

The New Testament and the Scriptures of Israel

The Psalms in the New Testament (2004)

Isaiah in the New Testament (2005)

Deuteronomy in the New Testament (forthcoming)

Isaiah in the New Testament

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 T & T CLARK INTERNATIONAL
A Continuum imprint
LONDON • NEW YORK

Published by T&T Clark
A Continuum imprint
15 East 26th Street
New York
NY 10010
The Tower Building
11 York Road
London SE1 7NX

www.tandclark.com

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First published 2005

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Typeset by R.eFINECatch Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed on acid-free paper in Great Britain
ISBN 0567030296 (hardback)
056703030 X (paperback)

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Chapter 2

Isaiah in Mark's Gospel

Morna D. Hooker

That the book of Isaiah was of particular importance for Mark seems clear, for he begins his 'Gospel about Jesus Christ' with a quotation which he attributes to Isaiah. It is, moreover, the only 'editorial' quotation in the whole gospel, since the quotations he uses elsewhere are always attributed to one of the characters in the story, normally Jesus himself. Like Rom. 1:2 – but more specifically – it establishes straight away that the Gospel proclaimed here was 'announced beforehand in sacred scriptures through his prophets'. This one quotation, in Mark 1:2–3, is thus the equivalent of all the 'fulfilment-quotations' in Matthew put together.¹ It would seem, then, that this opening quotation is understood by Mark to be programmatic: the key to understanding what this 'Gospel' – or 'Good News' – might be is to be found in the book of Isaiah.²

It is all the more remarkable, then, that what Mark introduces as 'written in the prophet Isaiah' begins with words written elsewhere! The opening sentence – 'Behold, I send my messenger before you, who will prepare your way' – appears to be an amalgam of promises taken from Exod. 23:20 and Mal. 3:1. This is even more surprising when we compare the Synoptic parallels to Mark 1:3, since though both Matthew and Luke use this Exodus–Malachi quotation elsewhere (Matt. 11:10; Luke 7:27), the quotation from Isa. 40:3 is found here on its own (Matt. 3:3 and Luke 3:4, in both cases attributed to Isaiah). If Matthew and Luke were independently using Mark 1, then they must both have decided to drop the first quotation at this point because each of them was planning to use it in another context. This would suggest that they had already thought out exactly what they would be including later in their narratives. Critics who argue that Mark used Matthew, rather than the other way round, see this passage as evidence that Mark, having decided to omit the story about

¹ It is, of course, true that Mark, unlike Matthew, is using scripture broadly, not to show how particular details were fulfilled. Cf. Hugh Anderson, 'The Old Testament in Mark's Gospel', in James M. Eird, ed., *The Use of the Old Testament in the New and Other Essays: Studies in Honor of William Franklin Sinespring* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1972), pp. 280–306.

² Alfred Suhl, *Die Funktion der alttestamentlichen Zitate und Auspielungen im Markusevangelium* (Gütersloh: Gard Mohr, 1965), denies the importance of 'fulfilment' for Mark, but ignores the importance of this opening quotation.

John the Baptist sending messengers to Jesus from prison, took the Exodus–Malachi quotation from that story and joined it to the words from Isaiah.

Both these explanations appear to envisage the evangelists poring over documents and piecing them together with scissors and paste. It seems more probable that both quotations were already being used in the pre-Markan tradition to refer to John, and came to the evangelists independently.³ All made use of a tradition quoting Isa. 40:3, while Matthew and Luke knew of a different story in which Jesus referred to Exodus–Malachi. Further evidence that Isa. 40:3 was an important one in the early Christian community⁴ is to be found in the fact that it is used also in the fourth gospel, where it is once again employed of John the Baptist (John 1:23).⁵ It may well have been Mark, then, who was responsible for bringing the two quotations together.⁶

Why did Mark attribute this 'mixed' quotation to Isaiah? Was it a mistake? Did he, that is, *assume* that both halves of the quotation must be from Isaiah? Or was it a 'deliberate' mistake? In other words, was Isaiah so important for him that it seemed necessary to establish straight away that the Good News about Jesus Christ was the fulfilment of what had been promised through Isaiah? This question can be answered only by examining the way in which he uses Isaiah, not only in this passage but elsewhere in his gospel.⁸ Before doing that, however, we must gauge its importance here.

First, we need to remember that the later chapters of Isaiah (generally known as 'Deutero-Isaiah' and 'Trito-Isaiah') make his book the obvious source for proclamations about God's eschatological salvation. Moreover, what Mark sets out to write is the 'Good News' or 'Gospel', and the noun he uses (εὐγγέλιον) is related to a verb that is used several times in the later chapters of Isaiah, where it is used of proclaiming the good news of God's rule.⁹ It has, to be sure, been pointed out that the noun itself is not used with this eschatological sense in the LXX, and attempts have therefore been made to derive Christian use of the term from the imperial cult, where the plural form is used

of 'good news' about the emperor. No doubt those living in the Roman Empire would have made that link, but the frequent use of the verb, which certainly has an Isaianic background, suggests that we should look for the origin of both terms in the LXX.¹⁰ The fact that Mark claimed that the beginning of the gospel was 'as it is written in the prophet Isaiah' suggests that he was well aware that the prophet had proclaimed 'good news'.

Secondly, it is worth noting *why* Mark needed to use the Exodus–Malachi quotation to introduce the lines from Isaiah. Matthew and Luke both begin their accounts of John's mission with a reference to him in the wilderness, and to the fact that he was preaching (Matt. 3:1; Luke 3:2–3): they then use the quotation from Isaiah to back this up. Mark, however, *begins* with scripture, and since he has not yet mentioned John, the first quotation, from Exodus–Malachi, serves to introduce him, and to explain who the 'voice crying in the wilderness' is. The quotation from Exodus–Malachi underlines the specific role of John: his whole purpose is to prepare the way of the one who follows him. By beginning in this way, rather than by introducing John by name, Mark ensures that his readers will immediately understand that John's only purpose is to point forward to the one who follows him. Not surprisingly, then, in contrast to Matthew and Luke (Matt. 3:7–10; Luke 3:7–14), John's message in Mark consists of three pithy statements which concentrate our attention on the one who is so much greater than he. The quotation from Isa. 40:3 is sandwiched between the words from Exodus–Malachi and the description of John vv. 4–6 which identifies him as a prophet – and in particular the prophet Elijah (2 Kgs 1:8), who was expected to return before the coming of the Lord (Mal. 4:5) – and so underlines the fact that the one for whom John has prepared the way is none other than 'the Lord':

a voice crying in the wilderness –
'Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight'.

In Isa. 40:3, 'the Lord' was, of course, God himself; the LXX (which Mark follows exactly, apart from substituting 'his' for 'our God' at the end) used the word κύριος here in place of the divine name. Mark, it would seem, has identified 'the Lord' of Isaiah 40 with Christ, for by the end of Mark 1:8 all eyes are focused expectantly on the one who comes after John, and in vv. 9–11 Jesus not only appears on the scene, but is addressed by the heavenly voice as God's beloved Son, and is revealed to Mark's readers as the one in whom God's holy Spirit is at work.

Although Isa. 40:3 is interpreted by Mark as being fulfilled in John the Baptist, therefore, its real significance – like that of John himself – is to point to the one who follows him, and to inform us that in Jesus the salvation promised

³ Comparison of Mark 1:1–13 with its parallels in the other gospels suggests that Matthew and Luke were not following Mark closely at this point but using another, parallel, tradition.
⁴ The use of the opening verses of Isaiah 40 in the New Testament is discussed by Klyne R. Snodgrass, 'Streams of Tradition Emerging from Isaiah 40:1–5 and their Adaptation in the New Testament', *JSTNT* 8 (1980), pp. 24–45.
⁵ It is possible, of course, that the author of the fourth gospel was here drawing on one of the Synoptics, rather than using an independent tradition.
⁶ An alternative explanation suggests that the first quotation was an early gloss copied into the text of Mark from Q 7:27. This solution is favoured by some commentators, e.g. V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1952), p. 153. There is, however, no textual evidence to support this suggestion.
⁷ See in particular Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (WUNT, 2nd series 88; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), pp. 88–90.
⁸ Recent discussions of this are to be found in Watts, *New Exodus*; and Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992).
⁹ See 40:9, 52:7, 60:6, 61:1.

¹⁰ For further discussion of this issue, see Watts, *New Exodus*, pp. 96–99.

in Isaiah has arrived. It is in the light of this text, therefore, that Mark wishes us to read his narrative.

Before we turn to the rest of Mark's gospel, however, we must consider what these introductory quotations tell us about the message of John. When he appears, in v. 4, he prepares the way of the Lord by proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It is noticeable that Mark, unlike Matthew and Luke, does not present John as a prophet of judgement: the Baptist's message is entirely positive, and indeed is echoed by Jesus himself in 1:15. God offers the forgiveness of sins to those who repent, and nothing is said in these introductory verses about the fate of those who refuse to do so. Nevertheless, the promised forgiveness requires repentance. The fact that Mark's account of the ministry of Jesus begins, in 1:14, with the words 'After John had been handed over', indicates straight away that not everyone has welcomed his proclamation, and that the coming of the Lord will inevitably mean judgement, as well as salvation.

Other Clear Quotations of Isaiah

The theme of repentance and forgiveness is echoed in the next clear quotation of scripture, in 4:12. This quotation, too, is from Isaiah, although this time Mark gives no hint of its source. It occurs in 4:12, in the brief comment about the purpose of parables which links the parable of the Sower (4:1-9) with its interpretation (4:13-20). Mark tells us here that before explaining the parable itself, Jesus told his disciples why he taught the people in parables. It was

in order that they may look and look, yet perceive nothing; that they may listen and listen, yet understand nothing. Otherwise they might turn and be forgiven.

The saying itself, together with the setting (a private explanation to Jesus' disciples), bears the hallmark of teaching emanating from the early Christian community. The quotation is from Isa. 6:9-10, though it is by no means exact, since the order of 'seeing' and 'hearing' has been reversed, and the first part of v. 10 has been omitted. Mark's version shows no clear dependence on either the Masoretic text or the LXX or the Targum. The introductory 'Iva suggests, however, that Mark intended his readers to understand these words as a quotation.¹¹

Although the quotation raises considerable theological difficulties, its meaning for Mark seems clear. Jesus taught in parables in order that his hearers should *not* understand and respond to his teaching. This harsh statement appears to clash with what Mark tells us elsewhere about Jesus' proclamation

of God's Kingdom. Indeed, in 4:33-34, he explains that Jesus taught the people 'the word, as they were able to hear it', and that he invariably used parables to do so. These parables were a challenge – one could respond to their message or ignore it – and the so-called 'parable of the Sower' is in fact a parable about parables. Sandwiched between the parable itself and its explanation, this quotation from Isaiah 6 offers an explanation as to why so much of the crop had failed – in other words, why so many of Jesus' fellow-Jews had failed to respond to his message. Since God was omnipotent, the fact that men and women were apparently unable to see and hear the offer of salvation must be part of his purpose. Just as the call of Isaiah was interpreted, after the event, as a call to *prevent* men and women responding to his message, so Jesus is depicted as preaching in parables in order to conceal his message. Mark 4:11-12 reflects the early Christian community's attempt to deal with a problem that left its mark elsewhere in the New Testament – above all in Romans 9-11. The same verses from Isaiah 6 are quoted in John 12:40 and Acts 28:26-27, which are concerned with the same problem.

Set as it is in a pivotal position in this collection of parables – which is Mark's first major section of Jesus' teaching – this quotation reminds us that seeing and hearing the Good News which Jesus is proclaiming and enacting is not enough; it needs to be perceived and understood. The salvation which the Lord brings must be grasped: those who have not turned again and repented do not receive the forgiveness promised by John, and so are not ready for the coming of the Lord announced in Isa. 40:3. Although the quotation's function is negative, however, the reference to 'turning' and to 'forgiveness' points to the fact that the *primary* purpose of the Lord's coming is to bring salvation.

The third clear quotation in Mark is once again from Isaiah, and this time it is introduced as a prophecy of Isaiah concerning the 'hypocrites' whom Jesus is here addressing (7:6-7). These are 'the Pharisees and some of the scribes, who have come from Jerusalem' (7:1) and who are criticizing him because of his disciples' failure to observe the traditions of the elders. The form of the text is closer to the LXX of Isa. 29:13 than to the Hebrew, which would be less appropriate here, since it is concerned solely with the contrast between worship with the heart and with the lips. Jesus' comment in vv. 9-13, which contrasts divine and human commandments, picks up the accusation in the final line of the LXX:¹²

This people honours me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me.
In vain they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.

¹² It is undoubtedly true, as Watts, *New Exodus*, pp. 216-18, has argued, that the religious authorities' concern with petty regulations was also interfering with their worship of God, which is the main theme of the Hebrew text of Isaiah. Nevertheless, the specific application of the passage in the Markan context – to the priority being given by the religious leaders to human tradition – requires the LXX version rather than the Hebrew.

¹¹ Although Matthew has a saying similar to Mark 4:12a (Matt. 13:13; cf. Luke 8:10), he follows it with a clear citation of Isa. 6:9-10. It seems that he recognized the allusion, but did not regard the words as a quotation. Matthew and Luke may well be using a 'Q' tradition at this point, rather than following Mark.

The quotation is not only introduced with the words 'as it is written', but is ascribed specifically to Isaiah, as in 1:2. This offers some support to the suggestion noted earlier that Isaiah was of particular importance to Mark. In contrast to that introductory quotation, however, what we have here (as in 4:12) is a saying which condemns God's people for their failure to respond to him: those who worship with their lips but not their hearts are not ready for the coming of the Lord. The words of Isaiah pronounce judgement on the religious leaders of Israel, who oppose the teaching and practice of Jesus. Isaiah announced the coming of the Lord (Mark 1:2-3), but he also announced that his people would fail to respond to him (4:12) or worship him wholeheartedly, because they were more concerned with their own teaching than with God's commandments (7:6-7). One of the inevitable results of the Lord's coming is judgement.

Mark 7:1-23 appears to be a collection of different sayings which have been brought together at some stage. The first few verses (1-5) describe the incident which provokes the Pharisees' criticism of the disciples, and vv. 6-8 provide Jesus' first response to that criticism, based on Isa. 29:13. The quotation is then echoed, rather clumsily, in v. 9, which introduces an example of the way in which the Pharisees 'abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition' (v. 8), using two more biblical quotations (vv. 9-13). The particular example seems to have no obvious relevance to the matter of hand-washing, and may well have originally been part of a different dispute. The relevance of Isa. 29:13 to the argument is brought out better by Matthew, who tells us that Jesus threw back the accusation brought by his opponents: he places Jesus' discussion of what 'Moses' said and what 'you' say before the Isaiah quotation, which he uses to effect as the punchline of the incident.

The specific example given of the way in which Jesus' critics abandon the commandment of God in favour of human tradition is the commandment to honour one's father and mother, given through Moses (Exod. 20:12 and 21:17). Jesus accuses them of allowing the commandment to be set aside by declaring goods to be 'corban', or dedicated to God by an oath. The human tradition can hardly be the refusal to break a vow, since the irrevocable nature of oaths is also a divine commandment (Num. 30:2; Deut. 23:21-23). It must therefore be the ruling that the vow takes precedence over one's duty to father and mother. Jesus' attitude is similar to the judgement expressed in the third century AD in the Mishnah (*Ned.* 9:1), where the honour due to father and mother is said to overrule all vows. The fact that this is spelt out in the Mishnah suggests that someone had at some stage argued the opposite, and that the dispute with the Jewish religious authorities described in Mark 7:1-13 – whether this involved Jesus himself or his later followers – was therefore a possible one.

Following this argument about the divine commandment and human tradition, Jesus is said to have summoned the crowd (Mark 7:14) in order to give a second, quite different, answer to the question regarding hand-washing. He

now declares that what enters the mouth does not defile, only what leaves it (v. 15), a saying that is then explained, privately, to the disciples (vv. 17-23). The saying in v. 15 seems a far more apposite response to the criticism levelled at the disciples than the sayings in vv. 6-8 and 9-13,¹⁵ and may well represent an earlier tradition.¹⁶ It is possible that vv. 6-13 have been inserted into the story at some stage. If Mark himself was responsible for the somewhat clumsy introduction of these verses here, it may have been because he thought the Isaiah quotation of particular importance, as showing, once again, that Israel's failure had been foreseen by the prophet. We have no way, however, of knowing whether or not Mark was responsible for introducing it here.

A brief quotation from Isaiah occurs in the description of Gehenna in Mark 9:48: it is the place where 'their worm never dies, and the fire never goes out'.¹⁵ The words are taken from the final verse of Isaiah, and are close to, but not identical with, the LXX. This time, the words are used as a warning to the disciples themselves, not as a comment about 'those outside' (4:11-12) or about Jesus' critics (7:6-7). Even Jesus' followers need to be on their guard lest they stumble and fall. Like the original words in Isaiah, this warning of possible destruction stands in stark contrast to the promise of reward, which is described in Mark in terms of entering into life (9:43, 45) or entering the Kingdom of God.

The next plain quotation of Isaiah occurs in 11:17, in the story of the so-called 'cleansing of the temple'. Whatever the nature of the original incident, it is clear that for Mark the event is part of Jesus' judgement on Israel for her failure to worship God aright. The words of Isa. 29:13 might well have been used appropriately here, but instead Mark quotes a positive text from Isa. 56:7 – 'my house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'. These words were originally part of God's promise regarding his temple, but in Jesus' mouth here they become a condemnation, because the temple is *not* a house of prayer for all the nations but – in the words of Jeremiah – has been made 'a robbers' den' (Jer. 7:11). The Greek, both of the quotation from Isaiah and of the phrase from Jeremiah, agrees exactly with the LXX, but since this provides an accurate translation of the Hebrew, we cannot be certain that Mark was using it.¹⁶

Debate about the meaning of this incident continues unabated: is it a 'cleansing' or a 'sign of future destruction'? The answer may well be that Jesus himself intended it to be the former, but that Mark, writing after the event, saw

¹⁵ Cf. also Luke 11:37-41, which links criticism of Jesus' failure to wash before eating with a saying about the 'outside' and the 'inside'.

¹⁶ See e.g. Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8* (AB; New York, etc.: Doubleday, 1999), pp. 447-48.

¹⁷ The description is found three times in some MSS (as vv. 44, 46 and 48), but the shorter version is almost certainly original.

¹⁸ A.E. Harvey's comment that the quotation cannot have been taken from the Hebrew *Jesus and the Constraints of History* (London: Duckworth, 1982), p. 132, is mistaken; he appears to have been looking at the wrong half of the Hebrew verse.

it as the latter.¹⁷ Certainly the setting he gives it suggests that he sees it as signifying judgement and destruction. He interweaves the story (11:11, 15–19) with that of the barren fig-tree (11:12–14, 20–24). The temple is first inspected, then condemned, because those to whom it was entrusted are robbers; the tree is inspected for fruit, then cursed, and is later discovered to have withered. Following this, we have a confrontation between Jesus and the religious authorities, who question him about his authority. In reply, Jesus questions them about the authority by which John baptized. It is obvious from this that readers are intended to understand that Jesus' ministry is closely related to that of John. Mark apparently expects us to think back to the first eight verses of his gospel, in which the baptism of John was shown to be the preparation for the one who followed him, and John himself was identified as the messenger of Exod. 23:20 and Mal. 3:1, who was also the voice crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'.

In view of this reference to the baptism of John, it is a source of surprise to all commentators that Mark failed to make any reference in chapter 11 to Mal. 3:1, since that verse announces that 'the Lord', whose way the messenger was sent to prepare, 'will suddenly come to his temple'. Jesus, the Lord (11:3), has now ridden into Jerusalem, has entered the temple, and has condemned, in God's name, what is happening in 'my house'. Perhaps Mark failed to recognize the importance of Mal. 3:1, having referred specifically only to Isaiah in 1:2; perhaps, in any case, that passage would have seemed irrelevant, since he appears to have assumed that Jesus came to the temple in judgement, and not to refine and purify (Mal. 3:2–4).

The theme of judgement is continued in the next two chapters of Mark's gospel. Chapter 12 represents the second block of teaching in Mark, and like chapter 4, its first and most memorable element is a parable about the produce of a crop. The parable of the Sower (4:1–9) pointed to the urgency of responding to the good news proclaimed by Jesus; the comment from Isaiah 6 in 4:12 offered some explanation of Israel's failure to understand. The parable of the vineyard in 12:1–12 contains clear echoes of the imagery of the vineyard in Isa. 5:1–2. Isaiah describes Israel as the Lord's vineyard, which, being planted on fertile ground, should have produced a splendid crop, but which produced only wild grapes. Some of Mark's vocabulary is close to that of the LXX: 'built a wall round it' (not in the Hebrew of Isa. 5:2, though v. 5 refers to both a wall and a hedge). The major difference between the two stories is that in Isaiah the vineyard itself fails to produce a good crop, and so is destroyed by its owner; the moral is spelled out in Isa. 5:3–7, where the Lord brings destruction on his people. In Jesus' story, however, the vineyard produces a crop, but the tenants refuse to hand any of it over to the landlord, and ill-treat his messengers. Finally, when they kill his only son, he comes in person, kills the tenants and

lets the vineyard out to others. Mark's final comment, in v. 12, indicates that he understands the parable to be directed against 'them' – i.e. the religious leaders who have been questioning Jesus at the end of chapter 11. It is the religious leaders, rather than the crowd, who here fall under divine judgement.

Once again, a scriptural quotation has been added to the story, either by Mark or by someone before him. This time it is taken from Psalm 118(LXX 117):22–23, and – remarkably – this injects a message of hope into the parable. The stone rejected by the builders will become a cornerstone. The quotation seems totally inappropriate here: the cornerstone of a building has nothing to do with a vineyard. It is so inappropriate, however, that its use must be deliberate. In fact, it is more relevant than we might suppose.

First, as we have already noted, the vineyard in Jesus' parable is not destroyed but handed over to new tenants. Although judgement descends on the previous tenants, the vineyard remains in the owner's possession. Israel's leaders will be punished, but Israel herself will be saved. However 'mixed' the metaphor may be, the rejected stone that is raised as a cornerstone illustrates the continuity in God's plan for his people.

Secondly, the reference to the cornerstone, like the reference to the beloved son who features in the parable, means that our attention is inevitably focused on the figure of Jesus. Christology is central to this parable, but it also dominates this entire section, from the moment that Jesus rides into Jerusalem like a king. The question regarding his authority to challenge what was happening in the temple (11:27–33), his teaching about the Messiah (12:35–37), and his warning about the coming of the Messiah/Son of Man in 13:21–31, all focus our attention on Jesus himself.

Thirdly, Mark has placed this block of teaching in the setting of the temple (11:27; 12:41; 13:1). Reference to the 'cornerstone' thus links the parable to Jesus' provocative action there. Even though Mark has interpreted that event as a sign of coming destruction – a theme which will be elaborated in chapter 13 – the hint here of a new building suggests that there is to be a 'new' temple which will fulfil the intention expressed in Isa. 56:7 of being 'a house of prayer for all the nations'. Further hints of this hope for the future are expressed in 12:28–34, in the story of the scribe who is 'not far from the Kingdom of God', in the account of the poor widow who throws everything she has into the temple treasury (12:41–43), and in Jesus' words about the fig-tree, apparently dead, which is in fact merely dormant, and bursts into leaf when summer approaches (13:28). Although the accusation that Jesus said that he would destroy the temple and raise another, not made with hands (14:58; 15:29), is said to be false, the fact that Mark uses it in his story of Jesus' trial and crucifixion, together with the account of the tearing of the temple veil in 15:38, suggests that he saw it as a distortion of Jesus' teaching about a judgement that would bring both destruction and restoration. Through him, therefore, Isa. 56:7 will, finally, be fulfilled.

This coming judgement is the theme of Mark's final quotation from Isaiah,

¹⁷ Cf. M.D. Hooker, 'Traditions about the Temple in the Sayings of Jesus', *BJRL* 70 (1988), pp. 7–19.

in 13:24-25. Here we have another composite citation, which begins with lines drawn from Isa. 13:10, a passage which announces the coming of the Day of the Lord. These lines are similar to the LXX translation, though they may be an independent translation of the Hebrew. The second part of the citation echoes phrases from the LXX version of Isa. 34:4, though there are similar passages elsewhere, e.g. Joel 2:10. Although these lines in Mark 13:24-25 are not introduced as a citation, they would clearly evoke memories of the prophetic threat of judgement among Mark's Jewish readers, together with those gentiles familiar with the Jewish scriptures.

These verses occur at the climax of the so-called 'Apocalyptic Discourse' in Mark 13, which is itself the conclusion to the section dealing with Jesus' arrival and activity in Jerusalem (chapters 11-12). Jesus here finally announces the coming judgement on Jerusalem: the temple will be destroyed, and its inhabitants will endure suffering and death. Before that happens, however, the Good News will be proclaimed among the nations, and his own followers will be persecuted: in other words, the pattern of Jesus' own ministry will be repeated, but on a worldwide scale. When the end finally comes, it will be heralded by the traditional signs accompanying the arrival of the Day of the Lord. Then the Son of Man will be seen, coming in clouds—a clear allusion to Dan. 7:13—and will gather his elect (13:26-27).¹⁸

In 1:1-3, Mark used the quotation from Isa. 40:3 to introduce 'the Good News about Jesus Christ'. We might have expected him to employ other 'positive' texts from Isaiah, such as 9:1-2 (used by Matthew in 4:15-16), 42:1-4 (used by Matthew in 12:18-21) or 61:1-2 (used by Luke in 4:18-19). In fact, 'the way of the Lord', which John prepared and which Jesus has walked, has proved to be the way of suffering and death for them both, even though it has brought forgiveness and health and salvation to others. Many of Jesus' fellow-Jews have been blind and deaf to his message, and the religious authorities have been implacably opposed to him. The quotations from Isaiah in chapters 4 and 7 were used by Mark to show that Israel's failure to respond to the Gospel was decreed in scripture; even in 11:17, the fact that God's purpose for the temple set out in Isa. 29:13 had been thwarted was apparently foreseen by Jeremiah. In 9:48, words from Isaiah were used in warning the disciples of the punishment that awaited those who failed to follow Jesus and to gain life thereby. Now, in chapter 13, this final quotation announces the coming judgement, which will inevitably mean destruction for all who are not acknowledged to be his own by the Son of Man. This consistently 'negative' use of Isaiah may seem surprising, but the coming of the Lord inevitably means judgement, and that can lead to punishment as well as to salvation.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the Old Testament texts which may lie behind Mark 13 see Lars Hartman, *Prophecy Interpreted: The Formation of Some Jewish Apocalyptic Texts and of the Eschatological Discourse Mark 13 Part* (ConBNT, series 1; Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1966).

Possible Allusions to Isaiah

Appendix 4 to the 27th edition of the Nestle-Aland edition of the *Novum Testamentum Graece* (1993), 'Loci citati vel allegati', lists a further eighteen places in Mark's gospel where there are possible allusions to Isaiah.¹⁹ This list is by no means complete, however, since we find that some possible allusions which are noted as occurring in Marcan passages are ignored in their Markan parallels. Thus Isa. 28:16 and 8:14 are listed as influencing Matt. 21:42, but there is no reference to Isaiah for the identical Mark 12:10, while for the equivalent verse in Luke (20:17), Isa. 28:16 is mentioned, but not Isa. 8:14! In fact, any reference to Isaiah here is superfluous, since all three gospels give an identical word-for-word quotation of Psalm 118(LXX 117):22.²⁰ Of greater significance is the fact that a more likely reference to Isa. 43:16 is ignored at Mark 6:48, though noted for Matt. 14:25.

It also has to be remembered that Nestle-Aland sometimes uses an exclamation mark to refer to parallel passages where important information is given in the margin. If we work through the text of Mark, we find that the editors have failed at 1:10 to warn us to turn to Matt. 3:16, which refers us to Isa. 11:2. In the following verse, however, an exclamation mark alerts us to turn from Mark 1:11 to Matt. 3:17, which refers us to Isa. 42:1 and 62:4. When we come to Mark 9:7, we are referred back to 1:11 and its parallels (and hence to Matt. 3:17 and the references to Isaiah). Similarly, Mark 14:36 indicates that we should turn back to 10:38 and its parallels, a verse which alerts us to Matt. 26:39 and its parallels (Mark 14:36!), and this in turn points us to Isa. 51:17-22. The same kind of detective work takes us from Mark 14:65 to 10:34, which refers us back to Isa. 50:6.

Other possible references are missed altogether by Nestle-Aland: it fails, for example, to give any reference to Isa. 64:1 (63:19 in Hebrew and LXX) for Mark 1:10 or its parallels in Matthew and Luke, though commentators frequently suggest that there is an echo of that verse in this passage.²¹

A number of the suggested allusions seem fanciful.²² Others seem to have more substance. Mark's description of a demoniac who lives among tombs near pigs (5:3, 11) is reminiscent of Isa. 65:4; the comment in 7:37 that Jesus 'makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak' may put us in mind of Isa. 35:5; Jesus' denunciation of those who oppress widows (12:40) echoes the charge of

¹⁹ These are: Mark 2:7; 3:21, 27; 4:30; 5:3; 7:37; 9:12; 10:34, 45; 12:1, 32, 40; 13:8, 31; 14:24, 49, 61; 15:27.

²⁰ The same is probably true of Mark 12:32, where Nestle-Aland suggests a quotation from Isa. 45:21. It is more likely, however, that it derives only from Deut. 6:4 and 4:35. Deut. 6:5 is quoted in the next verse.

²¹ The verb used by Mark for 'breaking open' (*oryzō*) is not the one used in the LXX. Matthew and Luke both use the verb used in the LXX (*thyroō*). Does Mark's version reflect the Hebrew? Were Matthew and Luke aware of the link? Or are the coincidences accidental?

²² Mark 2:7 (Isa. 43:25); 3:21 (Isa. 28:7); there is little, if any, verbal similarity in either case. Isa. 40:18 and Mark 4:30 are linked only by a question about whether or not one can make a comparison: in the former case the answer is 'No', while in the latter, this is then done.

Isa. 10:2, and his prediction of coming disaster in 13:8 reminds us of similar predictions in passages such as Isa. 19:2, 13:13 and 8:21; the comment that heaven and earth will pass away but Jesus' words endure (13:31) may well have been based on Isa. 51:6. The most convincing suggestion in the early chapters is the possible allusion to Isa. 49:24f. in Mark 3:27, for though there are no clear verbal allusions to the LXX, both passages describe taking prey from the strong.²³ The suggestion that Mark had that passage in mind is strengthened by the fact that Jesus' words here echo those of John the Baptist in 1:7, where he spoke of his successor as 'stronger' than himself; moreover, they appear to point back to Jesus' confrontation with Satan in the wilderness in 1:12-13. What is happening in Jesus' ministry, then, demonstrates the truth of what we were told in Mark 1:1-13 – that what is now taking place in him was written in the prophet Isaiah.

Another possible echo of Isaiah is found in the words of the heavenly voice in 1:11 – 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased' – and in the similar words used in the account of the Transfiguration (9:11). These words have frequently been traced to Isa. 42:1, where God declares:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights.

Although there are obvious similarities with that passage, however, there is no overlap whatever between Mark's Greek and the LXX. Not surprisingly, therefore, other passages (in particular, Gen. 22:2 and Ps. 2:7) have been suggested as possible backgrounds. Perhaps the strongest claim of Isa. 42:1 for consideration lies in the fact that the next line reads, 'I have put my spirit upon him'. The relevance to Mark 1:10 is plain.

The significance of this possible allusion to Isa. 42:1 was much distorted in the era when, having isolated the so-called 'Servant songs' in Isaiah (42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-9, 52:13-53:12), scholars assumed that there was a particular figure (present or future) known as 'the Servant of Yahweh', with whom Jesus was here being identified. In fact, God is said to have addressed various individuals as 'my Servant' in the Old Testament (e.g. Gen. 26:24; Exod. 14:31; 2 Sam. 3:18; Isa. 20:3). Moreover, Jesus is not addressed as 'Servant' in chapters 1 and 9, but as 'Son'; if any 'title' is being used, this is it. In the absence of linguistic links, there is little to indicate that Mark had Isa. 42:1 in mind. What we can say is that, since Mark understood the Gospel to be the fulfilment of what was written in the book of Isaiah, he may well have been familiar with Isaiah 42. Whether or not he (or anyone before him) thought this particular verse relevant is not clear, and certainly he was not quoting from it.

In all these cases, it is difficult to be certain as to whether possible allusions are deliberate. Those who shaped the tradition before Mark may or may not

have been aware of the biblical echoes it contained; Mark himself may or may not have been consciously using Isaiah's words; Mark's first readers may or may not have picked up allusions. What is certain is that subsequent readers, alerted by Mark's opening reference to Isaiah, would have read his gospel in the light of their knowledge of that book.

This may be the case with many of the references to Isaiah given in the margins of Nestle-Aland concerning passages which relate to Jesus' death. In 9:12f., Mark alerts us to the fact that what is about to happen 'is written about the Son of man' without indicating *where* it is written. The passage is notoriously difficult, because it refers also to the things written about the sufferings of the returning Elijah. Commentators have been unable to find an appropriate biblical reference for Elijah, but for the Son of man confidently refer to Isa. 53:3 (presumably through the idea of treating with contempt), even though there is no linguistic link with that verse.²⁴ Similarly, when Jesus is arrested in the garden, and is reported as saying 'Let the scriptures be fulfilled' (14:49), the margin refers us to Isa. 53:7 – though why this particular verse should have been singled out is not clear. In both cases, however, the editors seem to have assumed that if the scriptures are being invoked in connection with Jesus' death, then Isaiah 53 must have been in mind. A third reference to what is written, in 14:21, appears to have escaped the notice of the editors of Nestle-Aland. Many commentators, however, attribute this also to the influence of Isaiah 53, because of the use of the verb *παράδοσθαι*, usually translated here as 'betray', in vv. 18 and 21. The verb is used in the sense of 'to hand over' or 'to deliver up' in Isa. 53:6, 12.

We can be certain, from these general references, that Mark intended his readers to understand the sufferings of Jesus to be seen as the fulfilment of scripture. Yet he does not refer to Isaiah by name, and he uses no clear quotations from that book in either the Passion narrative or the predictions of Jesus' coming death and resurrection. The only quotations he uses in connection with the Passion are from Zech. 13:7 (Mark 14:27), Dan. 7:13 (Mark 14:62), and Ps. 22:1 (LXX 21:2) (Mark 15:34).

Once alerted to the idea that Jesus' suffering, death and vindication were the fulfilment of scripture, one becomes aware of words used by Mark which 'echo' words in Isaiah. The verb *παράδοσθαι*, just mentioned, is a good example. It is, nevertheless, the obvious verb for Mark to have used, especially as it can convey a *double entendre*: Jesus is 'handed over' to the authorities by Judas, but also by God himself. Mark 10:34 and 14:65 both refer to spitting, as does Isa. 50:6, but did Mark have that passage in mind?²⁵ Mark 10:38 and 14:36 speak of a cup that Jesus is reluctant to drink, and Isa. 51:17 refers to a

²³ The reference to the demonic's strength in 5:4 may also be suggestive, indicating Jesus' superior strength (see below, on 3:27).

²⁴ A more appropriate biblical passage is Ps. 22 (LXX 21):7, which is also listed by Nestle-Aland; this uses the same verb as Mark.

²⁵ See also 15:19, 14:65 is the closest to Isaiah, having three words in common with the LXX: *ἔκτισεν*, *πρόσωπον*, *παροργισαίν*.

cup of wrath: the image of drinking from a cup, however, is used elsewhere (e.g. Ps. 75:8). Mark 10:45 and 14:24 both refer to the benefits of Jesus' death 'for many', a word used in Isa. 53:11, where many are made righteous because of the sufferings of God's righteous one,²⁶ but the word is a common one. In Mark 14:61 Jesus is at first silent, reminding us of the image of a sheep silent before its shearers in Isa. 53:7,²⁷ but again, we cannot know whether Mark was thinking of that passage. The fact that Jesus was crucified between two robbers (Mark 15:27) was linked at an early date with the statement that 'he was numbered with the transgressors' in Isa. 53:12, as is demonstrated by the gloss in v. 28, but this does not mean that Mark himself necessarily realized how appropriate these words were for his narrative.²⁸

The passage, above all others, where the influence of Isaiah has been detected is Mark 10:45. Here, the reference to service, to a ransom, to the voluntary giving-up of one's life, and the use of the word 'many', have all been said to derive from Isa. 53:10–11. The word 'many', as we have already noted, is indeed used in Isa. 53:11, but there is no other linguistic echo of that passage. True, the LXX speaks of God's righteous one 'serving many', but the verb it uses is a different one from that used by Mark.²⁹ If we turn back to the Hebrew, that speaks, not of 'serving many', but of 'my Servant' – i.e. God's Servant – a title of great honour. The idea of a 'ransom' (ἀντίποινα) may well come from these later chapters of Isaiah, for the cognate verb (ἀντιπóω) is used of God's expected redemption of Israel (Isa. 43:1; 44:22–23; 52:3; 63:9), while Israel is to be set free without a ransom (ἀντίποινα) being paid (Isa. 45:13). God himself is described as 'Israel's Redeemer' (Isa. 41:14; 43:14; 44:24), and his people as 'the redeemed' (Isa. 35:9; 62:12). These passages reflect the belief that there would be a new Exodus, which would deliver Israel from exile, just as she had been delivered in the past from Egypt. The image of redemption is particularly appropriate for rescuing a people in bondage, since it reflects the practice of paying a ransom in exchange for someone or something, especially a slave.³⁰ This redemption of his people is now to be fulfilled, according to Mark 10:45, by the Son of Man surrendering his own life as a 'ransom'. Isa. 53:10–11, however, contains a different idea. This passage speaks of God's Servant being made a 'guilt offering', which involved making restitution to the injured party and offering a sacrifice as a means of expiation. This is a very different image, and it is taken over in the LXX version, which translates that term by the phrase 'for sin'. Once again, readers of Mark's gospel in a modern

translation who know Isaiah 53 may well think the relevance of the passage is clear; there is little evidence, however, to show that Mark himself saw the connection with that particular passage.³¹

Conclusion

If we look at the overall pattern of citations in Mark's gospel, it would seem significant that more of these are drawn from Isaiah than from any other book.³² This is in keeping with Mark's opening claim that the Good News is the fulfilment of what was written in the prophet Isaiah. Apart from these, there may also be allusions to images and expectations found in Isaiah at various points in Mark's narrative,³³ though there can be no certainty that these were indeed drawn from that book, either by Mark or by his sources, and there is little sign that he was quoting from the LXX.

It is important to remember, however, that Mark was a man of his own age. We should not imagine him doing what we might do – thumbing through the pages of Isaiah, checking references, or even finding relevant passages with the aid of a computer! 'Looking things up' in a scroll was not simple. Certain passages of Isaiah may well have been familiar to him (perhaps because they had already been incorporated into the tradition), but he would not have known Isaiah by heart. Some phrases may already have become part of Christian vocabulary, without Mark being aware of their source. Which of us knows that 'the apple of his eye' is used in Deut. 32:10, or that Shakespeare's statement that 'We are such stuff as dreams are made on' is found in *The Tempest* Act IV Scene 1 (or, indeed, can quote it accurately)? Scholars often echo ideas they have picked up from others, often totally unaware that they are 'recycling' something that they have heard or read. In the same way, some of Mark's debt to Isaiah may well be unconscious. We should not exclude the possibility that he owes more to the prophet than appears on the surface – but neither should we assume that he was aware of many of the links with Isaiah which have been suggested subsequently. Readers of Mark may well discover that the story he tells is one that is 'as written in Isaiah the prophet' in more ways than Mark himself ever imagined.

²⁶ Mark uses the same Greek word, πολλῶν, as the LXX of Isa. 53:11. The verb ἐκγυνώσκω, 'poured out', has also sometimes been traced to the Hebrew verb used in Isa. 53:12. See also Mark 15:5.

²⁷ Others have found still more allusions to Isaiah 53 in the Passion narrative. See, e.g., Douglas J. Moo, *The Old Testament in the Gospel Passion Narratives* (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1983).

²⁸ Mark uses δίκαιον; the LXX, δίκαιοι.

²⁹ E.g. Exod. 30:12; Lev. 25:24–26, 51; Isa. 45:13.

³¹ On Mark 10:45, see M.D. Hooker, *Jesus and the Sonnet* (London: SPCK, 1959), pp. 74–79; C.K. Barrett, 'The Background of Mark 10:45', in *New Testament Essays: Studies in Memory of Thomas Walter Manson*, ed. A.J.B. Higgins (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), pp. 1–18. W. Grimm, *Wiel in die liede: Die Verknigting Jesu und Deutungsjesaja* (ANT 1; Frankfurt am Main and Bern: Peter Lang, 1976), pp. 231–65, has argued that Mark 10:45 owes more to Isa. 43:3f. than to Isaiah 53.

³² There are, to be sure, a similar number of appeals to 'Moses'. In the Passion narrative, echoes and quotations from the Psalms predominate.

³³ It has been possible here to mention only those that have been most frequently suggested.