

Literature Review

The essay question I have selected for this literature review is: ‘The presentation of Jesus in The Gospel of Mark has been profoundly influenced by the author’s reflection on the Jewish Scriptures. Discuss’. Due to the immensity of the topic I have decided to focus my reading concerning Mark’s use of the Jewish scriptures on his use of Isaiah, which he quotes from more than any other Old Testament text.

It is particularly notable that Mark begins his gospel with a quotation from Isaiah (Mk. 1:2-3). This is the only time Mark makes explicit his use of scripture; most other quotations are on the lips of his characters (more often than not of Jesus: Mk. 4:12; 7:6-7; 11: 17). The quotation used in Mk. 1:2-3 is actually a composite quotation; an amalgam of Exod. 23:20/Mal. 3:1 (Mk. 1:1), followed by Isa. 40:3 (Mk. 1:3). Literature dealing with Mark’s use of Isaiah presents several possible explanations for why the evangelist made this apparent mistake. In his 1965 dissertation A. Suhl asserts that Mark uses scripture to add ‘colouring’ to his gospel. His use of the Old Testament is thus not supposed to ‘prove’ specific events in light of Jewish Scripture, but to make the general assertion that the gospel message is in accordance with them.¹ If Mark was quoting Isaiah only to add ‘colour’ he may not have considered it important that the first verse of his quotation was not from Isaiah. In her essay ‘Isaiah in Mark’s Gospel’ Morna D. Hooker postulates that some phrases from Isaiah may have become a part of Christian vocabulary without Mark being aware of their origin.² Mark may therefore not have known that the quotation he was citing was a composite and not entirely from Isaiah. Most critics however attach a deeper level of significance to Mk. 1:2-3. S. Moyise argues that the significance of Mark using Isaiah is that he claims the good news of Jesus is written in Isaiah.³ This suggests that Isaiah was a particularly important text for Mark, and is the position that the majority of writers on the subject argue from. In his book *The Way of the Lord* Joel Marcus argues that Isaiah represents the thematic backdrop against which The Gospel of Mark is set and meant to be understood.⁴ Marcus understands the themes of Mark and Isaiah to be eschatological and that both Jesus and John the Baptist are set within a Jewish apocalyptic eschatological context:

‘(Jesus and John the Baptist’s) appearance on the scene...heralds eschatological events, because it is the preparation for and the beginning of the fulfilment of that end so eagerly yearned for since Old Testament times: the triumphant march of the holy warrior, Yahweh, leading his people through the wilderness to their true homeland in a mighty demonstration of

saving power',⁵

Marcus' elucidation of Mk. 1:2-3 I think presents the most likely explanation for Mark's strategic placement of the Isaiah quote; it does justice to the seeming importance Mark attaches to Isaiah while explaining the apparent mistake in a way which does not require us to think of Mark as some sort of literary bumbler. Finally, it is worth drawing attention to the work of Rikki E. Watts, who in his book *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* places emphasis of the Malachi/Exodus part of the composite. Like Marcus, Watts thinks that the overall conceptual framework of the gospel is Isaiah, but he adds that the judgement theme of Malachi, from which he argues Mk. 1:2 was lifted, presents an ominous counterpoint to the optimism of Isaiah and suggests that Israel is not yet ready for Yahweh's coming.⁶ This view so neatly fits in with both the theme of rejection in Mark's gospel *and* the way subsequent scriptural references (particularly Isaiah) are used to show the general unpreparedness (fruitlessness/hypocrisy/blindness/violence) of the religious leaders (Mk. 4:12; 7:6-7; 11:17; 12:1-11) and disciples (Mk. 7:14-21), I am inclined to support it. From the literature dealing with Mark's use of scripture it is evident that allusions and meanings are often not made explicit; readers are assumed to have some level of knowledge of the texts which Mark draws upon.⁷ That Mark intended to allude to the themes of Mal.3:1 in Mk. 1:2-3 therefore seems likely to me.

Another key area where Mark's use of Isaiah draws a variety of responses from the subject literature is the cleansing of the temple incident of Mk. 11:15-19 in which Jesus quotes (another composite citation) from Isa. 56:7 followed by Jer. 7:11 (Mk. 11:17). Again the contrasting themes of the texts from which the composite is taken divides scholarly opinion. Isa. 56:7 ('my house will be called a house of prayer for all the nations') is in the context of redemption 'for all the nations'. Is Jesus' protest therefore to do with the exclusion of the gentiles? The 'den of robbers' part of the composite (drawn from Jer. 7:11) suggests Jesus' concern is corruption rather than exclusion. In his book *The Old Testament in the New: An Introduction*, Moyise argues that the quote is to be taken in the context of destruction due to its interweaving with the story of the barren fig tree.⁸ For the same reason, Hooker assumes that Mark meant to present the temple incident in terms of judgement and destruction.⁹ In his recent work *Jesus the Temple*, Nicholas Perrin observes that it would be a distortion of context to argue that Jesus is objecting to the exclusion of the gentiles from the temple in principle, but that he recognises the text from Isaiah as pointing to a future glorious reality which by his quotation he intimates is now present.¹⁰ For the purpose of this literature review I should also note that John F. A. Sawyer, writing for *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, also seems to view Jesus' use of Isaiah in Mk. 11:17 to concern the gentiles (though he passes over the matter very quickly).¹¹

Of final (and essential) note in the Debate of Mark's use of Isaiah is the question of whether Mark presents Jesus as the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. The strongest evidence that he does is to be found in Mk 10:45, which when combined with Mk. 14:24 is an obvious parallel to Isa. 53:11-12. However Mark never makes the allusion explicit; if he wanted to present Jesus as the suffering servant, then why does he not do so in more concrete terms? Most biblical scholars attach some

level of importance to the fact that, excluding Mk. 1:2-3, Mark only ever refers to scripture implicitly.¹² What is it about Mk. 1:2-3 which is different? Could it be that Mark reserves his only explicit quotation from scripture to direct us toward the text which his gospel is meant to be understood in terms of, and that all other references to it are implicit because he has already given readers the tool to understand what he is driving at? This is the view Douglas J. Moo presents in his seminal work *The Old Testament in the Gospel Passion Narratives*.¹³

This literature review presents some of the key ideas of scholars who have written extensively on the subject of Mark's use of scripture, and in particular of Isaiah (Hooker, Moyise, Marcus, Moo, Watts). However, I have also made an effort included some of the views given by other critics whose works are in a broad way related to the theme (Perrin, Sawyer). Covering the interpretation of a few key passages I have highlighted areas where scholarly views converge and diverge and in some cases I have offered my own analysis of their arguments.

Bibliography

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