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## The Missing Pillow : Mark 4:35-41 cum parallelis

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## The Missing Pillow

In June 2009 I participated in a research workshop on “John and Philosophy” in Copenhagen.

One of the participants, Jeremy Hultin from Yale, had brought to the workshop an essay by George Steiner called “Two Suppers”, that is the supper in Plato’s Symposium and The Last Supper as described by John in his Gospel.

When Steiner arrives at the terrible scene in John Ch 13, verses 18-30, he discusses the meaning of Jesus’ utterance in v 27 where the Son of God instructs the man possessed by Satan: “What you are going to do, do quickly”, in Greek phrased in the most succinct and straightforward way: *ho poieis, poiêson tachion*. You must admit that the original Greek has a terribly authentic ring to it: *o piis, piison tachion*, to pronounce the phrase as it was probably pronounced in the 1st c AD.

Let me now quote George Steiner’s brief commentary on this passage:

“A terrible humanity comes through : that of a man scarcely capable of countenancing the horrors to be

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visited on him, yet wishing to 'be done with them' . To my mind the abyss of truth in this pericope precludes literary invention, be it that of a Dostoevsky. I cannot avoid the belief that these four words "ο πιis, πιison tachion" were uttered. "

The head of the research workshop in Copenhagen Troels Engberg-Pedersen is a scholar very much in favour of the literary creativity of John and he turned a cold shoulder to George Steiner's authenticity claims, not to mention the intricate problem in what language those four words were uttered.

My interest in the pericope of Jesus stilling the storm in Mark 4 centers around the same problem as that described so poignantly - but perhaps with too much literary creativity - by Steiner.

And this problem is:

The polarity in Mark between on the one hand literary invention (or narrative creativity, if you prefer that term) and on the other hand literal authenticity, the fact that Mark must have exactly remembered details told to him by his tradent and that he also had a creative author's understanding of putting down those details in writing, even if the details could seem irrelevant to his argument as a whole.

I ask you to consider the difficult problems involved, and therefore you must not expect any miraculous

results! What I can offer is a straightforward presentation of my problem.

The problem is, to put it bluntly: Mark's astonishing predilection for picturesque details and his supreme, outstanding expertise in presenting those details.

As to my method of research I must tell you that I am not so very fond of studying old and new commentaries to Mark's gospel ( with a few exceptions which I will come back to). What I like is sitting with my Huck-Grewen's synopsis reading, comparing, pondering over similarities and dissimilarities between the three synoptics, reinventing the wheel so to speak.

The question now is: from where do those colourful details come. I suppose you have all thought about Mark's green and juicy grass on the slopes where people sat down waiting to be fed by Jesus and his disciples (Mk 6:35). As you know the grass is not green, chlôros, in Luke and Matthew. Mark knew that the feeding of the five thousand took place in early spring, before Easter, when the grass was not yet burnt down by the scorching rays of the sun.

Two alternatives for answering my questions present themselves automatically.

1.

The details are ad hoc creations of the fictionalist Mark. In that case we should be able to detect some sort of

pattern in those creations, e g that they were put into the narrative to heighten the verisimilitude of the text. *Exit* the naïve Mark, *intrat* a fully-fledged author of short stories.

2.

The other alternative is, as you might already have guessed, that all those picturesque illuminations are random reminiscences from sources contemporary to the events narrated that were accessible to Mark. In that case those sources probably go back to an early tradent that we might as well call Peter. In the early church there was a strong belief in the Petrine qualities of Mark's gospel.

Let us therefore hear what Papias thought ( quoted in Eusebios' Church History Book III ch 39:

“Mark, the interpreter (hermeneus, whatever that can mean) of Peter, wrote diligently (Greek: akribôs) down everything he remembered”. (And at the end of Eusebios' quotation) “Mark gave forethought to one thing, not to leave out anything of what he had heard nor lie about any of those small items.”

We have also to consider the question why most of those let us, for the sake of brevity, call them graphic markianisms were not considered interesting or relevant enough to be taken over by Luke in the first instance, and by Matthew in the second instance.

Let us now have a closer look at my test-case, the pericope about Jesus stilling the storm, with some attention to the Lucan and Matthean parallels.

I will select and comment on those Marcan details which are not in Luke or Matthew or can be considered to have been, for whatever reason, deliberately left out by them.

To my knowledge the only commentator who has consistently been attentive to the graphic marcanisms is Father Lagrange and, as he wrote in French, he is today, sorry to say, out of circulation, hors de circulation.

The Calvinist Cranford, if I may call him so, and his predecessor the classic Vincent Taylor have also, but to a lesser degree than Father Lagrange, noted some of my problems.

I will also at some points quote a Swedish commentary on Mark written by Lars Hartman . Hartman is particularly interested in the Greco-Roman Umwelt of Mark and has deliberately left out all references to Luke and Matthew. Hartman is now working on an English translation of his commentary, which will be of great interest to marcan scholars as it contains a lot of Umwelt-material hitherto unknown.

Let us now begin with Mark 4:35

“On that day when evening had come”.

It is not characteristic of Mark to give attention to such chronological details. We can infer that he got this detail from his tradent, who must also have known that fishing on the lake of Tiberias was best carried out during night. Luke’s and Matthew’s fishing knowledge was equal to nil.

v. 36

“Just as he was” *hôs ên*

What can that mean? The new Swedish translation gives us “in the boat in which he was” which is definitely wrong and seems to be unable to tell the difference between *hôs* and *hos* the masculine relative pronoun. No! Jesus lived the simple life of one of these poor people always ready to set out without carrying anything with them, just as they were.

v. 36 b

“and other boats were with him”

Father Lagrange has a good grasp of the situation. The reason for that is that during his years at L’Ecole Biblique de Jerusalem he often went up to the Lake of Tiberias and often spent an evening down at the water thinking about what had taken place there.

I translate from his Commentary ad locum: “The apostles, as good seamen, direct the movement. Other boats depart at the same time. Nothing is more natural, when you have every evening seen the boats of the lake of Tiberias depart in order to go fishing during night.

Reading the Gospel we are often absorbed by the teaching (la doctrine!) and lose sight of the daily necessities. These fishermen did not want to get separated from Jesus, but the disciples themselves planned both to bring Jesus with them and devote their night to fishing. The other boats will have been sunk by the tempest or dispersed. Mark will not mention them again and if he mentions them here, it is quite simply as a faithful narrator.”

v. 37

“a great storm of wind”

*lailaps megalê* with the addition of *anemou* seems to me a very strange expression. It is not to be found in earlier Greek or in the LXX, and we must trust those knowledgeable about Semitic languages that the phrase is neither Hebraic nor Aramaic.

What is it then? Perhaps an expression from Mark’s own spoken Greek.

v.38

“he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion”.

I prefer to take *ên katheudôn* as the periphrastic tense: he was sleeping etc.

Both details (the stern and the cushion or pillow) are marcan. This is also the only place where the gospel (with parallels in Luke and Matthew) shows Jesus sleeping. How Mark imagined the stern (or how the stern was constructed) we do not know, just as we do



not know whether the the cushion or pillow belonged to the boat's ordinary equipment.

Luke and Matthew did not understand the significance of these details and found them unnecessary.

To Lars Hartman Mark's most important frame of reference is the Greco-Roman world and Hartman has collected much valuable Umwelt-material, which is easier now than before when there was no Thesaurus Linguae Graecae and no digital corpus of Papyri and Inscriptions. The days of Walter Bauer extending his reading in Greek and Roman literature for every new edition of his Wörterbuch are certainly over. No lexicographer will ever grasp the Umwelt-Literatur of the New Testament as Bauer did. Fewer and fewer exegetes are able to understand the articles of the 5<sup>th</sup> edition as envisaged by Bauer himself who knew the precise significance of every illuminating item for the Greek of the New Testament.

Hartman does not think that the definite article before *proskephalaion* is what the grammarians call generic, nor do I. From a grammatical point of view the article marks the lively interest felt by the writer (cf. Soph. Oid. Col. 1415 with Jebb's comments). To me as a reader the cushion means the cushion the disciples brought with them to make the voyage comfortable to their master, their *didaskalos*, who had been preaching the whole afternoon and must have got tired.

The three synoptics are nevertheless agreed upon the fact that their master fell asleep (*ekatheuden*

respectively *aphypnôsen* in Mt/Lk). Jesus falling asleep is an essential part of the whole story.

v. 38

“do you not care if we perish”.

The phrase contains a nuance of rebuke, absent in Luke and Matthew who do not like to portray their master in that way.

According to Mark Jesus is master of the situation even if asleep. Or do Mark's disciples ask Jesus how he could sleep under the present circumstances?

v. 39

“be still, shut up”

*pephimôso* is a rare perfect passive imperative. *phimoô* literally means “to put a muzzle on an animal” and Mark obviously finds this bold and violent metaphor appropriate and his Jesus turns to the Lake of Tiberias in *oratio recta*. Luke and Matthew are not so direct, they retell in a more indirect and sober way what happened: “Jesus rebuked the winds...”. Mark's Jesus also uses the same metaphor *phimoô* in Ch 1:25, when he addresses the unclean spirit.

v. 40

With Sinaiticus et ceteri codices I read *oupô* “have you not yet faith?”

Vincent Taylor in his classic commentary says very aptly:”Luke has simply: Where is your faith? The

greater originality of Mark is evident. The tone of the rebuke is sharp.”

v. 41

The imperfect *elegon* probably means “began to say”.

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We have now gone through the graphic Marcan details of this pericope. Compared to Luke and Matthew Mark is surely in closer contact with reality.

Let me just enumerate for the last time his peculiarities:

It is early night

Jesus sets out just as he is

Other boats try to follow him

He sleeps on the pillow

His pupils rebuke him for not caring about the imminent danger.

Jesus turns to the Sea of Tiberias in *oratio recta*.

I will not here go further into the differences to Luke and Matthew. You have had time enough to observe them yourselves as I went along in my exposition.

Luke follows the same order of events as Mark but

Matthew lets Jesus rebuke his pupils before stilling the storm. You may find Mark’s reverse order more natural because it stresses Jesus’ readiness to act immediately and the disciples’ lack of faith.

For conclusion:

Mk has in father Lagrange's fine phrase a sovereign instinct of the picturesque. Are we to admit that Mk is a creative story-teller or is it more likely to view these picturesque details as a reflection of his most precise remembrances of Peter?

Is it for a NT exegete to decide upon these matters?

Some might say that the miracle can easily be reduced to a natural event.

Lars Hartman reminds us of the fact that several reports from late antiquity tell us how humans who were close to God (with a capital G) or to the gods had power over sea and winds.

A bucolic poem by a Calpurnius from the 1<sup>st</sup> c AD tells us the following about the emperor, probably Augustus himself, who was thought of as a σωτηρ, a Saviour:

Do you see how the whisper of the groves ceased at the voice of the emperor?  
How ever much the storm was raging, I remember,  
All of a sudden the grove was quiet and the branches did not move. I said:  
Here is a god; a god subdued the wind.

Hartman does not think that Mark's first readers believed that the narrative was a report of an actual event. Mark's readers lived in a cultural climate where you believed in the supernatural powers of mighty or wise or pious humans. These assumed readers would probably have understood the pericope about Jesus

stilling the storm in the same manner as they would have understood the bucolic lines about the emperor which I just quoted.

Is our understanding of this pericope in the end a matter of faith?

Perhaps as to the authenticity of the stilling of the storm, but not as to all those peculiar Marcan details . Those details are all due to an early tradent. Who else could he have been but the apostle Peter himself?

I must remind you of Papias' verdict:

Mark became the interpreter of Peter and wrote down akribôs (diligently) everything he remembered

(And further on:)

Mark gave forethought to one thing, namely not to leave out anything he had heard nor lie about any of those things.

If we believe in the Petrine qualities of Mark's picturesque details we can as well believe that Jesus calmed the storm just so as Mark tells us. By doing so we also honour the beliefs of Mark's first listeners and readers and need not bother about "what really happened", a *formula* so very typical of us modern people.