The Gospel of Mark

An Exegetical and Theological
Commentary for Preaching

O. Wesley Allen, Jr.

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"The disciples as dimwits? Jesus on the cross at his most powerless as the key salvific moment of the story? The women fleeing from the tomb in terror and amazement? No resurrection appearances? Wesley Allen's *The Gospel of Mark: An Exegetical and Theological Commentary for Preaching* names these and many other jarring details in the Gospel of Mark as evidence that it is written as a parable, in which the author deliberately twists familiar details of the narrative to invite readers then and now to experience the story and Jesus himself in a radically new way. Allen names Mark's choice of parabolic twisting as a pastoral response to the destruction of the temple in 70 CE and the looming threat of persecution. The genius of Allen's interpretation is seen in the rich harvest of theological, homiletical insights it yields for contemporary preachers in complex contexts.

Allen's *The Gospel of Mark* is a work of homiletical, exegetical, and theological depth. Each passage includes general suggestions for preaching, followed by an analysis of literary context, theological and homiletical reflections, and exegetical notes. This magisterial work should be on every biblical scholar's and preacher's shelf!"

—Alyce M. McKenzie, Le Van Professor of Preaching and Worship Emeritus, Altshuler Distinguished Teaching Professor, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University

"In this splendid scholarly commentary on Mark's Gospel, Allen has given preachers two fine gifts. He provides provocative, homiletically stimulating comments on every passage in Mark, and he shows the literary and theological connections throughout that show how this Gospel works together as a whole. Any preacher who reads this book will be invigorated with renewed excitement to preach the great 'parable' that is the Gospel of Mark."

—Thomas G. Long, Bandy Professor Emeritus of Preaching, Candler School of Theology

"Allen was classically trained as a New Testament scholar and has spent decades preaching and teaching preaching. His ability to combine exegetical rigor and homiletical vision is everywhere evident in this substantial contribution to the understanding—and communication—of Mark's distinctive version of the good news. Here at last, and not a moment too soon, is that rarest of books: a large commentary on a Gospel that is also, and impressively, useful. Allen's clear prose, cogent judgment, and creative theological reflection make this a book every serious preacher will appreciate."

—Luke Timothy Johnson, Robert W. Woodruff Professor Emeritus of New Testament and Christian Origins, Candler School of Theology, Emory University

"I have been in New Testament studies and preaching since 1968. Once in a generation, a commentary comes along that opens a window on a biblical book in new and compelling ways. Allen's *The Gospel of Mark* is that book for the early twenty-first century, as Allen sees the second Gospel as itself a parable intended to get inside the minds, hearts, and behaviors of an unfaithful congregation and awaken them to want to turn toward faithfulness and to join the movement toward the present and coming realm of God. Even better: Allen leads readers in theological reflection and lifts up homiletical possibilities. I

have never said this about any other commentary, but I believe this work is so comprehensive that it is the only commentary a preacher needs on the Gospel of Mark."

—Ronald J. Allen, Professor Emeritus of Preaching, and Gospels and Letters, Christian Theological Seminary

"Allen's commentary on Mark works so well because it's written with preachers in mind. Word-level commentary is blended with notes on literary structure and context, alongside reflections for preaching, all framed by Allen's assertion that Mark's Gospel should be read as a parable written for a community of believers struggling to find their way in complicated and traumatic times. Veteran preachers in search of fresh ideas and new preachers who don't know where to start will find wisdom in these pages."

—Lee Hull Moses, Senior Minister, Central Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Indianapolis

"The most useful commentaries for preachers perform two distinctive tasks: They offer thorough analysis of individual passages, and they connect each passage with pervasive themes and the overarching theological rhetoric of a biblical book. The first task proves especially handy for late-week sermon writing; the second for long-range planning to facilitate a congregation's deeper, thoughtful engagement with Scripture. Allen's treatment of Mark devotes itself to both tasks, with a theological generosity and an approachable style that readers will find welcoming and stimulating for their callings to preach good news."

—Matthew L, Skinner, Asher O. and Carrie Nasby Professor of New Testament, Luther Seminary

"Allen invites preachers and all clergy and laity alike to a fresh reading of Mark's story of Jesus. By analyzing every component of the Gospel within its overarching framework and function as an extended parable, Allen enables Mark's readers to understand the Gospel as a fully and deftly integrated narrative. The result is a stirring interpretation that ushers readers into a new experience of Mark's theology and message. Sophisticated in approach and rich in insight, the book's style and format are yet very accessible, making the book an ideal theological and homiletical companion throughout Year B in the Revised Common Lectionary."

—Mary F. Foskett, Wake Forest Kahle Professor and John Thomas Albritton Fellow, Department for the Study of Religions, Wake Forest University

"This lucidly written commentary makes a bold case for the unsettling nature of our earliest Gospel. Allen presents Mark as a parabolic performance that uses ambiguities, ironic reversals, and unexpected narratological shifts to create a salutary crisis of understanding for those who follow Jesus. Guiding preachers skillfully through the liminal terrain of Markan proclamation, Allen argues that Mark disrupts theological triumphalism as a pastoral strategy, bearing witness to a crucified Savior whose power has been made manifest in conditions of suffering and despair."

—Carolyn J. Sharp, Professor of Homiletics, Yale Divinity School

In memory of my alma mater,
Birmingham-Southern College (1856–2024),
with special thanks to

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Abbreviations

Reference Works

ABD	*Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Edited by David Noel Freedman. 6 vols. Doubleday, 1992.
BDAG	Danker, Frederick W., Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. University of Chicago Press, 2000.
LSJ	Liddell, Henry George, and Robert Scott. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Revised and augmented by Henry Stuart Jones. Oxford University Press, 1968.
NIDB	*New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible.* Edited by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld. 5 vols. Abingdon, 2006–2009.
TDNT	*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Eerdmans, 1964–1976.

Journals and Series

ABR	*Australian Biblical Review*
Bib	*Biblica*
BBR	*Bulletin for Biblical Research*
BibInt	*Biblical Interpretation*
BSac	*Bibliotheca Sacra*
BTB	*Biblical Theology Bulletin*
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CurBR	*Currents in Biblical Research*
CurTM	*Currents in Theology and Mission*
DSD	*Dead Sea Discoveries*
ETL	*Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*
EvQ	*Evangelical Quarterly*
ExAud	*ExAuditu*
ExpTim	*Expository Times*
GT	*Grace & Truth*
HBT	*Horizons in Biblical Theology*

HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
HTSTSt	*HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*
IDS	*In die Skriflig*
Int	*Interpretation*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JR	*Journal of Religion*
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
Neot	*Neotestamentica*
NovT	*Novum Testamentum*
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
PEGLMBS	*Proceedings of the Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Biblical Societies*
PRSt	*Perspectives in Religious Studies*
RB	*Revue biblique*
RevExp	*Review & Expositor*
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
STRev	*Sewanee Theological Review*
Thf	*Theoforum*
TJ	*Trinity Journal*
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	*Westminster Theological Journal*
WW	*Word and World*
ZNW	*Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche*

Primary Sources

1 En.	1 Enoch
1Q	Dead Sea Scrolls from Wadi Qumran Cave 1
1QS	Rule of the Congregation
2 Bar.	2 Baruch
2 En.	2 Enoch
3 Bar.	3 Baruch
4Q	Dead Sea Scrolls from Wadi Qumran Cave 4
4QD	Damascus Document
Ag. Ap.	Josephus, *Against Apion*
Ant.	Josephus, *Antiquities*
Apoc. Ab.	Apocalypse of Abraham
Apoc. Isa.	Apocalypse of Isaiah
As. Mos.	Assumption of Moses
b.	Babylonian Talmud

Deut. Rab.	Deuteronomy Rabbah
Gen. Rab.	Genesis Rabbah
Gos. Thom.	Gospel of Thomas
J.W.	Josephus, *Jewish War*
Jub.	Jubilees
Let. Aris.	Letter of Aristeas
LXX	Septuagint
m.	Mishnah
Mek.	Mekilta
MT	Masoretic Text
Pss. Sol.	Psalms of Solomon
Quaes. Conv.	Plutarch, *Quaestiones convivales*
QT	Dead Sea Temple Scrolls
Sib. Or.	Sibylline Oracles
Spec. Laws	Philo, *On the Special Laws*
t.	Tosefta
T. Benj.	Testament of Benjamin
T. Dan	Testament of Dan
T. Iss.	Testament of Issachar
T. Jud.	Testament of Judah
T. Levi	Testament of Levi
T. Mos.	Testament of Moses
T. Naph.	Testament of Naphtali
T. Sim.	Testament of Simeon
Tg. Isa.	Targum Isaiah
Tg. Neof.	Targum Neofiti
y.	Jerusalem Talmud

Introduction

Historically, the Gospel according to Mark has been the least favorite child among the church's Gospels, appearing in pulpits much more rarely than the other three.[1] In recent decades, however, this has changed for two main reasons. First, in the late 1960s, Vatican II replaced the Roman Catholic Church's five-hundred-year-old Tridentine annual lectionary with a three-year cycle, in which Year B was anchored by Mark. The Common and Revised Common Lectionaries followed suit, and preachers rediscovered Mark in the 1970s and 1980s. Second, around the same time, biblical scholarship shifted its reading of Mark from considering it a mere collection of bare-bones traditional materials about Jesus to viewing it as a significant literary achievement.

Narrative approaches to Mark invited preachers to appreciate Mark in new ways beyond the source-, form-, and historical-critical approaches.[2] Geddert captures well the fascination with Mark when he compares it to Magic Eye 3D images in which the surface simply looks like squiggles and patches of color until the viewer focuses to look *through* the surface level and sees a whole new picture.[3] This critical homiletical commentary builds on that narrative approach, squinting and staring through the plain sense of Mark to find that the Second Gospel is a parable, from beginning to end.[4]

1. On the reception of Mark, see Schildgen, *Power and Prejudice*.

2. Early influential narrative works on Mark include Tannehill, "Disciples in Mark"; Petersen, *Literary Criticism;* Kermode, *Genesis of Secrecy;* and Rhoads and Michie, *Mark as Story*.

3. Geddert, "Use of Psalms," 110–11.

4. I first experimented with a parabolic approach to Mark in "Resurrection in the Gospel of Mark," in *Preaching Resurrection*, 9–36; and "Mark 16:1–8." See also "Easter Sunday"; and "Mark," in *Preacher's Bible Handbook*, 227–34. Although it moves in different directions from other narrative readings of Mark, the interpretation proffered in the pages of this commentary is greatly indebted to the arguments for Mark as parable made by Kelber, *Oral and Written Tradition*, 211–26; Donahue, "Jesus as Parable of God"; and Beavis, *Mark's Audience*. It is worth noting the very early mention of this perspective by Crossan, in a section called "The Parabler Becomes the Parable," in *Dark Interval*, 123–28, as well as a passing comment by Marcus in *Mystery of the Kingdom of God*, in which he says that for Mark, "the events of Jesus' life and death turn out to be 'parables' in the broad sense" to strengthen Mark's community (116).

Others also approach Mark as parable. Robin Griffith-Jones writes, "Mark challenges the audience to recognize the whole gospel as a parable, whose surface story will trap most listeners in a profound miscomprehension" ("Going Back to Galilee to See the Son of Man: Mark's Gospel as an Upside Down Apocalypse," in Malbon, *Between Author and Audience*, 82–102). Deppe construes Mark's literary devices as clues to the metaphorical, symbolic, parabolic approach of the whole Gospel (*Theological Intentions*). Nagel similarly argues that the whole of Mark's narrative is a parable, "defined as being ambiguous in nature, a method of communication that requires a certain amount of confusion" ("Theological Significance," 1–2). Bassler's use of Dodd's definition of parables combined with reader-response sensitivities to the effect of parabolic narrative on an audience to interpret the feeding miracles as functioning parabolically in line with Mark's purpose of parables as named in 4:11–12 ("Parable of the Loaves") is similar in approach to the way I work with numerous individual scenes. And, finally, in a discussion of Mark's use of irony, Fowler states, "To say that the Jesus of this Gospel habitually speaks

In the Greek tradition, Aristotle used *parabolē* to refer to a realistic fiction, meaning a story that might have happened but did not, in contrast to a fable (for example, with animals talking) that could not have happened (*Rhetoric* 2.20). To assert that Mark can be considered a "realistic fiction" is not to assert that Mark does not speak truth nor that there are no historical elements in Mark's stories. It does, however, recognize what Gospel scholars have long asserted—that the Gospel writers shaped their material not in accordance with historical or journalistic purposes but to meet theological and kerygmatic purposes. More than that, however, labeling Mark a "parable" signals that the author has intentionally altered elements of the story of the Christ event into fictional elements that his original audience *would have recognized* as such. They would have recognized that the story of Jesus and his disciples they already knew did not unfold in the way Mark tells it. Mark uses his audience's recognition of the parabolic twisting to invite them to experience that very story (and indeed Jesus himself) in a radically new way.

Perhaps a better way to explain this phenomenon is to consider a modern definition of a parable, adapted from C. H. Dodd's classic work on parables: *A parable is a metaphor or simile, usually but not always in narrative form, drawn from nature or common life familiar to the hearers, which arrests the hearers by its vividness or strangeness and leaves their minds in sufficient doubt about its precise interpretation or application in order to tease it into active thought even to the point of altering their worldview*.[5] The tension in a parable between something familiar to the hearer and a twist in the midst of that familiarity is at the core of the experiential nature of parables.[6] As McFague puts it, parables

> work on a pattern of *orientation*, *disorientation*, and *reorientation:* the parable begins in the ordinary world with its conventional standards and expectations, but in the course of the story a radically different perspective is introduced, often by means of a surrealistic extravagance, that disorients the listener, and finally, through the interaction of the two competing viewpoints tension is created that results in a reorientation, a redescription of life in the world.[7]

Parabolic twists, then, invite the reconsideration of one's understanding of the focus of the metaphorical comparison. If that focus is core to one's

---

in parables is to say that he speaks metaphorically, in riddle style, which is to say that that narrator's discourse is habitually parabolic and metaphorical. After all, if Jesus speaks parabolically, he does so only because the narrator speaks parabolically, and the narrator often speaks parabolically when he is not attributing words to Jesus" (*Let the Reader Understand*, 160).

5. Allen, *Reading the Synoptic Gospels*, 72–74; adapted from Dodd's classic definition of kingdom parables in *Parables of the Kingdom* (for an extension of Dodd's work, see Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*). The employment of the definition in interpretation is greatly influenced by Funk's understanding of metaphor and parable in *Language, Hermeneutic, and the Word of God* and *Parables and Presence*. Indeed, Funk's emphasis on metaphor as a multivalent language event with the power to invite hearers to participate in the process of creating meaning (an emphasis that grows out of the work of the New Hermeneutic) has been a significant influence on my approach to preaching. For a survey of modern scholarship on parables, see Snodgrass, "From Allegorizing to Allegorizing."

6. Ricoeur speaks of the parable as metaphor having the capacity to "re-define and re-describe reality" ("Biblical Hermeneutics," 75).

7. McFague, *Models of God*, 50; emphasis added.

understanding of God, world, and self, the reconsideration can be radical in terms of one's experiential and existential being.[8]

In parabolic fashion, Mark takes stories of Jesus and his disciples that would have been familiar to his audience and twists them into a narrative in ways that would have forced them to question Mark's intended meaning of both the individual scenes and the overarching story. When the Markan Jesus asserts that God's reign is a like a mustard seed that becomes the greatest of all shrubs—a claim that was untrue to what ancient people knew of mustard plants (see "Notes" on 4:30–32)—the audience could be expected to recognize that the parabolic twisting of a mustard plant was intended to twist their understanding of God's reign. Likewise, Mark's audience would have experienced the recognizable twisting of the whole of his story of Jesus and the disciples as disorienting, deconstructing their very theological worldview to invite the construction of a new understanding of their faith in Christ and their lives as his followers.

This twisting is especially evident in the odd ending of the Gospel: At the empty tomb there is no resurrection appearance, and the women leave in fear, telling no one that Jesus has been raised (16:1–8). Moloney writes,

> Unlike the readers of most "stories," the original Christian readers and hearers of the Gospel of Mark knew the ending: Jesus was crucified and, they believed, raised from the dead. . . . The reader is led . . . into a story whose ending is known, yet is surprised along the way—and at the end. . . . The Gospel of Mark is unique among the gospels and unlike most other narratives in that the crises which emerge during its course are not resolved through a *dénouement* at the end of the story (Mark 16:1–8). Much is resolved, but a further crisis emerges that cannot be resolved by the story itself.[9]

Mark, of course, did not write his extended parable as some literary experiment. He twisted the story of the resurrection known to the original audience in order to push them pastorally to reconsider their theological and existential commitments and behavior in light of recent experiences.[10] Likewise, attending to the parabolic nature of Mark offers preachers today new opportunities to invite hearers to reconsider and deepen their faith and Christian life, especially given that Mark twists the characterization of the disciples from familiar role models of faith and obedience to those who lack faith and understanding and are driven by fear. We, today, are so familiar with the Gospels' portrayal of the disciples as dunces and screwups that we miss how odd this characterization would have been to those in the generation immediately following them, the generation who would have

8. Lakoff and Johnson argue, "New metaphors have the power to create a new reality. This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend or experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it" (*Metaphors*, 145; quoted in Shively, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 31). Hartin names the transformative power of parables in this way: "The parable projects a world into which it attempts to translate the hearer. Since the world it describes deforms the 'received' world, it constitutes nothing less than an invitation to live in that world, to see the world in that way, to take up one's abode within a totality of significations that is different from the everyday world" ("Disseminating the Word," 190).

9. Moloney, *Mark*, 16.

10. While the exact form of the story (or stories) of the risen Jesus appearing that was known to Mark's audience is impossible to reconstruct, the overwhelming evidence of that tradition as seen in 1 Cor 15:3–8; Matt 28:9–10, 16–20; Luke 24:13–53; John 20:11–21:23 make it certain they would have been familiar with some resurrection appearance tradition. While not using the language of parable, A. Smith writes, "In effect, Mark reshapes the memory of Jesus and his movement" (*Mark*, 1).

seen themselves as heirs to their mission. The disorientation would have been as obvious to them as it would be to Americans today to hear someone speak of Washington crossing the Potomac in a helicopter or to characterize Lincoln as a corrupt real estate mogul.

A Parable for and from Whom

The author of the Second Gospel is unknown. The original manuscripts had no name on them, and traditions that the author was a companion of Peter who wrote in Rome arose in the second century (e.g., Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.14–15) without any evidence (perhaps based on the author of 1 Pet 5:13 sending the recipients greetings from "my son Mark").[11] Scholars continue to call the author Mark for convenience, and this convention will be followed in this commentary.

While we do not know anything of the identity of the author from external evidence or direct reference, we can construct something of the author's probable intent, theology, and circumstances of writing from the text itself. Throughout the commentary, then, when we speak of the author we are really speaking of the "implied author"—the author's method, values, goals, and identity *as implied by* the composition itself. Indeed, in Mark's case, "implied author" and "narrator" are practically synonymous and will be used as such in this commentary. For example, Mark could read and write (in contrast to most first-century people, who were illiterate), but his style lacks the eloquence of more polished writers (e.g., Luke). A plausible conclusion is that Mark was educated but not extensively, thus signaling that he was neither impoverished nor part of the elite economic upper class.

Similarly, we have no external evidence as to or direct description of the identity of Mark's original audience, but elements of their identity and values are implied in the text as well. The reason the identity of Mark's community concerns us is that this commentary offers a narrative reading that focuses on the implied intended effect of the narrative on the original audience.[12] Understanding who Mark's original audience was and what situations they were facing when Mark wrote helps us see the narrative through that lens. That said, we need to be clear that any historical reconstruction of Mark's audience based on Mark's narrative from our distance of two millennia later is limited. The more specific we try to get, the more likely we are to err. So, we should paint a picture of Mark's audience in broad strokes but still offer a specific-enough picture to ground our interpretation.

Mark's audience is Christian[13]—Mark does not seem to be introducing them to the story of the Christ event, as seen in the fact that the narrator makes references to elements of Jesus's story that presume foreknowledge on the part of

11. For a full review of early discussion of Mark's provenance, see Kalin, "Early Traditions."

12. Cf. Julien Smith's approach in which Mark's authorial audience is viewed as "a hypothetical audience comprised of contextualized implied readers whose literary competence is not text-specific but made up of certain socially determined skills of interpretation, and who possess the basic cultural and historical assumptions necessary to understand a given text" ("Construction of Identity," 462).

13. Calling Mark's audience "Christian" is not meant to imply that the term "Christian" was part of their identity at this early stage of the community of faith. (There is no evidence of such early use of the term; see Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pet 4:16.) It is simply a shorthand method of naming that they were part of the gathered community (*ekklesia*) of postresurrection followers of Jesus.

the audience (e.g., describing Judas as the one who betrayed Jesus in 3:19, long before that part of the story is narrated, and using christological titles to refer to Jesus without explanation of their meaning). As converts, Mark's original audience certainly already knew the story of Jesus and the disciples, at least in some basic form. This being the case, Mark could assume that when he made changes to the story (such as the omission of a resurrection appearance story, the women's silence, and the absence of the disciples in ch. 16), his audience would recognize and puzzle over such parabolic twisting.

Mark shows that he has knowledge of and assumes his audience has knowledge of the Septuagint (LXX, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, which would have served as the early church's Scriptures) in that he quotes and echoes passages to ground the story of Jesus in the ancient sacred texts in ways that presume they are authoritative texts for the audience and require no introduction. That said, the full depth of either Mark's or the audience's knowledge of the LXX is difficult to determine.[14]

This knowledge of Scripture does not necessitate that the audience be Jewish Christian, however. As a part of their conversion and continuing communal worship, gentiles would likely have been introduced to and become invested in the LXX. Indeed, Mark's audience seems to have been a primarily gentile, second-generation community of faith (and Mark was likely a gentile himself). There are subtle clues pointing in this direction, such as the fact that the narrator translates some Aramaic terms,[15] explains some Jewish customs,[16] uses Latinisms,[17] reflects gentile mores,[18] and, at least at times, counts time in the Roman way instead of the Jewish convention of beginning the new day at sundown.[19] More importantly, in a broad section of the narrative (4:35–8:26) where Jesus travels back and forth across the Sea of Galilee to symbolically Jewish and gentile communities, the author uses parallel scenes on each side to ground the inclusion of gentiles in Mark's community in the very ministry of Jesus himself (see "Literary Context," 4:35–41). In these travels Mark makes some blatant geographical errors[20] that signal that he and the audience were at best only generally knowledgeable of

14. At times Mark seems to echo texts and themes from the LXX with sophisticated nuance, but in the opening lines of the narrative, for example, he draws on a hybrid of Exod 23:20 or Mal 3:1 and Isa 40:3 but cites only Isaiah.

15. E.g., *Boanerges*, "Sons of Thunder" (3:17); *Talitha cum*, "Little girl, get up" (5:41); *Corban*, "an offering to God" (7:11); *Ephphatha*, "Be opened" (7:34); *Abba*, "Father" (14:36); *Golgotha*, "Place of a Skull" (15:22); *Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (15:34); see Mudroň, "Jesus' Aramaic."

16. E.g., handwashing (7:2–4); the timing of the Passover sacrifice (14:12); the day of Preparation (15:42).

17. E.g., *modius* (peck measure; 4:21); *legio* (legion; 5:9, 15); *speculator* (executioner; 6:27); *sextarius* (quart measure; 7:4); *census* (tax; 12:14); *denarius* (12:15); *quadrans* (roman coin; 12:42); *flagellum* (flog; 15:15); *praetorium* (governor's residence; 15:16); *centurion* (15:39, 44, 45).

18. E.g., allowing women to divorce men (10:12); designating four night watches per Greco-Roman practice instead of three watches per Jewish practices (13:35).

19. E.g., claiming that the Passover sacrifice occurs on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when by Jewish accounting the sacrifice occurs on Nisan 14 and the feast begins at sundown, which would start on Nisan 15 (14:12; cf. 4:35; 14:1).

20. E.g., Gerasa (or Gadara) is not on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (5:1, 13); Sidon is not on the way from Tyre to the Sea of Galilee (7:31); a traveler from Jericho (10:46) would not pass through Bethphage and then Bethany, which is farther from Jerusalem than Bethphage (11:1).

Palestinian geography (with no firsthand experience of the area) and that they likely lived somewhere in the Roman Empire outside of Galilee and Judea.[21]

Two key moments on the (symbolically) gentile side of the sea especially point to how important this theme of justifying inclusion of the gentiles in the church is for Mark. First, in 7:1–23, Jesus debates Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem concerning issues of washing, impurity, and the tradition of the elders. This inner-Jewish conflict, however, takes place in symbolically gentile territory (see "Notes" on 7:1), indicating that the scene is really addressing whether gentile Christians need to follow Jewish purity rituals. Near the end of this scene, the narrator interrupts Jesus's speech, breaking the fourth wall, to offer a word of interpretation directly to the audience. Mark does this only twice in the entire Gospel, and both instances are key for understanding the situation of the original audience (see "Notes" on 13–14). Here the narrator interrupts Jesus's declaration about what makes one unclean by changing the subject and announcing to the audience, "Thus he declared all foods clean" (see "Notes" on 7:19). In other words, Mark explicitly interprets Jesus's parabolic teaching (7:17) as having this conclusion: Gentiles do not need to keep kosher practices.

The second key moment pointing to the gentile identity of Mark's audience follows in the next scene, 7:24–30. The Syrophoenician woman responds to Jesus's rejection of her request that he cast out a demon from her daughter in a way that changes Jesus's mind. When the woman speaks, Mark has her address Jesus as *kyrie*. In a secular sense, this term was a title of respect for a male with higher status in terms of social standing, authority, or power (akin to "sir," "master"). But the term can also mean "Lord" when used as a title for the Divine. In Mark, the Syrophoenician woman is the only person to call Jesus *kyrie*, paralleling the (gentile) centurion who is the only person in the narrative to refer to Jesus as "God's Son" (see "Notes" on 15–39). In Mark's parabolic approach, then, this gentile woman, whom Jesus himself calls a "little dog," is the only one to exhibit the understanding and faith to recognize Jesus as *kyrios*. This certainly seems to be an implicit apology for the inclusion of gentiles in Mark's ecclesial community and pushes us to read Mark as written to create certain effects for such a gentile community.

Why a Parable?

Mark signals that two main concerns of his gentile audience stand behind his approach to telling this particular story of Jesus and the disciples: the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and persecution of the church.

The Fall of the Temple

Huebenthal writes, "The experience of crisis and dealing with crisis is a continuous subtext of Mark's Gospel."[22] The primary crisis for Mark's audience

21. Beyond this general statement, claims locating Mark and his audience in specific locales, such as Rome or Syria, are not persuasive.

22. Huebenthal, *Reading Mark's Gospel*, 248.

was likely the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Roman army in 70 CE.[23] As Boring puts it,

> The destruction of the temple was a deeply traumatic event for both Judaism and the new Christian movement. . . . What could it mean that God has allowed the unthinkable to happen? Zealot defenders of the temple had to the very last proclaimed that God was testing the believers, that divine deliverance would come at the last moment, that they needed only to have faith (see Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.286–89). But the temple flames meant that both the temple and faith had to be rethought.[24]

The so-called apocalyptic discourse of ch. 13 focuses on this issue explicitly. After one of the disciples expresses how impressed he is with the temple's large stones and buildings, Mark has Jesus declare that not one stone will be left upon another (vv. 1–2). The rest of the discourse takes place with Jesus sitting on the Mount of Olives "opposite" or "over against" (*katenanti*) the temple (v. 3). In vv. 7–8, Jesus says that there will be wars (such as the Jewish War of 66–73) and makes clear that these events do not equate to the End (*to telos*) but to only the beginning of the birth pangs (*archē ōdinōn*; perhaps echoing the title of the Gospel in 1:1, "The beginning [*archē*] of the good news of Jesus Christ, [Son of God]").[25]

In case one wonders whether this apocalyptic language might be a record of the historical Jesus speaking about what is to come instead of Mark putting words in Jesus's mouth about what has already occurred in the experience of his audience, 13:14 makes clear that Mark is trying to speak directly to his audience at this point. When he has Jesus warn, "When you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be . . . then those in Judea must flee to the mountains," the narrator inserts "(let the reader understand)."[26] The fact that this is only one of two times in the entire Gospel where the narrator steps through the fourth wall, interrupting Jesus's speech to address the audience directly, speaks to its importance in addressing the current circumstances and concerns of his audience (see discussion above of 7:19). As Kelber puts it,

> While throughout the gospel the past of Jesus speaks to the present of Mark, in this one instance the Markan reality bursts through the medium of the Jesus story. The force of the present experience is such that it asserts itself in unmediated fashion. . . . What comes to expression in the apocalyptic speech must be of ultimate concern to Mark. At issue . . . is the very crisis which gave rise to the gospel composition, the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.[27]

The question of theodicy likely arose for Christians, including gentile Christians, in such a powerful way when the Jerusalem temple fell that Mark needed to retell

23. E.g., Marcus, "Jewish War," 449; also see Balabanski, *Eschatology*, 55–100; Winn, *Purpose of Mark's Gospel*, 43–91; Carter, "Things of Caesar," 6–9.

24. Boring, *Mark*, 320.

25. "Son of God" is in brackets to indicate that the originality of the phrase in 1:1 is uncertain; see "Notes" on 1:1.

26. This reading assumes that Mark adopts *to bdelygma tēs erēmōseōs* ("the desolating sacrilege") from Dan 11:31 to point to the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. For a survey of the major interpretations of this phrase in Mark, see Ford, *Abomination of Desolation*, 158–216.

27. Kelber, *Kingdom in Mark*, 109–10.

and recast the story of Jesus's ministry, death, and resurrection parabolically so that it could be heard anew as the smoke cleared from around Jerusalem.

Why would gentile Christians have cared about the destruction of the Jerusalem temple? First, they would have seen themselves as heirs to the promises God made to Israel, would have claimed the Jewish Scriptures as their own, and would have held the Jerusalem temple to be a central sign of God's presence (see "Notes" on 11:15, 24). Second, they likely would have viewed the Jerusalem temple similarly to how Greco-Roman temples were viewed. Such a temple housed a statue of a god, which was thought to manifest something of the god's presence. Therefore, it was a place where prayers and sacrifices were directed to that divine presence. Indeed, even prayers from a distance would have been considered to be directed toward the temple.[28] Mark's gentile community may well have considered their prayers to be directed toward the great Jerusalem temple even though they did not worship or sacrifice there.

The destruction of the temple, then, would have called into question, for Jewish and gentile Christians alike, whether God was truly present with Israel and the church and whether the promise of the parousia held any truth.[29] Why hold on to the Christian faith if the God of Israel, the God of Christ, could not protect the very institution signifying divine presence in the world against the Roman Empire and its gods, if the Son of the Human (see p. 12 for this translation of *ho huios tou anthrōpou*) did not return at this moment of all moments? Moreover, considering the destruction of God's dwelling place, where is God to be found now?

In the quick review of key passages related to the temple above, we see that part of Mark's answer to the question of theodicy caused by the fall of the temple is to present Jesus himself as disconnecting the temple's destruction from the issue of the full manifestation of God's reign and the parousia. Two key scenes make this point even more clearly than the eschatological discourse.

The first is the intercalation or rhetorical sandwiching of the prophetic action concerning the fig tree and the prophetic action concerning the temple in 11:12–25.[30] In the passage under consideration, the sandwich is as follows:

> Jesus curses the fig tree for producing no fruit out of season.
>
> > Jesus turns over tables and stops things from being carried in the temple, claiming it was intended to be a house of prayer for all nations.
>
> The fig tree has withered.

Mark's use of the rhetorical sandwich technique implies that Jesus's prophetic action toward the fig tree parallels Jesus's action in the temple, making it a prophetic action. As Jesus's curse resulted in the fig tree dying, so do Jesus's actions in the temple imply that it has withered.[31] Thus Mark implies that its

28. See Dowd, *Prayer*, 45–55.

29. Winn similarly argues for a gentile audience being concerned with theodicy following the fall of the temple, although he proposes the concern is specifically related to Roman propaganda that the Flavian family "was a recipient of divine favor and that the gods who favored it, the Roman gods, were greater than the God of the Jews" (*Reading Mark's Christology*, 37–39).

30. Other examples of Markan sandwiches include 3:20–35; 5:21–43; 6:7–32; 14:1–11; 14:53–72; 15:40–47. For narrative studies of Mark focusing on the use of intercalations, see G. Wright, "Markan Intercalations"; Edwards, "Markan Sandwiches"; Shepherd, *Markan Sandwich Stories*; Deppe, *Theological Intentions*, 30–94.

31. See Kelber, *Kingdom in Mark*, 87–107.

destruction should be understood as being of lesser existential, theological consequence for the church than his audience was experiencing because Jesus had already declared the temple otiose.

The second key scene outside of the apocalyptic discourse in which Mark deals with the temple is the crucifixion. The moment Jesus dies, the sanctuary curtain is ripped (*schizō*) from top to bottom (15:38). The only other time Mark uses *schizō* is in the epiphany at Jesus's baptism, when the heavens are ripped as Jesus's identity as God's Son is revealed to Jesus (1:10). This moment at the cross, therefore, is epiphanic and reveals that through Jesus's crucifixion, God's presence is available outside the temple.

Apart from these individual scenes, it could be argued that the whole of Mark's Gospel is (at least in part) an answer to the question, What is the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God, in light of the tragedy of the destruction of the temple? Mark answers this question by taking the story of Jesus and the disciples that was already known to his audience and twisting it parabolically so that his audience could hear and experience it in a radically new way. As Mark revisits the story of the Christ event, from baptism to empty tomb, one of his key purposes seems to be promoting a christological perspective focused on the cross more than the resurrection, with a related approach to discipleship that grounds the Christian faith for a post-temple era.

Persecution

In addition to the fall of the temple, part of the occasion for the writing of Mark is persecution that Mark's audience was experiencing or feared was coming. Mark mentions or implies a situation of persecution several times (4:17; 8:34–38; 9:42–49; 10:29–31, 38–39) and is especially graphic in ch. 13.[32] Mark presents Jesus as telling the disciples that they will be handed over to councils, beaten in synagogues, tried by governors and kings, betrayed to death by family members, and generally hated for Jesus's name (13:9–13). The narrator may (or may not) be using apocalyptic hyperbole. Historically speaking, we know little of widespread or intense persecution of the church at the time of Mark's writing, although it is easy to imagine that anyone sympathetic to the Palestinian Jews during the Jewish Revolt and following the fall of the temple might have experienced persecution. While we cannot be sure of the source, level, or types of persecution experienced by Mark's audience, the evidence in the narrative clearly shows that Mark *views* his community as being at risk of religious, familial, social, and political threat at the time of his writing.[33] Such persecution would have caused the gentile Christians Mark addresses to struggle in their faith.[34]

In sum, then, the situation of Mark's audience involved the fall of the temple and persecution, either of which would raise the question of theodicy considering

32. For a thorough review of these passages as indicating that persecution is the occasion behind Mark's writing, see Roskam, *Purpose*, 27–74.

33. For questions concerning whether Mark is addressing his audience's current suffering or the possibility of future persecution, see Tuckett, "Gospels and Communities."

34. A. Smith argues, "The Gospel's earliest auditors needed reasons to stay within the movement" based on the persecution the movement was experiencing in Mark's day (*Mark*, 1); also see Keller, "Opening Blind Eyes," 151–52.

Jesus's resurrection and expected parousia. Occurring simultaneously, the crisis of faith would have been intensified exponentially. One way of reading Mark, then, is to attend to ways that the narrative emphasizes Jesus's suffering to contextualize and make sense of the suffering of Mark's community theologically and existentially. In other words, Mark likely wrote his disorienting, reorienting parable out of pastoral concern for his audience.[35]

An Apocalyptic Worldview Parabolized

The previous section referenced Mark's eschatology, apocalyptic worldview, and religiopolitical tensions in relation to his dealing with the fall of the temple and persecution of the church. These are complicated, interrelated concepts of which laity have little grasp. To appropriately understand and preach Mark, preachers must be able to make sense of their meaning and significance for today.

Apocalypticism follows in the strain of Jewish prophetic theology as a form of political eschatological resistance that developed in response to times of crisis and severe imperial oppression. The Greek root of "apocalyptic" is *apokalyptō*, meaning to uncover or reveal. This label comes from the apocalypse genre (e.g., Daniel, 1 Enoch, Revelation), in which a human is given a dreamlike, highly symbolic revelation by a heavenly being. The broad worldview associated with the genre, but not limited to that genre, has come to be called "apocalypticism" or "apocalyptic eschatology" even when a secret revelation is not involved. Scholars debate what characteristics are central to apocalyptic eschatology, but a typical list would include these ideas (with examples from Mark in parentheses):

- Hope for a better world and belief that God's reign will break into history (Jesus's proclamation of God's reign is central to Mark, see 1:14–15 and ch. 4; Jesus prophesies concerning the coming of the Son of the Human and the angels gathering the elect from the four winds, 13:24–27)
- Dualism (Mark presents Jesus as God's representative doing battle with Satan in his temptation story and subsequent exorcisms, 1:12–13, 23–28, 32–34, 39; 3:11–12, 14–15, 22–27; 5:1–20; 6:7–13; 7:24–30; 9:14–29, 38–41)
- A stark contrast between the present evil age and the glorious future involving a divine reordering of the world (Mark presents Jesus as forming a new family of followers over against people's families of origin, 3:31–35; 10:28–31; 13:12–13)[36]

In the first century, in which Christianity arose and Mark wrote his Gospel, the Roman Empire ruled with an iron fist. Subjugated Jews and Christians held strongly to the kind of apocalyptic hope named above, to the expectation that God would intervene radically to rescue the oppressed from the oppressors. Such expectation fueled the Jewish Revolt against the Roman Empire (66–74 CE). When the Jewish Revolt failed and the church experienced persecution

35. Best argues that Mark's purpose was pastoral (*Mark*, 93–99).

36. Christopher Rowland, "Apocalypticism," *NIDB* 1:190–95; see also Horsley, "Kingdom of God," esp. 323–32.

and God did not intervene, such an apocalyptic worldview could have easily been experienced as a lie or a mistake. Questions of theodicy arose. Mark wrote to respond to this problem.[37]

The first Gospel writer might have chosen to forsake apocalyptic eschatology altogether in trying to offer the church reason not to abandon faith in Jesus as the Christ. Yet, as we have already noted, the core characteristics of apocalypticism are easily identifiable as part of Mark's story. Indeed, two key elements of Mark especially reflect a political-apocalyptic theology. First, Mark places at the center of Jesus's preaching and teaching the announcement of the advent of the reign of God (1:14–15). This proclamation envisions God breaking into the reign of Caesar and replacing it with God's rule. Even after the fall of the temple and amid persecution, Mark still projects hope that God's will for justice and peace will be accomplished on earth. "The reign of God," then, signifies Mark's moral universe.[38]

At this point a short excursus concerning the phrase *hē basileia tou theou*, traditionally translated "the kingdom of God," is needed. The traditional translation of *basileia* as "kingdom" is problematic for two reasons. First, the English word "kingdom" is primarily a spatial or territorial term. *Basileia*, in contrast, more broadly refers both to a place that is ruled by someone *and* to the act and power of ruling itself. Second, the word "kingdom" is not inclusive by today's standard of theological language. A kingdom is a place ruled by a male king, thus "kingdom of God" limits God by portraying the Divine as male. Various terms—such as reign, realm, rule, dominion—are in use as alternatives to kingdom, but none are without problems. This commentary will use "reign of God" unless quoting directly from another source. Although we rarely speak of rulers as "reigning" these days, and "reign" loses some of the force of the spatial qualities of *basileia*, this translation conveys the power, authority, and regality of *basileia*.

The second key element of Mark that reflects a continued political-apocalyptic theology even after the destruction of the temple and amid persecution is his use of christological terms.[39] Take, for example, *Son of God*. It was common in the ancient Near East and in the First Testament (see 2 Sam 7:11–16; 1 Chr 17:13; 22:10; 28:6; Pss 2:6–7; 89:26–27) for a king to be viewed as God's son. Likewise, in the era of the early Christians (following Caesar Augustus), it was common to think of the Roman emperors as sons of gods.[40] The New Testament use of "Son of God" as a christological title grows out of this religiopolitical context and should not be read as expressive of later Christian Trinitarian theology. Jesus is presented as *the* Son of God over against all others who claim to be God's chosen one, thus affirming that in Jesus, God's eschatological rule has begun as a challenge to the rule of oppressive regimes (see "Notes" on 1:11).[41]

37. On this line of thinking, see Kelber, *Kingdom in Mark;* Donahue, "Are You the Christ?"; Radcliffe, "'Coming of the Son of Man'"; and van Iersel, "Failed Followers."

38. Matera, *New Testament Ethics*, 14–20.

39. For a review of the history of scholarship on Markan Christology, especially as it relates to the study of various titles, see Johansson, "Identity of Jesus."

40. For a full exploration of Roman imperial ideology and the practice of claiming divine status for emperors, see Peppard, "Eagle and Dove."

41. Nel, in "Gospel of Mark," 137–38, points out that original readers would have immediately recognized 1:1 as having a straightforward political connotation over against similar language used for the Roman emperor.

Other christological terms in Mark do not make different claims than that asserted with "Son of God" so much as they affirm and expand upon that central term.[42] *Christos* is such a term. It is used some forty-five times in the LXX to mean "anointed (by oil)" and is a Greek translation of the Hebrew *mashiakh* ("messiah"). Primarily the term is used in a religiopolitical fashion to refer to kings as ones who had been anointed during their coronation, but following the end of the Davidic line it came to signify more narrowly the eschatological fulfillment of God's promises regarding the eternal rule of a king from the line of David. Such an eschatological understanding of messiahship dominates the New Testament use of the term. It is important to recognize, however, that messianic expectations leading up to the first century CE varied greatly, and it is unclear "what messianic connotations colored traditions that Mark inherited."[43] Preachers should avoid language that stereotypes ancient Jews as all being of one mind.

Mark, broadly speaking, seems to use the term apocalyptically, but twists it parabolically. In 1:1 and 9:41, where *christos* is used as a name (without an article), the term reflects the understanding of the term Mark wants to engender in his audience. Every time the word is used as a title with the article (*ho christos*), it is connected with a christological misunderstanding Mark wants to correct with his parable (8:29; 12:35; 13:21; 14:61; 15:32).

Finally, there is Mark's use of *ho huios tou anthrōpou*, traditionally translated as "the Son of Man." This translation uses antiquated, male-exclusive language and simply does not convey the full sense of *anthrōpos* ("human"). Scholars have suggested terms like "the Human One" or "the son/child of humanity." There is much to value in these suggestions, but they lose the linguistic parallel with "the Son of God" (*ho huios tou theou*) that would have been obvious to Mark's original Greek-speaking audience. Therefore, although it is a wooden translation and awkward in English, this commentary uses "the Son of the Human."

For Mark, the terms "Son of God" and "Son of the Human" complement each other more than naming different understandings of Jesus. We must be careful, therefore, not to read later doctrinal formulations into "Son of God" (fully divine) and "Son of the Human" (fully human). In Mark's narrative, only Jesus refers to himself as Son of the Human, and he does so thirteen times. Hebrew and Aramaic predecessors to *ho huios tou anthrōpou* are simply poetic ways of referring to a generic person or a likeness of a person (over against a paternal reference to a male as something like "Jesus son of Joseph"). This is the case in the vision in Dan 7, from which the Gospels' use of the term is likely drawn (see Matt 24:30). In the first part of the vision recounted by Daniel (7:1–8), four beasts represent four kingdoms. Then two heavenly figures in human likeness appear, the Ancient of Days (v. 9) and "one like a son of a human coming on the clouds of heaven" (au. trans.; v. 13), to whom the former gives authority and kingship to bring judgment upon the beasts/kingdoms (v. 14). In other words, in Daniel "Son of the Human" designates a celestial being appearing in the vision in the likeness of a human.

42. McInerny notes that in Mark, Jesus "is named some twenty-eight different ways throughout the story" ("Unresolved Question," 255).

43. Black, *Mark*, 193.

By the time the Gospel writers use the term in the first century CE, however, the figure in Dan 7:13 was understood by some in Second Temple Judaism as a specific apocalyptic redeemer/judge, and thus Jews used the phrase as a title.[44] Mark's use of the term clearly includes this apocalyptic element, since Jesus is presented as being in an apocalyptic struggle with Satan (1:12–13; 3:22–27).[45] Because Mark portrays Jesus as using the term self-referentially, the audience can be assured it is an appropriate term. Nonetheless, Mark uses it parabolically, twisting the audience's understanding of it. Yes, the Son of the Human is an apocalyptic figure who has authority and will come in glory and judgment (2:10, 28; 8:38; 13:26; 14:21, 62), but central to the identity of the Son of the Human is that he suffers and dies powerlessly on the cross as a servant (8:31; 9:9, 31; 10:33, 45; 14:41).

We see in Mark's use of the motif of the reign of God and in his various christological titles that the Gospel writer does not reject an apocalyptic worldview altogether. Indeed, he employs a thoroughgoing apocalyptic backdrop for his Gospel. As has been hinted at, however, Mark parabolically twists and reinterprets that worldview so that it still makes sense after the fall of the temple and amid persecution.[46] Indeed, Mark is not concerned about christological titles per se. He uses them parabolically, narratively de-emphasizing some titles to lift up the use of Son of God by the centurion at the crucifixion (15:39) to point to the importance of the cross over the resurrection in a post-temple world (see below).

Early in the narrative, we see Jesus battling Satan in the wilderness and surviving (1:13), but neither Satan nor Jesus is portrayed as victorious. Jesus's ministry then begins with the pronouncement that the critical time (*kairos*) is fulfilled and the reign of God has arrived or drawn near (*ēngiken*; v. 15). In other words, Mark presents Jesus interpreting his ministry as the eschatological moment in which God begins breaking into history to transform the world. But, again, this opening does not lead to some apocalyptic victory. Instead, for Mark the cross where Jesus dies is the climax of the story. The effect of his death ripples out to rip the temple curtain in two (15:38) and reveal his full identity to the centurion (v. 39). A story that starts with what looks like the assertion of power in an apocalyptic schema parabolically ends by emphasizing Jesus at his most powerless as the key apocalyptic, salvific moment.

Mark seems to be adjusting his audience's apocalyptic hopes to assert that they need not wait on salvation if it has already arrived in Jesus. The problem, of course, is that the Roman Empire was still very much in power and the risen Jesus was gone. What developed was a version of eschatology that views the church as existing in between the present salvation *already* experienced (individually and communally) by followers of Jesus and the future manifestation of that salvation *not yet* realized throughout the whole of the world. By placing the cross and not the resurrection at the center of his eschatological theology, Mark

44. Scholarship on the origin and meaning of *ho huios tou anthrōpou* as used in the Gospels is extensive and lacks consensus. For a broad overview of the literature, see Burkett, *Son of Man Debate*; for recent essays contributing to the debate, see Reynolds, *Son of Man Problem*.

45. See Shively, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 2.

46. Some scholars who have noted Mark's twisting of apocalyptic language and themes, especially in ch. 13, interpret it intratextually as fulfilled in the passion narrative or as a vindication of Jesus in his resurrection. For a recent version of this argument see van Eck, "Eschatology."

twists those continued expectations of God's future so that Christians should not imagine God's inbreaking to be that the parousia would have occurred to defeat the Romans and save the temple from being destroyed and the church from being persecuted.

This already/not yet element of Mark's twisting of apocalyptic theology is also seen in the way he subtly plays with the chronological element of such a worldview. Consider these three scenes:

8:34–9:1. In response to Peter's rebuke after predicting his passion, Jesus declares that followers must be willing to lose their life to gain it. In a penultimate claim, Jesus adds an apocalyptic note that when the Son of the Human comes in glory, he will be ashamed of those who have been ashamed of him in this generation. But then in a final note, Jesus adds, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who *will not taste death until they see that the reign of God has come with power*" (au. trans.; italics added).

10:28–31. Following Jesus's discourse concerning the difficulty of the rich entering God's reign, Peter asks about the fate of the disciples who have "left everything" to follow him. Jesus assures Peter of their reward both in this age and eschatologically: "There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, *who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age*—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—*and in the aeonic age*" (au. trans.; italics added; on "aeonic age" as the translation of *zōēn aiōnion*, see "Notes" on 10:17).

13:30. Toward the end of the eschatological discourse, after describing the coming of the Son of the Human, Mark has Jesus repeat a claim similar to that in 9:1, "Truly I tell you, *this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place*" (italics added).

Since Mark is writing soon after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE—some forty years after Jesus's crucifixion—the first generation of Jesus followers (or at least most of them) would have already passed away (e.g., 10:39). Thus, Jesus's promise of wondrous rewards in this age and his prediction that people in his generation would not pass away before the sun ceases to shine, the stars fall from the heavens, the Son of the Human comes surfing in on the clouds, and the angels gather the elect from the ends of the earth (13:24–27) would have been judged as incorrect by Mark's original audience (and by us today). A good editor would have had Mark fix such a contradiction.

Mark, however, is writing a parable, and lines such as these are not intended to be interpreted literally. They seem designed to create tension. By the third occurrence of this kind of language at the end of the eschatological discourse with its familiar apocalyptic imagery, it is clear Mark is twisting traditional apocalyptic views of Jesus, disorienting the audience to the point of altering their apocalyptic worldview. It de-emphasizes (without completely erasing) a traditional chronological interpretation of eschatology and offers an experiential, communal interpretation in its place.

Put differently, Mark does not exactly offer an anti-apocalyptic worldview.[47] As the shadow of the destroyed temple fell across the church, Mark worked to

47. See Hooker, "Trial and Tribulation," 84.

help people hold on to eschatology by revising their apocalypticism, by deliteralizing the chronological aspect of it, and by offering *an experiential/existential approach* to it in which life in the community of faith is presented as eschatological reward.

The Parabolic Structure

Much scholarly ink has been spilt debating the structure of Mark's narrative.[48] Less than providing us with a clear sense of Mark's mind, these proposed structures are heuristic constructs that highlight different elements of Mark's unfolding but unified story and emphasize different theological themes.[49]

Mark, unfortunately, did not supply us with clear division headings to reveal his intent and guide our reading. Instead of indicating how one scene flows out of the previous one, Mark begins the vast majority of the Gospel's scenes paratactically with "and" (*kai*).[50] Scanning down the Greek text of Mark is like looking at a list with *kai* as the bullet designating each paragraph. The audience experiences the story as "this happened and then that happened and then this and then that." Add to this the forty-two times Mark uses *euthys* ("immediately"), and the effect is "this happened and then immediately that happened and then this and then immediately that." Mark provides us with an episodic story but does not make explicit his overarching plot structure.

Since Mark does not provide obvious divisions, we must look to more subtle narrative patterns to determine Mark's structure. More than proposing a detailed outline, this introduction will focus on two overlapping structural elements of Mark to help the preacher recognize how an individual pericope works in the wider context of the Gospel.[51]

The first element is geography. In Mark's story there is much movement. Any attempt to map the journeys Mark outlines would involve lots of back and forth that seem like rambling and poor trip planning (one can hear a GPS voice screaming at Jesus and the disciples, "Recalculating!," at the top of its digital lungs). There is, however, an overarching logic to the journey when one backs away from the trees to see the forest. There are five major geographical units in Mark:

1:2–13. The story opens in the "wilderness" (*erēmos*; vv. 3, 4, 12–13) connected with the Jordan where John is baptizing. In this geographical setting Mark clearly names (or, better, confirms) the identity of Jesus as the eschatological Messiah, the Son of God, for the hearer.

1:14–8:26. Jesus's ministry begins in and focuses on Galilee and surrounding areas, calling the disciples (1:16–18; 2:13–14; 3:13–19; 6:7–13), and going

48. For a thorough review of the main options, see Collins, *Mark*, 85–93.

49. As Dewey puts it, "Mark does not have a single structure made up of discrete units but rather is an interwoven tapestry or fugue made up of multiple overlapping structures and sequences, forecasts of what is to come and echoes of what has already been said" ("Mark as Interwoven Tapestry," 224).

50. Donahue and Harrington note that eighty of the eighty-eight Markan pericopes begin with *kai* (*Mark*, 17).

51. Throughout the commentary when we examine literary context of passages, we will attend to other structural elements of the narrative.

back and forth across the Sea of Galilee to the symbolically constructed Jewish and gentile sides (4:35–8:26). Jesus teaches crowds, heals the sick, casts out demons, and eats with sinners.

8:27–10:52. Jesus travels "on the way" (*hodos*; 8:27; 9:33; 10:17, 32, 46, 52; see also 11:8) toward Jerusalem and the cross. While not solely so, this is a journey in which Jesus concentrates on teaching his disciples, repeatedly speaking about his coming suffering, death, and resurrection (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34).

11:1–15:47. Jesus is in Jerusalem, taking on the authorities in the temple, commissioning his disciples, being arrested, tried, crucified, and buried. Whereas time passes quickly through most of the Gospel, Mark slows the narrative significantly in these chapters, indicating that the events in Jerusalem, and especially the crucifixion, are the climax to his story.

16:1–8. The final scene of the Gospel technically occurs in the geographical setting of Jerusalem, but it is a scene set in more mythical, liminal space. Indeed, Galilee gets the last word, geographically speaking, in that the young man at the empty tomb reminds the women and the readers that the disciples will meet the risen Jesus back in Galilee (v. 7), even though that promise is not fulfilled in the narrative itself.

In addition to the geographical progression of the narrative, a second structural element of Mark is the building of conflict across the scope of the narrative. This is a key and complex element of Mark that supports a parabolic interpretation and will be laid out in detail below. Before we zoom in on Mark as parable, however, it will be helpful to take a wide-angle view of the narrative in terms of key indicators of increasing conflict:

While still in the wilderness in the opening geographical movement of the story (1:2–13), Jesus is tested by Satan among the wild beasts (v. 13). This opening scene of conflict sets the tone of Mark as presenting Jesus engaged in a parabolic, apocalyptic battle.

This continued apocalyptic struggle with Satan is seen most obviously in Jesus's powerful and authoritative subduing of the unclean spirits. But Mark frames all the conflicts in the story as related to this eschatological battle. For example, in his very first healing in the Galilean section of the narrative, Jesus exorcises a demon from a man in the synagogue. The narration of the exorcism follows immediately on the heels of the notice that Jesus taught as one with authority that the scribes did not have, setting up Jesus's challenge to religious leaders (1:21–28; see also 3:22–27).

This conflict with the religious authorities grows quickly so that by 3:6 (still early in the Galilean section) the narrator already notes that the Pharisees and Herodians conspire to "destroy" (*apollumi*) Jesus (the very action that demons fear Jesus has come to do to them; see 1:24). Early in the narrative, then, Mark presents religious and political powers as intertwined and united in their stance against Jesus in Mark's apocalyptic narrative world.

In the section in which Jesus is "on the way" to Jerusalem (8:27–10:52), Jesus himself names this growing conflict with the religious/political authorities three times as he describes his coming execution (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34).

In the Jerusalem section (11:1–15:47), the conflict climaxes. When Jesus prophetically stops the temple from functioning (11:15–17), the chief priests and scribes "seek to destroy" Jesus (11:18; au. trans.). Jesus does not back down and instead takes on the religious authorities on their home turf of the temple (11:27–12:44) and then predicts the fall of that very temple (13:2). The religious authorities continue to seek a way to kill Jesus (14:1). They seize him (14:43–50), have the council convict him by means of perjury (14:55–65), and hand him over to the Roman Empire's local authorities (15:1–15). Pilate's soldiers mock and crucify him (15:16–32), and after his death a prominent member of the council buries him quickly (15:42–47).

16:1–8 is the conclusion of the narrative, but it is hardly a resolution to the conflict that resulted in Jesus's execution.

This quick sketch shows how the apocalyptic battle begun in the wilderness leads to the cross. However, the overview is incomplete without pointing out that the resurrection shows that the cross is not a sign of Jesus losing the battle (even with Mark's omission of a resurrection appearance). Jesus wins the battle in his powerless death, but Mark's interpretation of the victory can only be understood when the story is recognized as a parable. Because Mark's audience is struggling with the destruction of the temple and persecution of the church, the author cannot end the narrative with all conflict tied up with a nice bow.

The Unfolding of Mark's Parable of Jesus and the Disciples

It is the twofold thesis of this commentary that (1) Mark parabolically twists the story of Jesus and the disciples familiar to his original audience as a pastoral offering in light of the destruction of the temple and persecution, and (2) preaching on Mark is greatly enhanced by emphasizing this parabolic nature in individual sermons and cumulative preaching strategies.[52] Both sides of this thesis are dependent upon the view that Mark invites the audience (and preachers can invite congregations today) to identify with the disciples, who play a key role in the unfolding of the conflict. This identification with the disciples is what leads the audience to experience the christological and existential orientation, disorientation, and reorientation that Mark offers in his parable.[53]

52. Snodgrass writes, "Typically Christians read small sections of the NT, and sermons typically and understandably focus on a short pericope. This often leads to distortion, but especially with Mark it can be disastrous, for it does not allow one to hear all the text with the implicit commentary that the narrative offers on itself. We cannot deal adequately with the whole on a given occasion, but we must be sure that we see how the relations within a text work and the implications this has for understanding" ("Hermeneutic," 68).

53. For a brief overview of ways that redaction and literary-critical readings of Mark have emphasized readers' identification with the disciples, see Horsley, who criticizes elements of this emphasis, in *Hearing*, 81–86.

Before the disciples appear in the narrative, Jesus's identity is clearly established with the opening line, John's role as preparer of Jesus's way, the epiphany Jesus receives at his baptism, and his testing by Satan in the wilderness (1:1–13). The fact that the audience witnesses Jesus's private epiphany and private battle with Satan sets up a literary technique of irony that will be used throughout the Gospel to increase the parabolic effect of the narrative. By irony, we mean knowledge of underlying connotative meanings offered to the audience that characters in the story do not possess in their surface-level understanding of what is being said or what is happening.[54] In Mark, the audience knows from the prologue how the narrator wants us to understand Jesus, but do the disciples in the narrative?

The Galilean section of the narrative (1:14–8:26) opens with a summary of Jesus's proclamation (1:14–15), followed immediately by the call of the first four disciples (vv. 16–20) in ways that *orient* the audience or present them with characterizations of Jesus and the disciples which they recognize and value. The narrator gives no indication that the four fishermen had any prior knowledge of Jesus—they simply respond obediently when Jesus invites them to follow (cf. 2:13–14). The familiar and appealing image the original audience would have had of the disciples as founders of the Christian community prior to reading or hearing Mark's story would have been confirmed by this scene.[55] The disciples immediately take on the role of representing the church, therefore, and the audience would have experienced a strong identification with them.

This identification would have been strengthened in scenes that follow by contrasting the disciples with those who respond to Jesus in less positive ways.[56] In the scene immediately following the call of the disciples, Jesus casts out an *unclean spirit* who knows who he is (Jesus silences it) and clearly stands against Jesus (1:21–28). Soon after, Jesus cleanses a *man with a skin disease* (vv. 40–45), an act that would seem to indicate Jesus's favor (see vv. 40–41). Yet when Jesus instructs the cleansed man to say nothing to anyone (vv. 43–44), the man, in contrast to the fishermen earlier, is disobedient (v. 45).

In these two opening scenes we see a literary device that will recur throughout Mark. Scholars have called this motif the "messianic secret" and have debated its theological significance for over a century.[57] Mark portrays Jesus as commanding silence of various characters (demons and humans) and instructing them to tell no one of his identity or work (1:34; 3:11–12; 5:43;

54. See Camery-Hoggart, *Irony*.

55. The parabolic reading offered in this commentary argues that Mark twists the narrative characterization of the disciples for the sake of pastorally creating a narrative experience for the readers in which they question their own manner of being disciples and their Christology in the wake of the fall of the temple. Interpretations go too far, however, when they argue that the characterization of the disciples constitutes a Markan attack on the disciples in some historical fashion (e.g., Tyson, "Blindness") or on a specific group in the Markan community (e.g., Weeden, "Heresy"; Kelber, *Kingdom in Mark*). On the audience's preexisting attitude concerning the disciples, cf. Paul L. Danove, "The Narrative Rhetoric of Mark's Characterization of Peter," in Skinner and Hauge, *Character Studies*, 156–57.

56. Attempting to correct scholarly overemphasis on the incomprehension of the disciples in Mark, S. Henderson views their role in the opening half of Mark as primarily positive examples of discipleship (*Christology and Discipleship*).

57. So labeled by Wrede, the first scholar to discuss the motif in Mark, in *Messianic Secret*. For a brief overview of interpretive developments concerning the motif, see Christopher M. Tuckett, "Messianic Secret," *ABD* 4:797–800; also Boring, *Mark,* 264–71.

7:36; 8:30; 9:9; cf. 7:24 and 9:30, where Jesus tries to keep his whereabouts unknown). The fact that it is counterintuitive for one starting a movement to keep others from telling of his deeds highlights the parabolic nature of this motif. The secrecy motif is part of Mark's twisting of the familiar story of Jesus, leaving the audience in doubt about its precise interpretation: Why are Jesus's authoritative identity and powerful works to be kept secret?

After initially portraying unclean spirits and those Jesus heals in a negative light, Mark offers several scenes in which *religious authorities* also line up over against the disciples. When Jesus forgives the sins of a man who cannot walk, some scribes consider him to be blasphemous (2:6). When Jesus dines with tax collectors and sinners, the scribes of the Pharisees question the disciples about his behavior (2:16). Jesus and the disciples are contrasted with John's disciples and the Pharisees in that they do not fast (2:18). The Pharisees challenge Jesus for allowing his disciples to pluck grain on the Sabbath (2:24). And when they witness Jesus healing on the Sabbath, the Pharisees and Herodians conspire to destroy Jesus (3:6). The early conflict with the religious authorities climaxes when scribes from Jerusalem accuse him of casting out demons by Beelzebul (3:22), the very one (Satan) whom Jesus begins to oppose in the opening scenes of the story (1:12–13).

If the identification of Mark's audience with the disciples was not strong enough yet, Mark reinforces it yet again by contrasting them with *Jesus's family*. When they hear people saying that Jesus is out of his mind, his family comes to restrain him (3:21). But when his mother and brothers arrive, Jesus leaves them outside, points to the crowd sitting around him, and calls them his family because they do the will of God (vv. 31–35). The disciples are so obedient that they have replaced Jesus's family, so of course Mark's audience values and identifies with them in the strongest possible way. While apocalyptic militaristic imagery might (and should) be problematic or even offensive today, it is clear Mark is working out of a dualistic view of the universe in which Jesus is battling Satan, and the troops for each side are being formed in the audience's mind: Jesus and the disciples stand against Satan and his minions—the unclean spirits, those who are healed but disobey Jesus's call to keep silent, religiopolitical authorities, and even Jesus's biological family.

Parabolic Hook Is Set

Once the identification is in place, however, Mark begins twisting the story so that the familiar view of the disciples is challenged and replaced. This parabolic *disorientation* begins when Mark presents Jesus as teaching in parables (ch. 4).[58] The chapter opens with a notice from the narrator that Jesus taught the crowd "many things in parables" (v. 2) and presents the parable of the sower (vv. 3–9) as an example. When Mark next presents the Twelve as asking him privately "about the parables," he has Jesus (drawing on Isa 6:9–10) explain the purpose of parables:

58. See Ahearne-Kroll, "Mysterious Explanations: Mark 4 and the Reversal of Audience Expectation," in Malbon, *Between Author and Audience*, 62–69.

> To you has been given the secret of the reign of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that
>
> > "seeing they may see and not perceive,
> > and hearing they may hear and not understand;
> > so that they may not turn and it be forgiven to them."
> >
> > *4:10–12; au. trans.*

For Mark, parables are not simple sermon illustrations about the reign of God. Instead, they distinguish between those inside and those outside of God's reign. In working through the narrative so far, the audience would assume that those who have been lining up against Jesus—Satan, unclean spirits, religious authorities, and family—are outsiders and the disciples are insiders. Therefore, if the Gospel of Mark itself is a parable, the whole narrative will draw a line between such insiders and outsiders, and those who identify with the disciples are insiders.

The twist comes in the very next line (v. 13). Jesus says to the disciples, "Do *you* not understand this parable? Then how will *you* understand all the parables?" (emphasis added). Note the logic: Insiders possess the mystery of God's reign and thus understand the parables. The disciples (who have been presented as insiders and with whom the audience identifies), however, do *not* understand the parables and thus do not possess the mystery of God's reign, even though it has been given to them. This raises the question: Are the disciples (and by implication, are *we*) insiders or outsiders?

The question is reasserted at the end of the parables discourse when the narrator states explicitly, "With many such parables he spoke the word to them [the crowds] as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples" (4:33–34). If the disciples are insiders, why must Jesus keep having to explain the parables to them?

The very next scene (vv. 35–41) turns the question mark into an exclamation point. Later on the same day that Jesus had been teaching in parables and interpreting them for the disciples, Jesus and the disciples are in a boat in a storm. When the disciples wake him and Jesus calms the storm, he indicts the disciples: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" (v. 40). This indictment initiates a recurring motif in the Gospel in which fear and faith/understanding are opposites (4:40, 41; 5:36; 6:50; 9:32; 10:32; 16:8).[59] Removing any hope in the audience's mind that the disciples still have some shadow of insider status, the narrator ends the story with the disciples amazed and saying to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (v. 41). The very disciples who jumped up and followed Jesus obediently now show that they have no idea who he is. Mark is indicting the audience for not knowing who Jesus is either. As Tannehill puts it,

> [Mark] composed his story so as to make use of this initial tendency to identify with the disciples in order to speak directly to the reader through

59. For a brief survey of scholarly interpretations of the theoliterary function of fear in Mark, see Iverson, *Gentiles*, 30–31 n. 47.

> the disciples' story. . . . Then he reveals the inadequacy of the disciples' response to Jesus . . . which requires the reader to distance himself [*sic*] from them and their behavior.[60]

Conflicts Intensify in Galilee

Having called into question the insider status of the disciples (and of the audience), the narrator continues through the Galilean section of the story (1:14–8:26) telling of Jesus's miracles and teaching. The question of which characters are insiders and which are outsiders continues. After raising a twelve-year-old girl, Jesus commands the witnesses to tell no one (5:43). His hometown synagogue takes offense at him (6:1–6). People claim that Jesus is John the Baptist raised from the dead or Elijah or a prophet (6:14–16). Herod kills John, who had baptized Jesus (6:17–29). Pharisees and scribes challenge Jesus because his disciples do not wash their hands before eating (7:1–15). Jesus heals a man who is deaf and orders him to tell no one, but he disobeys (7:32–37). The Pharisees return and test Jesus by asking for a sign from heaven (8:11). Mark reinforces the characterization of those groups introduced as outsiders and adds new groups to the list—the general public, political authorities, and even Jesus's hometown. But what about the disciples?

While their insider/outsider status is not central in 5:1–8:26, Mark continues to keep the question of their ambiguous status dangling in front of the audience in significant ways. On the one hand, their positive character is lifted up again when Jesus sends the Twelve to extend his work of exorcising demons, healing, and preaching (6:7–13). Indeed, they are successful in this work (vv. 12–13).

On the other hand, their confusion and misunderstanding continue. When Jesus recognizes that power has gone forth from him when the woman with the twelve-year flow of blood touches him, and he asks who touched him, the disciples seem to think Jesus has just been bumped in the crowd (5:31). Even after they have experienced the power to cast out demons and heal the sick upon Jesus's command, they question their ability to feed the crowd of five thousand (6:37). Worse, when the disciples are presented with the same scenario a second time, they again question how anyone could feed a crowd of such size (8:4).

Two other scenes also function in parallel fashion. First, as the disciples had earlier questioned Jesus's identity in the calming of the storm on the seas (4:41), so again when Jesus walks on the sea, the disciples are afraid and think he is a ghost (6:49–50). After Jesus gets in the boat, the narrator connects their reaction in this scene to their response to the first feeding miracle by saying, "And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened" (vv. 51–52). Second, Mark brings back the language of the disciples' inability to understand parables without explanation from 4:11–13, 34. Following the dispute with the Pharisees over washing, in which Jesus says to the crowd, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile" (7:14–15), the disciples ask about the "parable" in private. Jesus begins his explanation with an indicting question: "So, are you also without understanding?" (vv. 17–18).

60. Tannehill, "Disciples," 392–93.

Finally, in 8:14–21, Mark has Jesus try to draw a line between the disciples and the religiopolitical authorities by warning them about the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod. The disciples, however, are worried about not having brought bread and are confused. Jesus calls out their lack of understanding in language that echoes back to the discussion of the purpose of parables as keeping outsiders outside (4:11–13) and to the disciples' bafflement related to the two feeding miracles (6:30–40; 8:1–10):

> "Do you not yet perceive or understand? Do you have your hearts hardened? Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?" They said to him, "Twelve." "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?" And they said to him, "Seven." Then he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?" (8:17b–21; au. trans.)

The increase in the ranks of the outsiders along with the sprinkling of indicting references to the misunderstanding of the disciples, with whom the audience has identified, pushes the audience to question even more the status of the disciples and themselves (ourselves) as insiders. The next narrative section places this question in bold font.

Conflict Deepens "on the Way"

The section of the narrative in which Jesus leads his disciples "on the way" to Jerusalem and the cross (8:27–10:52) brings his identity into sharp focus. Similar to the Galilean section that follows on the heels of the baptism scene in which God privately tells Jesus he is God's beloved Son (1:9–11), this travel narrative has near its beginning the scene of the transfiguration, in which the inner group of disciples see Jesus revealed and hear the heavenly voice declare that Jesus is God's beloved Son and they should listen to him (9:2–8). Surely after such an epiphanic experience, they will come to full understanding! Alas, surely not. When Jesus comes down the mountain and finds that his disciples have been unable to cast out a spirit (even though he had previously authorized them to do so), Jesus despairs about the "faithless generation" (v. 19). The disciples must again ask for a private explanation (vv. 28–29).

Three parallel scenes that clarify both Jesus's mission and identity and the disciples' inability to understand his mission and identity dominate this narrative section. The first (8:27–9:1) opens the section just before the story of the transfiguration. Having left Galilee, Jesus leads his disciples to Caesarea Philippi. The city was named in honor of Augustus by Herodian client-tetrarch Philip, was home to a marble temple honoring the emperor, and was a site where Vespasian housed troops during the Jewish Revolt and where the Romans sponsored games in 70 CE to celebrate Titus's capture of Jerusalem (which included the destruction of the temple).[61] Mark makes a strong theopolitical statement by placing Jesus's discussion with his disciples

61. See Leslie J. Hoppe, "Caesarea Phillippi," *NIDB* 1:517–18; John Kutsko, "Caesarea Philippi, *ABD* 1:803.

about his identity and mission in this city that had such a blatant symbolic connection to the Roman emperor and to the destruction of Jerusalem (see "Notes" on 8:27).

Like the people in 6:14–16, the disciples are confused about who Jesus is (8:28). But finally, Peter seems to get the answer right: "You are the Messiah" (v. 29). Or does he? Immediately following Peter's declaration, Jesus commands him to tell no one (v. 30). Then Jesus (referring to himself as the "Son of the Human" instead of "Messiah") tells the disciples that he must suffer, be rejected, be killed, and then rise again (v. 31). Peter responds by rebuking Jesus, which provokes Jesus to call him "Satan" (vv. 32–33). This should not be missed: after Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah, Jesus equates Peter with the chief outsider, his apocalyptic opponent. There is no worse indictment. Mark seems to imply that even though Peter gets the vocabulary correct (*christos*, echoing 1:1), the content with which he fills that term (that is, rejecting the idea of Jesus suffering and dying powerlessly) is wrong. Is that the situation of Mark's implied audience (and us) as well?

The next parallel scene is when Jesus offers his second passion-resurrection prediction to his disciples (9:30–37). Mark tells us explicitly that they do not understand and are afraid to ask (v. 32; again, connecting fear and lack of faith). As Peter responded inappropriately to the first prediction, so here the whole group of disciples responds inappropriately. They argue about which of them is the greatest (v. 34). In other words, when Jesus tells the disciples he is going to die, Mark portrays them as arguing about who would succeed him.

Jesus's third passion-resurrection prediction evokes yet another inappropriate response from the disciples (10:32–45). James and John ask Jesus to seat them on his right and left in his glory (v. 37). As did the disciples in the previous scene, they are vying for status. Jesus tells them that those who will be on his right and left have already been chosen (v. 40). When the rest of the Twelve hear what James and John had done, they become angry (v. 41). Jesus's response to them (that the one who would be great must be a servant; vv. 42–45) implies they were not angry about the sons of Zebedee acting inappropriately toward Jesus but about the two of them going behind their backs. The punctuation at the end of the scene is Jesus reminding them of what his passion-resurrection prediction should have already told them: the Son of the Human "came not to be served but to serve" (v. 45).

Mark's case against his audience by way of his characterization of the disciples as misunderstanding Jesus's identity and mission is nearly complete: They (we) do not know Jesus even though they follow him and name him using language of the faith. They have been "on the way" with Jesus, but they are not yet in Jesus's Way.

There is, however, a glimmer of hope in this section. Mark frames the travel narrative with two stories of healing blindness. Blindness for Mark is a metaphor for lack of faith and understanding. In the first scene (8:22–26), Jesus restores a man's sight in stages, suggesting that the disciples will come to full faith and understanding slowly. In the second, which is the final healing story of the Gospel and the last scene before Jesus and the disciples enter Jerusalem, Jesus heals Bartimaeus (10:46–52). As the disciples left behind the nets with which they gathered fish when Jesus called them at the beginning of his ministry, so

Bartimaeus throws off his cloak, which beggars used to collect money, at the end of Jesus's itinerant ministry (v. 50). And after he is healed and Jesus instructs him to go, Bartimaeus shifts from sitting alongside the way (v. 46; *para tēn hodon*) to following Jesus "on the way" (v. 52; *en tē hodō*). Jesus has been "on the way" to his cross, and Bartimaeus follows Jesus, implicitly taking up his own cross (8:34). If this Bartimaeus can gain new sight and a fullness of faith, perhaps so can Jesus's disciples and Mark's audience (us).

Conflict and Abandonment in Jerusalem

In the Jerusalem section of the narrative (11:1–15:47), Mark presents Jesus himself as intensifying the conflict. He stages a parade of sorts (11:1–11) into this religious and political center for the region. The parade begins an ironic coronation ceremony (i.e., a sequence of events in which Jesus is presented as crowned as the Messiah-king in ways the audience can recognize but characters in the story do not; for a detailed review of this motif, see "Literary Context," 11:1–11).[62] New kings/conquerors would ride into the city and into the temple to be anointed by the high priest. Even though Jesus processes with crowds acclaiming the one who comes in the name of the Lord and the coming reign of David, when he enters the temple, he simply and anticlimactically looks around and departs.

He returns to the temple the next day, however, and causes it to cease from functioning, prophetically foreshadowing its destruction (11:12–25; see above) and leading the authorities to look for a way to kill him (v. 18). Then he begins teaching in the temple, where chief priests, scribes, and elders challenge him (vv. 27–28), leading him to speak again in parables that condemn them (12:1–12), which in turn leads them even more to conspire to seize him (v. 12). These disputes culminate in Jesus warning the crowds to beware of the scribes (12:38–40) and criticizing the temple for being an institution that would take a widow's livelihood (vv. 41–44).

After Jesus's private instruction of the disciples concerning the destruction of the temple and the parousia (ch. 13), Mark uses an intercalation to sandwich two scenes together: In the first slice of bread, the narrator begins by reminding the audience that the chief priests and scribes were seeking a way to arrest and kill Jesus (14:1–2). The filling is the story of the woman anointing Jesus (vv. 3–9). The second piece of bread is the description of Judas conspiring with the chief priests to betray Jesus (vv. 10–11). The intercalation indicates the importance of the anointing story *in relation to* Jesus's capture and death. It is also part of the ironic coronation story unfolding across the Jerusalem section of the narrative. Jesus is anointed for his death, which is also his coronation, not by the high priest in the temple but by a woman in the unclean house of a man with a skin disease.[63]

62. Hooker writes, "Mark presents the crucifixion of Jesus almost as though it were an enthronement: Jesus has been hailed by the crowds as he entered Jerusalem (11.1–10), anointed (by a woman!—14.3–9), 'identified' by the high priest (14.61), proclaimed to the people by Pilate (15.9, 12) and saluted as king by the soldiers (15.17–19). [Then] he is enthroned on the cross, with an inscription telling the world who he is [15.26], and with two thieves occupying places of honour at his right and his left [15.27] (10:37)" (*Mark*, 371–72). I would add to this list the ironic messianic banquet of 14:17–25.

63. See Park, "Coronation."

Coronations would include a great banquet, for which Mark gives us Jesus's Last Supper (14:12–25). Instead of a great celebration of military victories, however, here Mark portrays Jesus as foretelling his being handed over by Judas (vv. 18–21) and interpreting the meal in relation to his coming death (vv. 22–25). Following the meal, Jesus also foretells that all the disciples will stumble and desert him (vv. 26–31). Peter (and the others) argue that they would never do such a thing (vv. 29, 31), provoking Jesus to predict specifically that Peter would deny him three times that very night (v. 30). And, indeed, despite their protestations, the disciples cannot even stay awake and keep watch as Jesus prays before his arrest (vv. 32–42).

In the midst of Mark pushing the question of the status of the disciples (and the audience), however, we should not miss something the author has Jesus say in 14:28. Even though Jesus knows the disciples will all abandon him, he promises to go before them into Galilee after he is raised from the dead. Mark's original audience (and we) cannot miss that here potentially is a foreshadowing of redemption.[64] Readers are led to expect that after Mark has completely deconstructed the audience's sense of the disciples (and themselves/us) as faithful followers of Jesus, he will bring them/us back as insiders in the resurrection story. In other words, Mark establishes the expectation that parabolic reorientation will follow disorientation by Jesus's own words.

When the chief priests, scribes, and elders are finally able to seize Jesus with Judas's aid (14:43–52), the disciples do exactly as Jesus said they would: they all desert and flee (v. 50). At the end of the arrest scene is a note that has greatly puzzled interpreters: "A young man who was following with [Jesus] was wearing a linen cloak upon his naked [body]. They seized him, but leaving behind the linen cloak, he fled naked" (vv. 51–52; au. trans.). Who is this young man who fled like the other disciples? Why does Mark specify that he is wearing a linen cloak? Why does Mark portray him as running away naked? Mark is at his parabolic best throwing in this odd, vivid, twisting moment late in the narrative. Readers *are supposed to be* in sufficient doubt about the precise interpretation or application of this scene to be teased into active thought so that the whole of Mark might alter their worldview.

Trials and Denial

Mark's use of irony thickens like an overfloured gravy as he takes the audience closer to the cross. In the trial scene before the council (14:53–65), witnesses claim that Jesus said he would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days (vv. 57–58). They are lying—Jesus said no such thing—but the audience knows that their interpretation of what is about to follow is (metaphorically) correct. The high priest asks Jesus directly, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed?" For the first and only time in the entire narrative, Jesus claims to be the Messiah, responding, "I am," and interpreting his messianic identity apocalyptically (vv. 61b–62; cf. 13:24–27). Instead of receiving Jesus's word as confirmation of what the audience has known since 1:1 and an echo of the heavenly voice

64. Blount, *Go Preach!*, 109.

at his baptism (1:11) and transfiguration (9:7), the council condemns him for blasphemy and begins mockingly to call on him to prophesy, not realizing he has just done exactly that (on the christological title "Son of God" in Mark, see "Notes" on 1:1, 11).

Once Jesus has been condemned, Mark returns the focus to Peter and shows him denying Jesus (14:66–72), just as Jesus prophesied. Especially poignant is Peter's third and final denial. He says, "I do not know this person you are talking about" (v. 71). Mark portrays Peter as thinking he is lying, but by now Mark's implied audience (and we) are aware that Peter ironically speaks the truth: *he does not know who Jesus really is*. At this point the parabolized disciples disappear from the narrative and do not return. They are now fully outsiders. And this leaves the original audience (and us) who identified with the disciples in the narrative with the inescapable conclusion: although we are Jesus followers and speak of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, *we do not know who Jesus really is and we are outsiders to God's reign*. In our theologies and actions, claims Mark, we have abandoned and denied Jesus.

The disciples are gone but the audience can continue looking on as Jesus's trial advances from the condemnation by the religious authorities to judgment by the political authority. Pilate, the religious leaders, the crowd choosing Barabbas over Jesus, and soldiers all stand over against Jesus with the disciples (us).

The ironic coronation continues as Pilate derisively refers to Jesus as "king of the Judeans" (15:2, 9; au. trans.) even to the point that his soldiers dress Jesus in a purple cloak and crown of thorns and salute him as king. Now that Jesus is crowned, the only thing left is for him to take his throne, as the audience watches and hopes for a way back inside.

Crucifixion Twisted

The conflict between insiders and outsiders, between Jesus and opponents, culminates in Jesus's crucifixion. To a theology that focuses on power, resurrection, and parousia, this moment seems like defeat. But Mark's ironic parable is not yet finished, as 15:25–27 makes clear. As Jesus hangs on the cross, his charges ironically read, "The King of the Judeans." Immediately following this notice, Mark tells the audience that Jesus is crucified between "two bandits, one on his right and one on his left." This language echoes 10:37, when James and John ask to sit on Jesus's right and left in his glory, to which Jesus replies that it has already been chosen who would be on his right and left (v. 40). The echo points to the cross, and not the resurrection, as Jesus's locus of glory. Ironically, the cross is his throne, and his death completes his coronation.

When Jesus dies, the sanctuary curtain is ripped from top to bottom, and the presence of God is (metaphorically) released from the temple (15:38). At that moment, the centurion guarding Jesus—that is, the person who crucified him—sees how Jesus dies and says, "Truly this person was God's Son!" (v. 39). Mark's parabolic purposes are on fine display at this point, twisting the familiar into the unexpected. This representative of the oppressive military state that is empowered by Satan, persecutes Christians, and destroyed the temple is the only human in the whole of Mark's narrative to recognize Jesus as the Son of

God. The most outside of outsiders becomes the only insider as he witnesses Jesus's powerlessness on the cross.

Parabolic Nonending: Resurrection Twisted Back to Galilee

By the end of the crucifixion scene, the audience who identified with the disciples not only experiences the story of Jesus as being twisted by the narrator; they feel themselves being twisted. We are disoriented, left to hope that the story of the resurrection will bring resolution to the parable, clearing up our confusion and making clear our proper identity. They/we will be disappointed. The most parabolic part of the whole lengthy parable is 16:1–8.

The scene opens with Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome coming to the tomb to anoint Jesus's body. (The use of their names shows that they and their role in the resurrection story were likely familiar to Mark's original audience; see also 15:40, 47.) A member of the council who had voted to condemn Jesus had quickly and improperly buried the body (15:42–47), only wrapping it in a linen cloth (*sindōn*).

When the women find the tomb opened and they enter, they discover a young man dressed in a white robe. He tells them that Jesus has been raised and instructs them to tell Jesus's disciples and Peter (presumably singling him out because of his denial) that he goes before them to Galilee. The earlier hint of redemption in 14:28 seems near to fulfillment. The women, however, flee and tell no one. They do this because they are afraid (see the several terms used for fear in vv. 5, 6, and 8), a return to the literary device signaling lack of faith and understanding. The irony is high in this scene: After Jesus repeatedly told demons, people who had been healed, and disciples to tell no one about him, finally the command to tell comes, only to be met with fear and silence. Even those who are witnesses to the empty tomb end the Gospel as outsiders.

Does Mark imply there is no hope for his audience/us? Is there no reorientation at the conclusion of his sixteen-chapter parable? Does he not think we can come to a better Christology and more faithful form of discipleship?

One does not go to the trouble of constructing a parable this thoroughgoing only to condemn the audience. Mark does so to convert them, to offer them pastoral care in light of the crises they are experiencing because of the destruction of the temple and persecution of the church. Of course Mark thinks there is hope for his original audience (and there is thus hope for us). Mark has arrested his audience with the twists he adds to the story of Jesus and the disciples and caused us to doubt its interpretation and ourselves *so that* our worldview, faith, and discipleship might be altered. He "preaches for decision," if you will.

Indeed, Mark does not leave every character in the story unredeemed. It is common for interpreters to think of the young man at the tomb as an angelic figure, but this is a misinterpretation based on harmonizing with Matt 28:2. Mark does not in any way signal that the young man (*neaniskos*) is an angel. In fact, this is not the first time the young man has appeared in the narrative. The only two occurrences of *neaniskos* in Mark are here at the empty tomb and earlier in the garden when Jesus was arrested (14:51–52). There is no reason not to recognize that this is (parabolically speaking) the same character. In the garden he was wearing nothing but a linen cloak (cf. Jesus being wrapped in a

linen cloth at his burial in 15:46) and ended up running away naked. Now at the tomb, reminiscent of Jesus's clothes when he was transfigured (9:3), the young man is wearing a white robe. The young follower of Jesus who abandoned him and fled with all the other disciples is now faithfully and fearlessly announcing the return of the resurrected Jesus to Galilee—the place where the good news of God's reign and the call to repentance are proclaimed, demons are exorcised and the sick are healed, the hungry are fed, parables are taught, and even the dead are raised.

Mark's original audience knew that their very identity as Christians meant that the disciples and women had followed Jesus and proclaimed his resurrection. In parabolically twisting Jesus and the disciples' story, Mark did not intend to slander the character of the disciples but to impugn his audience's theology in order to offer them new faith, life, and hope in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, in a post-temple era. Offering the audience a new point of identification in the mysterious young man leads us to a potentially revised worldview—reorientation after the open ending. Divine presence is not to be found in some temple but in the places of suffering and hardship where divine presence is most needed (symbolized in Galilee). When the community of faith goes to these places, perhaps inviting persecution, then they will meet the crucified (powerless) and risen (powerful) Jesus anew.

Preaching Mark as Parable

As noted earlier, the last quarter of the twentieth century saw a shift in Gospel scholarship from historical criticism to narrative criticism. Around the same time, homiletical scholarship was experiencing a shift toward proffering narrative approaches to preaching.[65] In a sense, both Gospel criticism and homiletical scholarship were experiencing a shift from rooting their work in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* to rooting it in his *Poetics*. However, they were mostly making this move independently. Even though preachers began embracing a narrative homiletic, narrative readings of biblical texts were challenging for them. Because narrative interpretation focuses on the *whole* of the story, it is often hard to know how to bring broad narrative insights into sermons focused on *individual* passages without losing the interpretive potential of that smaller unit of meaning. This is even more the case when that narrative reading proposes to view the whole Markan narrative as a parable, because the overarching literary elements are viewed as twisting the story and challenging the audience in ways that a more straightforward story about Jesus does not typically do. How does one preach a passage from the early orienting chapters of Mark when we know that Mark will, in later chapters, twist the characterization of Jesus and the disciples to effect a disorientation in the audience?

This commentary struggles with this exegetical-homiletical dilemma on behalf of the preacher. Like all commentaries, this one attends to issues of grammar, vocabulary, and historical context in each passage. It focuses on the

65. Early influential works related to narrative preaching include Craddock, *As One without Authority*; Lowry, *Homiletical Plot*; and Steimle et al., *Preaching the Story*.

Greek text, using the NRSVue as the primary English translation, except when the author offers variations to help preachers better see elements of the Greek text even if the offered translation does not make for the best English in stylistic or grammatical terms. Each entry also (1) relates the passage to the wider literary context, highlighting the passage's connection with the overarching literary/parabolic moves made by the author, and (2) includes explicit theological and homiletical reflections that explore when there is need to include a discussion of these overarching moves in a sermon to help the congregation see Mark's big picture. A strict narrative reading of a biblical text would be solely concerned with the narrative world *in* the text. A homiletical-narrative reading is concerned with how the narrative world of the text can influence the congregation's experience, interpretation, and engagement of their contemporary world. Suggestions will be made to help preachers refer to the wider parabolic purposes of Mark without turning the sermon into an exegetical lecture or losing sight of the tree due to an exploration of the whole narrative forest.

Broadly speaking, this commentary suggests that in addition to thinking about individual sermons functioning narratively, preachers need to think cumulatively about their sermons on Markan texts over time.[66] Intentional and strategic use of repetition and variation in describing elements of Mark's literary techniques and broad parabolic purposes across multiple sermons will help congregations better understand and retain knowledge of those techniques and purposes and in turn get more out of the homiletic interpretation of the individual passage under consideration in a single sermon.

Such a cumulative approach to literary themes is easier for lectionary preachers focusing on Mark often throughout Year B of the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL). What can be difficult is helping hearers get a sense of the unfolding of Mark's story from Advent to Pentecost, when the RCL is shaped thematically around a christologically focused liturgical calendar and does not choose readings from Mark in a clear narrative order. During Ordinary Time, the Gospel lections do flow in order but avoid repetition of texts read during the earlier seasons of the church year.

Nonlectionary sermon series on portions or elements of Mark can also serve as appropriate occasions for holding in tension the broad purposes of Mark with the narrower meanings of individual passages. In such series, preachers can choose texts that focus on specific literary-theological elements.

In either approach, helping a congregation move to the place where they are willing to view Mark as a parable and then helping them hear and experience different Markan passages parabolically is a challenge. Yet when the challenge is faced creatively, sermons on Mark can reap significant homiletical fruits.

66. For discussions of cumulative approaches to preaching, see Allen, *Homiletic of All Believers*, 58–149, and *Preaching and Reading*.

Incipit

1:1

Notes

archē. The first verse of Mark is not a complete sentence—it lacks a verb. Often ancient Greek sentences omitted a verb when it could be assumed that the audience would supply the intransitive "is." The grammatical structure here, however, does not imply such a verb.

The unique structure and content of the sentence fragment suggest that v. 1 functions as a title for the entire narrative.[1] This raises the question: What is meant by describing the whole of the Markan narrative as "the *beginning* of the good news . . ."? This opening word of the narrative points to the parabolic nature of Mark. The narrative that ends abruptly with the women fleeing the empty tomb without telling anyone that Jesus is raised from the dead (16:8) is only the beginning of the good news.[2] There is more to the story of Jesus and the disciples than is told in these pages.

euangelion. This term, meaning *good news*, was not a specifically Christian word in the first century. It and its cognates are found in the LXX, ancient Near Eastern texts, Dead Sea Scrolls, and Hellenistic usage to mean good or celebratory news, which could be political (e.g., concerning the ruler), military (victory at battle), religious (God's saving acts in the exodus), or personal (a birth or a wedding).

It is unlikely, then, that Mark is using the word here to refer to the narrative as a formal, written genre (although it is Mark's use of the term in 1:1 that leads to the tradition of referring to the four narratives that open the NT canon as "Gospels"). Instead, we should think of Mark referring to his narrative as proclamation as opposed to other functions of narratives (e.g., historical or biographical). Such a claim does not preclude the possibility that the narrative might include historical and biographical details, but means simply that Mark is not concerned with those details for their own sake. He is concerned with parabolically "proclaiming" God's salvific work through Jesus Christ, Son of God.

In most of the other uses of *euangelion* in Mark, no content of the good news is clearly named or implied (8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9). It is 1:14–15 that supplies the audience with a summary of this content. What the narrator calls "the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God" in 1:1, the narrator calls "the good news of God" in v. 14. These are not two different proclamations but the

1. See Collins, *Mark*, 130.
2. See Waetjen, *Reordering*, 248.

same gospel. Jesus's oral proclamation is then summarized as, "The time has been fulfilled, and the reign of God is at hand; repent, and have faith in the good news" (v. 15, au. trans.; see "Notes" on 1:14–15). The connection between the two uses of *euangelion* in 1:1 and 1:14–15 implies that, theologically speaking, Mark's proclamation of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, is the same as Jesus's proclamation of the reign of God. Mark's description of the whole proclamatory story about Jesus as *euangelion* shows that the author equates the church's continuing proclamation about Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, with Jesus's proclamation of the eschatological advent of God's reign. In terms of narrative flow, this claim can be expressed in the following way: 1:1 foreshadows Jesus's proclamation of the eschatological reign of God, which in turn reinforces the narrative's thematic focus.

of Jesus Christ. *Christos*, which is used some forty-five times in the LXX to mean "anointed [by oil]," is a translation of the Hebrew *mashiakh* ("messiah"). Primarily the term is used in a religiopolitical fashion to refer to kings as ones who had been anointed during their coronation, but following the end of the Davidic line it came to signify more narrowly the eschatological fulfillment of God's promises regarding the eternal rule of a king from the line of David.[3] Such a political-eschatological understanding of messiahship dominates the New Testament use of the term.

There is more to Mark's use of *christos*, however. In 1:1 and 9:41, where *christos* is used as a name (without the article *ho* [the]), the term reflects the Christology Mark wants to engender in his audience. Every time the word is used as a title with the article (*ho christos*) it is connected with a christological *misunderstanding* Mark wants to correct (8:29; 12:35; 13:21; 14:61; 15:32).

[*huiou theou*]. Describing a king as a *son of God* was common in the ancient Near East and is found in the First Testament (e.g., 2 Sam 7:11–16; 1 Chron 17:13; 22:10; 28:6; Pss 2:6–7; 89:26–27). Likewise, in the era of the early Christians (following Caesar Augustus), it was common to think of the Roman emperors as having divine origin and status and being ones about whom good news was delivered (on the christological title Son of God in Mark, see "Introduction," p. 11; "Notes" on 1:11).[4] In the early church, Son of God is a christological title that grows out of this religiopolitical context and should not be read as expressive of postbiblical concerns about the second person of the Trinity. Mark does not offer a Trinitarian theology.

Contemporary versions of the Greek text of Mark place *huiou theou* in brackets, as we have above, indicating scholarly uncertainty as to whether the words are original to the text because of the complexity of and conflicts among early manuscripts. Indeed, there is no consensus among Markan scholars as to the inclusion of these words in the title of the book.[5] Both arguments (that scribes could have added the words and that scribes could have omitted the words) are

3. Nel, "Gospel of Mark," 137–38, points out that original readers would have immediately recognized 1:1 as having a straightforward political connotation over against similar language used for the Roman emperor.

4. Droge, "Ghostlier Demarcations."

5. For an example of the argument that the words were original to Mark, see Botner, "Role of Transcriptional Probability"; for an argument against the words being original, see Ehrman, *Orthodox Corruption*, 72–74. In contrast to these arguments, Croy contends in "Where the Gospel Begins" that the entirety of 1:1 was added to the manuscript after the original beginning was damaged.

plausible. At the very least, we can say that the use of Son of God here would have fit with Mark's use of the title throughout his narrative.

Indeed, although used sparingly, Son of God is the key christological term for Mark's parabolic purposes. Throughout most of the narrative, no human recognizes Jesus as the Son of God. The demons do (3:11; 5:7). Jesus himself does (13:32; 14:61–62). The audience should, thanks to the heavenly voice that speaks at Jesus's baptism and transfiguration (1:11; 9:7). But the disciples with whom the audience will identify do not (e.g., see how Jesus instructs those who witnessed the transfiguration to tell no one what they saw until after he had risen from the dead; 9:9). Only the most outside of outsiders, the centurion who crucified Jesus, recognizes him as God's Son (15:39).

Literary Context

As the incipit for the whole of Mark, 1:1 sets in motion the extended parable that is this Gospel (see "Introduction," pp. 1–4). The opening uses terms ("Christ" and "Son of God") that would have been familiar to the original audience. Little would they know, however, that the narrator twists a parable throughout the story in ways that lead them to question and rethink their understanding of these christological concepts.

At first (in chs. 1–3), the narrative seems to reinforce the audience's pre-understanding (through parabolic orientation). But when the disciples start showing signs of misunderstanding (in ch. 4), so does the audience (parabolic disorientation). Then when Peter is rebuked after he has called Jesus "the Messiah" (8:29), the audience questions whether they know what it means to profess Jesus as the Christ. Not until the centurion, the most outside of outsiders, professes Jesus as "God's Son" (15:39) do they begin to catch a new christological vision focused on the powerlessness of Jesus's death. And only in the very last verse of the narrative (16:8), when the women flee in silence, do they recognize that the whole story that has challenged them is only the "*beginning* of the good news," leaving them (and us) to be a part of its continuation. Thus, while Mark's audience is not aware of it at this point, this opening line establishes Jesus in a way that sets up the ironic tone of the rest of the Gospel.[6]

Theological and Homiletical Reflections

The Greek text of Mark 1:1 has only seven simple words, yet it foreshadows a web of theological issues that will unfold throughout the Gospel:

- The apocalyptic/eschatological worldview of the Gospel is highlighted by the fact that the narrative is only the beginning of the good news—there is more of the work of Jesus Christ to come beyond the end of the narrative, in the audience's future. The narrative and the reading/hearing of the narrative may represent the "already," but they also point to the "not yet."

6. See Adam Wright, "Recognizing Jesus," 175.

The political edge of Mark's theology (inseparable from the eschatological element named above but important to name explicitly) that would not have been missed by the original audience is signified immediately with the use of the name Christ and the title Son of God. These terms present Jesus as one who stands over against other rulers and false messiahs.

In addition, the use of these christological terms in the incipit shows that the central focus in Mark's proclamation/narrative is going to be Jesus, specifically filling out the theological and ethical content of what it means to claim Jesus as Christ or Son of God. At this point, the implied readers would assume they know what the titles mean, but how the author wants the terms understood is not yet evident at all.

Even though the verse is packed with foreshadowing, preachers will likely not be attracted to the idea of focusing a sermon on this single verse, and for good reason. The fullness of its meaning can only become clear by working through all of Mark. In a cumulative approach to Mark, however, it will be helpful to refer to this line in any sermon on any other passage in Mark where the audience's christological understanding is being twisted and where the open ending of Mark comes into play.

In the Wilderness

Notes

2

As it is written. In the whole of Mark, this is the only such explicit citation of Jewish Scripture offered in the voice of the narrator as a commentary on the story, highlighting its significance. The prophetic citation points in two directions: Both John's ministry narrowly and the whole book of Mark broadly are fulfillments of the messianic citation. Indeed, the two appearances of *hodos* (way) in vv. 2 and 3 along with the synonym *tribos* (path) in v. 3 foreshadow Mark's use of *hodos* in the travel narrative section of 8:27–10:52 to indicate Jesus being "on the way" to the cross in Jerusalem (8:27; 9:33; 10:17, 32, 46, 52; also 11:8).[1]

in the prophet Isaiah. While Mark claims the citation comes from Isaiah, the opening line of the citation is actually an adaptation of either Exod 23:20 or Mal 3:1 or a combination of both. In the Exodus passage, the "messenger" is an angel God sent ahead of Israel in the wilderness on its way to the promised land, and in Malachi the "messenger" is Elijah preparing for YHWH's coming (for this identification, see Mal 4:5).[2] While Elijah's ministry is portrayed in 1 Kings, his mysterious assumption in 2 Kgs 2 led later Jewish traditions to imagine that Elijah would reappear as a harbinger of the day of YHWH (see Mal 4:5–6; Sir 48:9–10) and as a precursor of the Messiah. Mark claims that role for John the Baptist.

3

a voice crying in the wilderness (au. trans.). This verse from Isa 40:3 LXX, which evokes the wilderness as a place of preparation for the coming of YHWH, establishes John's setting in the following verse. Mark quotes Isa 40:3 directly except that the ending is changed from "make the paths *of our God* straight" to "make *his* paths straight." In other words, Mark adapts the citation so that the original expectation of the coming of YHWH is equated with the coming of Jesus.

While Mark presents John as the one sent to prepare the way and to be identified with the voice crying in the wilderness (vv. 2, 3), that voice calls others to prepare the way in v. 3. The Greek imperative *hetoimasate* (prepare) is

1. The NRSVue obscures the repetition of *hodos* in Mark by translating it differently in different contexts (see 1:2, 3; 4:4, 15; 6:8; 8:3, 27; 9:33; 10:17, 32, 46, 52; 11:8; 12:14).

2. Later rabbinic interpretation combined these two references to a messenger and saw them as a reference to Elijah; see Matera, "Prologue as Key," 7.

plural, in the sense of "you all prepare." Thus, Mark has the scriptural citation foretell a dual—or better, cooperative—preparation. In the wider parabolic narrative, the audience is invited to prepare for the eschatological coming of Jesus based on Mark's characterization of him traveling "on the way" to the cross.

4

John the Baptist. Mark portrays John as proclaiming a *baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. While this scene clearly establishes John as a forerunner and inferior to Jesus, it also establishes continuity between John and Jesus's movement. Even though repentance (*metanoia*, lit., change of mind) is not a theme repeated often in Mark, it shows up in three key places, summarizing the proclamation of John here, of Jesus in 1:15, and of the Twelve in 6:12.

hamartiōn. *Sin* is a concept that appears only a few times in Mark (2:5–12, 15–17; 3:28–29; 8:38; 14:41). Through these disparate uses, Mark provides no clear theology of sin, perhaps because he assumes the meaning of sin is self-evident to his original audience. Generally, "sin" refers to behavior that goes against religious or moral standards, is opposed to God, and is an affront to God or injury done to others. In the ancient world, people were not seen as sinning because of some psychological issue or as the result of bad decision making, that is, making mistakes. When preachers see sin in the Markan text, then, they should assume the writer is talking about persons and behavior that are truly bad (see discussion of "sinners" in "Notes" on 2:15).

While Mark does not explicate a theology of sin, he does make explicit that Jesus has the authority to forgive sins (2:5–12). John's proclamation of repentance for the forgiveness of sins in this opening scene foreshadows that messianic authority (see also 11:27–33) as well as Jesus's call to repentance (1:15).

5

pas. Mark portrays the *whole* of Judea and *all* (again *pas*) Jerusalemites as coming out to John in order to signify the fulfillment of the prophecy calling for people to prepare the way of the Lord by confessing their sins and being baptized. Mark will use such hyperbole throughout the Gospel when discussing the size of groups, especially, but not limited to, highlighting Jesus's growing popularity, influence, and work (in the opening chapters, for instance, see 1:28, 33, 37, 39; 2:2, 12, 13, 15; 3:7, 20; 4:1; cf. 4:8).

It is important to note that Galilee is not mentioned until Jesus arrives in v. 9 (see "Notes" on 1:9 and 1:14). The implication is that John's ministry takes place in the Jordan on the border of Judea. In contrast, it will not be long before Mark's audience will see the stronger one (v. 7) gathering fame throughout the surrounding region of Galilee (1:28) and attracting crowds from a much larger geopolitical area (3:7–8).

The repenting people's coming to John at the Jordan in the wilderness represents a reversal of Israel's departure from the wilderness and crossing the Jordan to enter the promised land.[3] Mark is, in a sense, presenting a new,

3. Drury, "Mark 1:1–14," 31.

backward exodus in which repentance and baptism free the people from enslavement to their sinful ways. The coming out of Judah/Jerusalem here at the beginning of the story is bookended with the implied (but unfulfilled) movement of the disciples leaving Jerusalem to meet the risen Jesus in Galilee (14:28; 16:7).

6

clothed in camel hair and a leather belt (au. trans.). Mark describes John's clothing in terms that echo the portrayal of Elijah in 2 Kgs 1:8, asserting even more the connection between John and Elijah's role as precursor to the Messiah. John's location in the wilderness and his diet of common desert foods (see Lev 11:20–23) also strengthen this connection.[4]

7–8

ho ischyroteros mou. Whereas the scriptural citation in vv. 2–3 sets up an expectation of the coming of one called Lord, preceded by a messenger, John's (that is, the messenger's) proclamation in vv. 7–8 raises the stakes even higher. Mark portrays him describing Jesus as *the one stronger than I* (au. trans.), and John does not count himself worthy to remove his shoes. To recognize how low Mark has John naming his status in relation to Jesus, Culpepper notes, "Removing sandals was such a menial task that students were not required to remove their rabbi's sandals: 'a pupil does for his teacher all the tasks that a slave does for his master, except untying his shoe'" (b. Ketubbot 96a).[5]

The statement that the coming one is more powerful than John does more than just highlight Jesus's superiority over John. It is an apocalyptic note for Mark. In just a few sentences, Mark's audience will get an insider view of Jesus enduring being tested by Satan (1:12–13). Yet later, Jesus's opponents among the religious authorities will accuse him of casting out demons by the power of Satan (3:22). Jesus shows the logical flaw in this insult (3:23–26) then draws an analogy comparing his battle with Satan to binding a strong man (*ischyros*) and plundering his house (3:27). Jesus is not only stronger than John; he is stronger than Satan and all Satan's demons. This is a key christological claim for Mark, and one that will be parabolically turned on its head when Jesus dies powerlessly.

"will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Similarly, the assertion that the coming one will not simply baptize with water does more than just present a contrast between Jesus and John. The gift of God's Spirit was part of Israel's eschatological hope (Joel 2:28–29; Isa 32:15; 44:3; Ezek 37:14). Ezekiel 36:25–27 is especially significant because it connects the gift of the Spirit with water cleansing. (The metaphorical use of "baptism" here, as in Mark 10:38, should warn against using this passage in theological debate concerning the relation of the gift of the Holy Spirit to the sacrament of baptism.)

4. Kelhoffer compiles evidence to show that locust eating was common in the ancient Near East and thus need not be seen as significantly distinctive or ascetic ("Did John the Baptist Eat?").
5. Culpepper, *Mark*, 47.

Literary Structure

The core structure of the scene is simple. Verses 2–3 present a scriptural prophecy. While the fulfillment of this prophecy likely includes the whole of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God, that Mark presents (1:1), it certainly includes the rest of this scene. So, vv. 4–8 serve as an explicit fulfillment or dramatic enactment of that prophecy.[6] This is the primary movement of the scene, but in unfolding the passage for a congregation as part of a sermon, it is also helpful to note that each of these two parts of the story can be further divided.

Although language from Exodus and/or Malachi that presents the messenger as an Elijah figure opens the citation, the scriptural prophecy does not divide well with the break between Exodus/Malachi, on the one hand, and Isaiah, on the other. The way Mark has put together the composite citation, two voices are speaking. Following the citation formula (v. 2a), YHWH speaks about sending a messenger to prepare the way of the Lord (vv. 2b–3a) and then the messenger's message is dictated in v. 3b. When YHWH speaks, the addressee is "you," that is, Jesus. When the messenger speaks, the audience is an implied plural, thus any who will heed the call to participate in the preparation.

The narrative fulfillment of the prophecy (vv. 4–8) likewise has two parts. Verses 4–6 are the narrative description of John and his ministry, and vv. 7–8 include the summary of John's preaching. Thus, in some ways the structure of this section of the passage follows that of the first: both end with the voice of the messenger/John pointing to Jesus. This structure signals to the preacher that the weight of a sermon should focus on this parallel call for preparation.

Literary Context

In terms of the immediate context, Mark's story begins not with a birth story (as do Matthew and Luke) but with John the Baptist. Mark does not present John's ministry for its own sake but as an introduction to the character and work of Jesus and as a call for Mark's audience to prepare. The main purpose of the scene is to set up the baptism of Jesus in which the Holy Spirit descends into him in 1:9–11.

In a wider view of the context, we should recognize that 1:2–20 programmatically sets the tone for much of what will follow in the Gospel. The opening of the narrative with vv. 2–8 especially serves to orient the audience toward a particular understanding of Jesus that will be parabolically twisted starting in ch. 8 (see "Introduction," pp. 18–24). For example, the one coming is presented here as one with power, but later Mark's Jesus (who first appears in the narrative in the next scene) ends up dying powerless on the cross, even though he had been able to subdue demons, heal illness, calm a storm, and feed thousands. As part of a cumulative strategy of helping congregations see the big picture of Mark across sermons, it is helpful to point out the christological disorientation that will follow later in the narrative without letting it become too large a part of a sermon on this passage.

6. Botner, "Prophetic Script."

Theological and Homiletical Reflections

It is incorrect to say that the focus of this scene is on John the Baptist, even though on the surface it seems that the majority of the text presents him as a fulfillment of Scripture, describes him, and presents the success of his ministry. John is certainly key, but it is more precise to say that the focus of the scene is *through* John the Baptist and *on* Jesus. In other words, this is a thoroughly christological scene—a Christology highlighting Jesus as superior to John. Jesus is proclaimed as the one to come, the Lord, the one more powerful than John, and the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

The scene's christological focus, however, does not invite a doctrinal sermon. Here at the beginning of the story, we already see that Christology is an existential matter for Mark. A proper understanding of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God (1:1, 11), requires a proper orientation of one's life. The good news of the Son of God (over against so-called good news concerning Caesar as divine; see "Notes" on 1:1 and 1:11) is an invitation to prepare for the one who is coming.

In Mark's narrative world, this preparation to which John calls the people occurs immediately in the Judeans and Jerusalemites coming out to repent of their sins and be baptized. In Mark's worldview, however, this preparation is delayed. It is eschatological. In the narrative, Jesus has not yet arrived with the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The open ending of Mark (16:1–8) without a resurrection appearance but with a clear promise that Jesus will appear to the disciples in Galilee is foreshadowed here with this unfulfilled prophecy.

Preachers will do well to ask their congregations to identify with those the messenger/John calls to prepare the way of the Lord. The arrival of Jesus is yet out in front of Mark's audience (see commentary on ch. 13), out in front of our congregations. The eschatological experience of expectantly preparing for the coming of the more powerful one stands over against our experience of the world currently dominated by political and economic powers that are demonic and oppressive.

Given this eschatological emphasis, we should avoid interpretations of this passage that are too small, too individualistic. Repentance here is much more than feeling bad about one's sinfulness. As Mark pictures the Judeans and Jerusalemites leaving their homes to return to the liminal, mythical space of the wilderness, so the Gospel calls for a radical, social reversal from us (all). Preparing for the coming of the Lord means living in light of the arrival of God's reign over against Satan's/Caesar's reign.

Notes

9

Jesus. This verse marks the first appearance of the main character in the narrative and the second appearance of his name; the first is in v. 1, the incipit for the book. In his first appearance in the story, Jesus is, for the most part, a passive character. He is active in that he *came* from Nazareth, but otherwise he *is baptized*, the Spirit descends *into him* (see below), and the heavenly voice speaks *to him* (implied in the explicit use of the second person, "*You* are my Son"). Jesus will become active in 1:14–15.

from Nazareth of Galilee . . . in the Jordan. The geographical description names Jesus's hometown without any introduction. As opposed to telling the audience something new, the presentation without explanation indicates they would have already been familiar with this biographical information. In 1:5, people come to John from Judea and Jerusalem, and only Jesus comes to John from Galilee (see "Note" on v. 14). Jesus's journey from Galilee to the Jordan foreshadows his later journey from Galilee to Jerusalem (chs. 8–10). Jesus prepares for his ministry by traveling south and ends his ministry in the same way.[1]

10

kai euthys. This is the first of forty-one appearances of *euthys* in Mark—indeed, it shows up again at the beginning of the very next pericope (v. 12). The word woodenly means *immediately*, but this is not always the best English translation, especially for *kai euthys*, which counts for twenty-five of the forty-one uses in Mark and can simply mean *and then*, depending on context.[2] There is nothing wrong with the translation "and then" except that it does not invite English readers to recognize the term echoing through Mark's forty-one uses of *euthys* the way it would have rung in the original audience's ears, and we can risk missing the narrator's sense of events in the story clicking off one after another at a sound pace.

he saw the heavens ripped apart (*schizomenos*, au. trans.). Mark implies that God temporarily and symbolically pulls back the curtain between heaven and earth. Through this opening the Spirit and God's voice invade normal existence. This

1. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 114.
2. See Decker, *Mark*, 1:13.

cosmic aspect of the scene expressed in the divine passive is a traditional mark of ancient theophany stories (see Ezek 1:1; 2 Bar. 22.1; 3 Macc 6:18; T. Levi 2.6; 5.1; 18.6; T. Jud. 24.2; John 1:51; Acts 7:56; Rev 4:1; 19:11). These examples (except for 2 Baruch, which is in Syriac), however, use a form of the verb *anoigō* (open) instead of *schizō* (rip).[3] Mark's use of *schizō* is striking, then, and foreshadows the only other use of the verb in the Gospel, when "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom" (15:38).

The narrator's description, Jesus "saw [*eiden*] the heavens ripped apart," however, signals that this scene is to be interpreted as a private epiphany offered to Jesus alone. There is no indication that John or others at the Jordan saw the heavens torn apart, were aware of the descent of the Spirit, or heard the heavenly voice. This reading is clearer in v. 11 when Jesus is addressed directly.[4]

the Spirit descending like a dove into him (au. trans.). The Holy Spirit is not a pervasive character in Mark in the way it is, for instance, in Luke-Acts. Yet Mark presents Jesus claiming that "whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness" when he is attacked as casting out by Beelzebul (i.e., instead of by the Spirit; 3:29), which shows how important the Spirit is to Mark's Christology. Certainly, here in the opening scenes of the narrative, the Holy Spirit is a key player. Just before Jesus's baptism, John proclaims that the more powerful one who comes after him will baptize with the Holy Spirit (v. 8), and immediately (*kai euthys*) after Jesus's baptism the Spirit "drove [Jesus] out into the wilderness" (v. 12). The three compact references to the Holy Spirit make it clear that Mark intends the audience to interpret Jesus throughout the narrative as an agent of the power of the Holy Spirit.

The phrase "like a dove" (*hōs peristeran*) can be read as modifying the Spirit ("the Spirit like a dove descending") or the Spirit's descent ("the Spirit descending like a dove"). The difference is subtle but can be important. The first option can be read as assuming a visual representation or manifestation of the Spirit (as Luke 3:22 interprets and makes explicit). In this case, *eis auton* would have to mean "upon him," as translated in the NRSVue, because a physical dove would not enter Jesus. The second option translates the phrase as a metaphor for the movement of the Spirit, and *eis auton* can be understood to mean "into him" in the sense that the Spirit enters Jesus ("into" is the more common, but hardly exclusive, meaning for *eis*). Since this scene has characteristics of a call story (often prophets receive a theophany and are endowed with the Spirit when they are called) and Jesus becomes an agent of the Holy Spirit (as the disciples will become; 13:11), the latter is the preferred translation. The one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit is possessed by that very Spirit.

Michael Peppard argues that Mark's use of the dove is mimicry of the Roman use of the eagle as a symbol of imperial power, glory, and victory. Roman intrigue with augury is well-known, and birds often played a role in the description of the adoption of one who would become emperor. Mark's description of the dove descending on Jesus at his baptism evokes this imagery

3. Matt 3:16 and Luke 3:21 both change Mark's *schizō* to *anoigō*.
4. Contrast Matt 3:14–17; Luke 3:21–22.

but turns it on its head: "This counter-emperor will rule not in the spirit of the bellicose eagle, but in the spirit of the pure, gentle, peaceful, and even sacrificial dove."[5]

11

a voice came from the heavens. John's voice (*phonē*) crying in the wilderness (1:3) disappears into the background as the heavenly voice (*phōnē*) speaks through the ripped-apart heavens. This heavenly voice will speak again in the transfiguration story in 9:7 (as lit., voice from the cloud), where it again pronounces Jesus to be God's Son. In the transfiguration story, however, the epiphany is not a private experience offered *to* Jesus, but instead the voice speaks to the inner group of disciples *about* Jesus ("*This is* my Son, the Beloved" instead of "*You are* my Son, the Beloved").

"You are my Son." The declaration of Jesus as God's Son (and indeed the baptism scene as a whole) has intertextual connections with several passages from the First Testament and with various cultural uses of the title Son of God.[6] We will look at two.

First, Ps 2 is a royal psalm likely used as part of a coronation ceremony. In v. 7, God declares to the anointed king, "You are my son; today I have begotten you." The language of the psalm does not indicate divine origin of the king, but that instead the anointing (messiah-ing) of the king represents his adoption and installation by God. Given that Mark has no birth narrative comparable to that in Matthew or Luke, it seems Mark uses the baptism story as an adoption/anointing scene like that assumed in Ps 2: Jesus *becomes* God's Son at the baptism *when* God declares him to be so. This accords with messianic interpretations of royal texts in late Second Temple Judaism.[7] Other similar language from the LXX often viewed as a background for Mark's use of "Son of God" and "Beloved" includes Isa 42:1 and Gen 22:2.[8]

Second is the use of "Son of God" and similar deifying terms as an honorific for the Roman emperor (see "Introduction," p. 11; "Notes" on 1:1). An inscription from Pergamum reads, "The Emperor, Caesar, Son of God, the god Augustus." One from Magnesia speaks of Nero as "the son of the greatest of gods."[9] Denarii, which circulated at least throughout the western parts of the empire, propagated such a view with an image of Tiberius and a legend reading, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus." Mark's view of Jesus being adopted as God's Son in this scene should not be misunderstood as an assertion of later adoptionist Christology in relation to Trinitarian considerations. Mark is specifically drawing on biblical and imperial language and concepts of the day to assert the theological and political significance of Jesus as the messianic Son of God *over against* similar claims about the emperor.[10]

5. Peppard, "Eagle and Dove."
6. See Jarl Fossum, "Son of God," *ABD* 6:128–37.
7. Marcus, *Mark*, 1:162.
8. For a full discussion of these three intertextual connections, see France, *Mark*, 79–83.
9. Evans, *Jesus and His Contemporaries*, 54–55 n. 5.
10. Peppard, "Eagle and Dove," 433.

Literary Structure

The structure of the baptism scene is fairly simple. Verse 9 provides the setting for the theophany in terms of both geographic location and ritual action, and it establishes the main focus of the pericope.

Verses 10–11 serve as the theophany proper, with v. 10 containing the visual elements and v. 11 the aural ones. As with most good stories, including most of the passages in Mark, the emphasis is on the final line. In some ways this story functions like a pronouncement story. In such stories, there is a *setup* in which Jesus notices something, is accused of something, or is asked a question, and then he responds with a *pronouncement*. The pronouncement is the punch line. In the story of the baptism, however, Jesus is not the one making the pronouncement; God makes a pronouncement to Jesus.

This pronouncement is, in part, Mark's answer to the theological problem of John baptizing Jesus, which seems to present Jesus as becoming a disciple of John. Mark allows God to make clear the relative status of Jesus and John.[11] By declaring Jesus to be God's Son, the heavenly voice confirms that Jesus is the one more powerful about whom John spoke (v. 7) and that John is the one who prepared his way (vv. 2–3).

Literary Context

The story of Jesus's epiphany at his baptism is tightly interwoven with its immediate context. On the front end, John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus (1:2–8), and now the one more powerful than John arrives. On the back end, the Spirit that entered Jesus during the theophany immediately casts him out into the wilderness (1:12–13) to battle with Satan. With the eschatological tone of John's preaching and the apocalyptic character of the "testing" scene, it seems clear that Mark presents the baptism as an eschatological event—or rather the beginning of the eschatological Christ event, since Jesus's ministry is eschatologically focused (1:14–15).

Mark unfolds his story in a way that leads the audience, composed of people who (think they) already know Jesus's story, to identify with the disciples. The disciples do not appear in the Gospel, however, until 1:16–20. At this point, then, the narrator is simply setting up the audience with what is familiar to them: Jesus is the eschatological, messianic Son of God for whom John prepared the way. Seemingly confirming what they know in the beginning (the way parables begin with things familiar in common life) will allow Mark to twist the story later and disorient the audience.

This early passage of the Gospel is key to that parabolic twisting across the whole of the story. Mark uses recurring motifs and language to effect this twist:

In 1:1 the narrator names the story in titular fashion as "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God," if "Son of God" is original (see "Notes" on 1:1).

11. Matthew deals with the problem by having John initially refuse to baptize Jesus (Matt 3:14–15), and Luke places the narration of Jesus's baptism after John has been arrested (Luke 3:19–22).

A few sentences later, this identity is confirmed by none other than God, who claims Jesus as "my beloved Son," with the ripping of the heavens, the descent of the Spirit, and a voice from the heavens. While Jesus experiences the epiphany accompanying his baptism privately in the narrative world, the audience standing before the text gets to see and hear everything.

Following Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus orders the disciples to tell no one and then rebukes Peter for challenging his instruction about his coming execution and goes so far as to call him Satan (8:27–33). It seems that Peter has the right vocabulary (the Messiah) but an incorrect definition of the term. In the next scene, Jesus is transfigured before the inner group of his disciples and a voice from the cloud says to them, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him!" (9:2–8). Knowledge that was private has now been given to the disciples. And yet, as they come down from the mountain, Mark has Jesus instruct the disciples to tell no one of the epiphany until after the resurrection (9:9). Having identified with the disciples, the audience is now being pushed to question whether their insider knowledge of Jesus as the Son of God is like Peter's: Do we have the right christological language but the wrong christological content?

Finally, the scene of the crucifixion explicitly echoes the baptism. While Jesus is on the cross, the sky grows dark and Jesus twice offers a loud *cry* (15:34, 37; *phōnē* as in 1:11). When Jesus dies, the curtain of the temple is *ripped* [*schizō*] from top to bottom (v. 38) recalling the sky ripping open in the baptism (1:10). A difference, however, is that no heavenly voice speaks. Jesus cries out, asking why God has abandoned him, but receives only heavenly silence. But someone does speak: The centurion—the most outside of outsiders, a servant of the emperor who is acclaimed as a son of God, the very soldier who crucifies Jesus and represents the oppressive power of Satan—sees Jesus anew and says, "Surely this person was *God's Son*!" (v. 39; cf. 1:11). Jesus's baptism anoints Jesus as the Son of God to travel to Jerusalem and die as the Son of God. What is the audience who identified with insiders who misunderstand Jesus's identity and purpose to do with their faith and theology when the most outside of outsiders is the only person in Mark to call Jesus "Son of God"? They must acknowledge Jesus's death as the central revelation of who Jesus is and question their own status as insiders. The open-ended empty tomb scene will, then, invite the audience to return to Galilee and view the Son of God's acts of power, healing, exorcisms, teachings, and conflicts through the lens of the powerlessness of the cross, thus finding Christ in the crisis of their own day.[12]

In this overview of the broad literary context, we see that Mark plans to challenge his audience's Christology. Before Mark can turn the tables on us, however, he must first get us to let down our defenses. By giving us an insider

12. The three scenes in which Jesus is proclaimed to be the Son of God are all accompanied by heavenly signs, which Jesus refuses to give to "this generation" when requested by the Pharisees; see "Literary Context," 8:10–12.

view of Jesus's adoption/calling at his baptism, Mark leads us to think the understanding of Jesus as the Son of God we bring to the narrative is confirmed and to trust the narrator.

The epiphanic nature of the scene assists in this endeavor. The heavens (the cosmic dwelling of God) are ripped privately and temporarily for Jesus (and the audience). At Jesus's death, however, the curtain of the temple (at the entrance to the earthly dwelling of God) will be ripped permanently ("from top to bottom") and for all. Only through the lens of the cross (and after the resurrection) can we fully and appropriately understand the eschatological presence of God-in-Christ in the world of conflict and suffering.

In sum, then, Jesus's baptism, like so many early scenes in Mark, functions proleptically, foreshadowing and finding its fulfillment in the crucifixion, which of course has already occurred in the past for the audience even though it lies in the future of the narrative. It is hard to imagine a more dramatic (or parabolic) expression of the eschatological experience of the already/not yet than this. The audience of Mark stands between the cross of the past (to which the narrative refers externally/historically, i.e., beyond the narrative world) and the cross of the future (the story of the crucifixion as interpreted by Mark in the narrative itself). At the baptism scene, we *already* know Jesus to be the Son of God, but the full import of this revelation for understanding Jesus and our role as disciples is *not yet* fully manifested to the world or to us!

Theological and Homiletical Reflections

Often preachers use the story of Jesus's baptism to interpret the meaning of our baptismal practices and our baptismal identity, especially in relation to different denominational theologies of baptism. This is a perfectly appropriate use of the story. After all, there is little doubt that language and images of Jesus's baptism in the Gospels reflect something of the original audience's ritual practices. Mark's version has much to offer a sermon dealing with sacramental theology and practice. In verses preceding this scene, John speaks of baptism in relation to *repentance* and *confession and forgiveness of sins* (vv. 4–5). The water bath ritual implies *cleansing*. Jesus's reception of the *Holy Spirit* is presented as paradigm for Christians' reception of the Holy Spirit in relation to baptism. And in baptism we are claimed as *God's beloved children* as Jesus is claimed to be God's beloved Son.

Yet Mark's story does not imply our baptism is equal to Jesus's. There is something sui generis about Jesus's private experience as narrated in the Second Gospel. This is a christological story through and through. It tells us something about Jesus's unique identity as God's adopted Messiah and thus invites a christological sermon. A christological sermon that allows contemporary hearers to identify with Mark's original audience draws them into the wider context of Mark's use of "Son of God" as making a claim about Jesus's identity over against Roman claims of the emperor being God's agent. For Mark, Jesus's baptism is a thoroughly eschatological, political event.

Notes

12

kai euthys. And immediately connects this scene with the preceding baptismal scene (vv. 9–11; on *euthys*, see "Notes" on 1:10).

Spirit. The Holy Spirit that descended into Jesus in his private epiphany following his baptism now immediately acts on Jesus by casting him out into the wilderness. The Spirit brings Jesus to this place, Satan tests him, and the angels serve him. Mark tells us of no action taken by Jesus.[1] This passivity grows out of the baptism story (see "Notes" on 1:9).

ekballei. Mark commonly uses *ekballō* to describe casting out demons in exorcisms (see 1:34, 39; 3:15, 22; 6:13; 7:26; 9:18, 28, 38), but the term is not limited to this setting. Mark also uses it for sending people away (1:43; 5:40; 9:47; 11:15) or throwing something out (12:8). In all uses, the term implies force. The strong verb evokes scriptural stories of God's Spirit transporting prophets (cf. 1 Kgs 18:12; 2 Kgs 2:16; Acts 8:39).[2] Here, the Spirit *casts out* Jesus into the wilderness.

erēmos. Mark has already introduced *wilderness* as a mythical space in the biblical quotation (from Exod 23:20 or Mal 3:1) in 1:3 and placed John's ministry in the wilderness (in partial fulfillment of that quotation) in v. 4. Even though Jesus is already in the wilderness at the Jordan with John in vv. 9–11, Mark describes the Spirit driving Jesus (farther?) into the wilderness, apart from John and John's crowds (v. 5). At the surface level, wilderness is a dangerous, isolated locale, but it also has symbolic import.[3] The wilderness is liminal space, a place of ambiguity and danger, but also a place where God is encountered (see 1:35, 45; 6:31, 32, 35). For example, in the story of the exodus, wilderness represents both God's liberation of Israel from Egypt and Israel's testing by God. In other words, "wilderness" evokes a metaphorical, mythical space as portrayed in Israel's Scriptures.

1. In Matt 4:1 and Luke 4:1, Jesus is the subject of the opening sentence of the temptation story, but in Mark's version Jesus is both grammatically and narratively the object of others' actions.

2. Van Henten, "First Testing," 351.

3. Dowd argues, "Since [Jesus] is already in the desert, because that is where John was baptizing (1:4), the repeated reference to *erēmos* cannot be a change of scene, but must have symbolic significance" (*Reading Mark*, 12).

13

forty days. With this time reference Mark evokes Scripture where forty can symbolize a long time: the Israelites wandering for forty years, being tested by God (Deut 2:7, 8:2); Moses on Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights (Exod 34:28; Deut 9:9, 18); Elijah in the wilderness for forty days, waited on by angels (1 Kgs 19:5–8). After opening his narrative by declaring that Jesus is the fulfillment of scriptural prophecy, Mark here shows that Jesus's story continues the epic, scriptural story of God and God's people.

peirazomenos hypo tou Satana. Surprisingly, Jesus's *being tested by Satan* (au. trans.) is mentioned only in a subordinate, participial clause, making clear that the purpose of this short scene is not to focus on Jesus being tested.[4] The testing is simply part of the context (see below). Indeed, whereas Mark uses *peirazō* when speaking of religious leaders opposing Jesus (8:11; 10:2 in some manuscripts; 12:15; see also 14:38), here Mark provides the audience with no clues to the content of the testing.

The translation issue is helped only slightly by the naming of the one who is doing the "testing" as *the Satan* (Satan is also mentioned in 3:23 [2×]; 3:26; 4:15; 8:33; only in 3:23 is the article omitted). The use of the article indicates a title for the adversary (Gk. *Satanas* is a transliteration of the Hebrew word meaning "adversary"). Preachers need to avoid contemporary images of the devil (Mark never uses the word *diabolos*) as a red, horned, pointy-tailed tempter. In first-century Judaism, Satan represented a cosmic opposition to the will and ways of God.[5] The appearance of Satan here at the beginning of Mark sets in place the dualistic, apocalyptic worldview that lies behind the whole of the narrative (see "Introduction," pp. 10–15). So, although Mark does not deem it important to offer the audience the content of Satan's testing of Jesus, the hostile, combative intent of striking against God's chosen one (1:11) in order to thwart God is clear. And, conversely, Jesus is Spirit-filled to oppose Satan.[6]

Satan does not continue to play a role as an active, explicit character in Mark's story after this scene. Satan is mentioned only three other times, but these occurrences show the audience how Satan is active in more implicit ways throughout the whole narrative:

- In 3:22–27, the scribes connect Jesus's ability to cast out demons to the claim that he "has Beelzebul," who is "the ruler of the demons." Jesus responds by asking, "How can Satan cast out Satan?" Thus, for Mark, Satan = Beelzebul = ruler of demons. Throughout the Markan narrative, then, every time Jesus confronts a demon, the audience recognizes that Satan is at work through those demons.
- In 4:13–20, Jesus interprets the parable of the sower (4:1–9). In v. 15, Jesus allegorizes the seed falling on the path and being eaten by birds (v. 4) in terms of the Satan coming and taking away the word that is sown in

4. Phanon, "Work of the Spirit," 58.
5. Edward W. Conrad, "Satan," *NIDB* 5:112–16.
6. For a thorough exploration of the characterization of Satan in Mark, see Elizabeth Shively, "Characterization of the Non-Human Satan in the Gospel of Mark," in Skinner and Hauge, *Character Studies*, 127–51.

hearers. So, Satan fights against the proclamation of the good news of God's reign (see 1:15).

In 8:27–33 Peter confesses Jesus to be "the Messiah," only to have Jesus "sternly order" the disciples not to tell anyone about him. When Jesus continues to tell the disciples that the Son of the Human must suffer and die (presumably against Peter's messianic expectation and hope), Peter rebukes Jesus. But Jesus rebukes Peter in return, saying, "Get behind me, Satan." Thus, we see that for Mark, Satan works through people as well as demons, even Jesus's closest disciples.

thērion. This term indicates *wild animals* (au. trans.) as opposed to domesticated ones. Their presence in this scene is sometimes taken as picturing Jesus residing peaceably with predators (such as in Isa 11:1–9) in a return to a paradise when Adam and the animals dwelt together. This reading, however, is not persuasive.[7] It is rooted in a Pauline theme of the new Adam (see 1 Cor 15:20–23, 45–49; Rom 5:12–21) that simply is not part of Mark's theonarrative worldview. It is better to view the presence of wild animals as threatening.[8] A wilderness is filled with wild animals (who can be viewed in demonic terms), which is part of what makes it dangerous (cf. Isa 13:20–22). A Greek amulet from the late Roman period reads, "I adjure you by the living God, that every spirit and apparition and every beast [*thērion*], be gone from this soul."[9]

and the angels [angeloi] *served him* (au. trans.). As this scene brings forward the introduction of the wilderness from the Scripture quote in vv. 2–3, so does it echo the introduction of "my messenger" (*angelos*) in that same quote. These echoes signal an inclusio framing the entire section (vv. 2–13) to be read and understood together.

The presence of angels also evokes the story of Elijah in the wilderness for forty days being cared for (fed) by God's angels and stands in contrast to the threatening presence of wild animals (such a contrast is found in Ps 91:11–13).[10]

Literary Structure

While the testing scene in Mark is only two sentences long, the structure does not simply divide at the break between sentences. Setting up a dualist conflict that will characterize the whole of Mark's narrative, the narrator frames the scene with an inclusio. It opens and closes with divine initiative: The Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness and the angels serve Jesus. In between is the mention of testing by Satan and the threatening presence of wild animals.

Literary Context

Jesus's testing flows directly out of the baptism story (1:9–11) and should not be read in isolation from it. The Spirit descends into Jesus in the wilderness and then casts Jesus out into the wilderness. In the baptism, the heavenly

7. See Bauckham, "Jesus and Wild Animals."
8. Heil, "Jesus with Wild Animals"; Garrett, *Temptations*, 58, 173.
9. Collins, *Mark*, 151–53.
10. Ps 91 is partially quoted by the devil in the testing stories in Matt 4:6 and Luke 4:10–11.

voice adopts/anoints Jesus as God's son, setting up the conflict with Satan and Satan's representatives that follows.

Mark neither gives content to the testing of Jesus nor hints at Jesus being victorious over Satan. Instead, the scene simply sets in place the conflict that will drive Mark's story. While Jesus is passive throughout the testing scene (as he was in the baptism scene), the very next line of the story presents Jesus proclaiming the good news (cf. 1:1) of the advent of God's reign while calling for repentance and faith (1:14–15). Jesus comes out of the wilderness embodying his anointing as God's Son and claiming God's reign over against forces that oppose God's will for the world. The strength of Jesus's fight against Satan's forces will be named explicitly in 3:22–30. When the scribes accuse Jesus of casting out by Beelzebul, the audience already knows that Jesus is the "stronger one" about whom John spoke and that he has already been confronted by Satan. Jesus, who is possessed of the Holy Spirit, is the one who binds the strong man.

Theological and Homiletical Reflections

Preachers might be tempted to speed past these two small verses. After all, Mark's version of Jesus's trial in the wilderness does not include the colorful, threefold dialogue found in Matthew's and Luke's versions, which seem to offer ready-made three-point sermons. Conversely, we might unconsciously import elements of Matthew's and Luke's longer versions to fill out Mark's sparse description. The harmonization is understandable given that the three versions all follow the baptism and lead into the beginning of Jesus's ministry, and all mention the Spirit, the wilderness, forty days, and testing. This brief scene, however, deserves to be read on its own terms.

While the scene does flow out of the baptism story (in relation to the role of the Spirit and the setting of the wilderness instead of the title "Son of God") and does have christological implications, it is not primarily christologically focused. Instead, Mark's brief scene of Jesus's testing establishes a theological point of view from which to view the rest of the narrative to follow: The world is a battle between good and evil, and Jesus is about to enter that struggle. Instead of narrating that battle, these two sentences simply set the scene for it to unfold across the narrative.[11] This dualistic, cosmic, apocalyptic conflict is the lens through which Mark tells his good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God.[12] But Mark is going to tell that story parabolically and twist the audience's views of both the nature of the apocalyptic battle and who is on each side of the battle.

These two verses, then, can set up preaching cumulatively through Mark's narrative by showing how this scene establishes the basic conflict of who is inside and outside God's reign that will unfold in different ways throughout the narrative. We can name that theme in detail when focusing on this text and refer back to this text every time that theme shows up in other focal passages from Mark.

11. Myers, *Binding*, 130.
12. Dowd, *Reading Mark*, 12; cf. Garrett, *Temptations*, 59.

Also, twenty-first-century congregations need help to recognize the apocalyptic dualism that lies behind the majority of the New Testament and insight in how to interpret that worldview today (see "Introduction," pp. 10–15). Fewer people in the pew today think of Satan in literal terms than perhaps ever before in the history of the church. The picture of the world as the battlefield between supernatural forces is greatly strained by a scientific understanding of the world. Yet evidence of and the congregation's experience with evil is undeniable. Naming that evil as a concern of God's as clearly as Mark does will be useful.

To be clear, Mark's short testing story does not present Jesus as overcoming evil. But neither does evil overcome Jesus in it. Mark leaves the scene open-ended to serve his wider theonarrative purposes. But the open-endedness can also be an effective homiletical point of connection. When we invite congregations to identify with Jesus in Mark's testing scene, hearers can see themselves in Jesus as one who is struggling with evil now and will do so in the future. And they can receive the promise of the guidance of the Holy Spirit and providential care given by God.

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