

Mark's distinctive emphasis on the temple's torn curtain

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This article asks several questions: What is distinctive about Mark's description about the rending of the curtain in the Jerusalem Temple during Jesus' crucifixion?; What is his rhetorical strategy in doing so?; What role does the temple play in Jewish religion? What role does the Temple play in Jesus' ministry and message?; and What is the context of the narrative about the torn temple curtain? The conclusion is that Mark utilises the description to demonstrate God's judgement on the worship at the temple, but at the same time illustrates how the way between heaven and earth is opened at the moment of the death of God's Son.

Markus se onderskeidende beskrywing van die geskeurde tempelgordyn. Verskeie vrae kom in hierdie artikel aan die bod: Wat is onderskeidend in Markus se beskrywing van die gordyn in die Jerusalemtempel wat tydens Jesus se kruisiging skeur?; Wat is die evangeliese retoriese strategie?; Watter rol speel die tempel in Joodse godsdiens?; Watter rol speel dit in Jesus se bediening en boodskap?; en Wat is die konteks vir die narratief binne die Evangelie oor die gordyn wat skeur? Die gevolgtrekking is dat Markus die beskrywing benut om God se oordeel oor die tempel te demonstreer, maar terselfdertyd illustreer dit ook hoe die weg tussen hemel en aarde oopgebreek word in die oomblikke toe God se Seun sterf.

Introduction

The three synoptic evangelists describe how the curtain in the Jerusalem Temple is torn during Jesus' Crucifixion, although they differ at what specific point in time it happens. This article asks the questions: What is distinctive in Mark's emphasis of the event?; and Why does he describe it and what is his rhetorical strategy in doing so?

In order to analyse the Markan reference to the event, it is necessary to first ask three questions:

1. What role does the Temple play in Jewish religion?
2. What role does the Temple play in Jesus' ministry and message?
3. What is the context of the narrative about the torn Temple curtain?

The author of the Gospel of Mark uses setting to underline what he considers to be the essence of Jesus' message. For this reason he utilises a dualism between Galilee and Judea, Jesus and the Jewish religious authorities, and Jesus and evil forces. This dualism reflects an eschatological dualism that determines the evangelist's thought with its apocalyptic differentiation between two *aeons*: the present *contra* the eternal, the reign of the evil *contra* triumphant salvation, the earthly and death *contra* the heavenly, and the unrighteous and evil people *contra* the elect and righteous (Auffarth 2013:1; Kippenberg 2013:1).

Temple in Mark

Space depicted in narratives is never without ideological meaning, but forms part of a specific strategy to communicate ideology. Space is not limited to physical areas, but holds ideological meaning for those who live in it. People extend their beliefs into everyday spatial reality (Venter 2006:993). This is also true of Mark where Malbon (1986:141) describes three types of spatial background detail: geopolitical (referring to regions, cities and towns), topographical (referring to physical characteristics of nature and the elements), and architectonic background (referring to buildings, palaces, temples and other sacred spaces) (cf. Funk 1988:141). Important geopolitical locations in Mark are Galilee (the place of the initial proclamation of the Gospel with power), Jerusalem (the place of opposition where Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple and where he becomes progressively powerless until he dies on a cross), Transjordan, the Decapolis and the area around Tyre and Sidon (symbolising the future mission of the disciples to the Gentiles).

The journey from Galilee to Jerusalem that happens only once in Mark, provides the bridge between the beginning and ending of Jesus' ministry (cf. Mk 14:28; 16:7).¹ Judea was considered a second-rate Roman province and did not get the best governors – only prefects of equestrian ranks – whilst Herod Antipas, a client king appointed by Rome, ruled Galilee. Other topographical settings include the Jordan, the desert and the sea, all events from Israel's past with rich associations, and in the case of the desert and the sea, also apocalyptic associations. Van Iersel (2000:33) finds five indications of topography in the Gospel: the desert, Galilee, the way, Jerusalem, and the desert or grave.² His discussion of topographical oppositions between Galilee and Jerusalem is especially important (Van Iersel 2000:35). Jesus also frequently crosses the Sea of Galilee, the barrier between Jews and Gentiles. Architectural settings are a house, synagogue, temple and palace.

Jesus was a peasant theologian and broker of the kingdom of God in such an environment. The pattern of movement determined in the Gospel of Mark by reference to the diverse settings is very significant, with Jesus changing the setting more than 40 times in the narrative, thereby underscoring the urgency of his message, his success and the bigger goal that he has in mind (Tolmie 1999:112).

Mark depicts the Temple as the centre of Israel's religious cult (Tolmie 1999:111). The narrator provides the setting for the tearing of the curtain, once the preserve only of the priestly cast of Israel (Moloney 2002:328), in the temple. He implies that the setting will be significant for implied readers, because it is directly relevant to the rest of the narrative. The temple has deep symbolic connotations attached to it and positive as well as negative feelings associated with it (Tolmie 1999:106).

The main purpose of the implied author is to convey an ideological perspective to the implied reader (Tolmie 1999:130). To achieve this, various attempts dominate the textual strategy to convey the ideological perspective. For instance, the implied author uses the narrator to emphasise that Jesus' body and the Jerusalem Temple are linked in a special way (15:29): *Καὶ οἱ παραπορευόμενοι ἐβλασφήμουν αὐτὸν κινούμεντες τὰς κεφαλὰς αὐτῶν καὶ λέγοντες: Οὐὰ ὁ καταλύων τὸν ναὸν καὶ οἰκοδομῶν ἐν τρισὶν ἡμέραις, σῶσον σεαυτὸν καταβὰς ἀπὸ τοῦ σταυροῦ* ['And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days."']. Mark 15:37 describes how Jesus dies and verse 38 then continues: *καὶ τὸ καταπέτασμα τοῦ ναοῦ ἐσχίσθη εἰς δύο ἀπ' ἄνωθεν ἕως κάτω* ['And the curtain of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom']. This leads to the conclusive observation of the Roman officer that many researchers view as the climax of the Gospel (15:39; cf. Moloney 2002:328): *ιδὼν δὲ ὁ κεντυρίων ὁ παρεστηκὼς ἐξ ἐναντίας αὐτοῦ ὅτι οὕτως ἐξέπνευσεν*

1. Further references to Mark will be indicated only by chapters and verses.

2. The hinges between the various places Van Iersel (2000:43) finds, are, for the desert in 1:2–13; for Galilee in 1:14–8:26; for the way in 8:27–10:52; for Jerusalem in 11:1–15:41; and for the grave in 15:42–16:8.

εἶπεν· Ἀληθῶς οὗτος ὁ ἄνθρωπος υἱὸς θεοῦ ἦν ['And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God."'].]

The ideological perspective is thus served by the portrayal of Jesus' body as a type of temple. His torn body becomes the curtain in the temple, tearing in two from the top to the bottom (a case of reduplication, a favourite literary device with Mark) (Donahue & Harrington 2002:448). It is reinforced with the Roman officer's confession of Jesus being really the Son of God. The chronological setting is also used to reinforce the ideological perspective. The narrative forms the purpose for Mark telling the story of Jesus and it is related to what Mark says about the temple, as will be argued later. The narrative follows deliberately after Jesus' confrontation with the Jewish religious authorities, as symbolised by his cleansing of the temple by overthrowing the tables of the moneychangers (11–12). Then the eschatological discourse in Mark 13 emphasises that the temple would be destroyed completely. It then ends with his confrontation with the temple authorities that leads to his arrest, trial and execution (Van Aarde 1999:682). The spatial setting is also used to reinforce the ideological setting with the crucifixion within Jerusalem, the city of the temple.

Temple in Jewish ideology

The worldview of the Israelites before the exile coincided to a great extent with that of the Canaanites (Hanson 1995:11; Nel 2002:457). According to this view of the world, the gods made the world orderly, but the order is threatened continuously by factors such as floods, drought, famine and war (Cook 2004:93). Order is, however, guaranteed, because it is determined by God. Humanity contributes to the maintenance of the order by serving the gods in a prescribed manner. The temple was viewed as a copy or reflection of this order, with its pillars symbolising certainty (Brown 1995:114). It was designed as a symbolic replica of the Garden of Eden (Barker 1991:26–9). As Steyn (2011) notes:

Exodus 25–31 describes in vivid detail the layout and contents of the tabernacle as a prescribed plan from God to Moses. The later chapters of this section (Ex 35–40) deal with Moses' execution of that plan. An interesting aspect following onto these narratives is that they are leading towards a climax with the appearance of 'the glory of the Lord' in the Tabernacle (Ex 40:34–38). (pp. 1–2)

The great basin filled with water taking up nearly half of the space within the tabernacle, and later the Jerusalem temple, and holding 40 000 litres is a picture of the primeval chaos of water that is contained, ensuring the security of God's people (Van der Watt 2003:311). By bringing prescribed sacrifices, the worshipper strengthened God's hand to maintain order (Armstrong 1993):

In the Near East, the temple had often been seen as a replica of the cosmos. Temple-building had been an act of *imitatio dei*, enabling humanity to participate in the creativity of the gods themselves. (p. 78)

The destructive consequences of the Babylonian exile experience changed the worldview of Jews (Cohn 2001:143). The temple, where sacrifices could be offered to YHWH, did not exist anymore; the Davidic dynasty was destroyed. Jerusalem and the most important cities of Judah were destroyed and large quantities of Jews lived in exile (Lucas 2002:37–38; Nel 2002:459). The exilic experience led to changes in the Jewish worldview that were conceptualised by Ezekiel and especially Deutero-Isaiah (Albertz 2004:399–400). Salvation is now reinterpreted in terms of health, longevity, prosperity and peace (*shalom*). The reign of peace will have implications for nature as well.

Armstrong (2000:19) describes the extent of destruction brought about by the exile for Jewish consciousness. The destruction led to Jews reacting by changing the *Torah* into a new ‘temple’ where the misplaced nation could experience the divine presence and glory. ‘The codification of the world into clean and unclean, sacred and profane objects, had been an imaginative reordering of a shattered world’ (Armstrong 2000:19; cf. Brown 2000:228–234).

During the 1st century CE, the temple in Jerusalem was in the process of being rebuilt. Herod the Great (37 BCE–4 CE) had begun the work on the temple, and his son, Herod Antipas (the ‘fox’), continued the construction work (Cole 2006:1193). The temple would become one of the architectural wonders of the ancient world, although only for a short period before its destruction in 70 CE. The heavy taxes that Herod laid upon Jews to fund his massive building programs of temples (including the Jerusalem temple) and whole cities in honour of Caesar Augustus (as well as his own lavish Hellenistic-style court) would eventually contribute to the unhappiness amongst Jews leading to the Jewish War (Füssel & Füssel 2001:45–46).

Context for the reference to the tearing of the curtain

What is the context for Mark’s reference to the tearing of the temple curtain? The important markers in Mark’s Gospel are the sections placing Jesus’ ministry in Galilee (1:1–8:21), and his ministry and passion in Jerusalem (8:22–16:8; cf. Van Eck 1995; Theissen 2012:44, 47). Jesus’ ministry is interpreted as a journey from the edge to the centre – from Galilee to Jerusalem.

Jesus enters Jerusalem triumphantly on a colt (11:1–11), and once in Jerusalem, he curses a fig tree for its fruitlessness (11:12–14, 20–25), an acted parable³ about God’s judgement

3.The parable is ‘a story that never happened but always does – or at least should’ (Crossan 2012:5). It is a metaphor expanded into a story, or more simply: a parable is a metaphorical story (Crossan 2012:7). ‘A parable is a story whose artistic surface structure allows its deep structure to invade one’s hearing in direct contradiction to the deep structure of one’s expectation. It is an attack on the world, a raid on the articulate’ (Crossan 1974:98). Van der Watt (2009:328) refers to Eugene Peterson’s picture of a parable as subversive, absolute, ordinary and secular. When people listened to parables, they saw that it did not threaten their own sovereignty, they relaxed their defenses and then, like a time bomb, the stories would explode in their imagination. ‘Die Bedeutung einer Metapher erschöpft sich nicht in einer einzigen Interpretation. Metaphern haben grundsätzlich einen Bedeutungsüberschuss und setzen immer wieder neue Bedeutungen sich heraus’ [‘The meaning of a metaphor is not confined to a single interpretation. Metaphors can have a large surplus of meaning and set new meanings out’] (Erlermann 2003:38). Metaphors are at the heart of parables.

on his own people and their religious institutions, and especially on the religious leaders that caused Jews to stumble and betray their God (11:12–14) and their temple.⁴ The temple becomes a symbol of their deviated religious allegiance (Heil 1997):

The Markan audience realizes that the temple, like the fruitless fig tree, is condemned to destruction for failing to attain its purpose to be a house of prayer for all peoples. They must adopt Jesus’ attitude toward the temple by rejecting it as a den of robbers, just as he has rejected it and left it twice with his disciples. (p. 78)

That the Court of the Gentiles was utilised as a market in the temple indicates that Jewish leaders did not consider it of much interest that Gentiles are supposed to be part of Jewish worship of YHWH. Vledder (2005:593) emphasises that another factor important in understanding Jesus’ behaviour is that the corruption in the temple, as a result of the commercialisation and the cooperation between the ruling Roman and Jewish temple authorities, affected worship as the temple’s prime purpose to such an extent that Jesus rejected the temple as a valid place of worship (Destro & Pesce 2002):

Jesus’ reaction presupposes that he attached importance to the Temple and defended its dignity and cultic function. In essence, it seems to imply that Jesus did not exclude sacrifices from the cult. (p. 488)

Mark embeds the Temple episode (11:15–19) between the initial cursing of the fig tree and the disciples’ observation the next day of it being shrivelled. The use of the fig tree episode as a literary frame for the Temple episode is Mark’s deliberate and conscious choice (not so in Matthew and Luke; DeSilva 2004:219).⁵ The fig tree is a symbol of God’s people and the parable explains that God expects his people to bear fruit in its time.⁶ Those who fail to bear fruit will face God’s judgement. A problem for many is Mark’s statement that it was not the season for figs to bear fruit, and still Jesus expects it to bear fruit and curses it for not living up to his expectations (11:13). The female fruit comes later and is edible. At this time the male fruit can be expected to be available and in this case the tree was fruitless despite its luxuriant foliage. Mark states that Jesus’ visit to the temple comes at an unexpected season

4.For Viljoen (2014:1) it is important that the evangelists emphasise that Jesus did not come to abolish the Law of Moses (e.g. Mt 5:17–19): ‘As a teacher of the Law, Jesus enacts the true intention of the Law, which is to establish a holy community of believers within the Kingdom of heaven.’

5.Fowler (1991:97) refers to the shocking aspect of this event: ‘As a narrator, perhaps Mark has stumbled here, having made a parabolic episode too lifelike in its violence.’ Fowler then asks what interpretive options remain open to modern readers. He discusses a few: to adulterate the story like Matthew did, or ignore it like Luke and John did, or blunt the edge of the curse by concentrating on the figurative significance of the episode as modern interpreters have done in many cases. ‘Or perhaps we can acknowledge and contemplate our own shock and distress at the tree’s undeserved and violent fate.’

6.A symbol discloses meaning and provokes imagination, writes Blackwell (1986:12). It first facilitates one’s perception of meaning, where the symbol enables one to see, understand and embrace the meaning of some large and significant reality. The symbol is also dense: it serves as a repository of the meaning that the story conveys, and as a repository of meaning, the symbol mediates meaning to the human imagination. The symbol furthermore facilitates the conceptualisation of meaning by impregnating the imagination (Blackwell 1986:12–13). The etymology of the word *symbol* suggests its function as a connecting link between two different spheres. Whereas the tenor and the vehicle are given in a metaphor and the reader must discern the relationship, a symbol presents the vehicle. The relationship may be stated, implied by the context, or assumed from the shared background or culture of the writer or reader (Culpepper 1983:182).

resulting in a curse for its failure to bear the appropriate fruit. The description prepares the way for the subsequent passages concerning the temple and its eventual destruction (13:1–2) as well as the rending of the veil at the crucifixion (15:38). The indictment of the Temple is the first of three crucial references to the Temple – the second clarifies the significance of Jesus’ action in the temple and the third points to the replacement of the Temple with the cross of Jesus (DeSilva 2004:221). The fig tree passages also give poignancy to the instruction to watch carefully for Jesus’ coming at an unexpected time (οὐκ οἴδατε γὰρ πότε ὁ καιρὸς ἔστιν, 13:32–37; Ἀπὸ δὲ τῆς συκῆς μάθετε τὴν παραβολήν, 13:28). The fate of the fig tree would become theirs if they fail to watch and produce the kind of fruits expected by God. Jesus’ condemnation of the temple arouses the hostile intent of the chief priests (11:18), and the charges at his trial includes Jesus’ attitude towards the temple (14:57–58; Kloppenborg 2005:428). His actions are interpreted as a threat to the temple’s existence. In this way, every paragraph is interconnected with, builds on and clarifies, prepares for and is further clarified by the other passages (DeSilva 2004:222).

In 11:15–19, the evangelist tells how Jesus reacts when he enters the temple. He drives out the moneychangers and dove sellers and overturns their tables and teaches those present what the essence of the temple is. The temple is a house of prayer for all people (Ὁ οἶκος μου οἶκος προσευχῆς κληθήσεται πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, Mt 21:13). This incident occurred in the Court of the Gentiles where space was taken up for commerce instead of ministering to the Gentiles (πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, 11:17). Jesus cleanses the space that represents the heart of Israel’s religion and, at the same time, he enacts God’s judgement over Israel with righteous anger.⁷ Jesus is not reforming the Jewish cult. He is rather the prophet that announces God’s final judgment over the cult in its present form (Van Aarde 1999:686). Although, it must be kept in mind that God’s judgement is never only vindictive, but always redemptive too. Jesus is the prophet functioning with the dualism that is typical of apocalypticism between kingdom and temple, and God and Satan (Wink 1984:140).

On their way back to the city, after sleeping in Bethany, the disciples see that the fig tree has withered and point Jesus’ attention to it (11:20–25). He uses the observation as a parable to teach them about faith: διὰ τοῦτο λέγω ὑμῖν, πάντα ὅσα προσεύχεσθε καὶ αἰτεῖσθε, πιστεύετε ὅτι ἔλαβετε, καὶ ἔσται ὑμῖν [‘That is why I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours’] (11:24).

Beginning in 11:27–33 and continuing through Mark 12, there are five or six challenges to Jesus’ authority and his responses to it. In Jewish culture, the issue of authority was important and a rabbi’s authority normally lay in his faithfulness in interpreting the *Torah* primarily, and the

TeNaK in general (Vermes 2010:100). Jesus chooses to refer to the authority of a figure to whom he has been closely linked: John the Baptist – a figure that the priests, scribes and elders rejected, but against whom, out of fear for the masses and the people’s reverence for John, they could not take a stand (11:32).⁸

The almost constant conflict in Mark 11–12 has a triumphalist tone, with Jesus taking control of the temple by defeating his opponents in debate. In this way he would eventually provide the motivation for the officials’ attack on Jesus (Shiner 2003:16). In the passion narrative, Mark undermines this sense of triumphalism by facilitating in the audience an emotional and visceral appropriation of Jesus’ death and the meaning of that. In this way, the Gospel places the audience in a liminal state in which they pass through death to a new state of being (Turner 1967). The eschatological alarm in Mark 13 has an indispensable role in the creation of that state by placing the coming passion narrative in the context of the impending death and suffering of the listeners themselves so that the death of Jesus and their own death become emotionally merged (Kühshelm 1983:207; Shiner 2003:16).

Mark 12:1–12 contains a parable about wicked tenants that demonstrates corrupt leadership in Israel. The early audience would likely have interpreted it in terms of Isaiah’s parable of the vineyard (Is 5:1–7). The meaning of the parable is that the vineyard is not the property of the tenants. They can never control it as they like; it will one day be claimed by the heir, the Son. If the vineyard workers are not open to direction and correction from the Owner through his messengers, and later his Son, they face the fearsome prospect of the Owner’s judgement (Collins 2007:547).

Another confrontation between Jesus and his opponents concerns taxes, and believers’ responsibility to show reverence to a foreign oppressor (12:13–17). Jesus’ theocratic stance is explained in his answer that all things belong to God and that Caesar should be given his unrighteous coins with their graven images on them (Horsley 2001:41). Jesus does not identify with the revolutionaries of his day. However, he critiques the state and the cult of emperor worship without the suggestion of taking up arms, as he takes his audience back to their ultimate allegiance: to God (Witherington 2001:354). People are made in God’s image and they belong to God. Therefore, they should pay to God what they owe God.

Some Sadducees try to trap Jesus by asking him a tricky question – this time about the resurrection (12:18–27). Their aim is to convince Jesus of the difficulty one gets into when one believes in an afterlife, and Jesus’ response shows what difficulties one experiences if you do *not* believe in the Jewish Scriptures that support the concept of an afterlife (English 1992:197). In the eschatological world, the institution of

7. Kelber (1974:99) warns that any attempt ‘to elucidate the Markan significance of the temple “cleansing” will prove abortive, unless the whole complex, fig tree – “cleansing” – is taken into consideration’.

8. Du Rand (2001:109) emphasises that other rabbis used ‘Thus speaks the Lord’, but Jesus’ self-understanding allows him to say Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν as in, for example, John 5:24.

marriage will become invalid, because humans will be *ὡς ἄγγελοι ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς* [‘as angels in the heavens’].

Jesus initiates the next discourse when he asks how it is possible to maintain that the Christ is the son of David when David himself declared the son as the Lord (12:35–37). No answer is given to his question except the statement that the crowd listen to him with delight.

The passage about the widow contributing a penny to the temple’s treasury, follows on the previous saying about the scribes and concludes Jesus’ visit to the temple (12:41–44). The meaning of the passage is that God requires total commitment from God’s people, also with regard to their money. The widow’s mite is worth more *coram deo* [in the presence of God] than the large sums contributed by others to the temple. If Mark’s economics had been enacted, it would have been disastrous for the operation of the temple (Kloppenborg 2005:428).

Mark 11 and 12 paves the way for the discourse in chapter 13 that begins with Jesus and four of his disciples looking at the temple and the disciples’ remark about the imposing greatness of the buildings. Jesus remarks that the building will be destroyed completely and the disciples ask when this is going to happen. In this way, Jesus’ visit to the temple and his confrontation with the religious leaders associated with it leads directly to the discourse about the circumstances and time of the destruction of the temple in Mark 13. His implicit judgement of the temple and what it stands for in the withering of the fig tree, and Jesus’ expulsion of the dealers from the temple continues in Mark 13 (Horsley 2001):

Jesus cursing of the fig tree, juxtaposed sandwich-style (Van Eck 2008:574) with his prophetic demonstration against the Temple, makes clear that the Temple is about to ‘wither’ because it has not borne fruit (11:12–23). (p. 18)

Mark 13 is placed between the account of Jesus’ ministry (1:14–12:44) and the account of his death and resurrection (14:1–16:8). The disciples’ questions (13:4) and the teacher’s (*Διδάσκαλε*) discourse (13:5–37), serve as ‘Jesus’ instructions to his disciples on how they are to live in the time between the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world as we know it’ (Moloney 2002:251).

Jesus’ discourse on the end of Jerusalem and the end of the world is introduced by the example of the widow who gives her whole life (12:44). However, it is also framed by the account of another woman whose action in anointing Jesus’ body will be remembered wherever the good news is preached (14:9; Malbon 2000:215–217). The ‘framing’ of the eschatological discourse by the two women, the one who gives her life and the other sharing in the death of Jesus, highlights the fact that 13:1–37 is aimed at the disciples, according to Moloney (2002:273). The framing also introduces hope in the face of increasing opposition to Jesus (11:27–28; 12:12–13), and the disciples’ inability to understand Jesus’ invitation to

carry the cross and follow him through suffering and death to resurrection (8:22–10:52).

Now Jesus celebrates Passover with his disciples, and during the course of the meal he tells them that he will not drink wine again until that day when he drinks it new in the kingdom of God (14:25). This is not a spiritualised kingdom Jesus is talking about, but one in which he will drink wine, after his death and resurrection. When he is delivered into the hands of the high priest, Jesus admits that he is the Messiah and refers to the coming of the Son of man at the *eschaton* (Mk 14:62; cf. Dowd & Malbon 2006:295). In this way, the ‘good news’ (*εὐαγγέλιον Ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ*) of 1:1 is brought into view by framing it eschatologically.

Jesus’ death is described in terms that remind of the Jewish apocalypses, with darkness covering the land and the curtain before the Holy of Holies is torn in two. Now God enters the story (Moloney 2002:328). The curtain ripping in half shows that ‘with the death of Jesus, God is made available to his people directly and not through the Jewish priests’ sacrifice in the Temple’ (Ehrman 2009:60), according to Mark’s account. In Luke’s account (Lk 23:45), darkness comes over the land and the curtain is ripped whilst Jesus is still alive, marking the judgement of God against the Jewish temple (Donahue & Harrington 2002:452; Van Eck 2008:577) and anticipating Jesus’ death, which is described in the next verse (Lk 23:46).⁹ In Matthew’s account (Mt 27:51), Jesus dies, the curtain is ripped in two, the earth shakes, rocks are split, and saints rise from the dead (Mt 27:52–53). The ripped curtain appears to indicate that God is rejecting the Jewish system of worship, symbolised by the temple (Ehrman 2009:61). Given Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of the temple, the tearing of the curtain may symbolise destruction and connect it to the temple authorities’ rejection of Jesus and his realisation of God’s kingdom, along with the idea that access to God is no longer through the temple cult and its sacrifices, but through Jesus’ death.¹⁰ Dowd (2000) writes:

... the destruction of the veil is the proleptic destruction of the temple, the cancellation of the cult that had been prophetically enacted by the Markan Jesus in 11:15–16 and explicitly predicted by him in 13:2 [...] The positive aspect of the tearing of the curtain is the release of the divine presence into the world. (p. 162)

His resurrection is also pictured as an apocalyptic event, as a vindication of Jesus and a foretaste of the *eschaton* (16:6).

Some exegetical remarks: Mark 15:38

Mark 15:37 states that Jesus dies with a loud, probably wordless cry or shout. His death ends bystanders’ expectation

9. Du Plessis (2009:1564) reasons that Luke places darkness over the earth and the tearing of the curtain next to each other as two symbolic and dramatic signs, with the first signifying that Jesus’ death touches nature and the second that it implies the Temple. In Jesus’ death, light is extinguished for humankind. God’s salvation plan is, however, not destroyed by Jesus’ death. The tearing of the curtain demonstrates that God is still in control and that God reaches out to human beings through the death of his Son.

10. Dowd and Malbon (2006:296) mention that the only other usage of *σχιζομένου* occurs in 1:10, referring to the splitting of heaven at Jesus’ baptism.

that Elijah would come to rescue him and frustrates the attempt to provide Jesus with a drink by using a sponge on a reed. The reader is reminded of Jesus' prophecy in 14:25 that he would not drink of the vine ἕως τῆς ἡμέρας ἐκείνης ὅταν αὐτὸ πίνω καινὸν ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ ['until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God'] (Collins 1992:116). The description of his death fulfils the predictions in 8:31, 9:31 and 10:33–34.

The next element that the evangelist refers to is the depiction of the curtain of the sanctuary being split (τὸ καταπέτασμα τοῦ ναοῦ ἐσχίσθη εἰς δύο ἀπ' ἄνωθεν ἕως κάτω). It is an ambiguous remark and it should probably be taken symbolically rather than realistically.

As mentioned earlier, the temple (and its counterpart in the desert, the tabernacle) is meant to be a copy of the heavenly abode of God, with the Holy of Holies an imitation of the throne of God (Josephus *Ant.* 3.6.4:122–123). According to Josephus, the curtain ('the first one') conceals this space, whilst a second curtain hangs before the dwelling as a whole, between the sanctuary and the forecourt (Witherington 2001:400).¹¹ On feast days ('great days') the second curtain was drawn aside to allow a view of the main part of the inner tabernacle (*Ant.* 3.6.4:127–129). Herod the Great had hung a magnificent curtain in the main entrance to the temple that was visible from the forecourt (Witherington 2001:400). Coming to a description of the temple, Josephus mentions that the sanctuary has golden doors with a curtain made of different colours of materials representing fire, earth, air and sea hanging behind it. The curtain typifies the universe (*Bellum* 5.5.4:212). The woven material represents the heavens without the signs of the zodiac (*Bellum* 5.5.4:214). A second curtain also separates the temple from its innermost part, the Holy of Holies (*Bellum* 5.5.5:219). Both of these curtains were part of the temple (Collins 2007:760). Scholars are divided in their opinion on whether Mark's reference to the curtain refers to the outer or inner curtain. If the centurion's statement in 15:39 (Ἀληθῶς οὗτος ὁ ἄνθρωπος υἱὸς θεοῦ ἦν) is based on him actually seeing the curtain torn, it must refer to the outer one. There is, however, no reason to suspect that this is the case, given the probable location of Golgotha, with the temple on the eastern edge of the city and facing east and Golgotha outside the city to the west (Collins 1992:114–115). The outer curtain could, however, be seen from the Mount of Olives (Kleiber 2010:308). Also, Mark is not interested in the effect of the tearing of the veil on the characters in his narrative, but provides the short remark for the benefit of his readers (Linnemann 1970:159).

Schneider (1965) is of the opinion that the outer curtain has no known cultic significance, whilst the inner curtain plays an important role as the entity separating the holy part of the temple from the holiest: the Holy of Holies, only accessible

to the high priest bringing an annual sacrifice. It is therefore likely that the evangelist refers to the inner curtain.¹²

What is the significance of the torn curtain? The curtain resembles the barrier between humanity and God, where no one may enter the room where God's throne is except the high priest, and then only once a year (Lv 16). The torn curtain signifies that the death of Jesus makes access to God possible for humanity. Hebrews 6–9 knows a tradition that the curtain of the Holy of Holies was rent, meaning that God's presence would no longer be confined there, since Jesus had made it available everywhere (Witherington 2001:400).¹³ The hidden God makes God-self available to humans; the temple is open to all who wish to look (Moloney 2002:329).¹⁴ The event also signifies or, according to Donahue & Harrington (2002:452), serves as a portent of the revelation of God, perhaps indicating that God has heard Jesus' last cry on the cross.

How 15:38 is interpreted is determined by the passage(s) used by the interpreter as key to its significance. Lohmeyer (1967:347) links 15:38 to 15:29–30 and implicitly to 14:58, and concludes that the splitting of the curtain signifies the coming destruction of the temple as fulfilment of Jesus' prophecy as reflected in his mockers' words: Οὐὸ ἂ καταλύων τὸν ναὸν καὶ οἰκοδομῶν ἐν τρισὶν ἡμέραις ['Ha, you who destroy the temple and build it in three days'] (15:29). Then the second part of the prophecy will also be fulfilled, namely that he will inaugurate the new cult (Viljoen 2007:303).

Michel (1965) disagrees when he uses the *kerygma* of Jesus as the key to interpret 15:38. He argues that God's judgement has fallen on the temple.

Donahue (1973:203) interprets 15:38 in terms of what he calls the 'anti-temple theme', starting with 11:1, with Jesus in direct opposition and confrontation with the temple.¹⁵ He predicts and illustrates its destruction and is condemned to death for these daring words. 15:38 is then the culmination of the theme, signifying the reality of what Jesus has anticipated. Although Mark 13 explicitly refers to the destruction of the temple, the context shows that the temple as such is not rejected. Its destruction is the consequence of the disobedience and error of the

12. Moloney (2002:329) justifies the choice for the inner curtain: '... the mounting theme of the new temple, replacing the now defunct temple of Jerusalem (11:12–25), whose destruction Jesus has already foretold (13:5–23) constructed upon the rejected cornerstone (see 12:10–11), points to the veil which separated the inner sanctum of the Sanctuary from its outer chamber.'

13. Collins (2007:760–761) refers to a 7th century commentary on Mark interpreting the tearing of the curtain as heaven being opened. The *Gospel of the Nazarenes* 21 tells how the lintel of the temple is split and not only the curtain, consequently leading to a multitude of Jews being converted (Witherington 2001:400).

14. 'Die digte gordyn wat tempel en wêreld van God afgesluit het, is geskeur – God woon weer in die skepping' (De Villiers 2013). 'Die gordyn van skeiding tussen ons en God is afgeskeur. Nooit hoef ons meer te voel dat God ons verlaat nie. Die hel is verby. Christus het vir ons sondes betaal. Waarom sal God ons ooit weer verlaat?' (Vorster 2006).

15. Akin (n.d.) interprets the tearing of the veil in the same terms, namely that the Jewish economy (the Law of Moses or the Old Covenant) has been done away with, that the new high priest (Jesus) has the right to enter the heavenly tabernacle, that believers may approach God through Jesus and the Christian economy rather than through the Jewish or Mosaic economy, and that heaven has now been opened to receive believers.

11. The term *καταπέτασμα* was used for both curtains, as can be seen in LXX of Exodus 26:33, 37 and Josephus' *Antiquities* 8.3.3. Josephus (*Bellum* 5.3) refers to disturbances and zealot activities 40 years before the destruction of the Temple, at the time of Jesus' death, but he does not refer to the rending of the curtain (cf. the discussion in Witherington 2001:400).

religious leaders. Also, the remark of Jesus in 14:58, Ἐγὼ καταλύσω τὸν ναὸν τοῦτον τὸν χειροποίητον καὶ διὰ τριῶν ἡμερῶν ἄλλον ἀχειροποίητον οἰκοδομήσω [‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands’], implies renewal rather than abolition of the temple cult. When the rending of the curtain is interpreted in terms of the destruction of the temple, Collins (2007:762) argues, the implication of the supersession of the Jewish cult and practices by a Christian one is the result of developments in the early Church ‘when Christians were attempting to forge a new identity *vis-à-vis* Jewish communities’.

Some scholars argue for a link between the baptism and death of Jesus with the splitting (σχιζομένους) of heavens in 1:10 and of the curtain (ἐσχίσθη) in 15:38 (e.g. Malbon 1986:187). Mark is unique in using this verb in terms of the baptism, whilst the other synoptic evangelists use it in terms of the temple curtain. In the common diction between 1:10 and 15:38, Motyer (1987:155) sees an intentional resemblance, demonstrated by the events signifying the beginning and end of Jesus’ ministry. The curtain depicts the heavens, according to Josephus, linking the two passages in another way. Readers would then interpret the rending of the curtain in terms of the baptism episode as the rending of heavens and God revealing himself to humanity. A further link between 1:10 and 15:38 is that at the baptism the Spirit descends on Jesus, whilst at his death the Spirit ascends in his dying breath (Jackson 1987:27). The descent of the Spirit results in Jesus’ ministry and the death of Jesus results in the ascent of the Spirit as illustrated in the rending of the curtain.

Another aspect, emphasised by Linnemann (1970:162–3), is that the curtain functioned to veil the majesty of God, suggesting that at the moment of Jesus’ death the majesty of God becomes manifest to all people.¹⁶ Jesus’ death effected access to God and God’s revelation in the cross of the Son (Gnilka 1979:324).

Mark 15:38 suggests that Jesus’ death contains an ambiguous and mysterious theophany, with the purpose of God being fulfilled in the apparently shameful death of Jesus (Collins 2007:764). The God present in the baptism scene seems to be the *deus absconditus* [hidden god] in the crucifixion scene. However, in an ironic theophany, Jesus’ cry in 15:34 (Ἐλωὶ ἐλωὶ λεμὰ σαβαχθάνι) implies God’s presence demonstrated by the rending of the curtain. ‘A new temple is built on the destroyed body of Jesus as privileged access to the old temple comes to an end (v. 39)’ (Moloney 2002:330).

It is not necessary to choose between the different interpretive possibilities. Rather, the interpreter should use these possibilities to demonstrate the diverse associations that the reference to the temple’s curtain could have for the readers and listeners.

16.Linnemann (1970) argues that ἐσχίσθη should mean ‘separate’ or ‘open,’ rather than ‘split’ or ‘tear,’ although Josephus’ description suggests that the curtain does not consist of two parts, but rather a single large curtain.

Synthesis

This article asked the question: What is distinctive in Mark’s emphasis of the event of the torn curtain in 15:38 and what is his rhetorical strategy in doing so? The analysis shows that it represents a theme in Mark’s thinking, which begins with Jesus’ triumphant entrance into Jerusalem in Mark 11, of the opposition between Jesus and the temple authorities.

The significance of the rending of the curtain is:

- in the definite opening of the way between heaven and earth through Jesus’ death on the cross
- the expression of divine judgement on the continuing efficacy of worship at the temple, a theme that dominates since Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem in Mark 11
- based on the similarity between 1:10 and 15:38, as the Spirit, ascending in his dying breath, is in contrast to the Spirit descending on Jesus at his baptism.

Positively, Jesus’ death gives access to the Holy of Holies, indicating God’s presence, whilst negatively his death announces the end of the Jewish temple cult (Kleiber 2010:308).

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