THE MESSIAH FORSAKEN...WHY?

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Thousands of interpreters of the Gospels have attempted to summarize the story of Jesus, but few have been more perceptive and penetrating than Søren Kierkegaard. In one of his journal entries for June, 1837, he observed that the whole story of Christ's life is contained in six statements. One of these six is the final exclamation of the Crucified: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46; H.V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers, Vol. I, A-E, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1967, 124). Because Kierkegaard did not specify in what sense this cry of Jesus contained the whole story, we are free to speculate. Did it contain that story by being a microscopic epitome of the Messiah's long struggle with the people he was sent to save, a struggle anticipated by Herod's pogrom in Bethlehem and completed in the successful plot of Caiaphas? Or did it contain that story by being a macroscopic vision of God's design from the foundation of the world? Whatever the answer, few readers of the Gospels will contest the judgment that Jesus' cry on Golgotha is one of the most climactic and enigmatic statements in the Gospel, — ample reason to devote an essay to explore its possible implications.

For this exploration I will follow only one of many possible angles of approach. I could concentrate on the type of questions that modern historians usually ask. Did Jesus actually utter these words? If so, what did he mean by them? Who heard them and who reported them? Why did the bystanders misunderstand them? Such questions proliferate endlessly, while convincing answers persistently elude the historian's net. Jesus' question belongs to the story as Matthew told it and since, as the text says, Jesus addressed that question to God, only God knows the answer.

Readers are always tempted by another angle of approach: a psychological probing of the inner thoughts of Jesus in the last moments. Accepting the text as it stands, on which word did this accent fall: my... God... forsake... why? The character of the question invites
intrusion into the deepest recesses of Jesus' spirit, but it provides scanty basis for confident answers. Even the canniest interpreters remain uncertain whether the cry reflected a sense of God's absence or his presence. Did it connote grief at its maximum or trust under maximum provocation?

I could venture into an even more problematic area and raise ultimate theological questions. Can a God who forsook this Son be trusted as just? Or was he in fact unable to help? Was his silence a denial of his love or a sign of it? Did he forsake Jesus in fact, or only appear to do so? Thoughtful readers deny neither the cogency of such questions nor the hazards in any of the standard answers. Ever since Matthew, together with Mark, reported this death-cry, it has provoked endless discussions among historians, biographers, theologians, preachers and casual readers.

In this essay, however, I have chosen to approach the riddle from a different angle. Examining only the Matthean version I will try to discover what this narrator was trying to convey to his first readers. How did he understand the forsakenness? How did he expect his readers to answer the question why? How did he want them to understand the implications of Jesus' urgent prayer to God? This goal makes it desirable for me to begin by recalling first the position of the narrator and then the position of his readers.

The Outlook of the Narrator

The basic perspective of Matthew has been accurately described by D.P. Senior. First of all, the entire Gospel was written with the Passion story in mind: "The Passion story describes the final climactic moment of a fateful choice that has suffused the entire Gospel" (The Passion Narrative According to Matthew, Louvain University Press, 1975, p.2) Second, the longer Passion story was written with the account of Jesus' death in mind: "The natural climax of the Passion is the death of Jesus. This, obviously is the end toward which each scene in the narrative is directed" (op.cit. p.337). Without the crucifixion, there would have been no Passion story, and without that story, no Gospel. In the first verse Matthew had introduced Jesus as the Messiah; it was that messiahship that was the decisive point of