historical Jesus actually felt as he died or what his last words on the cross, if any, were”; CAREY, *Jesus’ Cry* (n. 4), pp. 27–28, n. 47: “there is no way to determine if the historical Jesus actually uttered this citation”.

38. BROWN, *The Death of the Messiah* (n. 24), vol. 2, pp. 1086–1088. He sees a double “advantage” in this proposal: (1) it traces back to Jesus a basic wording that shows similarity with the Gospel tradition, and (2) it is in agreement with all the Gospels in having Jesus speak words before he dies (p. 1088). A similar interpretation is found in LOHFINK, *Der letzte Tag* (n. 27), p. 59.

which has the advantage of explaining more logically the phonetic misunderstanding by the bystanders, is “purely arbitrary”³⁹. Moreover, when the reaction of those hearing Jesus’ words is considered as a conscious misunderstanding with the intention to mock Jesus (and not as a simple accidental consequence of phonetic confusion), there is no reason at all to make any conjecture about the historical wording.

In summary, one can say that the same arguments are used both for and against the authenticity of the citation of Ps 22. The problem with the verse in Mark is that the number of possible intertexts that are found between the “historical” Jesus and Mark’s Jesus put a veil over the “factual” history, a veil which renders any sound reconstruction impossible⁴⁰. Mark’s text does not really seem to help solving the problem. The complexity of Mark’s text caused by the double layer of communication – on the one hand, between the characters in the story that do not understand and, on the other, between the narrator and his readers/audience who knows Jesus is calling God – is, according to R.M. Fowler, an instance of *opacity* in the text⁴¹. And this un-transparent character of the verse as a form of the “rhetoric of indirection” of Mark’s gospel is one of the causes of the divergence between the interpretations: “The degree of variation among scholarly opinion is indicative of the opacity of the text”⁴². But is this variation only due to the opaque quality of the text? Or could it partly be explained by the specific perspective the scholars have on the text? It suffices to compare the introductions of two commentaries on Mark to understand how from the outset two perceptions on Mark’s gospel will unavoidably influence the further interpretation⁴³:

Gundry, *Apology*, 1993, p. 1 (excerpts)

The Gospel of Mark contains no ciphers, no hidden meaning, no sleight of hand:

No messianic secret...

No Christology of irony...

No symbolism...

No open end celebrating faith over verifiability.

Focant, *Mark*, 2012, p. 1, first line

The world to which the gospel of Mark introduces its reader is a world of conflicts and suspense, enigmas and secrets, questions and overturning of evidence, irony and surprise.

In light of the extreme positions concerning the authenticity of these words, the debate concerning the historical questions should first be put

39. FOCANT, *Mark* (n. 21), p. 647.

40. This last critique of Brown’s historical analysis and of historical criticism in general is found in T. THATCHER, *(Re)Mark(s) on the Cross*, in *Biblical Interpretation* 4 (1996) 346-361: “The ‘history’ in Brown’s reading actually refers to a sub-text generated by proposed intertextual links which Brown’s own language renders unstable” (p. 361, Abstract). But for a short critique of Thatcher, see CAREY, *Jesus’ Cry* (n. 4), p. 19.

41. FOWLER, *Let the Reader Understand* (n. 15), pp. 161-162, 213.

42. G.R. WEBB, *Mark at the Threshold: Applying Bakhtinian Categories to Markan Characterization*, Leiden, Brill, 2008, p. 192, n. 52.

43. GUNDRY, *Apology* (n. 27); FOCANT, *Mark* (n. 21).

on a meta-level. Why do scholars attach such an importance to historical problems? How do they see the relationship between history and theology? Of course, there is a general theological approach to that question: Christianity itself is a religious current in which God manifests himself in history. This is based on theological convictions like creation or incarnation or revelation history. But what should one think about the degree of desire or the necessity to know as much as possible about the exact historical events? Does this aspect matter to exegetes in the method they use and in the outcome of their research? When speaking about Mark 15,34, in what sense is it necessary to know whether Jesus had spoken any last words on the cross and, if so, what these words could have been? Or is it sufficient to know that there were early Christians who told stories about Jesus? What would be “lost” – apart from the historical transparency – if one would conclude that it is impossible or irrelevant that we can or should know the exact words Jesus had spoken on the cross⁴⁴?

2. *The Whole of Psalm 22 or Just the First Verse of Psalm 22?*

Although very tightly related to the problem of the meaning of Mark 15,34 (which will be discussed further on), we would like to consider apart the issue of whether Mark (or the Markan Jesus) meant to refer to the first verse of Psalm 22 or to the entire Psalm. It is, indeed, one of the main issues which are debated in almost all commentaries. As J. Marcus writes: something of the context of the Psalm plays a role in Mark’s use of it, “[b]ut how much of the context?”⁴⁵.

In a recent analysis, Holly Carey has focused on this issue. After having made a distinction between a “contextual” interpretation (i.e., the context of the whole of the Psalm) and an “atomistic” interpretation (i.e., only Ps 22,1), she argues on the basis of the following reasons that the first century readers must certainly have heard the whole Psalm: (1) the presence and use of incipits in Qumran and Rabbinic literature; (2) Mark often (not always) gives hints elsewhere in his gospel that the larger context of citations is relevant for interpreting his narrative; (3) Mark’s gospel has other interests which are in line with a “contextual” interpretation (Jesus as Righteous Sufferer; preparation of the readers to anticipate the vindication via resurrection after his death; the inclusion of other allusions of Ps 22 in the Passion Narrative and in the rest of the gospel)⁴⁶. Many

44. See the volume of the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9 (2011). The Editorial Foreword (M.A. Powell) explains the theme: “This issue is devoted to examining a highly significant but often ignored issue in historical-Jesus studies: the question of how evangelical Christian scholars can contribute productively to a historical quest for Jesus that seems to presuppose tenets at variance with the convictions of their faith”.

45. MARCUS, *Mark 8–16* (n. 32), p. 1063.

46. See the summary in CAREY, *Jesus’ Cry* (n. 4), pp. 155-157. I find the categories ‘contextual’ and ‘atomistic’ confusing. Scholars who limit the interpretation of Mark 15,34

authors had already defended the hypothesis that Mark only quotes the beginning of the Psalm but that he clearly presupposes that the whole Psalm is implied⁴⁷. R. Pesch states in his commentary: “unterstellt ist wohl, daß Jesus den ganzen Psalm zu beten beginnt”⁴⁸. The same position is defended more recently by L. Caza (1989)⁴⁹, S.P. Ahearne-Kroll (2006)⁵⁰, M.N. Sabin (2006)⁵¹, P. Dschulnigg (2007), M. Healy (2008)⁵² and B. Standaert (2010)⁵³. In so doing they want to affirm that Jesus on the cross was expressing “the hope that God will vindicate him for all the world to see”⁵⁴. They react against the interpretation which focuses (exclusively or too much) on the solitude or despair of the suffering Jesus. And this reaction is mostly inspired by theological arguments and by the presupposition that the Bible should always be proclaiming faith⁵⁵. The use of fragments of Ps 22 elsewhere in the Passion Narrative offers an argument in favor of this hypothesis.

to the single verse of Ps 22,1 also read it contextually, but the context for them is not Ps 22 but the gospel of Mark.

47. C. FOCANT, *L'ultime prière du pourquoi: Relecture du Ps 22 (21) dans le récit de la Passion de Marc*, in J.-M. AUWERS – A. WÉNIN (eds.), *Lectures et relectures de la Bible. Festschrift P.-M. Bogaert* (BETL, 144), Leuven, University Press – Peeters, 1999, 287-305; = ID., *Marc, un évangile étonnant: Recueil d'essais* (BETL, 194), Leuven, University Press – Peeters, 2006, 321-339, p. 335, n. 63, mentions A. Loisy (1908), M. Dibelius (1933), M.-J. Lagrange (⁶1942), P. Benoit (1947), A. Gelin (1953), H. Gese (1968), J.H. Reumann (1974), L.P. Trudinger (1983) and C. Burchard (1983).

48. *Markusevangelium* (n. 26), vol. 2, p. 494. See also J. GNILKA, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (EKK II/2), Zürich, Benziger, 1979, pp. 309-330.

49. L. CAZA, *Mon Dieu, pourquoi m'as-tu abandonné?* (Recherches. Nouvelle Série 24), Montréal, Bellarmin; Paris, Cerf, 1989; ID., *Le relief que Marc a donné au cri de la croix*, in *Science et Esprit* 39 (1987) 171-191.

50. AHEARNE-KROLL, *The Psalms of Lament* (n. 25), p. 209.

51. M. NOONAN SABIN, *The Gospel according to Mark* (New Collegeville Bible Commentary), Collegeville, MA, Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 145.

52. M. HEALY, *The Gospel of Mark* (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture), Grand Rapids, MI, Baker, 2008, pp. 320-321. The author adds that “this interpretation, while true, cannot be used to soften the scandal of the crucifixion” (320).

53. B. STANDAERT, *Évangile selon Marc. Commentaire* (Études bibliques, NS 61), 3 vols., Pendé, Gabalda, 2010, pp. 1140-1142. The author finds the theme of negative and positive in the whole of the book of Psalms and also in Ps 22. In fact, Standaert considers it to be a Biblical theme in general.

54. CAREY, *Jesus' Cry* (n. 4), p. 156.

55. GNILKA, *Markus* (n. 48), p. 322: “Stirbt Jesus in Verzweiflung? Die theologische Verwertung des gesamten Psalms spricht gegen einde solche Möglichkeit”. Cf. M. DIBELIUS, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* [1931], ⁵1966, pp. 194-195: “– in keinem Fall kommt in diesem Ruf verzweifelte Trostlosigkeit zum Ausdruck, immer ist biblisches Wort Zeugnis des Glaubens”; C. BURCHARD, *Mark 15,34*, in *ZNW* 74 (1983) 1-11. LOHFINK, *Der letzte Tag* (n. 27), p. 59: “Falls Jesus mit Fragmenten des 22. Psalms auf den Lippen gestorben ist, steht fest: Sein Leben endete nicht in Verzweiflung, sonder trotz der unendlichen Not in abgrundtiefem Gottvertrauen: ‘Mein Gott bist du – trotz allem!’”; T.J. GEDDERT, *The Use of Psalms in Mark*, in *Baptistic Theologies* 1 (2009) 109-124, p. 119: “Jesus did not die in despair with a cry of dereliction on his lips, not even in Mark – especially not in Mark”.

The opposite view, that there is no reference to the rest of Ps 22, has also been defended. Here, the influence of R.E. Brown's plea that God "seemingly has left Jesus unsupported" may not be overlooked⁵⁶. Some commentators are clear about this: "to read into these few tortured words an exegesis of the whole psalm is to turn upside down the effect which Mark has created by this powerful and enigmatic cry of agony"⁵⁷. R.T. France is not the only one who thinks so; see R.H. Gundry (1993), B. Witherington (2001)⁵⁸, F. Bigaouette (2004)⁵⁹, C. Focant (2006/2012), R.A. Culpepper (2007), J. Marcus (2009). These scholars too have several arguments: the only citations of Ps 22 in the context of the crucifixion are found in the lamentation part of the Psalm; Mk 15,34 is not a real call for help (Mark could have chosen more adequate texts, like Ps 27,9; 38,22; 71,9.18; ...); the reaction of the bystanders is based on the beginning of the Psalm; the Greek⁶⁰ translation makes clear only the first verse is meant by Jesus. A special argument, often found, is the reversed order of references to Ps 22 in Mark's Gospel⁶¹. Clear references are found in Mark 15,24 (Ps 22,19), Mark 15,29 (Ps 22,7-9, esp. 8b), Mark 15,34 (Ps 22,2a): the cry of dereliction seems to be the result and the climax of the negative mockery scenes preceding the crucifixion. Jesus' cry is the final and deepest expression of all the humiliations he has felt until now. The Christological background

56. BROWN, *The Death of the Messiah* (n. 24), vol. 2, p. 1049. See, e.g., the approval by W.J. HARRINGTON, *Mark: Realistic Theologian. The Jesus of Mark*, Dublin, Columba, 1996, 2002, pp. 134-137.

57. R.T. FRANCE, *The Gospel of Mark* (The New International Greek Testament Commentary), Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2002, pp. 652-653. See already TAYLOR, *Saint Mark* (n. 27), p. 594: "The interpretation which sees in the Cry a final utterance of faith [...] is a reaction from the traditional view which fails to take the saying seriously".

58. B. WITHERINGTON, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Grand Rapids, MI – Cambridge, Eerdmans, 2001, p. 399: there is no explicit mention that only the first verse is intended, but it is clear from his interpretation.

59. BIGAOUETTE, *Le cri* (n. 2), pp. 191-195: "Dans cette perspective, nous sommes alors en droit de penser que Jésus est présenté comme s'étant éprouvé abandonné par Dieu dans l'événement même de sa mort" (pp. 194-195).

60. The Greek translation is based on the Ps 21^{LXX} but has slight variations: repetition of ὁ θεός μου, the omission of πρόσχεε μοι, and the change of ἵνα τί in εἰς τί.

61. For other possible "strong" or "fainter" allusions to Ps 22 in Mark's gospel see CAREY, *Jesus' Cry* (n. 4), pp. 140-150. The argument is found, a.o. in V.K. ROBBINS, *The Reversed Contextualization of Psalm 22 in the Markan Crucifixion: A Socio-Rhetorical Analysis*, in F. VAN SEGBROECK et al. (eds.), *The Four Gospels 1992*. FS Frans Neirynck (BETL, 100), vol. 2, Leuven, University Press – Peeters, 1992, 1161-1183; FOCANT, *Mark* (n. 21), p. 641; THATCHER, *(Re)Mark(s) on the Cross* (n. 40); W.S. CAMPBELL, "Why did you abandon me?": *Abandonment Christology in Mark's Gospel*, in G. VAN OYEN – T. SHEPHERD (eds.), *The Trial and Death of Jesus: Essays on the Passion Narratives of Mark* (CBET, 45), Leuven, Peeters, 2006, 99-117, p. 114; see also A. WÉNIN, *Le Psaume 22 et le récit matthéen de la mort et de la résurrection de Jésus*, in Faculté de théologie Catholique Université de Strasbourg (ed.), *De Jésus à Jésus-Christ. I. Le Jésus de l'Histoire. Actes du colloque de Strasbourg 18-19 novembre 2010* (Jésus et Jésus-Christ. Colloques), Paris, Mame-Desclée, 2010, 59-78, p. 70.

of those who opt for this interpretation is highlighted by their emphasis on “the significance of suffering”⁶².

Looking at the two interpretations, I have the impression that there is not a real dialogue on many points. One group puts all the emphasis on the final result of Mark’s story (the resurrection of Jesus); the other group takes a pause when Jesus dies on the cross. But it must be admitted that in the commentators’ concrete descriptions of how Mark 15,34 should be understood it is not always easy to find the difference between the two approaches. Many are wise enough in wanting to keep together in *the one verse* 15,34 the suffering *and* the victory. This was exactly the purpose of Carey’s study⁶³. She does not want to deny the suffering, but she looks already further in the story and sees the victory on the horizon⁶⁴. But, as a matter of fact, this is only a variant of saying that Jesus is confident that everything is in the hands of the Father who will bring his life to a good end. Others, while putting the main emphasis on the moment of despair, will still accept that the link between Jesus and God is not completely broken, though there is only very little perspective on hope in Jesus’ words. But, so they have to, after all, the cry is a *prayer*: although Jesus does not call God his “Father” (*Abba*) as he did in 14,36, he uses the words “My God, my God” as a form of dialogue⁶⁵.

One other element seems to bridge the gap between representatives of the “contextual” and the “atomistic” interpretations. According to Mark, there is a parallel between Jesus and the figure of the Righteous Sufferer who is vindicated by God in the Hebrew Bible. But the whole discussion turns around the question how much of the idea of vindication is already present in 15,34. For Carey, it cannot be that the implied readers (for her: Mark’s intended real readers) did not hear the motif of vindication already present in the cry on the cross. The analysis is interesting, but how can we be sure about the fact that (1) these readers were accustomed to the use of

62. CULPEPPER, *Mark* (n. 1), p. 559.

63. CAREY, *Jesus’ Cry* (n. 4), pp. 163-164: suffering is taken seriously, but it is only after having demonstrated that the most important theme at the heart of the gospel is the love between the Son and the Father. Donahue and Harrington seem to be sitting on the fence: *Mark* (n. 3), p. 451: “both as the first words of a psalm of lament over real sufferings as well as an expression of trust in God’s power to rescue an innocent sufferer, and as expressing the sentiments that Mark (and his source) regarded as appropriate to Jesus at the moment of his death on the cross”.

64. According to Carey, the meaning of abandonment (considered in a stronger sense as complete removed presence of God *or* in a weaker sense as leaving Jesus helpless) depends on the co-text (i.e. the context) in Mark, since the word “abandon” does not necessarily have the strong meaning. Carey opts for the “helpless situation” since the elements in the context (Mark 15,38: the supernatural event of the tearing of the temple veil; 15,39: the centurion’s confession; 16,6: the announcement of the resurrection): “Jesus has not been abandoned by God in the sense that the presence of God has left him altogether” (*Jesus’ Cry* [n. 4], p. 163).

65. FOCANT, *Mark* (n. 21), p. 642; YARBRO COLLINS, *Mark* (n. 30), p. 755; BROWN, *The Death of the Messiah* (n. 24), p. 1044.

incipits in Qumran and Rabbinic literature and (2) that Mark used the same procedure in this particular case in his gospel? Of course, the motif of vindication is present in the gospel, but does it necessarily point to a “contextual reading” of Ps 22 in *Mark 15,34*: are the vindication and triumphant aspect present in 15,34 or do they come later in Mark, when God will act? The theme of the Righteous Sufferer *in se* is not enough an argument to defend the idea that the whole Psalm is involved, for there are scholars with an “atomistic” interpretation who accept the Righteous Sufferer motif in the Passion Narrative. J. Marcus, for instance, writes⁶⁶:

But while it seems likely that the psalm’s ending was in Mark’s mind as he continued his story, that victorious ending must not be allowed to override its distressed beginning in exegesis of Jesus’ cry of dereliction. This psalm, like several other Righteous Sufferer laments (e.g., Psalms 6, 31, 69, 71, and 130), has near its end a transition point from complaint to praise; the confidence that the speaker possesses at the termination is not available to him at the start, but only comes into being through an act of God in response to his troubled prayer. The Markan Jesus does not quote Psalm 22’s ending but its beginning, and that agonized incipit corresponds perfectly to the situation of torment in which a crucified person finds himself.

R.A. Culpepper agrees. And he does not exclude that the theme of the Righteous sufferer goes together with the general theme of abandonment in the gospel of Mark⁶⁷.

We are confronted with a similar opposition as was the case with the question of authenticity. The same text provokes a completely different exegesis. “An interpreter’s decision here is crucial”⁶⁸. How is this possible and how do scholars decide? Once again we would like to ask some questions that go beyond the enumeration of the arguments. It is clear that the choice for one of the interpretations is not made solely on the basis of a reading of the single verse Mark 15,34. The choice is part of a larger perspective on the text of Mark, more specifically on the character of Jesus in his relationship to God (Christology) and on the character of God as such and his relationship to the world and humankind (theology). Since the text itself quotes only the beginning of the Psalm, one could say that

66. *Mark 8–16* (n. 32), pp. 1063-1064. Cf. FOCANT, *Mark* (n. 21), p. 642: “This invocation in the form of a question is motivated by evil treatments that are themselves expressed in the words of Psalm 22 and that present the killed king of the Jews as a *righteous sufferer*” (italics GVO).

67. *Mark* (n. 1), pp. 558-559; see also e.g. M.S. RINDGE, *Reconfiguring the Akedah and Recasting God: Lament and Divine Abandonment in Mark*, in *JBL* 130 (2011) 755-774; CAMPBELL, *Abandonment Christology* (n. 61); HALEY, *Mark* (n. 1), p. 320: “the climax of his progressive isolation throughout the passion narrative”. But see CAREY, *Jesus’ Cry* (n. 4), pp. 158-159, who thinks this is only a secondary theme. Note that Culpepper adds a second theme as a basic background for the interpretation of the death of Jesus: the assurance of God’s presence within the persecuted community (see further on in this article).

68. STRUTHERS MALBON, *Mark’s Jesus* (n. 36), p. 187.

the burden of proof lies on the side of those who are in favor of a reading of the whole of the psalm. But adherents of *both* interpretations will have to find their arguments within the context. In this sense, the search for the meaning of 15,34 is an interesting case for reader-response critics, since it is clear that the readers themselves have a huge job to do in order to understand the meaning of the verse⁶⁹. And it is also clear that the meaning of the verse has implications that reach far beyond those few words. The more one discovers that the role of the reader is required in the construction of meaning, the more the hermeneutical background in which exegesis is embedded comes in sight. The interpretation of Mark 15,34 involves hermeneutical exercises, since the relationship between exegesis and theology is at the heart of the question. And in this relationship the problem of what comes first – exegesis or theology – is like the question of the chicken or the egg.

So what is really at stake in the confrontation of the two interpretations? The fundamental question seems to be the humanity of Jesus in relation to God⁷⁰: according to Mark, is it possible that Jesus has ever been so human that he might have doubted about God's power to save him? In Mark's perspective, would it have been possible that Jesus as a human person had the experience "as if God were not there"?

3. *Mark 15,34 within the Gospel of Mark*

Most interpreters of Mark 15,34 opt for either of the two interpretations⁷¹, but they all pretend to find their arguments in the text of Mark. And in a certain sense, both groups are right. There is a tension in Mark's gospel between (at least) two story lines with regard to the relationship

69. J. DEWEY – E. STRUTHERS MALBON, *Mark*, in G.L. O'DAY – D.L. PETERSEN (eds.), *Theological Bible Commentary*, Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox, 2010, 311-324, see p. 323: "Jesus' cry [...] is open to various interpretations. The internal characters hear 'Eloi, Eloi' ('My God, my God,' in Aramaic) as 'Elijah' (Mark 15:34-36). Some external interpreters hear total devastation; others hear not just the first verse of Ps. 22 but an allusion to the entire psalm, which ends with assurance and a vow to 'proclaim [God's] deliverance to a people yet unborn' (Ps 22:31). How audience members interpret will affect their understanding of the story's meaning".

70. Struthers Malbon notes that most commentators agree that the cry is the manifestation of Jesus complete humanity and of the stark reality of his death. The debate turns around the question of the relationship between God and Jesus; *Mark's Jesus* (n. 36), p. 186. – We are aware that we are limiting ourselves to one specific but essential element of the cry. We are not talking about other aspects, such as the idea uttered by Gundry that the meaning Jesus' cry is "a remarkable exhibition of strength" by the Son of God who acts in a superhuman way at the moment of his death (*Apology* [n. 27], pp. 947-948), or Marcus' opinion "that Jesus, on the cross, suffers such a sudden and intense Satanic assault that he becomes in some ways like a man possessed" (*Mark 8-16* [n. 32], p. 1063), or the more wide-spread eschatological interpretation of the passage (see already BROWN, *The Death of the Messiah* [n. 24], p. 1045).

71. Carey is right in her analysis (see above, n. 000).

between Jesus and God. On the one hand, God and Jesus share the same strong responsibility for the nearness of the Kingdom of God; God is the one who will never abandon his Son; Jesus is the one who submits himself to the will of his Father. On the other, there remains a distinction between the transcendent God and the human person Jesus; there always remains a veil of mystery with regard to Jesus' identity; as a human being Jesus undergoes the same conditions as all human beings, while God seems to act independently from Jesus. Opting for any of these two lines means that one considers them, if not as two conflicting and irreconcilable perspectives on the same reality, at least as two competing ideas. On the basis of Mark's text it is difficult to say which one of the two is better or more correct. Moreover, the impact of 15,34 on Christology and theology is so huge that one could ask if these do not unavoidably determine which story line is to be preferred⁷². While *as such* there is nothing wrong in choosing one option (since both seem to be in agreement with one of Mark's story lines), one could also consider if there is no third way which respects both the transcendent power of God and the full suffering humanity of Jesus as Son of God. Is there a way to think both lines together without suppressing either of them?

When for a moment one puts between parentheses the historical and theological questions and concentrates upon the narrative level, two insights might be helpful. The first is the idea of *narrative perspective*. Some authors – even before the rise of narrative criticism and thus unable to use its vocabulary – clearly distinguish between the (supposed) understanding of the character of Jesus and the understanding at the level of Mark's account (be it intended by the redactor or heard by the audience⁷³). They affirm that Jesus himself fully experienced the abandonment, but that the evangelist did not imply that God abandoned his Son⁷⁴. Although this is a very interesting distinction, the question is if it is in its place regarding the exegesis of the single verse Mark 15,34. It should be noted that this verse is written completely from the perspective of Jesus and it seems too early to confirm already in 15,34 that God is not abandoning Jesus. It remains questionable why Mark would have chosen precisely the opening verse of Psalm 22, if he intended his readers to understand something

72. See, for instance, two recent contributions: C. BÖTTIGHEIMER, *Does God Demand Sacrifice? Interpreting Jesus' Death as a Sacrifice*, in *Theology Digest* 54 (2010) 117-128; J. YOCUM, *A Cry of Dereliction? Reconsidering a Recent Theological Commonplace*, in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (2005) 72-80.

73. W.T. SHINER, *The Ambiguous Pronouncement of the Centurion and the Shrouding of Meaning in Mark*, in *JSNT* 78 (2000) 3-22, pp. 16-17. While not denying the possibility of plural meaning in the verse, why would the words in the mouth of Jesus have a literal meaning in the story and another, more profound meaning for those who have ears to hear? They could be literal for them as well.

74. HALY, *Mark* (n. 1), p. 321, n. 6; AHEARNE-KROLL, *Psalms of Lament* (n. 25), pp. 209-210; S. LÉGASSE, *L'évangile de Marc* (Lectio Divina. Commentaires 5), Tome 2, Paris, Cerf, 1997, p. 973, n. 19.

different. Would he have run the risk of being misunderstood? What if the readers do not catch Mark's intention and feel more empathy with the direct sense of Jesus' words? It is the merit of E. Struthers Malbon to have explored more deeply the phenomenon of plural perspectives in Mark's gospel⁷⁵. Jesus' perspective does not necessarily always have to be identical with God's. She does not want to make a separation between the level of Jesus and that of the real author (or the real audience), which in fact always suggests that the redactional level is the superior one. She radically maintains both aspects together in a deep and mysterious tension created by the implied author of Mark's Gospel: Jesus' loneliness at the moment of his death, audible in the cry of abandonment, and God's presence at this same moment of Jesus' death (notable in the phenomena that accompany Jesus' death). The advantage of this approach is that there is no need to split the meaning of the text in Mark 15,34, since both aspects belong to the implied author's strategy of keeping them together. According to her, it is through the arrangement of narrative events that the stereophonic message of Jesus' death is proclaimed:

(1) Jesus dies a real and horrible death, abandoned by his disciples and by his God; and (2) in Jesus' death, God is still present – through Jesus' death God still acts. The implied author has put the first message on the lips of the Markan Jesus and the second in the words of the narrator. Some interpreters hear one voice louder than the other. The voices are not blended or harmonized but presented in tension, a tension that can be dramatically experienced by the implied audience. It would be a disservice to the simple complexity of the Markan narrative to drown out one voice or the other, or to otherwise "resolve" this tension. This tension is the mystery that is given in the Markan narrative.

This analysis is only possible within a framework where God and Jesus act independently and where God is not dependent on the force of a human person, not even if this person is called by the narrator the Son of God. The two perspectives together show how Mark has emphasized both the extreme human aspect of the suffering Jesus who feels abandoned by God *and* the transcendent character of God, i.e., his strangeness, his otherness, his autonomy⁷⁶. And this leads us to the second insight which is sometimes found in the interpretation of Mark 15,34: paradox.

The denominator *paradox* for the meaning of Mark 15,34 is a second way to express the overall impossibility of giving a full and single explanation of the verse. Paradoxical statements express the desire to keep together two elements which as such cannot be kept together. Through his death by crucifixion Jesus' life is finished, and yet, in this death God

75. On our passage, see *Mark's Jesus* (n. 36), pp. 188-190.

76. DRIGGERS, *Following God* (n. 18), pp. 99-102 ("Mark's Audience and the Mystery of God").

continues to be present in the world. But this second idea is not expressed in Jesus' words. God also acts independently of Jesus⁷⁷. Looking at 15,34 within the paradoxical message of Mark opens new perspectives for the theology and Christology in Mark's gospel. It takes away the notion of divine necessity in the life, passion and resurrection of Jesus⁷⁸. It renders full freedom to God who acts with love for Jesus. It renders full freedom to Jesus who lives with love for God. The advantage of this approach is that theological reflections about sin or atonement which are sometimes read in Mark are left aside⁷⁹. R.T. France who wrote his commentary on Mark as a "theologically sympathetic reader" (p. 2) adds the following enlightening comments about Jesus' cry:

[...] in recording this last utterance he [Mark] has set up the supreme paradox of his paradoxical story. [...] But that cry in itself remains unexplained, unless it be by reflection back over a narrative in which Jesus' death has been repeatedly declared to be the goal of his ministry, in which Scripture must be fulfilled, and the purpose of which has been hinted at in tantalizingly brief statements about a ransom for many (10:45) and about the blood of the covenant (14:24). There are raw materials here for constructing a theological understanding of Jesus' death within which the stark words of v. 34 may find a place, but Mark gives us no help in constructing it. His theology of the cross remains expressed in paradox⁸⁰.

But this theological reconstruction [of the doctrine of atonement], though based on hints Mark has given earlier in his story as Jesus has spoken of what lies ahead of him at Jerusalem, goes far beyond anything he is willing to spell out at this point. He wants us to feel Jesus' agony, not to explain it⁸¹.

77. STRUTHERS MALBON, *Mark's Jesus* (n. 36), p. 189: "The Markan narrator affirms that the presence of God does not depend on the knowledge or emotional experience of the Markan Jesus".

78. On "Divine necessity or human inevitability?" see BORG – CROSSAN, *The Last Week* (n. 28), pp. 159-163.

79. On the theological level one of the interpretations of Jesus' death that was spread in larger circles is that Jesus became sin (e.g., by absorbing the sin of the world into himself); CULPEPPER, *Mark* (n. 1), p. 558: "popular in evangelical preaching"; TAYLOR, *Mark* (n. 27), p. 594: "maintained by Lutheran and Reformed theologians". As a consequence God had to abandon Jesus. But the majority of scholars agree that there are not enough elements in Mark's Gospel to support such a view. Culpepper rightly notes that the theme of "sin" is not present in Mk 10,45. It is found in 1,4-5 and 2,5-10, but Jesus' death is never a condition for the forgiveness of sins. WITHERINGTON, *Mark* (n. 58), p. 399: "abandoned to the fate of the sinner"; contrast GUNDRY, *Apology* (n. 27), p. 964: "But nowhere in Mark is Jesus said to bear the sins of others".

80. *Mark* (n. 57), p. 650.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 653. Interestingly enough, J. Marcus (*Mark 8-16* [n. 32], p. 1064) has similar comments on the paradoxical meaning of Jesus' cry but he adds that the "cry of dereliction becomes good news, and this probably has to do with Mark's Pauline soteriology" (identification with human lostness, ransom for many, slave-like accursed condition, redemption of humanity). – On the aspect of "feeling" the agony of Jesus, see the testimony of W. Shiner who describes what happens when performing this passage: "I have one line to express the suffering of Jesus. I muster up every ounce of pain I have felt in my life and

Using the category of paradox in order to emphasize the mysterious character of Mark's gospel, it is not a matter of weakness on the part of the interpreter, as if he were to refuse to take a decision in one way or another. It is, rather, a category to express that Jesus' question could not be explained by any speculative reason: "The last words of Jesus in the gospel of Mark are the ultimate prayer of *why*"⁸². In this sense, there is no formal answer from God to the question put by Jesus "in a loud voice"⁸³. In Mark 15,34, we are confronted with another case of Markan irony which is able to turn readers who would pretend to know more than the characters in the gospel, into non-understanding persons: "Yet, while the hearing-reader may perceive more than the bystanders (who misinterpret Jesus' words), the author uses irony-as-form-of-silence at this point. The meaning of the quoted words *for the Markan Jesus* has become an issue for continuing debate: even hearing-readers may hear Jesus' 'voice' but not fully understand it!"⁸⁴. Thus, Jesus' cry of abandonment expresses the experience of God's absence together with God's continuing presence within the gospel and becomes an example of the most mystical expression of God's reality⁸⁵.

One particular dimension of Mark's text has not yet been mentioned explicitly: the meaning of the text in the praxis of everyday life. Some people might assert after the above analysis that a literary approach to the text, especially if the latter is considered to be a paradoxical statement, is an exegesis without any commitment. But there is no serious reason why a literary analysis would exclude the performative power of the text. On the contrary, the discovery that a full understanding of Jesus' words on the cross is veiled by the paradox within the verse itself opens this text for dimensions other than reading or theologizing. Rather, through reading one should discover how the text should mean something in life, since "to

cry in a loud voice, 'Eloi! Eloi! Lema sabachthani?' Then I get to repeat it in English: 'My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?' (15:34). It is very cathartic for me, though it may be disconcerting for the audience. [...] Mark puts me in the place of Jesus in the one way I can feel directly" (*Proclaiming the Gospel* [n. 17], pp. 182-183).

82. FOCANT, *Mark* (n. 21), p. 642.

83. N. WILKINSON DURAN, *The Power of Disorder: Ritual Elements in Mark's Passion Narrative*, London – New York, T&T Clark, 2008, p. 107: "Central to their [i.e. the disciples'] incomprehension and ours is a failure to understand the necessity for Jesus' death. As readers privy to the narrator's translation, we understand Jesus' question from the cross, but we wait in vain to hear an answer. Why, indeed, has God forsaken him? No matter how many times Jesus reiterates that all of this suffering is 'necessary', we are at a loss to understand why it should be so, and, as with the meaning of the bread and for the most part the parables, no effort is made to explain it to us".

84. WEBB, *Threshold* (n. 42), p. 192.

85. See SCHWEIZER, *Markus* (n. 30), pp. 204-205; = *Mark*, p. 353: "This cry clings to the fact that God is real in all times, even in those times when neither experience nor thought can lay hold on him. [...] This passage presents the search for a faith which knows that God is real even in times when the believer feels forsaken and when the resources of thinking and experience have been exhausted".

read and to experience are not the same thing, particularly when the experience is torture”⁸⁶. Several authors have rightly noticed the community-building force of Jesus’ words when he is crying out that he is abandoned by God. Mark “contains hints that the death of Jesus should serve as a model for his followers”⁸⁷. And he reminds the suffering community who feels abandoned by God “that Jesus felt abandoned in his suffering as well, and God, just as he was not acting to prevent their suffering, had not acted to prevent Jesus’ death”. But “[t]he Lord had not abandoned the persecuted community; just as the Father had not abandoned His Son, even though he had felt abandoned”⁸⁸.

All along our analysis we have considered three kinds of interpretation of Mark 15,34: the “positive” one, in which Jesus is expressing his confidence in God, the “negative”, in which Jesus expresses his feeling of abandonment, and the “paradoxical”, in which the abandonment felt by Jesus is followed by God’s independent action as an incomprehensible mystery. This article is written in a Western-European context in which suffering or persecution for the sake of Jesus or the gospel is not among our daily experiences. This is a position that is not conducive to experience how Mark 15,34 would function in practice. Would that explain the special attraction by the third interpretation in which the *mystery* about the relationship between Jesus and God is accentuated (even if it would be perfectly understandable why colleagues choose one of the two other interpretations)? It is not impossible, since the *Sitz im Leben* in the Western world is more and more determined by a feeling of being abandoned by God – if only they are aware of it, since the “absence” of God is more a consequence of indifference than the result of a situation of suffering. In these circumstances where God seems to have abandoned his people, the chances for Mark’s story to survive are better if one does not have clear traditional theological answers but just takes a pause to repeat Jesus’ question “My God, my God, why have you abandoned us?”. While confessing we do not understand, this non-understanding could perhaps create openings to experience God anew in unexpected ways⁸⁹.

86. WILKINSON DURAN, *The Power of Disorder* (n. 83), p. 112: “We do not follow Jesus to the cross and through the tomb by merely reading the gospel. [...] The prominence of ritual elements in Mark’s Passion place a premium on experience as a requisite for understanding. [...] [T]ruth for Mark is an act, not a thought or belief; it is found in bodies, not in words. What it means is thus amenable to conscious thought – it must be experienced, and it is only to the limited extent that we experience by reading that we understand the point”. For some reflections on the meaning of the text for “Mark’s authorial audience” in a situation of persecution, see RINDGE, *Reconfiguring Akedah* (n. 67), pp. 771-774.

87. YARBRO COLLINS, *Mark* (n. 30), p. 755.

88. CULPEPPER, *Mark* (n. 1), p. 559.

89. On the topic of understanding Mark 15,34 in a modern context, see W. FRITZEN, *Von Gott verlassen? Das Markusevangelium als Kommunikationsangebot für bedrängte Christen*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 2008, esp. pp. 366-378.

IV. MARK 15,34 AND THE REAL READER: THE RESULTS OF AN EMPIRICAL SURVEY

Jesus' cry that God has abandoned him in Mk 15,34 creates a paradox and many questions for the readers. What is the meaning and function of Jesus' last words? In the first part of this essay, the many problems and the variety of interpretations this verse has aroused were presented. One important question remains: is it possible to explain such different positions concerning the interpretation of Mk 15,34? In the present contribution, we hypothesize that the *Sitz im Leben* of the real reader, or in other words, a person's individual characteristics and beliefs, play a role in explaining these differences. We do not argue that individual traits account for all the differences nor that they are the only explanation, but that they at least play some role.

This hypothesis may sound surprising to the exegetes' ear because they build their judgment using a scientific and rigorous method trying to be as objective as possible, i.e. not to be influenced by personal feelings and experiences. However, it is a well-established fact in social sciences, such as psychology or anthropology, that complete objectivity is impossible to achieve⁹⁰. Exegetes may not be the exception to the rule. The present study aims to explore this question directly by collecting quantifiable data through a questionnaire.

Before summarizing the results of the questionnaire, we would like to give three general introductory remarks about our working procedure, since we are aware that the contribution of empirical research in exegesis is rather innovative and therefore questionable⁹¹. Firstly, we understand

90. W.F. MCCOMAS, *The Principal Elements of the Nature of Science: Dispelling the Myths*, in *The Nature of Science in Science Education*, 2002, 53-70. See, for instance, S. OISHI – K. SEOL – M. KOO – F. M. MIAO, *Was He Happy? Cultural Differences in the Conceptions of Jesus*, in *Journal of Research in Personality* 45 (2011) 84-91: the authors clearly indicated that cultural differences account for the differences in perception of Jesus' well-being and happiness.

91. Studies making the link between empirical data (on personal characteristics or other) and biblical exegesis are rarely found in the 'classic' journals or series of Biblical exegesis. And until now, these studies are not focused on the role of the scholars themselves in the interpretations, but rather on the relation between other specific target groups like students, preachers or pastoral workers and their interpretation of the Bible. See, e.g., A. VILLAGE – L.J. FRANCIS, *The Relationship of Psychological Type Preferences to Biblical Interpretation*, in *JET* 18 (2005) 74-89; L.J. FRANCIS – S.H. JONES, *Reading and Proclaiming the Resurrection: An Empirical Study in Psychological Type Theory among Trainee and Experienced Preachers Employing Mark 16 and Matthew 28*, in *JET* 24 (2011) 1-18; J. THEIS, *Biblische Texte verstehen lernen: Eine bibeldidaktische Studie mit einer empirischen Untersuchung zum Gleichnis vom barmherzigen Samaritan* (Praktische Theologie heute, 64), Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 2005. An interesting *sociological* approach of the context of both Biblical scholars and exegesis can be found in P. LASSAVE, *L'appel du texte: Sociologie du savoir bibliste* (Sciences des religions), Rennes, Presses Universitaires Rennes, 2011.

very well that some people might feel rather uncomfortable with such a working method. Indeed, in our discipline in which we usually work in the quietness of libraries and offices, we are not very used to come up with personal histories and background. But still, we think, most of the scholars have (willingly or unwillingly) a personal involvement with the New Testament texts they are working on. They are not (only) studying them as frozen or sterile artifacts from the past, but they are somehow (and each one of them in different degrees) convinced that these texts still have a meaning for today. In this sense, the link with the present time is always inherent to the text. Secondly, there is a growing awareness that exegesis could not and should not be separated from theology. The area of the so-called objective exegesis belongs to the past. Biblical studies cannot be isolated from other disciplines within the larger field of theology or human sciences. Whereas in historical criticism the aim of biblical study was to free oneself from any (dogmatic or theological) presupposition in order to find the “only true universal” meaning of the text, it now becomes more and more acceptable to point out exactly in which theological tradition one stands as a scholar⁹². The logical consequence is that plurality of interpretation has now become the rule. Thirdly, such a questionnaire is not meant to close a debate on scholarly interpretation. On the contrary, its purpose is to create the opportunity to discuss with other colleagues on one specific aspect of the way we are doing exegesis, namely our personal involvement. It is not meant to show that one exegesis is better than the other, but to create a forum, an agora, to learn from each other about possible deeper grounds of why we are doing things the way we are doing them. This article is an invitation to a dialogue between scholars and, in this sense, will always be a work under construction.

1. *A Working Hypothesis*

We hypothesized that the endorsement of a specific interpretation of Mark 15,34 will also depend on the individual’s personal characteristics and general theology and Christology. The aim of the present study was not to formulate specific hypothesis regarding the different individual characteristics and beliefs investigated. Indeed, our goal is not to understand why, for example, Roman Catholic exegetes would favour one type of interpretation compared to Protestants. It is simply to provide evidence that the religious affiliation of the reader plays a role in the interpretation he or she will favour.

92. See for instance D.C. JACKSON, *The Gospel of Mark: Baptist Voices in Biblical Scholarship*, in *Review and Expositor* 107 (2010) 323-340; *Multicultural Perspectives on Reading the Bible*, Issue of *Interpretation* 65/3 (July 2011).

2. *The Questionnaire: Methodology*

a) Participants and Procedure

As the topic we investigated is highly specialized, we chose to restrict our sample to critical readers. All participants of the questionnaire were researchers (mainly members of the SBL Markan Group) and research master students in Biblical exegesis. An online anonymous questionnaire was created and the link was e-mailed to approximately 100 possible attendees of the Gospel of Mark Group at the Society for Biblical Literature annual meeting, San Francisco, 2011, of which Geert Van Oyen is a member. The survey was also sent to 20 other persons: professors and research master students in Biblical Studies of both the Catholic University of Leuven (Leuven, Belgium) and the Université catholique de Louvain (Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium). The questionnaire took some 15 minutes to be completed. Participants were explicitly told that we were interested in their personal opinion and not in what they thought they should answer. However, they were not explicitly told that we were interested in whether their personal background would play a role in the interpretation they would favour.

b) Measures: The Questionnaire Was Composed of Three Different Parts

– *Questions regarding the more specific interpretation of Mark 15,34*

The items reflect the different major positions found in the literature, as presented in the first part of this article. Then, the questions were reviewed for their formulation, neutrality, and representativity, by three independent judges. For all items, the scale used was a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Here are the different categories of questions: A) Three items investigated the historicity of the citation of Ps 22,2 in Mark 15,34a. A fourth item measured the importance of knowing if the citation of Ps 22,2 in Mark 15,34a is an authentic word of the historical Jesus. B) Two questions assessed whether in Mk 15,34 the reader should understand the whole of Ps 22 or only the first verse of the Psalm. We created a single score by subtracting results for question 1 from results for question 2. The new scale ranges from –4 to 4, –4 meaning that only the verse 1 is implied and 4 that the whole Ps 22 is implied. C) Four items asked for the meaning of Mk 15,34: expression of despair, confidence/hope on Jesus' side, another Markan paradox?

– *Questions assessing general beliefs (theology and Christology)*

Six items measured the degree to which people endorse particular theologies and Christologies derived from Mk 15,34. Three items assessed the meaning of the abandonment of Jesus and four items the meaning of the death of Jesus.

– *Relevant individual characteristics*

Some basic background information was collected: religious denomination (choice between Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Non-Christian, Agnostic); activity as a minister in a church or in a religious community (*yes* or *no*); teaching a course on the Gospel of Mark (*yes* or *no*). In addition, there was a general question concerning the Bible: is it primarily the Word of God or a book shaped by the human enterprise (forced choice between the two). Finally, we investigated a psychological construct: the image of God⁹³. The “Image of God” was assessed through three items from each of the three subscales of the *God Image Scale* (Lawrence, 1997):

(1) Presence: God does not answer when I call (reverse-scored); God is always there for me; I can feel God deep inside of me;

(2) Acceptance: I am confident of God’s love for me; I am not good enough for God to love (reverse-scored); even when I do bad things, I know God still loves me;

(3) Challenge: God wants me to achieve all I can in life; I think human achievements are a delight to God; God doesn’t mind if I don’t grow very much (reverse-scored).

Participants were asked to answer the questions according to their *personal experience* of God and rate their degree of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale (*strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*). Given the poor validity of the “Challenge subscale” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .26$), we chose to not include it into our analyses. In addition, we decided, based on the exploratory factor analysis, to compute a single mean score for the subscales Presence and Acceptance. Reliability for both subscales was satisfactory (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .63$). The score reflects the general tendency to see God as present and loving.

In addition, we included basic demographic questions, i.e. age, sex, country of work, mother tongue. Finally, at the very end of the questionnaire, we also added two questions regarding whether participants acknowledge that their religious background influences their exegesis in general (question 1) and their exegesis of Mk 15,34 in particular (question 2). They had to answer on a 5-point scale: *not at all*; *a little bit*; *more or less*; *a lot*; *completely or totally*.

3. *The Questionnaire: The Results*

– *Statistical analyses*

We used two different methods to analyse the results based on the types of variables investigated. For continuous variables, like Likert type scales,

93. We refer to R.T. LAWRENCE, *Measuring the Image of God: The God Image Inventory and the God Image Scales*, in *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 25 (1997) 214-226. The image of God refers to “a psychological working internal model of the sort of person that the individual imagines God to be”. The image of God is different from the concept of God which is “an intellectual, mental-dictionary definition of the word God” (p. 214).

we computed bivariate correlations. For dichotomous variables, we computed independent sample t-test.

– *Participants' description*

A total of 63 participants took part in the study. The participants had the following characteristics: 39 Protestants, 17 Roman Catholics, 2 Orthodox, 1 non-Christian, 3 agnostics, and 1 other; 49 men and 14 women; 10 students, 53 professional exegetes. Age: 20-30 = 12; 30-40 = 17; 40-50 = 9; 50-60 = 13; 60-70 = 7; older than 70 = 5. Most participants are from the USA (34), but there are also many participants from Belgium (15) and Ireland (7). The rest of the participants are from Canada, the Netherlands, Britain, Sweden, and Costa Rica. A total of 39 participants are or used to be Ministers in the Church or in a religious community. A total of 25 participants are currently teaching courses on the Gospel of Mark.

a) Preliminary notes

- *According to you, does your religious background influence your exegesis in general?*
- *According to you, does your religious background influence your exegesis of Mark 15:34 in particular?*

Globally, the majority of the participants acknowledge the fact that their religious background influences their exegesis in general (only 10% answered *not at all*; mean for the sample is around *more or less*) and their exegesis of Mk 15,34 in particular (14% answered *not at all*; mean for the sample is around *more or less*). In the following analyses, given the small number of participants who are not Protestant or Catholic, we chose to compare only those two groups (respective *ns* = 39, 17). In addition, as the variable about whether one is teaching on the Gospel of Mark or not never played a significant role, we chose to not report those results.

b) The first analyses that were conducted concerned the individual characteristics and the interpretation of Mark 15,34.

- *Historicity of the citation of Ps 22,2 in Mark 15,34a and the importance of determining it.*

- *The citation of Ps 22:2 in Mark 15:34a is an authentic word of the historical Jesus.*
- *The citation of Ps 22:2 in Mark 15:34a was created within the Christian community.*
- *The citation of Ps 22:2 in Mark 15:34a is a Markan redactional text.*
- *Is it important to know if the citation of Ps 22:2 in Mark 15:34a is an authentic word of the historical Jesus?*

– Religious denomination. Protestants believe more than Catholics that the citation of Ps 22,2 in Mk 15,34a is an authentic word of the historical Jesus (respectively, $M = 3.6, 2.7$; $SD = 1.0, 1.2$), $t(54) = 2.86$; $p = .006$. The question of the authenticity is also more important for Protestants than for Catholics (respectively, $M = 3.0, 2.3$; $SD = 1.3, 1.0$), $t(54) = 2.03$; $p = .03$. On the contrary, Catholics believe more than Protestants that the citation of Ps22,2 in Mk 15,34a is a Markan redactional text (respectively, $M = 3.2, 2.5$; $SD = 1.2, 0.9$), $t(54) = 2.37$; $p = .02$; and marginally that it has been created within the Christian community (respectively, $M = 3.0, 2.5$; $SD = 1.2, 1.0$), $t(54) = -1, 46$; $p = .07$ (one-tailed).

– Minister of the Church or a religious community. Being a Minister of the church does not affect those questions at the exception of the affirmation that Ps 22,2 is a Markan redactional text, which is less accepted by the participants who are or have been a Minister of the Church (minister of the Church $M = 2.5$; $SD = 1.1$, not minister of the Church $M = 2.7$; $SD = 0.9$), $t(61) = -1.64$; $p = .05$ (one-tailed).

– Bible, word of God or a book shaped by the human enterprise? As one could expect, participants who think that the Bible is primarily the word of God ($n = 39$) think more than those who believe that it is shaped by the human enterprise ($n = 21$), that the citation of Ps 22, 2 in Mk 15,34a is an authentic word of the historical Jesus (respectively, $M = 3.6, 2.8$; $SD = 1.0, 1.3$), $t(58) = 2.79$; $p = .007$. The question of the authenticity is also more important for the former (respectively, $M = 3.1, 2.4$; $SD = 1.2, 1.4$), $t(58) = 2.01$; $p = .05$.

– *In Mk 15,34, should the reader understand the whole of Ps 22 or only the first verse?*

- *When Mark 15:34 cites Ps 22:1, the reader should understand that Mark meant to cite the whole of Psalm 22.*
- *When Mark 15:34 cites Ps 22:1, the reader should limit the interpretation to this verse alone and not take into account the rest of Psalm 22.*

– Religious denomination. Protestants agree a little bit more than Catholics that the whole of Ps 22 is implied in the quote of verse 1 in Mk 15,34 (respectively, $M = 1.0, -0.3$; $SD = 2.0, 2.3$), $t(54) = 2.07$; $p = .04$.

– Minister of the Church or a religious community. There is no significant difference, $p > .32$.

– Bible, word of God or book shaped by the human enterprise? There is no significant difference, $p > .77$.

– *Meaning of Mark 15,34: Is Mk 15,34 in the first place an expression of despair or confidence on Jesus' side? Or is it a case of paradox in the Gospel of Mark?*

- *In the portrayal of Jesus by the evangelist, Mark 15:34 is to be taken literally: Jesus felt abandoned by God as he faced the agony of death.*

- *In the portrayal of Jesus by the evangelist, Mark 15:34 is the expression of an aspect of Jesus' confidence in God.*
- *In the portrayal of Jesus by the evangelist, Mark 15:34 is a sign of despair on Jesus' side.*
- *In the portrayal of Jesus by the evangelist, Mark 15:34 is a cry of hope on Jesus' side.*
- *Mark 15:34 is to be considered as one of Mark's mysterious paradoxes. It leaves the reader with more questions than answers about God's way of acting in the world.*

– Religious denomination. There is no significant difference between Protestants and Catholics on a “positive” (hope) or “negative” (despair) interpretation of Mk 15,34, all $ps > .20$. However, Catholics agree a little more than Protestants to say that Mk 15,34 is one of Mark's mysterious paradoxes (respectively, $M = 4.2, 3.3$; $SD = 0.6, 1.0$), $t(54) = -3.36$; $p = .001$.

– Minister of the Church or a religious community. Compared to the participants who have never been a Minister of the Church, those who are or have been privileged a “positive” interpretation of Jesus' abandonment by agreeing more with the fact that Mk 15,34 is an expression of Jesus' confidence (respectively, $M = 3.5, 3.0$; $SD = 1.0, 1.3$), $t(61) = 1.84$; $p = .04$ (one-tailed), and hope (respectively, $M = 3.1, 2.7$; $SD = 1.2, 1.2$), $t(60) = 1.49$; $p = .07$ (one-tailed) and by agreeing less that Jesus' expression reflected despair (respectively, $M = 2.7, 3.2$; $SD = 1.2, 1.1$), $t(60) = -1.55$; $p = .06$ (one-tailed).

– Bible, word of God or book shaped by the human enterprise? No significant difference was noticed, all $ps > .19$.

– Image of God. The more the participants have an image of God as loving and present, the more they thought that Mk 15,34 is to be taken literally: Jesus felt abandoned by God ($r = .22$, $p = .05$) but also the more they thought that Mk 15,34 is one of Mark's mysterious paradoxes ($r = .21$, $p = .05$). These somewhat surprising findings could be interpreted in different ways. One way is that participants who have experienced a loving and present God project what they would feel if God were not giving a sign.

c) The next analyses concerned the general beliefs (theology and Christology) and the specific interpretation of Mark 15,34

– *Meaning of Jesus' death*

- *Through his death Jesus becomes a model to follow in my life.*
- *Through his death Jesus becomes the one who carries away the sins of the world.*
- *Through his death Jesus shows he is the true Son of God.*
- *Jesus' death shows how the evil human forces can destroy the life of a just man.*

Interestingly, endorsing a positive interpretation of Jesus' death, either as a model to follow in one's own life, or as the one who carries away the sins of the world, or as the revelation that he is the Son of God, is marginally related to seeing in Jesus' words a cry of hope (respectively, $r = .22$, $p = .10$; $r = .25$, $p = .06$; $r = .23$, $p = .08$). It also positively related with the belief that Mk 15,34a is an authentic word of the historical Jesus (respectively, $r = .24$, $p = .06$; $r = .33$, $p = .009$; $r = .28$, $p = .03$) but not a Markan redactional text (respectively, $r = -.26$, $p = .04$; $r = -.40$, $p = .002$; $r = -.25$, $p = .05$). It is also strongly related to the belief that Mark 15,34 is a strong argument in favour of a theology of a "crucified God" (respectively, $r = .43$, $p = .001$; $r = .30$, $p = .02$; $r = .30$, $p = .02$) and of Jesus' divine Sonship (respectively, $r = .41$, $p = .001$; $r = .50$, $p < .001$; $r = .63$, $p < .001$), but not of Jesus' humanity (r s ranging from $-.03$ to $.12$, ns).

– *Theology*

- *Mark 15:34 is the expression of the desperation for the sake of the sinners or the Jews.*
- *Mark 15:34 shows how Jesus surrenders in love to his Father.*
- *Mark 15:34 might not be taken literally since this could weaken the divinity of Jesus.*
- *Mark 15:34 is a strong argument in favor of a "God is crucified" theology.*
- *Mark 15:34 is evidence of Jesus' divine Sonship.*
- *Mark 15:34 is evidence of Jesus' humanity.*

– *Meaning of the abandonment of Jesus*

- *When Mark 15:34 cites Ps 22:1, readers should place the abandonment by God within the general pattern of abandonment by Jesus' supporters in Mark's Gospel.*
- *Jesus' abandonment belongs to the "suffering servant" motif underlying Jesus' passion predictions.*
- *Although Jesus felt abandoned, the suffering of Jesus becomes a model for the Markan community.*

Finally, one's theology of Mk 15,34 is related to specific interpretations of Jesus' words in Mk 15,34a. Those who think that Mk 15,34 is the expression of the desperation for the sake of the sinners or the Jews, tend also to agree more that Mk 15,34 is not a sign of despair ($r = -.31$, $p = .016$), but a cry of hope ($r = .24$, $p = .06$). Similar results are found for those who think that Mk 15,34 shows how Jesus surrenders in love to his Father (despair: $r = -.40$, $p = .002$; hope: $r = .40$, $p = .002$). In addition, participants who think that Mk 15,34 is evidence of Jesus' humanity also agree more that Mk 15,34 has to be taken literally, i.e. Jesus felt abandoned ($r = .48$, $p < .001$) and that the abandonment of Jesus by God should be placed within the general

pattern of abandonment by Jesus' supporters in Mark's Gospel ($r = .43, p = .001$). However, there is no relation between believing that Mk 15,34 is evidence of Jesus' humanity and the belief that a literal interpretation could weaken the divinity of Jesus in general ($r = .07, ns$). On the contrary, those who agree more that Mk 15,34 is evidence of Jesus' divine Sonship also tend to believe that Mk 15,34 might not be taken literally since this could weaken the divinity of Jesus ($r = .35, p = .005$), and to believe more that Mk 15,34 is a cry of hope on Jesus' side ($r = .38, p = .003$).

In addition, still based on the exegesis in the first part of this contribution, we also explored the relations between the different specific interpretations of Mark 15,34. Interesting patterns emerged. In the first part of the paper, it was argued that those who think that Mark or Jesus meant to cite the whole Ps 22 actually react against a "negative" interpretation of the words of Jesus (loneliness and despair). Indeed, results from the survey show very clearly that the more participants thought that the reader should understand the whole of Ps 22 in Mk 15,34, the more they thought that what he said was an expression of confidence ($r = .38, p = .001$) and hope ($r = .38, p = .001$), and less they thought that it was an expression of despair ($r = -.42, p < .001$) or that Jesus felt abandoned ($r = -.37, p = .007$). In addition, they also thought less that Mk 15,34 is one of Mark's mysterious paradoxes ($r = -.29, p = .01$).

Interesting patterns also emerged when the relations between the historicity of Jesus' words and the meaning of these words are studied. Whether one agrees more that Mk 15,34a is an authentic word of the historical Jesus or that it is a Markan redactional text is related to very different interpretations of Jesus' words. In the former case, Jesus' words are believed to be more a sign of confidence ($r = .24, p = .04$) and hope ($r = .24, p = .066$); in the latter case, more a sign of despair ($r = .31, p = .013$) and of abandonment ($r = .27, p = .036$).

Another question concerns why it may be important to know if the citation of Ps 22,2 is an authentic word of the historical Jesus. Clearly and not unsurprisingly, the endorsement of the precedent item was related to the belief that Mk 15,34a is an authentic word of the historical Jesus ($r = .57, p < .001$). The opposite relation was found for those who consider the words as non-authentic (created within the Christian community, $r = -.50, p < .001$; Markan redactional text, $r = -.39, p = .002$). Finally, the interpretation of Jesus as the one who died in despair for the sake of the sinners ($r = .28, p = .03$) and his image as the suffering servant ($r = .25, p = .05$) are two motifs related to the importance of knowing whether Jesus' words were authentic or not.

d) *Discussion*

The goal of this empirical study was to explore the relation between the endorsement of one's interpretation of Jesus's last words and individual characteristics and beliefs. We found that participants' religious

background and beliefs were related to the endorsement of certain interpretations of Mark 15,34. Interestingly, the role of individual characteristics played out differently based on the question asked about Mark 15,34. Indeed, religious affiliation for example was related to the question of historicity of the citation of Ps 22,2 in Mark 15,34a but not to the interpretation of Jesus' words (i.e. hope or despair). Results also showed interesting patterns of answers suggesting that theology and specific interpretations of Mark 15,34 are interrelated. For example, participants who interpreted positively Jesus' death also interpreted his last words as a cry of hope, words that are considered as authentic. Another example is that participants who see Jesus' words as evidence of his humanity also think Jesus felt abandoned, but participants who see Jesus' words as evidence of his divinity also think Jesus felt hope.

Importantly, these results suggest that characteristics not present in the text, here personal demographics and beliefs, were related to specific interpretations of Mark 15,34. Individual characteristics and beliefs are one, certainly not the sole, factor related to the interpretation of Mark 15,34. However, given the correlational nature of the findings, we cannot speak to causality. Regarding the relation between one's theology and the interpretation of a specific text, both causal directions could actually be possible and likely inform each other. Indeed, one's theology informs the way people interpret a specific case but in return, the specific case informs one's more general theology. The same could apply for some individual characteristics such as religious affiliation. Longitudinal studies would be necessary to disentangle causal processes. The present work has other limits that future research could address. One is that the sample of our study was small and some of the effects found were only marginally significant or detected with one-tailed tests. However, one could also argue that despite the small sample, some interesting patterns still emerged. Other, larger studies are necessary to help us better understand the relations between individuals and their interpretation of a text. Finally, other studies could investigate whether the present findings extend to other ambiguous biblical passage. Indeed, given the paradoxical message of Mark 15,34 and the many interpretations that it has received across history, it is a particularly well-suited text to investigate our question. In the present exploratory study, we hypothesized and found support in favor of the idea that the *Sitz im Leben* of the real reader is involved in the act of interpreting Jesus' last words in Mark 15,34.

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ABSTRACT. — XXXXXXXX

