
Did God Forsake Jesus?

Abandonment and Presence in Mark 15

Jennifer Garcia Bashaw

*Associate Professor of New Testament and Christian Ministry
Campbell University
Buies Creek, North Carolina*

It is one of the most dramatic and heart-breaking scenes in literary history. A bleeding, innocent man is affixed to a cross, naked and on display for crowds that mock him. The man had been condemned to death for upsetting the status quo and claiming a kingdom on earth that lifted up the marginalized and brought down the powerful. For the hours that he is tortured by the Roman Empire's inhuman method of execution, the man speaks few words because the effort to do so is exhausting. The words he does speak are recounted by the four evangelists who later write the gospels. One of the phrases that Mark includes in his narrative (one that is picked up by Matthew as well) is often called the cry of dereliction—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This emotionally charged question has fueled much speculation in interpretive history. Countless commentators have unspooled complex explanations in attempts to decipher its significance. At the heart of these explanations stands a valid but assumptive theological concern—Why would God forsake Jesus? Given the context of Mark's passion narrative, however, I would like to raise a different concern—Is Mark communicating that God abandoned Jesus or have we inserted that interpretation into the text?

Let's address the why question and its common rationalization first and then visit Mark's narrative to determine what he might be communicating in the passage. One popular reading of, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" can be found in much of the ecclesial tradition of the last several centuries—the idea that God had to turn away from Jesus while he died because of our human sin. The justification usually goes something like this: Jesus took on the sins of humanity while on the cross and because God is holy, God could not look on that sin and so had to turn away from Jesus and forsake him, abandoning him at the most painful and traumatic moment of his life.¹ The problem with this interpretation is that it is constructed precariously on

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top of theological assumptions about atonement; the text of Mark's Gospel does not provide it. Mark's narration of Jesus' death is terse and includes no commentary on the so-called "cry of dereliction." The five verses describe only the natural phenomena in the backdrop of his words and the actions of the people around the cross:

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last (Mark 15:33-37).²

Certainly, the cry from the cross is a central piece in Mark's succinct treatment of the cross. However, nowhere does Mark pronounce Jesus' cry as an indictment of God's absence, nor does he provide a theological explanation about sin or its effects on the divine. Why, then, do Western Christians assume that God forsakes Jesus on the cross because sin required it? The first reason

1. For a popular (and influential) example of this, see <https://billygraham.org/story/did-god-abandon-jesus-on-the-cross-billy-graham-answers/>

2. All citations are from the NRSVue unless otherwise noted.

is contextual—we have not taken the cry as a piece of a larger narrative schema and have downplayed the fact that the cry, “My God, my God...” comes from the context of a psalm. The bulk of this essay will address why and how we must pay attention to this cry in its literary context. The second reason people assume that God abandons Jesus, however, is theological and historical. Modern Christianity’s obsession with the theory of atonement known as Penal Substitutionary Atonement (PSA) has led many people to a reading of the death of Jesus that emphasizes God forsaking Jesus because of sin. John Calvin was one of the first commentators to articulate this theological interpretation of the cross:

It is said that he descended into hell. This means that he had been afflicted by God, and felt the dread and severity of divine judgment, in order to intercede with God’s wrath and make satisfaction to his justice in our name, thus paying our debts and lifting our penalties, not for his own iniquity (which never existed) but for ours....But it is in this sense that he is said to have borne the weight of divine severity, since he was “stricken and afflicted” by God’s hand, and experienced all the signs of a wrathful and avenging God, so as to be compelled to cry out in deep anguish: “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?”³ (John Calvin, *Catechism of Geneva* from 1538, 20.4)

In this assessment of Jesus’ cry from the cross, Calvin draws from different unnamed sources for his interpretation, none of which is the text of Mark itself. Calvin’s theological commitment to a God of wrath who avenges the sins of humanity by bringing judgment on his son controls his analysis of Jesus’ words here. I am convinced that we do the text of Mark a great disservice if we read it through the lenses of white, Western theologians from the sixteenth century (even though many pastors and interpreters are trained to do just that in seminary). Instead, we should read Mark’s passion in its literary and historical contexts to determine if Mark is trying to communicate God’s abandonment or absence or if there is another emphasis that dominates the passage.

Mark’s use of Psalm 22

I quoted the immediate literary context of Mark’s “cry of dereliction” above. In those verses we see no clarification about what Jesus’ exclamation means. However, Mark and all the Gospel writers are well-versed in Israel’s scriptures and any good study Bible would tell you that, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is the first line of Psalm 22. Good, hermeneutical practice would dictate, then, that we explore Psalm 22 and its function in Mark 15 in order to determine what Mark means by

3. I. John Hesselink, *Calvin’s First Catechism: A Commentary*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 24.

Psalm 22’s opening line, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?,” does not reveal the prevailing theme of the psalm; it may start in a place of despair and accusation but it moves to a call for praise because of God’s faithful deliverance.

using it the way he does.⁴

A brief word about the psalms in the Hebrew Bible: they are what Ellen Davis calls “the common property of all who worship the God of Israel.” They function like blues songs, speaking a “vividly metaphorical language that is intensely personal and yet not private.”⁵ There are typical forms to the various psalms—praise, lament, thanksgiving, etc.—but they also contain an instability, an uncontrollable creativity inherent in their poetic language that allows them to be reconstituted in and for different communities at different times.⁶ When we encounter a psalm cited in another literary context, we must keep in mind the original message and form of that psalm but we must also analyze the secondary context in which it is cited.

Psalm 22 is an individual psalm of lament; however, Davis argues that its theme is one of praise.⁷ It moves from complaint to trust in God, which is a common structure for lament songs, but it ends with ten verses of description about the various groups that should praise God—the congregation of Israel, the foreign nations, generations yet unborn, even those who inhabit the land of the dead. The psalm’s opening line, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” does not reveal the prevailing theme of

4. My goal in this essay is not to draw firm conclusions about whether Jesus historically said these words on the cross. John Dominic Crossan maintains that Mark quotes from the psalm here to create a prophecy fulfillment motif, not to report historical details (*Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995], 1-13) and others, like Mark Goodacre, consider Mark’s use of the psalm as “history scripturalized” (“Scripturalization in Mark’s Crucifixion Narrative,” in *The Trial and Death of Jesus: Essays on the Passion Narrative in Mark*, eds. Geert Van Oyen and Tom Shepherd [Leuven: Peeters, 33-47], 39). More traditional scholars argue that the passion narratives represent recollections of the eyewitnesses, “history remembered”—a view assumed by Raymond E. Brown in *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave* (New York: Doubleday, 1984). Whether the words that Mark uses here are historically grounded or not, it is still important to ask the question, “Why did Mark include this saying of Jesus?” and to pay attention to how Mark as a storyteller structures the narrative.

5. Ellen F. Davis, “Exploding the Limits: Form and Function in Psalm 22,” *JSOT* 53 (1992): 93-105, 93.

6. Davis, “Exploding the Limits,” 95-96.

7. Davis, “Exploding the Limits,” 96.

the psalm; it may start in a place of despair and accusation but it moves to a call for praise because of God's faithful deliverance.

When Mark pens these words—the only words that Jesus utters from the cross in his Gospel—was he trying to communicate the message of the entire psalm? Or was he merely reporting the words of Jesus without the overarching movement of the psalm in mind? The context in Mark 15 will help us determine that. Scholars do not agree about the practice of quoting psalms in a first-century context. Some say that a Jewish person citing the first line of a psalm would automatically imply the entire psalm and its message. Others say that we do not have enough evidence to support that claim. This academic argument is important, but it is not key to this study of Psalm 22 because Mark does not just cite the first line of the psalm in his crucifixion account—he refers to it throughout the narrative.

Commentators have found several direct references to other lines from Psalm 22 in Mark's account of the crucifixion. The most common ones cited are Psalm 22:18 and 22:7-8. The line from verse 18— "...they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots"—appears in Mark 15:24: "And they crucified him and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take." Psalm 22:7-8 also makes it into Mark's narration, albeit with more paraphrase. "All who see me mock me; they sneer at me; they shake their heads; 'Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—let him rescue the one in whom he delights!'" shows up in Mark 15:29-31 as, "Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!' In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself.'"

In addition to these two quotations, Mark seems to be making other allusions to the content of Psalm 22. Take, for example, 15:36, "And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink," which calls to mind Psalm 22:15: "my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death." It seems that Mark goes to great lengths to describe the scene at the cross in terms that echo lines from Psalm 22. The parallels only multiply when we broaden the criteria for comparison from quotations and allusions to themes.

Academic commentators rarely take their comparative evaluations as far as themes because they have been trained in the modernist school of precision. Western scholarship dictates that one must find exact word parallels to have enough evidence to prove that an author is quoting another source. The problem with these exacting criteria is that they do not take into account the symbolic nature of the psalms or their creative, continued use in Jewish communities (as imaginative and flexible as the blues, said Ellen Davis!). When we look at the thematic movements of Psalm 22, we find that Mark has woven this psalm into almost every part of his crucifixion narrative, and when we fit the pieces together, it is not a picture of God-forsakenness that emerges. On

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the contrary, we find that the absence/abandonment descriptions refer to the human players around the cross and God's presence (what some would call God's "elusive presence") is what Mark painstakingly highlights as he parallels the themes of Psalm 22.

Affliction from people, petition for God

The first theme that Mark emphasizes from Psalm 22 is the growing persecution that people inflict on the suffering one (on the psalmist in the lament and on Jesus in the Passion). In the psalm, the attacks from humans are portrayed with animal imagery that builds upon itself and intensifies throughout the psalm. Bulls encircle the psalmist, ravening lions open wide their mouths, dogs (evildoers) surround him, and the horns of wild oxen threaten (22:12, 13, 16, 21). Starting in 15:16, Mark signals a similar crescendo of persecution, not by employing zoomorphic images but by using a litany of active verbs that increase in intensity. Between 15:16 and 15:32, the soldiers and people around Jesus are the persecutors, actively afflicting Jesus with physical and emotional torment while he remains a passive participant. The soldiers *lead* him, *cloth* him in a purple cloak, *twist* a thorny crown, *salute* him, *strike* him, *spit* on him, *kneel* in mock homage, *bring* him to Golgotha, *offer* him wine, *crucify* him, *divide* his clothes. Those who passed by *deride* him and *shake* their heads at him while the chief priests and scribes *mock* him and those crucified with him *taunt* him. The buildup of actions Mark describes during the crucifixion focuses our attention on the human actors in this drama of suffering. When God enters the narrative in Jesus' cry, it echoes the movement made in Psalm 22 from affliction to request, from human action to action of God. As Davis writes of Psalm 22:

As the series advances, the images of imminent death become more savage—the sword, the power of a dog, a lion's mouth, the horns of wild oxen. But strangely, the assurance of the demand also grows in strength. The first petition is formulated negatively: 'Do not be far away.'

Then the psalmist switches to positive imperatives—‘save me, deliver me’—and finally to a perfect verb . . . indicating that rescue is a certainty, if not already accomplished. It is, then, the petition itself, envisioning and calling forth God’s new action in the present desperate situation, that opens up the possibility of praise.⁸

If Mark is mimicking the climax of human opposition from Psalm 22, might he also intend for the cry from the cross to be the cry of rescue, which intensifies and moves toward praise, instead of a cry of dereliction? Twenty-first century readers may surface-read Jesus’ cry as an accusation of God’s abandonment but when Mark structures his crucifixion narrative, it moves like Psalm 22 from affliction by people to petition of a faithful God.

God’s presence with the afflicted: Simon of Cyrene

There is one anomaly in Mark’s crucifixion story that interrupts the human actors driving Jesus deeper into affliction and closer to the cross: the peculiar verse about Simon the Cyrene. After the soldiers strike Jesus, spit on him, mock him, and lead him to Golgotha, the actions against Jesus pause for this narration: “They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus” In my book, *Scapegoats: The Gospel through the Eyes of Victims*, I argue that this abrupt insertion by Mark serves as a “hidden transcript,” a kind of subversive, political message that scholars have found throughout canonical Gospels.⁹ These hidden transcripts function as a form of protest against the Roman oppressors, communicating to early hearers of the Gospels that God takes the side of the oppressed.¹⁰ One example of a hidden transcript can be found in Jesus’ line from the Sermon on the Mount which instructs his followers to “turn the other cheek.” These words, functioning as a hidden transcript, do not call the oppressed (Jesus’ teaching audience) to passive submission; they encourage the downtrodden to find dignity in passive resistance.¹¹ Instead of cowering and falling to the ground when struck by a Roman soldier, Jesus calls these occupied peoples to stand and

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The brief episode in Mark about Simon from Cyrene features and critiques one of the unjust practices of the empire—forced conscription. A soldier should have picked up Jesus’ cross when it fell but because that was a shameful act, they compelled Simon, a foreigner, to do it instead. The unsettling image of someone being forced to carry a load for the Roman military would have struck a familiar chord for anyone in Roman-occupied land. Conscripting soldiers from among their poorest subjects was one of the ways Rome maintained control and fear in their borderlands. The practice, which split up families and ended in death for many young men, illustrated how the Roman domination system wreaked havoc on the lives of the people they ruled.

When we view the Simon episode as a hidden transcript, we can uncover the message for the oppressed that Mark drops into the middle of the crucifixion. His focus on the compelled cross-carrier draws attention to Jesus’ plight as one afflicted by human systems of domination and power. Such an interpretation is yet another touchpoint Mark makes with the themes of Psalm 22. In 22:24, the psalmist sings of God: “For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.” For the first-century readers of Mark’s Gospel, Simon the Cyrene’s story provided a hidden transcript of hope in a God who does not hide or turn away from the afflicted. Mark could have processed Jesus from the palace courtyard to Golgotha without pause, and with Mark’s concise commentary, we would expect such expedience. Instead, the story halts, focusing on a conscripted man who—like Jesus and the other oppressed people under Rome’s heavy fist—needed to know that God cared about their plight and would hear them when they cried out. Simon’s moment in the spotlight comes right before Jesus is crucified. This purposeful order provides another clue that Mark is not leading his audience to Jesus’ cry as a proclamation of God’s absence but is preparing them to hear the cry that reverberates from the afflicted psalmist of Psalm 22—a plea to the God who hears the afflicted and does not turn away from them.

8. Davis, “Exploding the Limits,” 99.

9. Jennifer Garcia Bashaw, *Scapegoats: The Gospel through the Eyes of Victims* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 248-253. On hidden transcripts in the New Testament, see Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 11-12. The concept of “hidden transcripts” originates with political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott (*Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990]) and has influenced New Testament scholarship in recent years.

10. Richard A. Horsley locates hidden transcripts in Mark, the speeches of Jesus in Matthew and Luke, and in Paul. See “Introduction: Jesus, Paul, and the ‘Arts of Resistance’: Leaves from the Notebook of James C. Scott,” in *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul*, ed. Richard A. Horsley, 1-28, *Semeia Studies* 48 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004).

11. Walter Wink, “Jesus and the Nonviolent Struggle of Our Time,” *Louvain Studies* 18 (1993): 3-20.

God's continued redemptive work and presence

As we have seen, Mark has creatively interlaced the themes of Psalm 22 into his crucifixion account in a way that guides his audience to interpret Jesus' cry not as one of abandonment but of pleading to the God who hears the afflicted. But Mark's use of Psalm 22 continues until the end of his Passion narrative, past Jesus' cry and last breath. Before we look at the conclusion of Mark's crucifixion account, it will be helpful to revisit Psalm 22 and observe its ending themes:

All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD,
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before God.
For dominion belongs to the LORD,
and God rules over the nations.
To the Lord, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth
bow down;
before God shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for God.
Posterity will serve God;
future generations will be told about the Lord
and proclaim this God's deliverance to a people yet
unborn,
saying that the Lord has done it. (Psalm 22:27-31)¹²

The psalmist has moved from desperate plea ("My God, my God" in verse 1) through complaint about human enemies (the animal imagery in 12-21), to a call for praise ("You who fear the Lord, praise God!" in verse 23), and finally ends in a declaration of God's rule over the nations and deliverance for future generations. Mark picks up on these final themes in his conclusion.

After Jesus gives a loud cry and breathes his last in 15:37, Mark writes, "And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion who stood facing him saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'" (15:38-39). Scholars continue to debate about the significance of the temple curtain being torn—was it a judgement of the temple or an unleashing of God's presence from the Holy of Holies onto the world (or both)?¹³ When this description is paired with the Gentile centurion's exclamation about Jesus being God's son, though, Mark's emphasis becomes clearer. The Jerusalem Temple had developed a restrictive structure

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that kept various groups away from the center of divine presence instead of welcoming them into the presence of God (the Court of Women and the Court of Gentiles were positioned outside and farther from God's holy presence). When the curtain tears, the innermost boundary separating people from God is removed, perhaps suggesting that the others will fall as well. There is an apocalyptic significance to the ripping of the curtain that parallels the tearing open of the heavens when God speaks at Jesus' baptism (1:10-11) and readers get the feeling that something big is happening with regard to God's presence and (considering the centurion's confession) with regard to the Gentiles. This theme, that the nations (the Gentiles) will praise God, parallels the end of Psalm 22 when the nations worship God and deliverance for future people is announced by the psalmist (22: 27, 31). The presence of God with the nations, not the absence of God in suffering, is the emphasis that Mark chooses to highlight here and it points to a universalizing of salvation that the prophets and the psalmists had hinted at throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

What about the final verses of Mark's crucifixion narrative? Does the story end with a nod toward presence or toward abandonment? The section concludes with the presence of the women disciples at the cross: "There were also women looking on from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome, who followed him when he was in Galilee and ministered to him, and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem" (15:40-41). It is an odd way to end the crucifixion account. Surely, Mark could have mentioned their presence earlier as both Luke and John do. However, if we recognize the movement of Mark's crucifixion narrative as it parallels Psalm 22, we can see that the faithful presence and ministry of the women performs a contrastive pivot toward the future. The actions of humans during the crucifixion and throughout Mark's whole passion demonstrated that people are the ones who abandoned and afflicted Jesus all the way to the cross. After Jesus' final breath, though, Mark shifts his narration to show us a different kind of humanity—a group that has not caused suffering for Jesus but has offered support. The women disciples are the only people in the story who show up in a physically present, relational way—those who had followed him and ministered to him come up to

12. This is the NRSVue version with alterations made to prioritize inclusive language for God.

13. For support of the curtain-tearing as judgment against the temple and the prediction of its destruction, see Dennis MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2000), 241. For an example of a scholar who reads the tearing as the release of the divine presence in the world, see Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel* (Macon, Georgia: Smith & Helwys, 2000), 162.

Jerusalem to witness his torturous death.¹⁴ Their presence ends the human abandonment of Jesus that Mark's story had so painfully underscored. That they gather at the cross in solidarity with the suffering Jesus points toward a future in which those who will "serve God...and proclaim their God's deliverance" (Ps 22:30-31), *the church*, will become the presence of God in the world and declare God's praises among the nations.

Conclusion

In light of our exploration of Psalm 22, some may want to change their answer to the title question of this essay—"Did God forsake Jesus?" Reading the flow of Mark's story alongside the movement of the psalm has resulted in a conclusion that is quite contradictory to a surface-level (or John Calvin-inspired) reading of Jesus' cry from the cross. Because of Mark's creative and resonant use of Psalm 22, a statement that seems clear in its plain reading—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—ends up communicating not God's absence but God's presence, with Jesus and with all the afflicted. Mark's crucifixion account may be a tale of suffering and affliction but there is good news woven into it. It is not God who abandoned or afflicted Jesus, just as it is not God who has afflicted the psalmist in Psalm 22—it is always and only the people and the powers on earth. And when God feels absent or seems to have abandoned us in *our* suffering, we can cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and know that God will not turn from us but will hear our cry.

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14. J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays argue that if there were a unifying theme to biblical theology it would be God's relational presence and one of the places they recognize that relational presence is in the appearance of the female disciples at the cross at the end of Mark's Passion. *God's Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2019), 175.