It is one thing to be able to establish the emphases of both Mark and Luke in their accounts of Jesus going to his death. (See my previous post). It is harder, and more speculative, to establish why they chose to portray Jesus in these ways. But there are some good, plausible views of the matter. I’ll start with Mark.

In Mark Jesus appears to be in shock, is silent the entire time, seems not to understand why this is happening to him, up to the end, when he cries out asking God why he has forsaken him. And then he dies, never having received an answer. What is most striking is that even though Mark’s Jesus may not know why, when it comes to the time, he has to suffer like this, the reader does (and so, of course, does Mark). The moment that Jesus dies, two things happen: the curtain in the temple is ripped in half and the centurion confesses that he is the son of God. The curtain was the barrier between God, in the holy of holies in the temple, and the people. No one could go behind the curtain to be in God’s presence, except once a year when the High Priest entered the room on Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) to make a sacrifice to atone for the people’s sins for a year. For the author of Mark, Jesus’ death changed all that. There is now no longer a curtain separating God from his people. All people have direct access to God through the death of Jesus, which is the ultimate atonement. And someone recognizes it – the pagan centurion who has just crucified Jesus. The atonement is not for Jews only, but for all people. At the time he was suffering, Jesus may have been filled with doubts, but the reader knows why this had to happen: Jesus’ death was to bring an atonement for sin.

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