

## **Marc, le théologien.**

### **Une lecture symbolique du récit de Marc (1,9-11; 15,37-39)**

#### **1. Introduction**

I have chosen a subject that I hope it will be of interest for everyone here tonight. The subject of my presentation this evening is to study the way how the evangelist Mark describes and presents the deeds and words of Jesus in his gospel.

In the 19th century, it was thought that Mark was a simple redactor and compiler of the deeds and words of Jesus without any further theological insight. On the other hand, the gospel of John was considered mostly as a theological text that brought forth the meaning of the deeds and words, making emphasis on the "signs" accomplished by Jesus.

The situation began to change by the beginning of the 20th century with the publication of a book by W. Wrede titled "The Messianic Secret". In his book, Wrede noticed a motif in the Gospel of Mark, in which Jesus is portrayed as commanding his followers to maintain silence about his Messianic mission. This was seen as a major theological idea governing the narrative of Mark.

Since then, a number of scholars have sought to determine the main theological idea in the gospel, without reaching a consensus. In any case, what seems to be clear is that the evangelist Mark indeed worked as a theologian more than a simple compiler of traditions.

In this presentation, I will argue in favor of considering Mark as a true theologian. Thus, I think that one should read the gospel of Mark being aware of a deeper meaning in his narrative, even when he does not explain such meaning.

In the case of the fourth gospel, John uses a symbolic language that moves from one basic meaning of a word or an action of Jesus, to a deeper meaning. For example, in the dialogue between Jesus and the samaritan woman, the dialogue moves from "water" to "living water." I will propose here that Mark does something similar in his narrative. As an example of this idea, I will focus on the account of the death of Jesus in Mark 15:37-39.

In my presentation, I propose that the evangelist Mark, describing the death of Jesus on the cross (15:37-39), alludes also to the gift of the Spirit by Jesus, something that had been announced at the beginning of the gospel (1:8). I contend that this is not an allegorical reading of Mark's gospel. There are literary indications that show how Mark really intended to allude to the gift of the Spirit, while leaving it implicit.

## 2. The Centurion's Confession (15:37-39)

<sup>37</sup> Or Jésus, jetant un grand cri, expira.

<sup>38</sup> Et le voile du Sanctuaire se déchira en deux, du haut en bas.

<sup>39</sup> Voyant qu'il avait ainsi expiré, le centurion, qui se tenait en face de lui, s'écria:  
"Vraiment cet homme était fils de Dieu!"

The account of the death of Jesus on the cross is concise, and at the same time, filled with important events. First, Jesus dies giving a loud cry and expiring. Then, the veil of the Temple is torn in two, from top to bottom. And third, the centurion who was standing by the cross saw how Jesus expired and confessed that Jesus was truly God's son.

The recognition by the centurion of Jesus as God's Son is the most noticeable event and at the same time intriguing. Why a non-Jew, who had not even witnessed the miracles of Jesus neither listened to his preaching, would pronounce such recognition?

## 3. Insufficient Explanations

There have been two main approaches to explain the centurion's recognition, one can be labeled as negative and another as positive.

### A. A Negative Explanation

The negative consists in understanding the words of the centurion in a weak sense, stating that he does not acknowledge the divinity of Jesus but only expresses admiration for Jesus, similar to the account of Luke 23:47 ("le centurion glorifiait Dieu, en disant: "Sûrement, cet homme était un juste!"). This view was proposed by Bratcher in an article published in (1956). In support of this interpretation, some arguments have been adduced: 1) a Roman centurion could not betray his loyalty to the emperor. 2) the absence of the article preceding the words "God's son" (*υἱὸς θεοῦ*) in 15:39, would suggest to translate them simply as "a son of God" and not "the Son of God."

But these arguments can be understood in a different way. Regarding the idea of a centurion being loyal to the emperor, one has to distinguish between the point of view of the centurion and the point of view of the reader. For example, the title on the cross written by Pilate: "The king of the Jews" (Mark 15:26) can be understood in one sense by Pilate and the Jews, and in another sense by the Christian reader. One does not have to choose only one point of view. Both points of view and interpretations (that of the centurion and that of the narrator) are possible simultaneously, and of these, the point of view of the narrator, in this case the evangelist Mark, is the one that is more relevant for the reader.

As for the idea regarding the lack of definite article, E. C. Colwell published an article in 1933 which stated that although a noun can lack a definite article before the verb, the author might intend the noun to be definite. Thus for example, in the account of the temptations of Jesus, the evangelist Matthew presents the tempter saying to Jesus:

"Si tu es Fils de Dieu, dis que ces pierres deviennent des pains."  
εἰ υἱὸς εἶ τοῦ θεοῦ, εἰπὲ ἵνα οἱ λίθοι οὗτοι ἄρτοι γένωνται. (Matt 4:3)

The tempter knows that Jesus is "the Son of God" and nevertheless, the word "son" in the text does not have the article.

Another more recent negative interpretation has been proposed by N. Eubank who considers the centurion's confession as sarcastic. Granted, the Sanhedrin mocks Jesus as a prophet (Mark 14:65), the soldiers also deride Jesus as a king (Mark 15:17-20), and the people passing near the cross and the two bandits crucified with him make fun of Jesus as the Messiah (Mark 15:29-32). But while all this mockery is evident, the confession of the centurion cannot be considered as derision; in fact, it is preceded by the adverb "truly" (*ἀληθῶς* Mark 15:39). And most importantly, it is paralleled by the proclamations of Mark 1:1,11; 9:7, which are given by the narrator or by God, and hence, to be considered as true declarations.

#### B. A Positive Explanation (Although Incomplete)

The positive approach which consists in understanding the words of the centurion in a strong sense is maintained by the majority of commentators. This interpretation indeed agrees with other passages of the gospel where Jesus is acknowledged as the Son of God: the opening statement by the evangelist in 1:1 ("Commencement de l'Evangile de Jésus Christ, Fils de Dieu."). The voice from heaven at the baptism of Jesus in 1:11 ("une voix vint des cieux: "Tu es mon Fils bien-aimé"). And the voice from the cloud at the transfiguration, in 9:7 ("une voix partit de la nuée: "Celui-ci est mon Fils bien-aimé; écoutez-le.").

But how is it that such strong confession comes out from a pagan when Jesus actually dies? In general, the answer given is: Jesus can be acknowledged as God's son only when he fulfills his mission; when he dies on the cross.

We agree with this view. But still, it seems that there is the need of a further explanation. How can the centurion, looking at Jesus dying on the cross, can come to acknowledge that he is God's son? In the narrative, such declaration seems to come out of the blue.

#### 4. A Better Explanation

There are several indications in the account of Mark that suggest a better explanation regarding the confession of the centurion. One is the detail of the temple's veil being torn apart. The second one is the

use of the verb “to expire”. The third one is the announcement at the beginning of the gospel regarding the baptism with the Spirit. The fourth one is a comparison with the other gospels. The fifth one is the comparison with the account of the baptism of Jesus. We will study these literary indications now.

### 5. The Tearing of the Temple’s Veil: A Sign of Revelation

The evangelist Mark precedes the declaration of the centurion with one important event. He states that when Jesus expired,

“le voile du Sanctuaire se déchira (σχίζω) en deux, du haut en bas.” (Mark 15:38).

Some scholars like Howard Jackson (1987) have proposed that this was a miracle that was seen by the centurion, and which moved him to confess the divinity of Jesus. But this interpretation faces a huge problem: it would be impossible for someone outside the walls to see the inner veil of the temple.

A better interpretation of the tearing of the veil is to understand it as a sign of a revelation taking place. It is a sign of the revelation of God's holiness to all mankind. In fact, the function of the veil was to separate the place of the divinity (the Holy of Holies) from the rest of the temple and the city; it would preclude anyone to see the dwelling of God. Thus, one can say that the tearing of the veil is a sign that a theophany is taking place. This would agree with the account of the centurion “seeing” and acknowledging that he is standing before God’s son.

### 6. The Verb “expired”: An Allusion to the Gift of the Spirit

There is another meaningful detail in Mark’s account that it is usually left aside. Mark states twice that Jesus “expired” (Mark 15:37,39). Many modern versions translate the Greek verb *ἐκπνέω* only as “breathed his last” (NRSV, NJB, NABRE). However, I think that the verb has a deeper meaning. In fact, J. Donahue and D. Harrington, in their commentary on the Gospel of Mark, commented:

That Jesus gave over his “spirit” (*pneuma*) to his heavenly Father at this point is clear. Whether Mark intended a connection to Jesus’ giving of the Holy Spirit (also *pneuma*; compare John 19:30; 20:22) is not clear.

I propose here that Mark indeed intended a connection with Jesus’ giving of the Holy Spirit by using the verb *ἐκπνέω* “expired”. The verb *ἐκπνέω* is composed of the preposition *ἐκ* and the verb *πνέω* (Vulgate: *expiravit*), a compound word cognate with the word *πνεῦμα* “spirit”. Since Mark did not use the more common verb “to die” (*ἀποθνήσκω* or *τελευτάω*), and John paraphrased the verb as “gave up the

spirit" (παρέδωκεν τὸ πνεῦμα) (John 19:30), one can think here of an allusion to the gift of the Spirit, something that had been announced at the beginning of the gospel (1:8).

### **7. The Fulfillment of the Announcement of the Baptism with the Spirit (Mark 1:8)**

If we accept the existence of an allusion to the gift of the Spirit in Mark 15:37-39, there would be an agreement with the announcement stated at the beginning of the gospel. In fact, John the Baptist announced:

Moi, je vous ai baptisés avec de l'eau, mais lui vous baptisera avec l'Esprit Saint.  
(Mark 1:8)

This is an important announcement. John the Baptist presents Jesus as the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit (1:8). Nothing is said about Jesus' miracles or teaching; not even his death and resurrection. The only thing that is being said is that he will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

The announcement by John the Baptist about Jesus' baptism in the Holy Spirit is also mentioned in the other Gospels (Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16; John 1:33), and its fulfillment is mentioned or alluded to in those Gospels (Matt 28:19; Luke 24:49; cf. Acts 1:4-5,8; 2:2-4,33; John 19:34; 20:22). However, the fulfillment of the announcement is not clearly found in the Gospel of Mark, and this creates a literary problem. Consequently, commentators offer different explanations: some think that there was no need for Mark to narrate the fulfillment of the announcement of the baptism in the Holy Spirit since that baptism was taken for granted by the reader. Others think that Mark does not record the arrival of the Spirit for this took place after the events recorded in his Gospel. And others think that there was a narrative about the giving of the Spirit, after the resurrection, but that this part of the Gospel was lost.

But if the other evangelists narrate the fulfillment of this important announcement, it is reasonable to ask why Mark does not mention the fulfillment of this pronouncement. Or, perhaps, it is better to ask: how does Mark describe its fulfillment? If we accept the existence of an allusion to the gift of the Holy Spirit in Mark 15:37-39, this literary problem would be solved.

### **8. The Gospel of Matthew**

Sources Criticism has affirmed the existence of literary connections between the gospels. If so, one might ask: Do the other evangelists have understood the allusion to the gift of the Spirit alluded to by the evangelist Mark? We will explore this idea now.

In his description of the death of Jesus, the evangelist Matthew does not use the verb "expired" but uses the expression "he rendered the Spirit" (ἀφῆκεν τὸ πνεῦμα) (Matt 27:50):

Or Jésus, poussant de nouveau un grand cri, rendit l'esprit. (Matt 27:50)

Furthermore, Matthew mentions also the "loud cry," that "the veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom" (Matt 27:51), and the confession of the centurion and those with him: "Truly, this was the Son of God!" (Matt 27:54). But Matthew narrates a further event immediately before the centurion's confession:

Matt 27:51-53

<sup>51</sup> Et voilà que le voile du Sanctuaire se déchira en deux, du haut en bas; la terre trembla, les rochers se fendirent, <sup>52</sup> les tombeaux s'ouvrirent et de nombreux corps de saints trépassés ressuscitèrent: <sup>53</sup> ils sortirent des tombeaux après sa résurrection, entrèrent dans la Ville sainte et se firent voir à bien des gens.

According to tradition since the time of Irenaeus (AD 140-202), Matthew wrote his Gospel for readers coming from a Jewish background. This tradition finds support in the fact that Matthew quotes or alludes the OT over sixty times, more than any other Evangelist. So, we can assume that his readers would have been acquainted with the Scriptures.

Now, the prophet Ezekiel has a series of oracles of restoration of the people after the exile in Babylon, and in one of them he announces the gift of God's Spirit that will be poured into the hearts of the people (Ezek 36:26-27) that will make possible the union between God and the people (Ezek 36:28). Afterwards, the prophet describes the power of this Spirit: it will give new life to the dry bones (Ezek 37:1-10) that represent the people of Israel. So, the prophet is ordered to prophesy over the bones so that they come to life (Ezek 37:9-10):

Ezek 37:12-14

<sup>12</sup> C'est pourquoi, prophétise. Tu leur diras: Ainsi parle le Seigneur Yahvé. Voici que j'ouvre vos tombeaux; je vais vous faire remonter de vos tombeaux, mon peuple [...] <sup>13</sup> Vous saurez que je suis Yahvé, lorsque j'ouvrirai vos tombeaux et que je vous ferai remonter de vos tombeaux, mon peuple. <sup>14</sup> Je mettrai mon esprit en vous et vous vivrez.

According to Ezekiel, one of the signs that will manifest the gift of the Spirit is the opening of graves and the resurrection of the dead. This is precisely what Matthew adds in his narrative preceding the centurion's confession. If one interprets the death of Jesus as an allusion to the gift of the Spirit, the narrative of Matthew about the opening of tombs makes sense: Matthew is alluding to Ezekiel 37 in order to show that the promise of the gift of God's Spirit has been fulfilled.

## 9. The Gospel of John

John is even more explicit in his description of the death of Jesus in what concerns the gift of the Spirit as he states that Jesus "handed over the spirit" (*παρέδωκεν τὸ πνεῦμα*; John 19:30). It is to notice that John (like Matthew) does not use the personal pronoun "his" but the article "the" in reference to the Spirit.

Furthermore, John adds a unique detail which helps to explain the meaning of the death of Jesus: John does not report the centurion's confession but says that "one of the soldiers" pierced his side and "at once came out blood and water" (John 19:34).

John 19:34

mais l'un des soldats, de sa lance, lui perça le côté et il sortit aussitôt du sang et de l'eau.

If we understand "blood and water" as a hendiadys, that is, a literary figure in which two words united by the word "and" come to mean one single idea, then, what comes from the side of Jesus is 'living water' since for the semitic mind "blood" stands for "life" (Lev 17:11). Now, for John, the "living water" is a clear symbol of the Spirit. In fact, in John 7 the evangelist explains the meaning of "living water":

John 7:37-39

<sup>37</sup> Le dernier jour de la fête, le grand jour, Jésus, debout, s'écria: "Si quelqu'un a soif, qu'il vienne à moi, et qu'il boive, <sup>38</sup> celui qui croit en moi!" selon le mot de l'Ecriture: De son sein couleront des fleuves d'**eau vive**. <sup>39</sup> Il parlait de **l'Esprit** que devaient recevoir ceux qui avaient cru en lui; car il n'y avait pas encore d'Esprit, parce que Jésus n'avait pas encore été glorifié.

It has been argued that the gift of the Spirit in John's Gospel takes place at a later time, when the disciples are gathered in a room and Jesus appears to them (John 20:22), and therefore, it cannot take place before, at the cross.

John 20:21-22

<sup>21</sup> Il leur dit alors, de nouveau: "Paix à vous! Comme le Père m'a envoyé, moi aussi je vous envoie." <sup>22</sup> Ayant dit cela, il souffla sur eux et leur dit: "Recevez l'Esprit Saint.

But this misunderstands the account by reading it as a mere chronology of events. If we were to interpret these texts chronologically it would be confusing because Jesus also announces that the coming of the Spirit will take place after his departure to the Father (John 16:7).

Instead of trying to harmonize these references chronologically, it is better to interpret them as pointing to different aspects of the gift of the Spirit. The mention of the gift of the Spirit at the cross emphasizes the source of the gift: the sacrifice of Christ (John 19:30,34). The second account emphasizes the addressee or recipient of the gift: the disciples (John 20:22).

## 10. The Gospel of Luke

While the texts of Matthew and John align with the interpretation proposed for Mark, the text of Luke seems to move in another direction. Luke makes it clear that Jesus, at his death, surrenders his Spirit, but he surrenders it to the Father (Luke 23:46).

Luke 23:46

et, jetant un grand cri, Jésus dit: "Père, en tes mains je remets mon esprit." Ayant dit cela, il expira.

The reason Luke does not narrate the gift of the Spirit at this point is that, according to his account, the Spirit will be given at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). The basis for this is that Luke is more concerned with the ecclesial aspect of the gift of the Spirit. Being a companion of Paul, Luke was aware that in some communities such as Corinth, some believers were claiming that only they had the Spirit because they had been gifted with the ability to speak in tongues or to speak prophecies. But Paul makes clear that every Christian has the Spirit (1 Cor 12:3).

So, Luke describes the gift of the Holy Spirit being poured upon the Twelve, a number that symbolize the totality of the people of God. In fact, the gift of the Spirit occupies a key place in the narrative of Luke: his first book (the Gospel) ends with the promise of the Spirit (Luke 24:49), and its fulfillment (Acts 1:4, 8; 2:1-4) is the starting point for his second volume (the Acts of the Apostles).

## 11. The Parallel Account of the Baptism of Jesus (Mark 1:9-11)

A further argument to support the idea of seeing an allusion to the gift of the Spirit in Mark 15:37-39 comes from the parallelism between the account of Jesus' death (15:37-39) and Jesus' baptism (1:9-11). Only in these two passages in the Gospel of Mark, there is the verb σχίζω "déchirer". In one passage it is the heavens (1:10) and in the other passages it is the veil (15:38). And in both passages, Jesus is acknowledged as God's Son:

Mark 1:10-11:

<sup>10</sup> Et aussitôt, remontant de l'eau, il vit les cieux se déchirer et l'Esprit comme une colombe descendre vers lui,

<sup>11</sup> et une voix vint des cieux:

"Tu es mon Fils bien-aimé, tu as toute ma faveur."

Mark 15:37-39:

<sup>37</sup> Or Jésus, jetant un grand cri, expira.

<sup>38</sup> Et le voile du Sanctuaire se déchira en deux, du haut en bas.

<sup>39</sup> Voyant qu'il avait ainsi expiré, le centurion, qui se tenait en face de lui, s'écria:

"Vraiment cet homme était fils de Dieu!"

The fact according to Josephus, the Temple's veil depicted "a panorama of the entire heavens," would also reinforce the link between the tearing of the heavens in 1:10 and the tearing of the veil in 15:38.

Furthermore, it is significant that the voice from heaven, which declares that Jesus is God's Son (1:11), comes immediately after the "Spirit" has made its presence felt (1:10). Likewise, it is significant that the centurion confesses Jesus as "the Son of God" (15:39), immediately after he has "expired" (15:37,39).

Last, it is interesting that Mark indicates that the veil of the Temple "se déchira en deux" adding that it was "du haut en bas". The evangelist emphasizes that the tearing was complete and this began from above. Such movement downward seems to parallel the description of the movement of the Spirit at the baptism of Jesus, as Mark indicates that "the Spirit was descending" like a dove.

Therefore, it seems that we have an "inclusio" or "framing" that brackets the beginning of the ministry of Jesus and its end. Through this repetition or parallelism, the Evangelist draws a connection between the account of Jesus' baptism (1:9-11) and the account of his death (15:37-39). In both scenes, there is a sign of a revelation (tearing of the heavens or of the veil) and the recognition of Jesus as the Son of God. This parallelism suggests that the mention of the Spirit in Jesus' baptism (1:10) finds its equivalent in the use of the verb "expired" at the death of Jesus (15:39).

## **12. Objections**

### **A. A Veiled Allusion**

One objection can be raised against the interpretation proposed thus far. If the gift of the Spirit is so important for Mark, why he did not say this more explicitly? The answer may be that Mark intentionally left implicit the allusion to the gift of the Spirit in order to resemble or replicate the act of faith. Since Christians receive the Spirit at baptism but do not see it with their physical eyes, the Evangelist sought to described the gift of the Spirit in a veiled way as he narrated the death of Jesus by using the word "expired" (15:39).

In this sense, Ambrose expresses the theological meaning of the account of Mark 15:37-39 in this way: "the object of sight is temporal, but that other eternal, which is not apprehended by the eye, but is discerned by the mind and Spirit" (*On the Mysteries*, 3.15).

There is another reason why the Evangelist did not present the gift of the Spirit more explicitly at the death of Jesus on the cross. According to tradition (Papias, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria), Mark wrote his Gospel after the people had listened to the preaching of Peter in Rome, and he was then asked by them to write down what they had heard (so: Clement of Alexandria). Hence, we may assume that the written Gospel of Mark did not need to develop what the recipients of the Gospel already knew through the oral preaching of Peter. However, for modern readers, an interpretative effort is required to fully grasp the message of the Gospel. In order to understand the Gospel of Mark, it is necessary to have a pre-understanding of certain ideas that belong to the Christian faith.

## B. The References to the Spirit in Mark

A second objection is: if the gift of the Spirit is so important for Mark, why is the Spirit mentioned so few times in his Gospel?

If we review the recurrences of the word "spirit" (Greek: *pneuma*), we find that it appears nineteen times in Mark, of which, six times in reference to the Holy Spirit (1:8,10,12; 3:29; 12:36; 13:11).

The first three occurrences of the Spirit are very important: the first describes the mission of Jesus (1:8), the second describes the first appearance of Jesus and shows that the Spirit has come upon him (1:10), and the third indicates that it is the Spirit who drives Jesus into the wilderness (1:12).

The last mention of the Holy Spirit in Mark (13:11) indicates that the Spirit will move and assist the disciples in their life and ministry (an idea so important that it constitutes the center of Luke's second volume: the Acts of the Apostles):

Mark 13:11

Et quand on vous emmènera pour vous livrer, ne vous préoccupez pas de ce que vous direz, mais dites ce qui vous sera donné sur le moment: car ce n'est pas vous qui parlerez, mais l'Esprit Saint.

Hence, although Mark leaves implicit the mention of the gift of the Spirit by Jesus at his death (15:37, 39) and only mentions the Spirit a few times throughout the narrative, the Holy Spirit does appear at important moments in his Gospel.

Furthermore, one must take into account that by the time Mark wrote his Gospel, the letters of Paul had already been written and in them we find a developed teaching on the Holy Spirit. Hence, the readers of Mark were not ignorant about the importance of the Holy Spirit. In particular, in the letter to the

Romans (AD 57) written just a few years before the Gospel of Mark (circa AD 65), Paul wrote extensively about the Holy Spirit (Rom 8).

### 13. Conclusion

If we accept the idea that Mark alluded to the gift of the Spirit in his account of the death of Jesus in Mark 15:37-39, many ideas in the gospel of Mark make better sense.

The initial statement of the evangelist presenting Jesus as God's Son (1:1), is confirmed by the voice of God (1:11; 9:7), and it is finally proclaimed by a human character — a Roman soldier (15:39). This recognition of Jesus as the Son of God, however, is only possible through the gift of the Spirit (15:39).

Indeed, in the letter to the Corinthians written about AD 55, that is, about ten years before the Gospel of Mark, Paul already wrote:

“nul ne peut dire: "Jésus est Seigneur", s'il n'est avec l'Esprit Saint.” (1 Co 12,3).

Hence, Mark affirms the intimate sonship of Jesus with the Father and at the same time indicates how we can recognize his divinity.

If the Christians in Rome were asked by their Gentile neighbors: ‘How can you believe that Jesus is the Son of God, who died on the cross, under the power of Caesar?’ the answer of the Evangelist would be: ‘We have the gift of the Spirit that empowers us to understand Jesus’ true identity.’ Jesus is “the Son of God,” not in the sense that the Romans acknowledged the emperor to be the son of God, nor in the sense that Jews meant when they spoke of a righteous person or the king as God's son. To confess that Jesus is the “Son of God” is to acknowledge his unique relationship with God his Father, a relationship unlike any other (1:11; 9:7). And this acknowledgment is possible only through the action of the holy Spirit.

Many scholars have rightly stated that it is only in the light of the cross that one is able to recognize Jesus as the Son of God. But it should also be said that it is thanks to the Spirit, given at the cross, that one is able to confess Jesus as the Son of God. It is an act of faith, moved by the Holy Spirit.