

**A COMMENTARY ON
THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST MARK**

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I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you;
I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give you a
heart of flesh instead.

I shall put my spirit within you, and make you keep my laws and
sincerely respect my ordinances.'

Another interesting parallel is found in the Qumran literature (in 1QS 4.20f.), where we are told that God will cleanse mankind and root out the spirit of falsehood. 'He will cleanse him of all wicked deeds with the spirit of holiness; like purifying waters He will shed on him the spirit of truth, to cleanse him of all abomination and falsehood. And he shall be plunged into the spirit of purification that he may instruct the upright in the knowledge of the Most High. . . .' We have here, also, in the reference to being plunged into the spirit of purification, an idea similar to that of being baptized with the Holy Spirit. There is thus evidence in Judaism, not simply for the eschatological hope of the Spirit, but for linking the Spirit with the themes of purification and judgement, as well as of renewal. It is easy to see how the twin themes of water and spirit could be used either as parallels (as in 1QS 4), or to express the ideas of preparation followed by renewal (as in Ezek. 36). John may well have seen his own role as a cleansing which prepared men and women for the coming renewal by the Spirit. In common with the other evangelists, Mark sees the significance of John the Baptist solely in terms of his witness to Jesus. But he appears to have been an important figure in his own right. Like Jesus, he had a group of disciples (2.18; 6.29; Matt. 11.2ff./Luke 7.18ff.; John 3.25). It has even been argued that Jesus himself began his ministry as one of them. There is evidence of a continuing Baptist sect in Acts 19.1-5. The Gnostic sect of Mandaeans (still in existence) claims to go back to John but in fact is probably post-Christian in origin.

For further discussion, see: G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, pp. 1-44; W.F. Flemington, *The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism*, pp. 3-24; A. Oepke in *T.D.N.T.*, I, pp. 529-46; H.H. Rowley, in *New Testament Essays*, ed. A.J.B. Higgins, pp. 218-29; C.H.H. Scobie, *John the Baptist*.

2 THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

1.9-11

(Matt. 3.13-17; Luke 3.21-2)

(9) It was at this time that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. (10) And straight away, as he came up out of the water, he saw the heavens breaking open, and the Spirit coming down on him like a dove. (11) And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.'

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It is natural for modern readers of the gospel to interpret this event as a great spiritual experience in the life of Jesus, and to seek in it information regarding his 'messianic consciousness'. Although his baptism must certainly have been a significant experience, however, it is idle to look to Mark for answers to speculations as to whether the incident was in the nature of a call, or a confirmation of a vocation already accepted, or for information regarding the precise way in which Jesus understood the role laid upon him. Mark's purpose is not to write a spiritual biography, but to present a christological statement. Even though the story may well go back to Jesus himself, it is told now from the viewpoint of one who sees Jesus through the eyes of faith and knows him to be the Son of God, in whom God's Spirit is at work; if the story was once told in an earlier form, it has been overlaid by interpretation. This is not to deny the historicity of the event, nor the reality of the experience, but merely to recognize that the story of the baptism is related here only in order to demonstrate the truth about Jesus as Mark understands it. The story provides a setting for the revelation of Jesus' identity, spelt out in terms of the descent of the Spirit and the words addressed to Jesus from heaven.

Mark is apparently unembarrassed by the problems raised by this story which troubled later writers. Matthew's description of John's hesitation regarding the propriety of baptizing Jesus (Matt. 3.14f.) and even more the account in *The Gospel according to the Hebrews*, which stresses the sinlessness of Jesus, both demonstrate the difficulties which were felt regarding Jesus' submission to baptism at the hands of an inferior, a baptism described by Mark as intended for the forgiveness of sins. The same difficulties may explain why Luke does not emphasize the baptism of Jesus, and why the fourth gospel does not mention it at all. Mark does not seem to feel these difficulties, though a comparison with v.5 indicates a difference between the baptism of Jesus and that of those who came confessing their sins. The problems perhaps arise from a misunderstanding of Mark's narrative, together with an emphasis on the negative aspect of repentance. It is unnecessary, and indeed unwarranted, to explain the baptism of Jesus, as some modern commentators have done, as a vicarious act of repentance, or an identification with sinners. If John's baptism was intended to be the preparation for the New Age, this act of committal that they were ready for his coming, then it was natural for Jesus to associate himself with this movement, and to join those who by baptism showed that they looked for the coming Kingdom of God.

The words addressed to Jesus are spoken from heaven, and Mark therefore unquestionably intends them to be accepted as true. Although we may have doubts about how Mark regards some of the

other declarations of Jesus' identity later in the gospel (since they are found in the mouths of those who cannot fully comprehend what is happening, 3.11; 5.7), there can be no such hesitation here. If the term 'Son' occurs rarely in the rest of the gospel, this is because men and women cannot comprehend the truth, not because it is unimportant for Mark himself. The words are repeated in 9.7, in the story of the transfiguration, and in the ensuing conversation that scene is specifically linked with Jesus' death and resurrection; they are echoed in 15.39, when the centurion declares him to be God's son at the moment of his death. Jesus' identity as Son is also hinted at in 12.1-11, where the 'only son' is put to death. Jesus' sonship is thus linked in Mark's understanding with the crucifixion, and paradoxically revealed through it. Moreover, there is good reason to link the scene of Jesus' baptism with his death – not, as has often been done, via an imagined link with Isaiah 53 (see below, on v.11), but because the imagery of baptism is linked with death. This imagery is specifically used in 10.38, where Jesus speaks of suffering and death in terms of a baptism. The rite of baptism was an obvious symbol for death and resurrection, and one wonders whether the Markan community knew the kind of teaching about Christian baptism as a baptism into Christ's death which Paul expounds in Romans 6. Certainly it seems likely that when Mark related the story of the divine proclamation of Jesus' identity as Son within the setting of the baptism, he would have seen the link with the moment at the end of his life when that truth was proclaimed by his executioner (15.39).

Since Mark has already reminded his readers of their own 'baptism with Holy Spirit' in v.8, they might well remember their own experience as they read this account of Jesus' baptism.

The introductory phrase, translated **it was at this time** (καὶ 9 ἐγένετο ἐν ἐκείναις ταῖς ἡμέραις), uses Old Testament phraseology (e.g. Judg. 19.1; 1 Sam. 28.1). It serves to link the narrative that follows to the preceding description of John's baptism, and so to underline the fact that Jesus is the fulfilment of the expectation aroused by John. We are told nothing at all about Jesus' background (at the human level), except that he **came to John from Nazareth**. **Jesus was baptized in the Jordan by John**: as we have already noted, there is no hint in Mark's narrative that John recognized Jesus as the one whose coming he had proclaimed.

For the first time we meet one of Mark's favourite words (εὐθύς), 10 which we have normally translated **straight away**. The frequent use of this term gives a sense of urgency to the narrative, though, because it is used so often, it has a weakened sense and often means little more than 'so next'. According to Mark, it was Jesus who **saw** the events described in v.10, and presumably it was he alone who heard the words spoken in v.11, since they are addressed to him; the word-

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ing in Matthew and Luke suggests a wider audience, and according to the fourth gospel, John the Baptist saw and announced the descent of the Spirit – evidence that the idea was gaining ground that Jesus' status had been clear from the beginning of the ministry. But seeing and hearing are in Mark's gospel ways of comprehending the truth, and what he sets out here is the truth about Jesus, which cannot yet be grasped by anyone except Jesus himself.

The breaking open of the heavens was an obvious image for revelation at a time when God was believed to dwell in the top storey of a three-decker universe. Perhaps more significant, however, is its use in Isa. 64.1 in an appeal to God to come down and save his people. Certainly the idea of a new activity of God on earth is conveyed here by the descent of the Spirit, for in Jewish thought the Spirit of God represents his creative activity (cf. Gen. 1.2). In the Old Testament, the Spirit is described as resting on a variety of men – especially leaders, prophets and kings – giving them the power which they need for their different tasks. It was an obvious step to assume that the Spirit would also be given to any future 'Messiah'; so, for example, Ps. Sol. 17.37, describing the future king: 'For God made him mighty by means of his Holy Spirit, and wise by means of the counsel of understanding, with strength and righteousness.'

It is not clear what Mark means by the statement that Jesus saw the Spirit coming down. . . like a dove. Luke's understanding of the scene was that the Spirit came down 'in bodily form, as a dove' (Luke 3.22), but it is possible that Mark is thinking of the manner in which the Spirit descended, rather than the shape (so L.E. Keck, *N.T.S.*, 17, 1970, pp. 41–67). Whether or not the dove is a significant symbol is also uncertain: in rabbinic literature the dove is sometimes used to symbolize Israel, but this fact does not seem to be relevant here. In a few passages, however, it is mentioned in connection with the Spirit: e.g. the Targum to the Song of Solomon 2.12 equates the voice of the turtle-dove with the voice of the Holy Spirit, and a comment in the Babylonian Talmud refers to Gen. 1.2 in this way: 'And the Spirit of God was brooding on the face of the waters like a dove which broods over her young but does not touch them' (B. Hagiga 15a). These passages are late, but they lend support to the suggestion that in first-century Judaism the dove was already associated with the Spirit of God.

- 11 The voice. . . from heaven is usually explained in terms of the *bat qôl*. This Hebrew term, which means literally 'daughter of a voice', was used by the rabbis to denote the echo of a voice uttered in heaven. When the Spirit had withdrawn from Israel, and there were no more prophets, then, so it was said, the *bat qôl* was occasionally heard. The *bat qôl* was thus a means of revelation to men, a substitute for the direct word of God which had formerly been given by the Spirit. It

might be significant that its sound was at times compared to the cry of a bird (see Midrash Rab. Eccles. 12.7), and once to the moaning of a dove (B. Berakoth 3a). Even if this idea of the *bat qôl* were known to Mark, however, it seems unlikely that it could have been of any significance for his understanding of this event. For the *bat qôl* was essentially inferior – a substitute for the direct gift of God's Spirit – and Mark certainly had no intention of suggesting that Jesus was the recipient of anything inferior. There is, indeed, no need for a substitute, since Jesus has already been given the Spirit; the voice from heaven is no mere echo, but the direct word of God himself.

The words spoken from heaven are commonly traced to a combination of phrases from Ps. 2.7 and Isa. 42.1. The statement that '**You are my . . . son**' is certainly reminiscent of Ps. 2.7 and was evidently considered to be a quotation from that passage by some early Christians, since the 'western' text of the parallel account in Luke 3.22 continues by quoting the rest of the verse. The link with Isa. 42.1 is far more dubious, since none of the words used by Mark appears in the LXX version of that verse. It is misleading to try to press the words into either quotation, however, since they are reminiscent of other Old Testament passages also. The idea of an individual as God's son is not a common one in Jewish thought. Occasionally – as in Pss. 2.7 and 89.27 – the idea that the king is 'adopted' as God's son appears; in the book of Wisdom we find the idea that the righteous man is the 'child' of God (2.13-18; 5.5). The king is the representative of his nation, while the righteous man fulfils God's calling for the nation, and these passages reflect the more fundamental understanding of the whole nation as God's son which was one way in which the relationship between Yahweh and his chosen people was seen (see Exod. 4.22f.; Deut. 1.31; Hos. 11.1). It is certainly significant that Jesus is addressed in terms used in the Old Testament of the relationship which should exist between Israel and God – in other words, precisely the relationship to which John the Baptist is calling the people through repentance and baptism: Jesus is here revealed as the one man in whom that role of Israel's sonship is realized.

The term **beloved** (ἀγαπητός) is traced by most commentators to Isa. 42.1, although none of the Greek versions of the Old Testament which have come down to us uses it here (or elsewhere) to translate the Hebrew *bāḥîr*, which means 'chosen'; it is, however, used in the very different translation of part of Isa. 42 given in Matt. 12.18-21. More significant, however, is the fact that on the majority of occasions when it occurs in the Greek Old Testament, it is used (with or without a noun) to refer to an only child; it is, for example, used several times of Abraham's only son Isaac. Its position after *υἱός* in both Mark 1.11 and 9.7 suggests that we should perhaps take the two words together, and translate them as 'my only son' (so C.H. Turner,

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J.T.S., 27, 1926, pp. 113–129). The phrase thus denotes Jesus' unique status. The final words, **with you I am well pleased**, echo a phrase used in the Old Testament of God's delight in his people Israel (e.g. Ps. 44.5 [LXX 43.4]; 149.4; Isa. 62.4; the Greek of Isa. 42.1 is once again a less exact parallel) and suggests the obedient response of Jesus to the divine will which causes God to delight in him.

There is an interesting parallel to this story in *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. Although it has sometimes been argued that this is a Christian work, it now seems to be agreed that the basis of the book is Jewish, and that this has been reworked by Christian redactors. Since the passage in Test. Levi 18 may be a Christian addition, we cannot regard it as providing Jewish 'background' material to Mark's story; whether it is indeed Jewish, or a Christian exposition of the story of Jesus' baptism, however, it is worth noting that the voice from heaven in that passage is described as 'the Father's voice as from Abraham to Isaac'.

The words spoken to Jesus from heaven have sometimes been interpreted as an 'adoption formula' – that is, as an indication that at this point he was 'made' Son of God, as is the king in Psalm 2. Even if Mark had Ps. 2.7 in mind, however, there is no reason to suppose that he thought of the words in this way; it is far more likely that he interpreted them simply as a declaration of Jesus' identity. Certainly Matthew and Luke do not seem to have understood the words as an adoption formula, for they see no difficulty in using them after their own birth narratives – something especially striking if we accept the 'western' text of Luke 3.22 ('today I have begotten you'). Moreover, the repetition of the words in Mark 9.7 shows clearly that he regards them as a declaration and not as an adoption. Nor is there any basis for the common assumption that Jesus is here shown as accepting the mission of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. 53. Even if we accept the tenuous link with Isa. 42.1, there is no hint whatever in Mark 1.11 of the later passage from that book, and no reason to suppose that Mark saw any connection between them.

3 THE BATTLE WITH SATAN

1.12–13

(Matt. 4.1–11; Luke 4.1–13)

(12) And straight away the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness. (13) And he was in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was among the wild beasts, and angels looked after him.

The account Mark gives of the temptation is so brief as to be enigmatic. Unlike Matthew and Luke, he does not record the content of the temptations encountered by Jesus but concentrates on the confrontation between Jesus and Satan. There is nothing here to suggest that Mark thought of this as the period when Jesus deliberated about what kind of a Messiah he was to be. Neither is there any sign – whatever later interpreters and preachers may have done with his account – that Mark's purpose is to portray Jesus' spiritual pilgrimage, passing through a psychological trough after the peak of his experience at the baptism. Nor is it primarily his intention to depict Jesus as one whose example of steadfastness in temptation must be imitated by his followers and by the readers of the gospel. For this is no ordinary temptation, but the temptation – or testing – of the Son of God. Just as the account of the baptism is a theological statement about Jesus, so too is the story of the temptation; it provides us with vital information about Jesus which will enable us to understand the narratives which follow.

The narrative is linked with that of the baptism of Jesus with another use of Mark's characteristic phrase **straight away** (καὶ εὐθύς). In the encounter between Jesus and Satan, the initiative is taken by **the Spirit** who drives Jesus **into the wilderness**. The verb translated **drove out** (ἐκβάλλω) is a forceful one and, even though it is said to have lost something of its force in Hellenistic Greek, it retains to some extent its sense of compulsion: it is, for example, used repeatedly by Mark of the expulsion of demons; neither Matthew nor Luke uses it here. The fact that Jesus now enters the wilderness indicates (as we would expect) that the Jordan is not located in the wilderness, in spite of vv.4f.

Jesus is said to have remained **in the wilderness for forty days**. There are many possible interpretations of the period of forty days. Some have understood them as representing the forty years which Israel – God's son – spent in the wilderness while being tested by God. The allusion is however somewhat obscure, since forty days and forty years are by no means the same thing – though see Num. 14.34 and Ezek. 4.5f.; moreover, the testing in Jesus' case is hostile, even though he is in the wilderness at the instigation of the Spirit. There is much more to be said for this interpretation in Matthew and Luke, where Jesus' words are taken from the story of Israel's wilderness wanderings in Deuteronomy (see B. Gerhardsson, *The Testing of God's Son*, pp. 42f.). Another explanation links the forty days in the wilderness with the forty days spent by Moses on Sinai (Exod. 34.28) and the similar period spent by Elijah in travelling to Horeb (I Kgs. 19.8); but both men went to meet with God, not Satan, and the only connection between their stories and that of Jesus' temptation is that Moses and Elijah fasted during the forty days – and, of course, Mark

makes no reference to Jesus fasting. If we wish to discover Mark's own interpretation of the story, we must not read details from Matthew and Luke into his account. Mark may not have thought of Jesus as being without food in the wilderness; certainly he suggests that John found enough food to sustain him there. It is perhaps best, then, to understand the forty days as the conventional biblical round number, indicating a long period.

Satan (the Greek Σατανας is a transliteration of the Aramaic *sātānā*) first appears in Jewish thought in Job 1–2, where he is simply *haśśāṭān*, the accuser, one of the servants of God, but in later literature he develops into an evil power, the opponent of God, seeking to destroy the relationship between God and man. Although the verb πειράζω means basically 'to test' or 'to attempt', there is no doubt that in the present context it means 'to tempt' in an evil sense. The information that Jesus was **among the wild beasts** is another feature that is open to various interpretations. It has been seen as an indication of the loneliness of the wilderness, but this seems unlikely in view of the presence of the angels. Certainly the presence of wild beasts can be seen as a sign of desolation and of danger (cf. Isa. 13.21f.; Ps. 22.12–21); they came to be used as symbols of Israel's enemies (Ezek. 34.5,8; Dan. 7.1–8). Demons were thought to live in the wilderness (e.g. Deut. 32.17; Isa. 34.14), and it was a short step to the identification of the demons with wild beasts. Thus we find the hope of a future defeat of demons linked with the idea of the subjection of wild beasts in Test. Issach. 7.7:

'Every spirit of Beliar shall flee from you,
And no deed of wicked men shall rule over you;
And every wild beast shall ye subdue.'

Similarly, in Test. Benj. 5.2 we read: 'If ye do well, even the unclean spirits will flee from you, and the beasts will dread you.' The subjugation of wild beasts and demons became part of the hope for 'Paradise restored' – the renewal of creation which included the dominion of man over the animals that had been enjoyed by Adam before he succumbed to temptation (cf. Isa. 11.6–9). It is possible, therefore, that Mark understands the scene as the reversal of Genesis 3: unlike Adam, Jesus resists temptation, and nature's harmony is restored (cf. Paul's use of this idea in Rom. 8). If so, however, it is remarkable that Mark says nothing about Jesus' victory; he simply tells us that Jesus was **among** the animals, and we should therefore be wary of reading too much into this verse.

The function of the **angels** is equally enigmatic. In Matthew they appear after Satan has departed, and presumably he understood them to be bringing Jesus food at the end of his forty-day fast. It is pos-

sible that Mark interpreted their presence in a similar way; if so, however, he perhaps assumed that they **looked after** Jesus throughout the period of forty days, much as Elijah was supplied with food in 1 Kings 19 (the verb *δοξαζέω* means 'to serve' or 'to wait on'). It may be that Mark has not worked out the nature of their service, however: the angels are there to support Jesus in his conflict with Satan, just as the wild beasts oppose him. Ps. 91.11-13 couples service by the angels with a promise that lions and serpents will be trampled underfoot, and there is an interesting parallel in Test. Naph. 8.4:

'The devil shall flee from you,
and the wild beasts shall fear you,
and the Lord shall love you,
and the angels shall cleave to you.'

One remarkable feature of Mark's account of the temptation is that it ends without any indication as to the outcome. It is possible that he regarded this as so obvious that it was unnecessary to spell it out, but his failure to do so has left commentators arguing about how he understood the relationship between this scene and the rest of Jesus' ministry. Some (e.g. James Robinson, Kallas, Mauser) have understood the temptation as initiating Jesus' struggle with evil, and have seen the later exorcisms, Jesus' struggle with obtuse and antagonistic men and the passion itself, as part of a continuous conflict between Jesus and Satan. Others (e.g. Best, Barrett) have seen the temptation conflict as decisive and have likened the later exorcisms to 'mopping-up' operations. But perhaps this distinction is unreal. If we are right in understanding these events as part of Mark's dramatic statement of the truth about Jesus, then the conquest of Satan by Jesus which takes place throughout his healing ministry is at this point proclaimed in another mode; the idea that the truth about how things are can be brought into focus and expressed in a dramatic act lies at the heart of a great deal of Old Testament ritual, and Mark's readers may not have been so puzzled by the representation of truth on two levels as we sometimes are today. The picture of the Son of God doing battle with Satan in the wilderness is the key which will enable us to understand Jesus' authority over unclean spirits: the stronger one has confronted the prince of demons, and is plundering his house (Mark 3.22-7).

Before leaving Mark's prologue, we should note that the three short paragraphs in vv.2-13 are linked together by the occurrence of a reference to the Spirit in all three of them – in vv.8, 10 and 12. In view of the paucity of references to the Spirit in Mark, this is a noteworthy feature. They are also linked by the setting of all three narratives in the wilderness. Both these themes point to the fact that Mark is writ-

ing of a time of fulfilment.

We are now in possession of the information which Mark considers we need to know in order to understand the rest of his narrative. The ministry of John has shown that we can expect the coming of the Lord; the voice from heaven has identified Jesus as the beloved Son of God; the temptation has meant the defeat of Satan. These themes will be worked out in the following chapters: but from now on they will not often be stated so clearly. It is part of Mark's understanding of the 'messianic secret' that the titles and powers which are here attributed to Jesus will be hidden during his ministry; they can be grasped only by those who have faith in him as God's Son, but this is something which men and women experience fully only through his death and resurrection.

B Authority at work: success and opposition in Galilee

1.14-3.6

Mark begins his account of the ministry of Jesus with a series of incidents which demonstrate the authority of Jesus and the response of men and women to his words and actions. Whether deliberately or not, he has included in the next few pages material that is typical of the whole ministry. Jesus proclaims the gospel, teaches and heals with authority, calls men to follow him as disciples, and offers health and salvation to outcasts of all kinds including a leper, a paralytic and 'sinners'. The reaction to Jesus is immediate: on the one hand, the crowds marvel at his authority and flock to hear and see him; on the other, the religious authorities are offended by his actions – which are in their eyes at the very least inconsistent with true piety, and at worst contrary to the Torah – and are already plotting to destroy him (3.6). The disciples, at this stage, hardly emerge as a distinct group; they are simply those who accompany Jesus, having responded to his call.

In presenting his material in this way, Mark impresses us with the authority of Jesus: here is a man who astonishes his hearers with his teaching (1.22), who possesses the power to subdue evil spirits (1.24) and to forgive sins (2.10). Yet he is not one of the scribes, the official religious teachers in Israel, and what he proclaims is something essentially new (1.15, 27; 2.21f.), which challenges the scribes' understanding of the Torah (2.6-10, 23-8; 3.1-6). Moreover, Jesus does not belong to the 'religious' party of Judaism, the Pharisees: his attitudes are in many ways totally contrary to theirs, for he does not teach his disciples to fast (2.18), or observe the traditions which had

grown up to ensure that the Torah is kept (2.23–8; 3.1–6); he mixes with those whom the Pharisees regard as sinners (2.15–17), and even invites a tax-collector (an outcast from Jewish society) to join his band of disciples (2.13f.). Here is a religious teacher, healer and leader who comes from outside the system, apparently without credentials, and yet preaches with tremendous effect. It is hardly surprising if ordinary people ask one another ‘What is this?’ (1.27), or if the religious authorities are resentful and indignant.

1 JESUS PROCLAIMS THE GOOD NEWS 1.14–15

(Matt. 4.12–17; Luke 4.14–15)

(14) After John had been handed over, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the good news from God (15) and saying: ‘The time has come, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the good news.’

The story begins with a summary of Jesus’ preaching. Jesus himself must have spelt out his message at much greater length than this, which means that this succinct account may be either Mark’s own summary of what Jesus had taught, or one that had been handed down to him. **The good news** proclaimed by Jesus centred on **the Kingdom of God**, and this theme reappears in his teaching later in the gospel. But the call to **repent and believe** reminds us of the preaching of the Church (cf. Acts 2.38; 3.19; 15.7), and is addressed to all who hear or read it. The message is the good news proclaimed by Mark to his readers (cf. 1.1), as well as the good news proclaimed by Jesus in Galilee, and the words may well reflect the language of Mark, rather than the language of Jesus. This means that when we ask questions about the precise meaning of particular words, such as the verb here translated **is at hand** (ἤγγικεν), we are asking questions about Mark’s use of language, and his understanding as to whether Jesus announced the Kingdom as present or imminent, rather than about Jesus’ own words.

According to Mark, the ministry of Jesus begins **after John had been handed over**. These introductory words are far more than an indication of date. There is, indeed, some doubt as to whether John was in fact imprisoned so soon, since according to John 3.22–30 the ministries of John and Jesus overlapped. The significance of Mark’s words lies rather in his belief that the work of the forerunner is now complete, and the work of Jesus can therefore begin. The word translated ‘handed over’ can be used as a technical term for delivering up a

prisoner, but its choice here suggests that Mark is thinking of John being handed over by God into the power of men. The verb (παράδιδωμι) is used several times by Mark in the predictions of the passion to refer to the handing over of Jesus, and often seems to imply that God himself is responsible for this handing over: its use here, at the very beginning of the gospel, is an early pointer to the fact that John is the forerunner of Jesus in death as well as in life, a theme that will be taken up later in the gospel (see 6.17–29 and 9.13).

Jesus' ministry is set in **Galilee** – a region which was perhaps as strange a setting for messianic activity as the wilderness was appropriate. Unlike John the Baptist, Jesus does not withdraw from society for a ministry in the wilderness; nor, according to Mark, does he as yet proclaim his message in Jerusalem, the centre of Judaism, or even in Judaea; instead, he travels around semi-pagan Galilee, and preaches there.

15 In contrast to John, who proclaimed a baptism of repentance, Jesus comes **proclaiming** (κηρύσσων) **the good news from God**. Once again we have the word εὐαγγέλιον, echoing the introduction in 1.1: Jesus himself proclaims the 'good news' or 'gospel', but this time the genitive (τοῦ θεοῦ) has been understood in our translation as a subjective genitive meaning 'from God' rather than as objective ('about God'). This good news is that **the time has come**. The word translated 'time' (καιρός) denotes a particular, significant point in time. It is the time of salvation (and of judgement) appointed by God which has at long last arrived (Dan. 12.4,9). Throughout the Old Testament and in intertestamental literature there are many references to a coming time: there is no unified expectation, and the hope varies according to circumstances, but in different ways writers look forward to a future period of salvation. Yet the reality never arrived; however near the promised time might come, it was never grasped. But now Jesus announces that it is fulfilled, here at last. Here, in this proclamation of the good news, we already have the fulfilment of John's expectations, but in contrast to what we might have expected from John's declaration about his successor, Jesus says nothing at all about himself or his own position. He speaks instead of **the Kingdom of God** (see additional note on pp. 55–8). The message of Jesus, as Mark understands it, is that this Kingdom **is at hand**. The verb ἐγγίζω means 'to draw near', and is therefore generally understood here as referring to the close approach of the Kingdom. C.H. Dodd, however, maintained that the verb can mean 'to arrive' and understood it in that sense here (see Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, pp. 4f.). This interpretation, which was based on an examination of the use of the verb in the LXX, seems less likely than the translation suggested here (see the arguments of J.Y. Campbell, in *Exp.Tim.*, 48, 1936–7, pp. 91–4; W.G. Kümmel, *Promise and Fulfilment*, pp. 19–25; R.H. Fuller, *The Mission*

and Achievement of Jesus,
The response demands that they should

The response demanded with John – that they should have a new way of living involve that they should **believe** the authority with which Jesus speaks – the authority to respond – the authority that has already been given to the inhabitants of the earth. Mark at the same time challenges them: this is the go-

Additional

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but it brings judgement a
tance as well as faith.

The Aramaic phrase would perhaps be better phrased as 'the rule of the king is exercised'. The idiom is common in the Old Testament, even though the phrase is not used there; many of the psalms declare the rule of God on earth (e.g. Pss. 47.7; 97.1). The declaration went the other way: to acknowledge Israel's God as omnipotent, their disobedience to his reign. There arose, then, the hope that he would assert his authority in such a way that he would defeat them, and all men would acknowledge him (Isa. 24.23). This hope is expressed by prophets, apocryphal writers, and the same – the expectation of the Messiah's dominion.

When Jesus declares therefore, he is speaking, have already seen, Mark whether Jesus himself arrived, or whether he come. Whereas some p now (10.14f.; 12.34), ot 10.23–5), and 9.1 descri future. The question of

and Achievement of Jesus, pp. 21–5).

The response demanded from men and women is once again – as with John – that they should **repent**: but this time the ‘conversion’ to a new way of living involves, not a baptism signifying forgiveness, but that they should **believe the good news**. Already we notice the authority with which Jesus presents his message and challenges his hearers to respond – the authority that belongs to him because he is all that has already been spelt out to us. But the challenge is not confined to the inhabitants of Galilee; in this summary of Jesus’ message Mark at the same time challenges his own readers in language familiar to them: this is the good news from God; repent and believe.

Additional note: the Kingdom of God

According to Mark’s summary in 1.15, the Kingdom of God was the central theme of Jesus’ teaching, and this is borne out by the rest of the gospel, as well as by Matthew and Luke. Its arrival is good news, but it brings judgement as well as salvation, and so demands repentance as well as faith.

The Aramaic phrase underlying the Greek ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ would perhaps be better translated as ‘the kingship of God’: the emphasis is on the rule of God, rather than on the territory where this rule is exercised. The idea of God’s kingship is basic in the Old Testament, even though the phrase ‘the Kingdom of God’ itself is not found there; many of the psalms speak of him as king, or as ruling over the earth (e.g. Pss. 47.7; 97.1; 99.1; 103.19). But side by side with this declaration went the realization that men and nations did not acknowledge Israel’s God as king; though this did not diminish God’s omnipotence, their disobedience meant that God was not seen to reign. There arose, therefore, the hope of a time when God would assert his authority in such a way that rebellion against him would be defeated, and all men would henceforth be obedient to his will (e.g. Isa. 24.23). This hope is expressed in different terms and different forms by prophets, apocalyptists and rabbis, but basically it remains the same – the expectation that God would finally establish his Kingdom.

When Jesus declares that the Kingdom of God has drawn near, therefore, he is speaking within the context of this expectation. As we have already seen, Mark 1.15 raises the much debated question as to whether Jesus himself meant that the Kingdom had in some sense arrived, or whether he was referring to an event which was still to come. Whereas some passages in Mark imply that it can be entered now (10.14f.; 12.34), others speak of entering it in the future (9.47; 10.23–5), and 9.1 describes it as coming in a dramatic way in the near future. The question ought not, perhaps, to be posed in the form of a

stark either/or; we have already noted that the Old Testament speaks of the rule of God as something which is both present and future. Nevertheless, the preaching of Jesus does bring a new factor into the situation which is expressed in his words 'the time is fulfilled'. In 4.11 we read that the secret of the Kingdom of God is given to his disciples, but that it is hidden from outsiders; two parables (4.26-9 and 30-2) suggest that it is hidden now but will be revealed later; the saying in 14.25 could perhaps mean that Jesus' death may serve to bring the Kingdom into being. In some sense, the coming of Jesus is linked with that of the Kingdom, either because he brings it, or because he announces it: certainly signs of its coming are demonstrated in the ministry of Jesus. This tension between present and future is found throughout all the gospels.

It is important to remember that kingship can be seen from two points of view. On the one hand, it can be understood in terms of loyalty to a monarch. In ancient Israel, David was acclaimed king, first by the house of Judah, then by all the tribes (2 Sam. 2.1-4; 5.1-5): in theory, at least, every Israelite accepted him and acknowledged him as king. On the other, it can be understood in terms of the absolute authority exercised by a monarch over a circumscribed area: in this case, there may well be those within the kingdom who refuse to recognize the monarch's claims. The ambiguity in the idea contributes to our difficulty in understanding the image of the Kingdom in the New Testament.

Interpretation of the meaning of the Kingdom of God in modern biblical criticism has tended to divide into two very different approaches. On the one hand, there have been those who have emphasized that the Kingdom of God implies obedience to God's will. An early advocate of this view was Albrecht Ritschl who thought of Jesus as primarily a moral teacher setting out the ethical demands of God as the goal towards which men and women had to strive. The Kingdom of God was thus seen as something which Christians could build on earth. Within this Kingdom, everyone would acclaim God as King: those who do not accept his rule will not enter it.

In reaction to Ritschl, Johannes Weiss argued that the Kingdom was not something which would arrive gradually, as men and women accepted its claims, but that it would burst into history, bringing cataclysmic judgement and renewal. Only God could bring the Kingdom; all men and women could do was to repent and prepare for its coming. The background to this belief is to be found in Jewish apocalyptic literature which expected God to intervene to establish his rule on earth. Here, the model is that of a rule which is imposed from above: any malcontents will be thrown out of the Kingdom.

Weiss' interpretation was developed by Albert Schweitzer and Rudolf Bultmann, who understood Jesus to be announcing the immi-

ment arrival of the Kingdom of God. Schweitzer shocked the scholarly world of his day by concluding that Jesus was mistaken in this expectation, for no such intervention took place. Nevertheless, this understanding of the Kingdom as a future, eschatological event has been very widely held by biblical scholars. There have always been others, however, such as T.W. Manson, who have understood the Kingdom to have been manifested in Jesus' own obedience to God's rule and in the obedience of those who respond to his challenge to repent and believe. T.F. Glasson has pointed out that there is very little evidence for the widespread assumption that there was in the first century of this era a widespread Jewish expectation that the Kingdom would be established in a cosmic catastrophe bringing this world to an end.

The great strength of the 'futuristic' interpretation, however, was that it took seriously the proclamation by Jesus that something new was about to take place. This interpretation was challenged from a new quarter when C.H. Dodd argued, on the basis of the references in the gospels to the Kingdom as present, that Jesus announced that the Kingdom had already arrived in his person – an interpretation which was given the name of 'realized eschatology'. Dodd subsequently conceded that the Kingdom was not wholly here and therefore accepted the modified expression 'eschatology in the process of realization'. Much recent scholarship has acknowledged the truth in both positions and conceded that, while Jesus proclaimed a future coming of the Kingdom, there is a sense in which it is already here – proleptically – in the person of Jesus himself. (For a summary of the debate about whether the Kingdom is present or future, see N. Perrin, *The Kingdom of God*.)

As for Mark, it seems that he, too, believes that, though the final coming of the Kingdom lies in the future (9.1), it has nevertheless drawn near in the person of Jesus himself (1.15). According to the prologue, Jesus is the one with whom God is well pleased, the Son who is obedient to God's will, who has been given the Spirit of God and who has done battle with Satan: in a sense, then, Jesus is the very embodiment of the Kingdom. Thus, although Jesus speaks of the Kingdom, and not of himself, his words are nevertheless an indirect testimony to himself; it is because he himself lives in obedience to God's rule that he can announce the dawning of God's Kingdom and demonstrate its presence in his miracles. The key to Mark's understanding is found in the parables in chapter 4: the secret of the Kingdom is given to those who respond to Jesus' teaching (v.11); it is present already like seed (v.26) or a grain of mustard seed (v.31); but what will happen in the future (presumably when the Kingdom 'comes in power') will by comparison be overwhelming.

But if, in fact, the Kingdom is in some sense already here, then can it still be understood as a future cataclysmic event? It is perhaps sig-

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST MARK

nificant that Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom makes no reference to apocalyptic speculation about the End. Is not our problem very largely due to the fact that we interpret symbols literally? We assume that apocalyptic writers intended their symbols to be interpreted literally, of the break-up of the universe, even though, when they were first used, these symbols were used metaphorically. As for the phrase 'the Kingdom of God', that is clearly a metaphor, and like all metaphors it has its limitations. One of these limitations is that it may convey false ideas, as when James and John interpret Jesus' role in the Kingdom in the wrong way (10.35-45). Another is that there is a clear problem in speaking about the Kingdom of God's 'coming': rule can be imposed from on high or acknowledged from below, but it can hardly 'come'. Perhaps a more important question than the one concerning present/future which so concerns scholars is whether Jesus (and the evangelists) were thinking primarily of a rule which is accepted or of a rule which is imposed. Perhaps the answer – for both Jesus and the evangelists – is 'both'. But, in so far as there is a growing emphasis in the tradition on the judgement which will befall those who are excluded from the Kingdom, we suggest that Jesus will have been closer to the 'rule acclaimed' end of the spectrum, and Matthew to the 'rule imposed' end, with Mark somewhere in between. Inevitably the emphasis shifts from that found in the teaching of Jesus himself, because his proclamation of the Kingdom has been rejected and judgement has come. As for the question about present/future, if God's rule involves obedience to his will, as it surely does, is there not a sense in which one can enter it here and now, even though it will not be established universally until some future date? And since Jesus' challenge to Israel demands that individuals repent and believe, does this not necessarily involve opting to obey the will of God here and now – i.e., accepting his rule over one's life? Perhaps we can learn from the Old Testament's juxtaposition of the assertion that God already rules with the conviction that he *will* rule. How that rule will finally be established we do not know; but the evangelists are confident that we see something of it embodied already in the person of Jesus, who is obedient to God and who confronts men and women with the challenge to share his obedience.

For further discussion, see: T.W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus*; T.F. Glasson, *The Second Advent*; N. Perrin, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus*; *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*; R. Schnackenburg, *God's Rule and Kingdom*; B. Chilton, ed., *The Kingdom of God*; M.D. Hooker, 'The Kingdom of God'.