

1

Jesus and Scripture according to Mark's Gospel

Introduction

Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels (16 chapters), and moves rapidly from a ministry of teaching, healing and exorcism in Galilee (Mark 1—10) to the final week (the Passion) in Jerusalem (Mark 11—16). According to the best manuscripts, the Gospel ends with the story of the empty tomb (Mark 16.1–8) and does not record any resurrection stories. It used to be thought that Mark's original ending had been lost and that later scribes did their best to fill the gap (see the shorter and longer endings printed separately in the NRSV). But most scholars today believe that Mark deliberately ended his Gospel in an abrupt manner in order to stress the importance of the crucifixion. It corresponds with the abrupt beginning, where the story begins with Jesus' baptism and temptation and records the threat to his life as early as Mark 3.6.

There are about 25 quotations from the Old Testament in Mark's Gospel, of which some 22 are on the lips of Jesus. They are drawn from the law (10), the prophets (7) and the psalms (5). Since Mark is writing in Greek to a Greek-speaking audience, it is to be expected that the quotations would follow the LXX, which is generally the case. It is possible that Mark is responsible for this, but most scholars think that the translation of Jesus' sayings from Aramaic to Greek had happened long before Mark wrote his Gospel. The Gospel is usually dated between 65 and 69 CE, largely because Mark 13.14–23 seems to envisage a period just before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies (c. 70 CE). We will begin with Mark's view of Jesus' attitude to the law.

Jesus and the law

In the debate about hand washing in Mark 7 ('Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled

hands?' – v. 5), Jesus criticizes their adherence to tradition because it involves 'abandoning' (v. 8) or 'rejecting' (v. 9) the commandment of God. He then cites the example of 'Corban', a law whereby a portion of one's goods can be dedicated to God and is therefore no longer available for mundane use, even if that means hardship for one's parents. This time Jesus accuses them of 'making void the word of God through your tradition' (v. 13), specifically citing the commandment to 'Honour your father and your mother' (v. 10). Thus Jesus is clearly portrayed as one who upholds the law and is hostile to 'traditions' (*halaka*) that undermine it.

This episode is followed by a discussion of what defiles a person, where Jesus says that 'there is nothing outside of a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile' (v. 18). It is elaborated in verse 20 that the things in question are 'evil intentions' and that they come from the heart. There then follows a list of sins – drawn from the commandments (theft, murder, adultery) and other traditions (fornication, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly) – that come from the heart and defile. Thus in this episode Jesus upholds the law in the face of the human inclination to transgress it.

However, it is Mark's comment in the middle of this episode that has attracted attention. In verse 18, Jesus offers a rationale for why one is not defiled by what is outside: 'it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer'. This is then followed by a comment from Mark that literally translated means 'cleansing all foods' (NRSV: 'Thus he declared all foods clean'). It is not presented as words of Jesus, rather Mark's deduction from the aphorism. Thus we have a major difficulty with Mark's understanding of Jesus and the law. On the one hand, the episodes of Mark 7 strongly assert that Jesus upholds the law against Pharisaic tradition and the inclinations of the human heart. On the other hand, Mark thinks that Jesus' aphorism that 'there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile' implies that all foods are clean, effectively abrogating a major section of the law and the principle – the distinction between clean and unclean – on which it is based.

A similar ambiguity occurs with the way Mark presents Jesus' view of the Sabbath. On the one hand, it is evidently Jesus' custom to be in the synagogue on the Sabbath (Mark 3.1; 6.2), and he undoubtedly upholds the Ten Commandments (Mark 10.19), even though the

Sabbath is not explicitly mentioned in his summary. But Mark 2.1—3.6 collect together a series of controversy stories, two of which focus on what can or cannot be done on the Sabbath. In Mark 2.23–28 the Pharisees object that Jesus' disciples are plucking grain as they make their way through the grain fields. Jesus replies by citing a story from 1 Samuel 21.1–6, where David entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, along with his companions. Jesus acknowledges that what David did was 'unlawful' but ends with the saying: 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath' (Mark 2.28). This is open to at least three interpretations:

- 1 Jesus has the authority to *break* the Sabbath, as his royal predecessor did.
- 2 Jesus has the authority to temporarily *suspend* the Sabbath because of the disciples' hunger, as with David and his companions.
- 3 Jesus has the authority to *declare* that the disciples' actions do not constitute a break with the Sabbath, contrary to Pharisaic tradition that regarded 'plucking grain' as a form of work (see Appendix 2).

Before trying to answer this we will consider the second controversy story (Mark 3.1–6) – the healing of the man with the withered hand. It is a Sabbath, and Jesus is in the synagogue along with the sick man. In this instance there is no verbal accusation by the Pharisees, but Mark tells us that Jesus knew they were watching him, 'to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him' (v. 2). Jesus takes the argument to them by asking: 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?' (v. 4). Since he then proceeds to heal the man, it is clear that Jesus does not regard his healing activity as breaking the Sabbath, contrary to the view of the Pharisees. Indeed, Mark tells us that the Pharisees immediately went out to conspire with the Herodians to have Jesus put to death (v. 6). Mark clearly intends this to be ironic: the Pharisees complain that Jesus is breaking the commandments while they themselves are engaged in a plot to have someone murdered.

Thus it would appear that Mark does not regard Jesus as breaking the Sabbath, although his interpretation of it is clearly at loggerheads with Pharisaic tradition. Whether Mark is correct in this will be discussed in Chapters 5–7, but two points are worth mentioning here.

First, if this healing corresponds to what actually happened, the Pharisees would surely have pointed out that the man's life was not at risk. If Jesus truly respected the Sabbath, why did he not wait until the following day to heal him? Second, if Jesus defended the disciples' plucking of grain on the Sabbath by reference to David eating the consecrated bread, they would surely have pointed out that in that story there is no mention of it being on a Sabbath (1 Sam. 21.1–6). What is clear is that *Mark* thinks that Jesus upheld the spirit of the Sabbath against Pharisaic traditions.

We thus return to the question of the food laws. Is it likely that Mark thinks that Jesus castigated the Pharisees for 'abandoning', 'rejecting' or 'making void' God's commandments for the sake of their traditions, only to abrogate the food laws on the basis of an aphorism about what defiles a person? If we remember that the discussion began over the issue of Pharisaic hand-washing rituals (Mark 7.1–5), it could be argued that Mark's conclusion – 'cleansing all foods' – has nothing to do with the law's distinction between clean and unclean food. It is simply asserting that food does not become defiled by breaking the detailed hand-washing rituals of the Pharisees. The status of food that the law regards as unclean is simply not in view. Indeed, although Jesus is accused of eating with tax collectors and sinners (Mark 2.16), he is never accused of eating anything unclean, which concurs with Peter's protestation in Acts 10.14 that never in his life – thus including his time with Jesus – has he ever eaten anything unclean. Therefore while the question of Mark's attitude to the law continues to be a matter of debate,¹ most scholars think that Jesus kept the Jewish food laws and at no time spoke against them.

This appears to be confirmed by a number of other texts where Jesus is seen to uphold the authority of the law. For example, having healed the man suffering from leprosy in Mark 1.42, he tells him to 'go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them' (Mark 1.44). When the young ruler asks what he has to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus directs him to the commandments (Mark 10.19). The fact that Jesus adds the requirement to sell his possessions and give to the poor is hardly a criticism of the commandments. When the Sadducees seek to trap him with a concocted story about a woman forced to marry seven brothers after each dies (based on the levirate law of Deuteronomy

25.5), he replies: 'Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?' (Mark 12.24). He then argues from the book of Exodus that because God said 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' (Exod. 3.15), the dead must be raised. One might have expected a quotation from one of the texts in the Old Testament that speak of resurrection, such as Daniel 12.1–2, but this is probably to be explained by the fact that the Sadducees regarded the prophets as secondary to the law. According to John Meier, the logic of Jesus' reply is this:

- 1 Throughout Scripture, God refers to himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
- 2 Scripture also says that God is a God of the living, not the defiling, unclean dead.
- 3 Therefore Abraham, Isaac and Jacob must be 'alive' with God (now or in the future).²

However, there are two further stories that might challenge this view. The first is the discussion about divorce in Mark 10.2–9. The Pharisees ask Jesus whether it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Jewish sources suggest that this was a hotly debated subject, some arguing that divorce was possible for almost any reason (the school of Hillel), others taking a more rigorous line and insisting that the reason had to be something serious, such as adultery (the school of Shammai). Jesus responds by asking them what Moses commanded, and they reply by quoting words from Deuteronomy 24.1–4 ('Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her'), the only passage in the law to mention divorce. However, this is evidently not Jesus' position, for he says that this was written 'because of your hardness of heart', and goes on to quote Genesis 1.27 and 2.24, that marriage is about two people becoming one flesh. Although these texts do not mention divorce, Jesus deduces that 'one flesh' implies 'no divorce', and so goes beyond even the rigorous position of Shammai: 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery' (Mark 10.11–12).

Although one could argue that Jesus is not contradicting the law (Deuteronomy 24 permits divorce but does not command it), he is clearly giving the Genesis texts priority over the Deuteronomy text. Indeed, John Meier says that Jesus' position on divorce is nothing

short of astounding: 'Jesus presumes to teach that what the Law permits and regulates is actually the sin of adultery.'³ In other words, the Jewish man who conscientiously follows the Torah's rules for divorce and remarriage is in fact guilty of breaking one of the Ten Commandments. According to Meier, this is much more than entering the debate about permissible grounds for divorce. On the other hand, Jesus is not the first to give priority to the Genesis text. We find the same argument in a text from the Dead Sea Scrolls, though it is unclear whether it is condemning polygamy or divorce:⁴

The 'builders of the wall' [possibly Pharisees] . . . who have followed after 'Precept' - 'Precept' . . . shall be caught in fornication twice by taking a second wife while the first is alive, whereas the principle of creation is, *Male and female created He them* . . . (CD 4.20-21)

Our second example is where Jesus is asked, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' (Mark 12.28). He replies by affirming the traditional confession (known as the *Shema*): 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength' (Mark 12.29-30). However, he then goes beyond the scribe's question by asserting: 'The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself"' (Mark 12.31), adding that there is 'no other commandment [singular] greater than these'.

Combining the commandments to love God and neighbour was not unique to Jesus. In a work entitled *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, we read in the *Testament of Issachar*, 'love the Lord and your neighbour' (*T. Iss.* 5.2), and in the *Testament of Dan*, 'love the Lord and one another with a true heart' (*T. Dan* 5.3). However, there do not appear to be any parallels to citing them as the first and second commandments, although Philo and Josephus both think of the Ten Commandments as pertaining to God (first five) and neighbour (second five). It would appear to cohere with Mark's view that Jesus upheld the law but was antagonistic towards Pharisaic traditions that (in his view) diverted it from its humanitarian intentions. Thus Jesus is against using the 'permission' to divorce in Deuteronomy 24 as a path to adultery, or the dedication of goods to God (*Corban*) to avoid obligation to one's parents. In Jesus' view (as portrayed by Mark), such traditions do not 'uphold' the law, as the Pharisees claim, but undermine its true intent.

However, there are two further features of this story that require comment. The first is technical, and it is that Jesus cites four faculties (heart, soul, mind, strength), whereas Deuteronomy 6.5 only has three (heart, soul, might). It is inconceivable that Mark was not aware of this and indeed he has the scribe repeat Jesus' answer with just three ('You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that "he is one, and besides him there is no other"; and "to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength"'). We might compare this with Jesus' citation of the Ten Commandments in Mark 10.19, where honouring parents comes *after* murder, adultery, theft and false witness, and instead of the command not to covet we have the command not to defraud. It was evidently not Mark's purpose to show that upholding the law is dependent on citing its precise wording.

Second, Mark has the scribe make a deduction from Jesus' reply ('this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices'), which gains Jesus' approval ('When Jesus saw that he answered wisely'). As with his parenthetical comment about 'cleansing all foods', this looks like Mark's comment to make the point that moral laws are more important than ritual laws. It does not necessarily represent Jesus' view and as we shall see in the next chapter, it does not appear in Matthew's version of the story. Bill Loader thinks that Mark is deliberately contrasting 'heart religion' with 'cultic observance' for the benefit of his Gentile readers.⁵ This might be so, though it is worth noting that the scribe speaks of 'more important' (*perisotteron*) rather than replacement, and in this he is no different from many of Israel's prophets (Isa. 1.11; Hos. 6.6). In conclusion, Mark presents Jesus as a law-abiding Jew who was at odds with any who would use 'tradition', or even the law itself, as a means of avoiding what he considered to be the true intent of the law.

Jesus and the prophets

Mark opens his Gospel with either a statement or title ('The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'), followed by a composite quotation of Malachi 3.1/Exodus 23.20 ('See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way') and Isaiah 40.3 ('the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight"'). According to the best

manuscripts, the composite quotation is introduced by the words 'As it is written in the prophet Isaiah', which later manuscripts changed to 'in the prophets' (so KJV) to conform to the composite quotation. However, many scholars believe that the specific reference to Isaiah is significant, indicating not only that the messenger (John the Baptist) was prophesied in Scripture but that the 'beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ' was written in Isaiah. We will thus begin this section with an examination of Jesus' use of Isaiah.

The first clear reference to Isaiah comes in Mark 4.12, where Jesus answers the disciples' question about the meaning of parables by saying: 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that "they may indeed *look*, but not *perceive*, and may indeed *listen*, but not *understand*; so that they may not *turn* again and be *forgiven*.'" The reference is somewhat controversial since it appears to be saying that Jesus deliberately spoke in parables so that outsiders would not be able to comprehend and be forgiven. The words come from Isaiah's call-vision, where he is not only told that Israel will reject his message but that this rejection is part of God's purposes:

Go and say to this people: 'Keep *listening*, but do not *comprehend*; keep *looking*, but do not *understand*.' Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and *turn* and be *healed*. (Isa. 6.9-10)

Joachim Jeremias famously argued that the difficulty arose through mistranslation. The Greek word *parabole* translates the Hebrew *mashal*, which can mean riddle, puzzle, dark saying or oracle. He concluded that what Jesus meant was something like 'for those outside, it all sounds like riddles', but when this was translated into Greek it became 'for those outside, everything comes in parables'. Mark then added to the confusion by placing it in the middle of his parables chapter, suggesting that the purpose of the parables was to hide rather than to reveal. Jeremias thought that this explanation was confirmed by the fact that elsewhere in Mark, the parables are clearly intended to be understood by the hearers (Mark 12.12).⁶

Bill Telford disagrees. He does not think this is a case of Mark misunderstanding the saying but of deliberate reinterpretation. Whatever Jesus may have meant by comparing the dull response to

his teaching with Isaiah's commission, Mark thinks that 'the parables were *meant* to harden Jewish hearts, *meant* to make them misunderstand, *meant* to conceal . . . for history is governed by God's purposes which cannot be thwarted.'⁷ As we shall see in the following chapter, Matthew uses a different Greek word to connect the Isaiah citation with Jesus' saying, with the effect that the blindness is a 'result' (*hoste*) of the parables, but not their purpose (*hina*).

It is of interest that later in Mark, the accusation of blindness, based on Isaiah 6.9–10, is also aimed at the disciples. They are on a boat journey with Jesus and realize that they have forgotten to bring enough bread (Mark 8.14). Thus when Jesus warns them against the 'yeast of the Pharisees', they assume that he is having a dig at them for forgetting the bread. This calls forth the following accusation: 'Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?' Taken on its own, this could be an allusion to Jeremiah 5.21 or even Ezekiel 12.2, but it is almost certain that Mark intends his readers to connect this with the parable purpose of Mark 4.12. If outsiders cannot understand the kingdom because they have eyes that cannot see and ears that cannot hear, then the same is true of the disciples, raising a key question for Mark's Gospel: Did anyone believe in his message?

The second explicit reference to Isaiah is found in the controversy over hand washing (Mark 7.1–23), Jesus' response (before the aphorism about what defiles – see p. 14) is to say that 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites' and then to quote words from Isaiah 29.13: 'This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' This is then illustrated by the law of Corban, where they are said to put their 'traditions', which are therefore being equated with the 'human precepts' of the quotation, before the commandment of God. Mark follows the LXX in referring to 'teaching human precepts as doctrines', whereas the Hebrew text is more specific, stating that it is their *worship* which is governed by human precepts. Since the LXX rendering undoubtedly facilitates the application to the Pharisees, who are accused of using their traditions to avoid upholding the commandments, many scholars are sceptical that this goes back to Jesus. But it is clearly Mark's view that Jesus applied Isaiah 29.13 to the hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees

One of the reasons that some scholars challenge the reliability of Mark's Gospel is that its picture of the Pharisees is so different from what is found in Jewish sources. Thus, contrary to the Sadducees, who focused on the priesthood, and the Qumran community, who focused on monastic observance, the Pharisees believed that the law could be fulfilled in daily life. This sometimes meant adopting 'traditions' that went beyond the law, but there is no evidence that they were hostile to less observant Jews. Neither is there evidence that they would have opposed healing on the Sabbath or would have disagreed with Jesus that the commandment to honour parents takes priority over the tradition of Corban. Noting that Jewish debate often used hyperbole (exaggeration) and rhetoric (caricature), Sanders concludes that none of the disputes found in the Gospels falls outside the parameters of ordinary Jewish debate (see Appendix 2).⁸

The third explicit reference comes in the so-called cleansing of the temple incident, where Jesus issues the following accusation on God's behalf: 'Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"? But you have made it a den of robbers' (Mark 11.17). The words come from Isaiah 56.7, with the phrase 'den of robbers' from Jeremiah 7.11. The precise nature of the accusation is not clear. If Mark has the context of Isaiah 56.7 in mind, then the emphasis is on inclusion ('for the nations'). Jesus is condemning the commercial activity of the temple courts because it excludes Gentiles. It is of interest that the way Isaiah 56.7 expresses this is to say of the 'foreigners' and 'eunuchs' that 'their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar' – further evidence that Mark does not think that Jesus was against ritual in itself. On the other hand, Mark has combined Isaiah 56.7 with words from Jeremiah 7.11 ('den of robbers'), which might suggest that *corruption* rather than exclusion is the focus of his protest. If this is the case, then the emphasis of the Isaiah quotation falls on the words 'house of prayer', in contrast to the 'den of robbers' that it has become.

Most scholars recognize a fourth reference to Isaiah in the parable of the vineyard (Mark 12.1–11). Some scholars think that this parable began life as a protest against absentee landlords, but in Mark's version

it is clearly intended to be a reference to the song of the vineyard in Isaiah 5. This is seen by the following parallels:

- 1 the construction details specifically mention digging a wine vat and erecting a watchtower (Isa. 5.2/Mark 12.1);
- 2 the vineyard fails to return fruit to its owner (Isa. 5.4/Mark 12.3);
- 3 the people of the vineyard turn to murderous behaviour (Isa. 5.7/Mark 12.5);
- 4 they incur destruction by the owner (Isa. 5.5/Mark 12.9).

What is different about Jesus' parable is that a series of emissaries are sent by the owner/landlord before the vineyard is destroyed. This is almost certainly a reference to the prophets (2 Kings 9.7; Jer. 7.25; Ezek. 38.17), so Jesus is portrayed as *extending* the allegory to cover the whole period of Israel's relationship with God.

What stands out from these four explicit references to Isaiah discussed in the foregoing paragraphs is that they are all concerned with Jesus' opponents: Isaiah 6.9–10 is applied to their blindness; Isaiah 29.13 to their hypocrisy; Isaiah 56.7 to either their exclusivity or corruption; and Isaiah 5 to their unfruitfulness and violence. As we shall see in Chapters 5–7, one of the major questions facing the reconstruction of Jesus' use of Scripture is whether such quotations reflect later disputes between Church and Synagogue rather than between Jesus and his fellow Jews. What is clear is that Mark portrays Jesus as seeing in Isaiah a series of prophecies concerning those who are opposing him. This raises the question of how he viewed himself, the recipient of this opposition, and the most likely answer is that he viewed himself as the one who suffers in Isaiah 40–55.

The strongest evidence for this comes in Mark 10.45, where Jesus (under the epithet of 'the Son of Man') says that he 'came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many'. When this is combined with the words spoken at the last supper in Mark 14.24 ('This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many'), there is an obvious parallel with Isaiah 53.11–12:

- The righteous one, my *servant*, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he *poured out*

himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of *many*, and made intercession for the transgressors.

(Isa. 53.11–12)

Morna Hooker famously objected to such an identification, pointing out that Mark has managed to use a different Greek word from what is in the LXX for all of the key terms: 'service/servant'; 'ransom'; 'poured out'.⁹ Although it could be argued that Jesus originally spoke these sayings in Aramaic, so that differences from the LXX are irrelevant, it does raise the question of how Mark thought his readers, who are unlikely to have known much Aramaic, would have made the identification. Put another way, if Mark intended his readers to grasp the fact that Jesus saw himself as the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, why did he not make this more explicit, either with an explicit quotation or at least some use of the key vocabulary from that chapter?

Those who believe that Mark does intend such an identification point to the opening quotation, which could suggest that the events that are to follow are not just in accord with Isaiah 40.3 but also the material that it introduces, namely Isaiah 40–55. There is also the suggestion that the words at Jesus' baptism in Mark 1.11 ('You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased') reflect the language of the servant in Isaiah 42.1a ('Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights'), while the descent of the Spirit accords with Isaiah 42.1b ('I have put my spirit upon him'). In response, one could say that if Mark intended the quotation of Isaiah 40.3 to indicate that Jesus fulfils the role of the servant in Isaiah 40–55, why does he complicate this by making it a composite quotation, with words from Malachi 3.1/Exodus 23.20 coming first? And if Mark intends the words at the baptism to suggest the servant of Isaiah 42.1, why does he point his readers to Psalm 2.7 ('You are my son'), where the king is being addressed? At best, one would have to say that Mark's presentation leaves the issue of whether Jesus thought of himself as the servant of Isaiah 40–55 ambiguous.

After the last supper, Jesus leads the disciples to the Mount of Olives and predicts their desertion (Mark 14.27), quoting words from Zechariah 13.7 in the form: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered'. In the original, a sword is addressed ('Awake, O sword, against my shepherd . . . Strike the shepherd'), but Mark ignores this and assumes that it is God who does the striking. It does

Jesus and Scripture according to Mark's Gospel

not seem a very appropriate reference since God appears to be angry with both the shepherd and the sheep, but the clue might come in what follows. Zechariah says that two-thirds of the people will perish but a third will be refined by fire so that they will 'call on my name, and I will answer them' (Zech. 13.9). Some have argued that this is the point of the quotation – it predicts the desertion and return to faith of the disciples, and we know from the rest of the New Testament that this is in fact what happened (except for Judas). However, this is not the part of Zechariah that is quoted, so it must be assumed that Mark's readers would readily know what comes next. As with our discussion of Jesus and the Servant, it does not appear to be Mark's purpose to make the identification with Zechariah's stricken shepherd explicit.

Finally, we will consider the apocalyptic language that occurs in Mark 13. The chapter begins with the disciples' admiration of the temple and Jesus' response that it will be destroyed ('Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down'). He then utters a prophecy, similar in style to the Old Testament prophets, which begins with earthly woes (wars, earthquakes, famines) and leads on to what appears to be the end of the world:

But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

(Mark 13.24–26)

As is common in the apocalyptic style, phrases from different Scriptures are fused together to give a powerful and evocative warning of future judgement. The reference to sun and moon draws on Isaiah 13.10 and Joel 2.10 (also 3.4; 4.15). Stars falling from heaven echoes Isaiah 34.4, while the gathering of the elect suggests Zechariah 2.6. But most attention has focused on the reference to 'the Son of Man coming in clouds', which reflects the figure in Daniel's dream: 'I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him' (Dan. 7.13 rsv). Most of the discussion has centred on the authenticity of the saying, since the words translated

'son of man' would simply mean 'human' or 'mortal' when spoken in Aramaic (hence the NRSV translation, 'I saw one like a human being'); they would not have been understood as a title ('*the Son of Man*'). This is an important issue, also affecting whether Jesus' reply in Mark 2.28 means that 'humanity' is lord of the Sabbath (because the Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath) or specifically that Jesus, as *the Son of Man*, is lord of the Sabbath. At present, we will confine ourselves to Mark's probable meaning.

Daniel is referring to a human-like figure (as opposed to the four beasts of Dan. 7.1-8) who comes to God and receives 'dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed' (Dan. 7.14). As this stands, it sounds like a prophecy of the messiah's reign, but when Daniel asks about the meaning of the visions, he is told that the four beasts represent four kings (usually understood to be Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome), while it is the 'holy ones of the Most High' who will receive the everlasting kingdom. Either the 'son of man' is a symbol for God's people or it combines both individual and corporate traits (as perhaps Isaiah's 'servant' does). How then does Mark understand Jesus' words?

The traditional view is that Mark thinks that Jesus is referring to his second coming, that is, his return to earth in judgement (Acts 1.11; 1 Thess. 4.14). The difficulty with this view is that Mark 13 says nothing about Jesus coming *to the earth*, and if the allusion to Daniel 7.13 is deliberate, then it evokes the image of a figure going *to God*, not coming *from God*. Consequently, other views have been suggested that take the allusion to Dan. 7.13 in a less literal sense. Daniel is referring to the replacement of evil kingdoms with God's perfect everlasting kingdom, and that is what the allusion is intended to evoke. Thus in answer to the disciples' question concerning the fate of the temple, Jesus responds by saying (in symbolic language) that the temple will be destroyed and replaced by an everlasting kingdom, that of the messiah and his people. If it is replied that the cosmic language of sun and moon not giving their light and stars falling from heaven is rather excessive for a description of the destruction of the temple, it has been argued that the texts referred to earthly calamities in their original contexts. Richard France puts it like this:

Jesus and Scripture according to Mark's Gospel

the apocalyptic language of these verses, drawn almost entirely from identifiable OT texts, relates, as did those texts in their own contexts, not to the collapse of the physical universe and the end of the world but to imminent and far-reaching political change, in the context of the predicted destruction of Jerusalem. On this view the 'coming of the Son of Man' is language not about an eschatological descent of Jesus to the earth but, as in the vision of Daniel from which it derives, about the vindication and enthronement of the Son of Man at the right hand of God, to receive and exercise supreme authority.¹⁰

There is a further allusion to Daniel 7.13 in Jesus' reply to the high priest at his trial (Mark 14.62). The high priest asks Jesus, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?' For the first time in Mark's Gospel, Jesus openly accepts the titles and replies: 'I am; and "you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power", and "coming with the clouds of heaven."' The reference to being seated at God's right hand is probably an allusion to Psalm 110.1 ('Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool'), especially as this text is explicitly quoted in Mark 12.35–37. With typical Jewish reverence, the high priest avoids pronouncing the name of God by using a circumlocution ('Blessed One'), and Jesus does likewise ('the Power'). But what Jesus says next is offensive to the high priest and results in a charge of 'blasphemy' (Mark 14.64).

It begins with a prediction that they (the 'you' is plural) will see something, which later Christian theology has understood to be Jesus' second coming. This depends on taking the two phrases as sequential, so that Jesus 'sits' at God's right hand (for a time) and then 'comes' on the clouds (at the end of time). However, since the 'sitting' is clearly metaphorical and is not something that can be (visibly) seen, it is worth enquiring as to whether this is also true of the 'coming'. We have already noted that Daniel 7.13 is not referring to a 'coming' to earth but a 'coming' to God in order to receive a kingdom. Thus like Psalm 110.1, Daniel 7.13 is an enthronement oracle, where the recipient does not 'go' anywhere in a literal sense but receives power and authority.

Is this how Mark understood it? The high priest thinks that Jesus is worthy of death, but there will come a time when he (and those with him) will 'see' that God does not agree; far from it – they will 'see' that God has given Jesus a kingdom of power and authority. Mark may have thought this was fulfilled in the resurrection (Mark 9.1), the coming of the Spirit (Mark 13.11) or the destruction of the temple

(Mark 13.2). As we shall see later, this raises an interesting conundrum in terms of what Jesus might have meant. On the one hand, if Jesus was referring to one of these 'earthly' events, was the Church wrong to develop its view of a second coming of Jesus? On the other hand, if Jesus was thinking of a second coming (and the end of the world), then the high priest did not live to see it and Jesus was wrong.

Finally, although no explicit quotations are involved, there is an intriguing discussion that takes place after the story of Jesus' transfiguration. In that story Moses and Elijah appear on the mountain with Jesus (Mark 9.5), which prompts the disciple's question, 'Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' (Mark 9.11). This is puzzling, since they have just seen Elijah, and Jesus' reply is equally puzzling:

Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him.

(Mark 9.12–13)

Three things are difficult about Jesus' reply. First, he appears to endorse the scribal belief that Elijah is coming to restore all things (based on the reference to Elijah in Malachi 4.5 and the LXX's use of the word 'restore' in the next verse), but then states that Elijah has already come. The 'restoration' envisaged in Malachi 4.6 is the healing of relationships within Israel ('He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents'), but this has hardly been fulfilled. Second, the fate of the Son of Man and the fate of Elijah are said to be in accord with what is written, a formula that elsewhere means 'written in Scripture' (Mark 1.2; 7.6; 11.17). There is debate as to whether texts such as Isaiah 53 or Psalm 22 are in the background for the fate of the Son of Man (the actual phrase does not occur), but there are no texts or Jewish traditions that speak about a suffering Elijah. Third, the statement about the 'Son of Man' intrudes between the two Elijah sayings, making it difficult to see the underlying logic. That these are genuine difficulties rather than our modern desire for coherence can be seen by the fact that Matthew places the 'Son of Man' saying after the two Elijah sayings, and omits any reference to Scripture (Matt. 17.10–12).

Joel Marcus suggests that some of these difficulties are solved if we understand Jesus' first remark as, effectively, a question ('Does

Elijah restore all things?'), as the Greek would allow.¹¹ He believes it is an example of a common Jewish exegetical practice whereby difficulties in Scripture are resolved. In this case, the scribes think that Elijah's restoration will be something glorious, just as they think that the Messiah will come in power. Jesus responds by saying that Scripture (also) says that the 'Son of Man' will suffer, and deduces from this that the same must be true of his forerunner. Thus the second reference to what is written is not referring to a specific text but the exegetical procedure that has just been written by Mark.¹²

France finds this somewhat fanciful and suggests that Mark is not so much thinking about a specific verse but the Elijah stories in general, where he was 'driven by his faithfulness to God's commission into potentially fatal conflict with the royal house (1 Ki. 19:2-3, 10, 14)'.¹³ The difference is that Herodias succeeded where Jezebel failed (equating Elijah with John the Baptist, Mark 6.17-29), which confirms to Jesus that this will be his fate also. Jesus is not therefore claiming that the restoration of Malachi 4.5 has been fulfilled, but directs the scribes to the stories about Elijah's conflict with the king. France calls this a 'typological' reading, meaning that certain people or events in Scripture parallel certain people and events in a later period.

Jesus and the writings

If the opening quotation from Isaiah 40.3 (and Malachi 3.1/Exodus 23.20) indicates the importance of Isaiah for understanding Mark's account of Jesus, the words at the baptism play a similar role for the psalms. According to Mark's account (Mark 1.10-11), the heavens are torn apart (*schizo*), the Spirit descends on him like a dove and a voice from heaven says to him 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' This richly allusive phrase may draw on Genesis 22.2 (Isaac is called a 'beloved son'), Jeremiah 31.20 (Ephraim is called a 'beloved son') and Isaiah 42.1 (the servant in whom God delights), but it is Psalm 2.7 that is the principal text. This royal psalm addresses David as God's anointed ('You are my son; today I have begotten you'), and promises to make the nations his heritage and the ends of the earth his possession (Ps. 2.8). The words are repeated in the transfiguration story, where this time it is the disciples who are addressed: 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' (Mark 9.7). The psalm was important in the early Church for establishing the

'sonship' of Jesus (Acts 13.33; Heb. 1.5; Rev. 12.5), and Mark no doubt expects his readers to remember it when they encounter the 'beloved son' in the parable of the vineyard.

However, contrary to the exalted claims of Psalm 2.8–9 (that the 'beloved son' will reign over the earth), the son in the parable is killed by the tenants (Mark 12.7). But this is not the end of the story, for Jesus goes on to quote words from Psalm 118.22–23: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'. While some scholars believe this is a rather clumsy attempt to 'resurrect' the son in line with Christian doctrine, others point to the wordplay that exists between the Hebrew words for 'son' (*ben*) and 'stone' (*eben*) as a suitable rationale for the connection (which does not work in Greek as the words are *huios* and *lithos*). The quotation makes two points. First, the death/rejection of the son/stone becomes the cornerstone for a new building, which Mark undoubtedly understands as the Church. Second, the phrase 'this was the Lord's doing' confirms a point made in the Passion predictions (Mark 8.31; 9.31; 10.33) that Jesus' crucifixion was part of God's plan. How much of this goes back to Jesus will be discussed in Chapters 5–7.

Most of the disputes in Mark's Gospel begin with a challenge to Jesus, but in Mark 12.35–37 Jesus is portrayed as taking the initiative. While teaching in the temple he asks, 'How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David?' He then quotes Psalm 110.1 as a riddle, for if David (by the Holy Spirit) calls him Lord, how can he be his son ('The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"')? The Hebrew text makes it clear that the first 'Lord' is God (YHWH), and in the light of the promise (subjection of enemies), God is speaking to his Messiah, whom David addresses as 'my Lord' (*adonai*). Later Christian thought will argue that the LXX – which uses *kyrios* for both YHWH and *adonai* here – refers to God the Father speaking to God the Son, but is this Mark's meaning? Joel Marcus thinks that Mark is wrestling with an ambiguity:

Paradoxically . . . the Davidic image turns out to be both too triumphalistic and not triumphant enough . . . It is not triumphant enough because Jesus is victor not only over his earthly enemies but also, as his entire earthly ministry reveals, over their supernatural masters . . .

Jesus and Scripture according to Mark's Gospel

That image, on the other hand, is too triumphant because the manner in which Jesus wins his definitive victory over his enemies is through his suffering and death.¹⁴

It has been a puzzle and sometimes a theological embarrassment that God's Messiah ends his life in Mark's Gospel with the cry 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15.34). These are the opening words (after the title) of Psalm 22, and one suggestion is that Jesus was seeking to invoke the whole of the psalm, especially its more positive ending: 'For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him . . . future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it' (Ps. 22.24, 30–31). Certainly Mark appears to have the wider psalm in mind, for the dividing of Jesus' garments alludes to Psalm 22.18 ('they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots') and the mockery and wagging of heads alludes to Psalm 22.7 ('All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads'). However, these allusions merely confirm that Mark's focus is on the suffering of the psalmist, not the psalm's more positive conclusion. As France says, 'to read into these few tortured words an exegesis of the whole psalm is to turn upside down the effect which Mark has created by this powerful and enigmatic cry of agony'.¹⁵ It thus appears that Mark understood Psalm 22.1 as a prophecy of the Messiah's suffering, just as he has portrayed Jesus' suffering as God's will throughout his Gospel.¹⁶

The criterion of embarrassment

In this chapter we have seen several examples of where Jesus' words are not easy to reconcile with later Christian beliefs and practices. For example, Mark 4.10–12 states that Jesus spoke in parables so that his hearers could not perceive his meaning. This is very different from the idea that Jesus spoke in parables in order to communicate to a wide audience. In the story of the man enquiring about eternal life Jesus says 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone' (Mark 10.18). In Mark 10.11 Jesus forbids divorce on any grounds, a teaching that Paul finds difficult to apply in the case of a Christian married to a non-Christian (1 Cor. 7.12–16). And as we have just discussed,

it is surprising that God's faithful servant ends his life by crying out 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15.32), especially as the first Christian martyr (Stephen) seems far more composed (Acts 7.54–56). *The criterion of embarrassment* states that it is very unlikely that the early Church would invent sayings that contradict or otherwise differ from its own beliefs and practices. It is more likely that they have been included because the Gospel writers (or their sources) knew that Jesus had said them, even though they present the Church with certain difficulties.

Conclusion

Mark's Gospel is often thought of as the 'enigmatic Gospel', and this also applies to his portrayal of Jesus' use of Scripture. Thus he presents Jesus as strongly upholding the law against Pharisaic 'traditions', while almost going out of his way to provoke them concerning what can and cannot be done on the Sabbath. He refers to the Scriptures as the 'word of God' but suggests that the 'one flesh' view of marriage in Genesis 2 takes priority over the permission to divorce in Deuteronomy 24, which is said to be a concession by Moses. Isaiah is clearly an important text to Jesus, but the explicit quotations are not used to elucidate who he is and what he has come to do, rather to accuse his opponents of blindness, hypocrisy and self-interest. The psalms are also important to Jesus, and Mark probably thinks that the voice at the baptism and transfiguration ('You are my son') were significant for Jesus' own self-understanding. However, contrary to the victory message of Psalm 2, the son in the parable of the vineyard is killed and Jesus ends his life by identifying with David's suffering in Psalm 22, which if understood as prophecy becomes the suffering of the Messiah. The only explicit quotation that makes the point that suffering will not have the final word is Psalm 118.23, quoted at the end of the parable of the vineyard. The son in the parable is killed but the psalm envisages the son/stone becoming the cornerstone of a new building, which Mark undoubtedly understands as the Church. It remains a matter of debate as to why the allusions to Isaiah 53 are so tentative when quotations from this chapter would have brought some coherence to Mark's 'victory through suffering' theme. Perhaps coherence, in the sense of rational explanation, was not what Mark was trying to achieve.¹⁷