

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

A Commentary

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The use of κύριος and ὑποτάσσεται even suggest to the reader that claims made only for the God of Israel—Lord and Mighty One—are being shifted to the one who is to come.³⁷ For all the greatness of the Baptist,³⁸ the messenger of God sent to prepare the way of “the Lord,” a gulf lies between the messenger and the one he announces. Untying the master’s sandals was the one demeaning task never required of a Hebrew servant (*Mek.* 21:1; *b. Ketub.* 96a). “To be unworthy of such a task would be to lower oneself below the status of a slave.”³⁹ The Baptist’s final words in the Gospel of Mark look back to his baptism: “I have baptized (ἐβάπτισα: aorist tense) you with water,” and forward to the future activity of Jesus: “He will baptize (βαπτίσει: future tense) you with the Holy Spirit” (v. 8). The narrator has already described John’s baptism in vv. 4–5, and the idea of a baptism with the spirit is not entirely new. The prophet Ezekiel had promised, in the name of YHWH:

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. (*Ezek.* 36:25–27)

The Qumran sectarians and later Judaism spoke of a spirit baptism in which the Spirit was a gift of God to the faithful, and his promises for them would be realized through this gift.⁴⁰ It is not so much the idea of a gift of a “holy spirit” that is new but the proclamation that the coming one would dispense this gift. Not only are the names of God (“Lord” and “Mighty One”) taken over by the coming one, but also one of God’s functions as the giver of the Spirit.

The baptism of Jesus (1:9–11)

To this point in the prologue, Jesus the Christ, the Son of God (1:1) has not appeared in the narrative. God has been the main actor, through his word (vv. 1–3) and the partial fulfillment of that word (vv. 4–8). Jesus’ entry is solemnly announced in a Greek version of a heavily Semitic introduction (see *Exod.* 2:1; *Judg.* 19:1; 1 *Sam.* 28:1) of an important

³⁷ See Lohmeyer, *Markus*, 18 n. 1. Meier (*A Marginal Jew*, 2:32–42) regards the Baptist’s words on “the stronger one” as ambiguous, and probably coming from the historical John the Baptist. John used the expression not of a replacement for YHWH but of an imminent eschatological figure whom he expected but did not fully understand. The shift from the Baptist’s use of the expression to its present role in the presentation of Jesus in the Markan prologue allows our author to suggest a man who acts as God acts. For Marcus (*Mark*, 157–58) there are no such links. It is an indication of the relative “powers” of the Baptist and Jesus. Jesus is “stronger” than the Baptist. See, along the same lines, Broadhead, *Naming Jesus*, 61–62.

³⁸ It is often claimed that the Baptist material in the Gospels arose within a conflict in the early church. There was a need to place John the Baptist in a subordinate position, and to stress his inferiority to Jesus. The figure of John the Baptist was obviously important in those days (see especially *Acts* 18:24–19:7), but a problem with the catechesis of the ex-disciples of the Baptist rather than a polemic between Jesus’ followers and the Baptist’s followers may have generated the present form of the Baptist material in the Gospels. See Moloney, “The Fourth Gospel,” 49.

³⁹ Guelich, *Mark*, 24.

⁴⁰ See *1QS* 3:7–9; 4:20–21; 1 *QH* 16:11–12; *T. Levi* 18:6–7 (*OTP* 1:795). See Guelich, *Mark*, 24–26. For Meier (*A Marginal Jew*, 2:53–56), Mark distinguishes between the baptism “for the forgiveness of sins,” which is preparatory, and the baptism in the Holy Spirit, which marks the arrival of the eschatological age.

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In a world where God abides above the firmament and the human story takes place below, the opening of the heavens promises a communication from above to below (see Gen 7:11; Isa 24:18; Ezek 1:1; Rev 4:1; 11:19).⁴⁶ The messenger has performed his God-given task: going before the face and preparing the way for the Lord. We read of Jesus' experiences in 1:9–11, but God's action is reported. The Spirit descends upon Jesus, a hint of the older promise of the gift of the Spirit in the new creation, especially as it had been announced by the prophet Isaiah (see especially Isa 42:1–5, but also 11:1–3; 61:1; 63:10–14). It is as one gifted with the Spirit (v. 10) that Jesus will baptize with the Spirit (v. 8). The appearance of creation themes recalls the adumbration of the creation story by means of the word ἀρχὴ in v. 1 (see Gen 1:1). In Gen 1:3 the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters, and in Mark 1:10 the Spirit of God descends upon Jesus "like a dove."⁴⁷ Despite the widespread use of the symbol of the dove in ancient literature,⁴⁸ there is no precedent for the Markan link between the Spirit and the dove.⁴⁹ The use of the symbol is to be taken at its face value. The Spirit of God, who cannot be *seen*, gently descends upon Jesus like a

dove, which he carries as the Stronger One (v. 7) Spirit (v. 10).⁵¹

Jesus' vision of the dove, is paired with a voice about a voice (φωνή) coming authoritatively restated as "well pleased." The claim of God (v. 11). The "I am my Son" (LXX: ἡμεῖς υἱοὶ τοῦ Θεοῦ) uniqueness of the Son and further enhance the sameness between Abraham and Jesus. The suggestion here is a sign of his destiny.⁵³ The final v. 11 and the Son: "whereas the forces that pleasure works itself

The subsequent action

Thus far Jesus has been the dove (v. 10b). The Baptist and God continue Jesus into the wilderness" be fulfilled. The Baptists have opened and

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⁵¹On the possibility of Messiah and Son of

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1:31), and is a further hint of the Isaianic Servant of Isa-

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⁵³See Hooker, *Be* vv. 10–11 designate Jesus

⁴¹ See Marcus, *Mark*, 163.

⁴² Myers (Binding the Strong Man, 128) comments: "tantamount to announcing him as 'Jesus from Nowheresville.'"

⁴³ Modern scholars sometimes ask how Jesus could need John's baptism and argue whether or not it marks Jesus' conversion or his seeking forgiveness of sin. Mark's brief report of an event that no doubt took place in the life of the historical Jesus cannot bear the weight of such speculation. See, for example, Myers (Binding the Strong Man, 127–30), who sees it as a genuine act of repentance, a symbolic renunciation of the old order—too much is "read into" the text.

⁴⁴ The absence of proper names in v. 10 makes it difficult to be sure who "saw." Grammatically, however, it must be the subject of v. 9 (Jesus came from Nazareth and was baptized) and the one addressed in v. 11 ("You are my beloved Son"). It is Jesus who saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending. For "John" as the subject (with reference to John 1:31–34) see Painter, *Mark's Gospel*, 30. ⁴⁵ Marcus, *Mark*, 165.

⁴⁶ See Cranfield, *St. Mark*, 53; Hooker, *Message*, 11.

⁴⁷ For this, and further links with creation ideas and symbolism, see Marcus, *Mark*, 165–66.

⁴⁸ See especially E.-L. Lentzen-Deis, *Die Taufe Jesu nach den Synoptikern: Literarische und*

Gattungsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen (FTS 4; Frankfurt: Josef Knecht, 1970), 170–83.

⁴⁹ Because of my suspicion that a number of creation and new creation themes are developed toward the end of the prologue, I am tempted by the suggestions of Lane (*Mark*, 56–57) and Hooker (*Message*, 11–12), who trace a link between the Spirit of God in Gen 1:3 and a dove in Jewish literature (especially *b. Hag* 15a). See also Marcus, *Mark*, 159–60. The evidence, however, is slight and

dove, which he can see.⁵⁰ Jesus, Christ and Son of God (v. 1), the Lord (v. 3), and the Stronger One (v. 7) who will dispense the Holy Spirit (v. 8), has now been gifted with the Spirit (v. 10).⁵¹

Jesus' vision of the gift of the Holy Spirit, through the medium of the gently descending dove, is paired with an aural experience; he *hears* a voice from heaven. The rabbi often spoke about a voice from above that indicated God's mind (the *bat qol*), but this was merely a sound, and it was sometimes little more than a shadowy hint. What Jesus hears is a voice (*φωνή*) coming from heaven. What has already been made clear in the prologue is authoritatively restated by the voice of God: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." The claim made by the omniscient narrator (1:1) is confirmed by the voice of God (v. 11). The words from heaven are close to words of God reported in Ps 2:7: "You are my Son" (LXX: υἱός μου εἶ σὺ). But the Markan voice of God insists further on the uniqueness of the Son. The voice from heaven places the pronoun first (σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱός μου), and further enhances the dignity of the Son by describing him as "the beloved" (ὁ ἀγαπητός). The same expression was used to describe the special relationship that existed between Abraham and Isaac, his "beloved son" (see LXX Gen 22:2, 12, 16; T. Levi 18).⁵² Perhaps this suggestion of the love between Abraham and Isaac, whom he was asked to sacrifice as a sign of his unconditional allegiance to YHWH, is a first subtle hint of Jesus' destiny.⁵³ The final words of God indicate the quality of the relationship between the Father and the Son: "with you I am well pleased." The Gospel will show, as the Son encounters the forces that oppose God and God's original design for humankind, that God's pleasure works itself out in surprising ways.

The subsequent actions of Jesus (1:12–13)

Thus far Jesus has come from Nazareth (v. 9), risen from the water (v. 10a), and seen the dove (v. 10b). These actions, however, have put him in the right place so that others (the Baptist and God) might do things to him and for him. The final section of the prologue continues Jesus' fundamentally passive role: "The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness" (v. 12). The prolepses of earlier parts of the prologue continue to be fulfilled. The Baptist promised that Jesus would baptize with a holy spirit (v. 8), the heavens have opened and the Spirit has descended upon him (v. 10). The Spirit has taken

perhaps too late to be useful. There may be a more general link with the use of a dove by Noah in Gen 8:8–12. See H. C. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power: A Socio-Political Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 70.

⁵⁰ Even this approach has its difficulties. For some (e.g., L. E. Keck, "The Spirit and the Dove," NTS 17 [1970–1971]: 41–67), ὁς περιερεῖται καταβαίνων is to be read adverbially: "The Spirit, coming down, as a dove does." Others (e.g., Taylor, *St. Mark*, 160–61; Grundmann, *Markus*, 42; Pesch, *Markusevangelium*, 19) read it as an adjectival phrase: "like a dove." In the end, there is little between these positions. They both rightly claim that the dove is not important in itself. It is used to describe the gentle descent of the Spirit of God.

⁵¹ On the possibility that the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus marks the moment of his becoming Messiah and Son of God, see Marcus, *Mark*, 160.

⁵² See Kazmierski, *Son of God*, 54–55; Pesch, *Markusevangelium*, 93. Marcus (*Mark*, 166) suggests that "the good pleasure" of God, hints at the theme of "and it was good" in Genesis (see Gen 1:31), and is a further hint of the new creation. For Watts (*New Exodus*, 108–18) as well as Ps 2, the Isaianic Servant of Isa 42:1 also forms part of the background. See also Kazmierski, *Son of God*, 37–61; Marcus, *The Way of the Lord*, 48–56.

⁵³ See Hooker, *Beginnings*, 15–16; Marcus, *Mark*, 162. For Gibson (*Temptations*, 70–78), vv. 10–11 designate Jesus as the king of Israel, the Suffering Servant and sacrificial victim.

possession of Jesus, and is now the driving force of his actions. A strong verb (ἐκβαλλεῖ) associated with the famous Markan use of “immediately” (εὐθὺς) illustrates the divine urgency which determines the actions of Jesus.⁵⁴ Jesus is still the subject of the actions of God, driven out into the desert as God’s words had earlier predicted (vv. 2–3). The desert wilderness has a number of meanings in the Old Testament, Judaism, and early Christianity. Above all, however, it is a place of ambiguity. This ambivalence has its origins in the experience of the Hebrew people after their liberation from Egypt and their crossing of the Reed Sea. The desert was for Israel a place of refuge against aggression, a place of privileged encounter with God, but also a place of physical and moral trials, of temptation and sin. The theme continues into the experiences of many Old Testament personalities (for example, Abraham, Elijah, and David).⁵⁵ Against this background the authors of Genesis present the fallen state of humankind divided against itself, expelled from a garden where creation was in harmony, into a place where the land and its animal inhabitants rebel against a man and a woman, who are themselves in conflict (see Gen 2:15–25; 3:14–21).⁵⁶

Moses was forty days and forty nights on Mount Sinai without bread or water (see Exod 34:28; Deut 9:9, 18), and Elijah fled through the desert for forty days without food (1 Kgs 19:4–8). Jesus is in the wilderness for forty days (1:13a). Like Moses and Elijah, he experiences the ambiguity of the desert, and in this ambiguity he is exposed to the experience of the man and woman in Eden, tempted by Satan (v. 13b).⁵⁷ But here the parallel falls. Adam was tempted by Satan, fell, and was driven out of the garden (LXX Gen 3:24: “He [ΥΗΩΗ] drove out [ἐξέβαλεν] Adam”). Jesus, filled with the Spirit (v. 10), is driven (ἐκβαλλεῖ) by that Spirit into the wilderness (v. 12). We are not told explicitly of Jesus’ fall or victory (unlike Matt 4:1–11 // Luke 4:1–13). Jesus is tempted by Satan, and “he was with

⁵⁴ Mark uses this adverb more times in his 664 verses (forty-seven times) than the rest of the New Testament put together. The count depends upon one’s acceptance or refusal of the later scribal tendency to change the Markan εὐθὺς to the more elegant εὐθέως. It is often omitted in translation, but the rhythmic appearance of this word is deliberate. It indicates the urgency of what God is doing in and through Jesus.

⁵⁵ On this theme, see Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 2:43–46; E. Corsini, *The Apocalypse: The Perennial Revelation of Jesus Christ* (trans. and ed. F. J. Moloney; GNS 5; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1983), 216–18; Cranfield, *St. Mark*, 41–42. The ambiguous nature of the desert wilderness continues into the early church. See Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* (trans. R. C. Gregg; Classics of Western Spirituality; London: SPCK, 1980), 33–65; P. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), 213–40.

⁵⁶ With this paragraph I am suggesting that the use of “the desert” in Mark 1:12–13 (prepared in 1:2–3) is linked with the fall in Genesis rather than with the exodus. This does not exclude the possibility of the presence of exodus themes here. For that position, see U. Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness* (SBT 39; London: SCM, 1963), 77–102. See especially Gibson (*Temptations*, 60–64), who insists that “the desert” is the place of Israel’s post-exodus wandering; the place where Jesus must prove his devotion to God. Recently Watts (*New Exodus*, 96–121) has argued against both suggestions, claiming that major themes of the new exodus in Isa 40–55 emerge across the prologue, and set the agenda for the whole of the Gospel. For Painter (*Mark’s Gospel*, 32), the situation in the desert introduces the reader to the Gospel’s apocalyptic theme of goodness triumphing over satanic power. It was, of course, the ambiguity of the exodus that provided Israel with the hermeneutical key for the interpretation of the biblical narrative, including Gen 1–11. On the primacy of the story of Adam (and Jewish reflection upon Adam) in vv. 12–13, see Marcus, *Mark*, 169–70.

⁵⁷ For Gibson (*Temptations*, 58–60), Satan is the agent who tests Jesus’ faithfulness to God. Marcus (*Mark*, 169) looks to L.A.E. 6 for the theme of forty years in traditions surrounding the Fall. For an overview of the development of the notion of “Satan,” and his role in Jewish traditions, see S. R. Garrett, *The Temptations of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 32–35.

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the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him" (v. 13b). For the first time in the narrative Jesus is alone, and takes the initiative: "he was with the wild beasts." This may appear irrelevant, or something that one expects if one spends too much time in the wilderness (!), or even a note linking this gospel to the experience of the Roman Christians thrown to the wild beasts during the Neronian persecution.⁵⁸ Yet, "[t]his phrase, distinctive to Mark's account, holds the key to his temptation narrative."⁵⁹ In the Genesis story Satan's victory over Adam led to hostility and fear in creation (see Gen 3:14–21; Ps 91:11–13). In the Markan story that situation is reversed: he is *with* the wild beasts (ἦν μετὰ τῶν θηρίων). Prophetic tradition surrounding the new creation has been fulfilled (see Isa 11:6–9; see also 35:3–10; Ezek 34:23–31; T. Benj. 5:2; T. Iss. 7:7). One of the dreams of first-century Judaism has been realized in the coming of Jesus: what was in the beginning has been restored.⁶⁰ This link with the creation myths is further enhanced by the final remark of the narrator: "and the angels waited on him" (ἀγγέλων αὐτῷ). Once again exodus, Elijah, and creation motifs are present in this lapidary statement. Repeatedly throughout the desert experience of Israel angels help and guide the wandering people (see Exod 14:19; 23:20, 23; 32:34; 33:2). During Elijah's experience of despair and hunger in the wilderness, he is served by the angels (1 Kgs 19:5–7). Although not present in the biblical account, Jewish documents speculate that Adam and Eve were fed by the angels in the Garden of Eden (see T. Naph. 8:3–4; b. Sanh. 59b).⁶¹

Only toward the end of the prologue does a hint of the link with the original creation, provided by the ἀρχὴ of 1:1, return. Jesus is "with the wild beasts" and "waited on" by the angels. His coming has repeated the experience of the original people of God in the desert, but above all, it has restored the original order of God's creation. The promise of "the beginning" in v. 1 (see Gen 1:1) and the coming of the creating presence of the Spirit of God in v. 10 (see Gen 1:3) indicate that the prologue to the Gospel of Mark is linked to the prologue to the human story, as it was told in Gen 1–11. God has been the most active figure in vv. 1–13. Although present toward the end of the prologue, Jesus has been *presented* to the

⁵⁸ See, for example, Lane, *St. Mark*, 38. For Myers (*Binding the Strong Man*, 130), the "wild beasts" recall the animal representations of human kingdoms in Dan 7:3, 7.

⁵⁹ Guelich, *Mark*, 38.

⁶⁰ See also Waetjen, *Reordering*, 74–77. On Jewish hopes for the restoration of the Adamic situation, see R. Scroggs, *The Last Adam: A Study in Pauline Anthropology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966); W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (3 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988–1998), 1:356–57. In his major study of Mark 1:12–13, E. Best (*The Temptation and the Passion: The Markan Soteriology* [2d ed.; SNTSMS 2; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990], xv–xxiii, 3–60) makes little of creation themes (see pp. xvi–xviii, 6–7). He claims that Satan is definitively defeated in 1:12–13. For the opposite argument, see J. M. Robinson, *The Problem of History in Mark* (SBT 21; London: SCM, 1957), 21–53. See the summary of this discussion in Hooker, *St. Mark*, 51. J. W. van Henten ("The First Testing of Jesus. A Rereading of Mark 1:12–13," *NTS* 45 [1999]: 349–66) questions this interpretation. He points to the loose links with Genesis, to the need to look elsewhere for the forty days, and suggests that the background is "an allusion to Israel's period in the wilderness, with the focus upon Jesus as the people's leader" (p. 361). See also Gibson (*Temptations*, 65–69) for the rejection of any link with the Adam story. Via texts from T. 12 Patr., Gibson claims that the image of being with the wild beasts indicated the testing of Jesus' faithfulness to God's covenant obligations. Gibson's study of vv. 9–13 can also be found in idem, "Jesus' Wilderness Temptation according to Mark," *JSNT* 53 (1994): 3–34. Garrett (*The Temptations*, 55–60) also explains vv. 12–13 as a Markan indication that Jesus is not victorious over Satan, but must go on making decisions as the righteous servant of God.

⁶¹ See J. Jeremias, "Αδάμ," *TDNT* 1:141. For the L.A.E., see OTP 2:258. For extensive further documentation in support of this position, see Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, 1:356–57.

reader. He is the Christ, the Son of God (v. 1), the Lord (v. 3), the Stronger One (v. 7), one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit (v. 8).⁶² God's voice has assured the reader that he is the beloved Son of God, and that God is well pleased with him (v. 11). He is filled with the Spirit (v. 10), and driven into the desert to reverse the tragedy of the Adam and Eve story, to reestablish God's original design (vv. 12–13).⁶³

The suffering Messiah that faith perplex Moloney of tradition the content of the gospels story to

For most of the narrative, the reader (see, however, However, at the end of the asked where they stand bling and astonished were afraid" (16:8). The author focuses in

Conclusion

The storyteller has provided a dense prologue for the reader/listener. There should be no doubt in the reader's mind about *who Jesus is*. However, there have been hints throughout the prologue that pointed to a ministry, if he is to baptize with a holy spirit (1:8). There is perhaps even a hint that as God's "beloved" (v. 11) he will accept total and unconditional self-sacrifice. The reader comes to the end of the prologue well informed about *who Jesus is*, but as yet unaware of *how Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the Lord, the Stronger One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, and how in his person God's original creative design has been restored*. The readers of this gospel know that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, and they may well wonder how such an end could be pleasing to God (see v. 11).⁶⁴ The prologue to the Gospel lays down this challenge. Now the reader knows *who Jesus is* and must be prepared to read through a story which will show *how Jesus pleases his Father*.

Only the reader or listener is aware of what has been said in the prologue. The various characters in the story—the Pharisees, the crowds, the Romans, and especially the disciples—have not read the prologue. This gospel was not written to provide information about Jesus' story or the foundation of the Christian community, to which its original and most subsequent readers belong. By informing the reader—on the very first page of the story—of *who Jesus is*, the author issues a challenge. The readers know that his story ended on a cross. They therefore ask: *in what way does Jesus, the Son, respond to God's understanding of him? How does he live a life, preach a message, and die a death which restore God's original design and make the Father delight in him (1:11)?*⁶⁵ Answers to these questions can be found only by reading or listening to what Jesus does, what he says, what others do to him, and how he responds to the things done to him in the story that follows.⁶⁶

⁶² Waetjen (*Reordering*, 22) speaks of Jesus in the prologue as "God's surrogate."

⁶³ See also Ernst, *Markus*, 46–47; Lüthmann, *Markusevangelium*, 39.

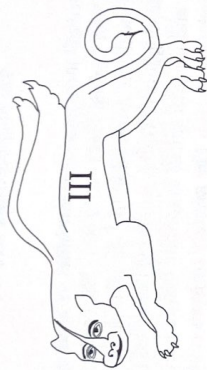
⁶⁴ It is sometimes claimed that Mark 1:1–13 tells the reader everything that needs to be known. See, for example, Hooker, *Message*, 5–7; idem, *St. Mark*, 52; idem, *Beginnings*, 16–22. This is not the case, as the reader still has a great deal to learn and experience via the story of Jesus. On this, see Matera, "The Prologue," 9–15; and idem, *New Testament Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 6–10. On the role of "telling" and "showing" in narrative, see W. C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (2d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 3–20; Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 106–8. See the good description of "the initiated reader" in B. M. F. van Iersel, *Reading Mark* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1988), 42.

⁶⁵ See Marcus, *The Way of the Lord*, 75–77.

⁶⁶ J. Drury ("Mark," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* [ed. R. Alter and F. Kermode, London: Collins, 1987], 405) puts it well: "Between the understanding given us in its first verse and the radical insecurity and incomprehension of the subsequent tale, Mark's book gets its energy." See also Boring, "Mark 1:1–15," 63–67. For Watts (*New Exodus*, 53–136), it is the citation in vv. 2–3 which determines the shape and message of the Gospel as a whole. Watts's study is most helpful on a number of issues, especially the highlighting of the widespread presence of Second Isaiah in Mark, but the overall project is something of a *tour de force*.

For most of the narrative of the Gospel of Mark little attention will be explicitly directed to the reader (see, however, 13:14),⁶⁷ who has been the unique focus of the words of 1:1–13. However, at the end of the story (16:1–8) the author will return to the readers. They will be asked where they stand as they hear: “And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:8). The Gospel of Mark has both a prologue and an epilogue during which the author focuses intensely upon the reader of the intervening narrative of 1:14–15:47.

⁶⁷This rare but important comment from the narrator, “Let the reader understand” (Mark 13:14), is an indication that, despite the fact that the narrator does not regularly address the reader through the narrative, the reader is the focus of the narrator’s storytelling.



JESUS AND ISRAEL (MARK 1:14–3:6)

The reader, armed by the prologue of 1:1–13 with the knowledge of *who Jesus is*, is led into the story of Jesus' public ministry by means of the first, and perhaps major, summary statement of the Gospel (1:14–15). What follows, down to 15:47, tells *how Jesus is* all that has been claimed for him by God and the omniscient narrator in 1:1–13. The section of the Gospel which runs from 1:14 to 3:6 contains textual markers indicating that it forms a discrete literary unit. Mark 1:14–3:6 opens with a summary (1:14–15) and is immediately followed by discipleship material (1:16–20). After various events from Jesus' ministry in Galilee, representative leaders of Israel (the Pharisees and the Herodians; 3:6) make a decision. From opposite ends of Jewish leadership, the coming together of Pharisees and Herodians to plan a unified agenda indicates Israel's initial response to Jesus' words and actions: they plan to destroy him.

The Shape of Mark 1:14–3:6

The overall outline of 1:14–3:6 is clear. It is our first indication that the Gospel of Mark is the product of careful planning and writing.¹ The same care, however, can be found in the internal articulation of 1:14–3:6. Jesus bursts upon the scene in Galilee, proclaiming the gospel and demanding conversion (1:14–15). Immediately he calls others to follow, and they respond without hesitation, following him down his way (vv. 16–20). Together they go forth. From this point on there are always disciples, the Twelve, or some named members of the Twelve "with" Jesus, until they separate themselves from him, fleeing in fear in 14:50. Representative powers of evil—an unclean spirit (vv. 21–28), sickness, and taboo—are overcome as Jesus touches Simon's mother-in-law, heals her, and is served by her (vv. 29–31). The narrative pauses as the narrator summarizes Jesus' healing activity and his power over demons (vv. 32–34), but Simon and some of the disciples disturb Jesus in his prayer, and he journeys on throughout all Galilee, preaching and casting out demons

¹Mark's Greek is regularly charged with being "rudimentary" (see, for example, J. Painter, *Mark's Gospel: Worlds in Conflict* [New Testament Readings; London: Routledge, 1997], 8). For an analysis of the Markan language and style, see V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (2d ed.; London: Macmillan, 1966), 44–54. Taylor remarks: "Mark's Gospel is written in a relatively simple and popular form of Greek which has striking affinities with the spoken language of everyday life as it is revealed to us in the papyri and inscriptions" (p. 52). But simple language can be used skillfully. See especially M. A. Beavis, *Mark's Audience: The Literary and Social Setting of Mark 4:11–12* (ISNTSup 33; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 13–44. These pages show that "Mark is not an artless jumble of transcribed oral stories, but the result of conscious artifice" (p. 21).

(vv. 35–39). The presence of God's goodness continues as Jesus again cuts through ritual taboo, touching a leper and healing him (vv. 39–45). The reader comes away from these first pages of the Gospel with the impression that Jesus' proclamation in v. 15 is bearing fruit. The presence of the kingdom of God is rendering powerless the signs of the kingdom of evil; sickness, taboo, and unclean spirits evaporate before him, his authoritative word (vv. 25, 39, 41), and touch (vv. 31, 41). The mystery of Jesus is already present: "What is this? A new teaching! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him" (v. 27). This authority is also seen in the vocation of the first disciples. Without a murmur, they show all the signs of conversion (μετανοοῦν), leave their worldly success, and walk after Jesus (vv. 16–20). The time is fulfilled, there is repentance, and the powerful presence of the kingdom of God is at hand. The initial proclamation of the gospel by word and deed brooks no opposition (v. 15).²

But this situation does not last. The first moments of Jesus' ministry are directed against *the powers of evil*, and such powers are unable to withstand his word and presence. This is not the case in the encounter between the word, works, and person of Jesus and *the leaders of Israel*. As the story proceeds, Jesus continues to work wonders. He cures a paralytic (2:1–12) and a man with a withered hand (3:1–6). He gathers further disciples from the peripheries of Jewish society (2:13–17), and his words and deeds arouse wonder: "We never saw anything like this!" (2:12). But opposition increases. The five episodes in 2:1–3:6 report not only the spread of Jesus' ongoing authority but also a mounting rejection of this authority. The overall argument of this section of 1:14–3:6 can be seen in the following scheme.³

[A] Jesus enters Capernaum again (καὶ εἰσελθὼν πάλιν εἰς), and forgives the sins of a paralytic, but some of the scribes in their hearts question Jesus' authority to forgive sins (see also vv. 9, 10). He affirms this authority by raising (v. 11; see also vv. 9, 13) the paralytic. (2:1–12)

[B] Jesus calls Levi from his tax office and shares his table and eats (v. 16a; see also v. 16b) with a number of similarly situated characters: sinners and tax collectors, along with his disciples. The scribes of the Pharisees complain about such behavior to his disciples. (2:13–17)

[C] At a time when the disciples of the Baptist and the Pharisees were fasting (v. 18a; see vv. 18b, 19, 20), people came to him and asked why he did not fast like other religious people. They will fast when the bridegroom is taken away (v. 20) from them. (2:18–22)

[B'] As Jesus and his disciples pluck grain and eat on a Sabbath, the Pharisees question Jesus on the right observance of the law, only to be instructed on Abiathar's eating the bread of the Presence (v. 26a; see also v. 26b). (2:23–28)

²The theme of the overwhelming power of the kingdom over against other powers of evil is lost in J. Marcus's title for 1:16–45: "The honeymoon period" (Mark, 177).

³This understanding of Mark 2:1–3:6 depends upon the work of J. Dewey (Markan Public Debate: Literary Technique, Concentric Structure, and Theology in Mark 2:1–3:6 [SBLDS 48; Chicago: Scholars Press, 1980]). An earlier summary can be found in "The Literary Structure of the Controversy Stories in Mark 2:1–3:6," JBL 92 (1973): 394–401. It is now available in *The Interpretation of Mark* (ed. W. R. Telford; IRT 7; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 109–18. See also E. S. Malbon, "The Major Importance of the Minor Characters in Mark," in *In the Company of Jesus: Characters in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 213–14, 217–20, and Marcus (Mark, 212–15), with reservations about the relationship between 2:13–17 and 2:23–28.

[A'] On a Sabbath, (καὶ εἰσηλθὼν ἕν ἡμέρῃ) day so that the their hearts (v. 18) sees and the H

Jesus enters a town at (2:1–12) and at the en eating is found in the heart of the central pa the central message of and last episodes. The traditional material, on

Ongoing themes d ject "in their hearts" (2:1–12) next dispute with him might accuse him (3:2) in descriptions of the (v. 18), the Pharisees (v. 18) first two episodes deal v Jesus performs actions t 3:1–6). The unveiling c where the Son of Man i scenes, which show that however, takes place un groom is taken away fro and Herodians plan his c vious only at the end of t acle story does a sense of the linear development c dom only to meet increa The overall structure

Summary: 1:14–15 and belief

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1:16–20 Discipl
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⁴Some New Testament s of the chiasm. See, most recei and Beyond (New York: St. Vi way, but readers do not read in chiasm. Readers come to the thought and its language. It r reader becomes aware of hav story must be allowed to pre Reader-Response Criticism and

[A'] On a Sabbath, a man with a withered hand is present as Jesus enters the synagogue again (καὶ εἰσὶν ὁ δὲν πάλιν εἰς). But "they" were watching to see what he would do on the holy day so that they might accuse him. He reduces them to silence, grieves over the hardness of their hearts (v. 5), raises the maimed man (v. 3), and performs the miracle (v. 5). The Pharisees and the Herodians hold counsel—to destroy him. (3:1–6)

Jesus enters a town and a synagogue for the two miracle stories found at the beginning (2:1–12) and at the end (3:1–6) of the collection. They both refer to raising. The theme of eating is found in the second and fourth episode (2:13–17, 23–28), while fasting lies at the heart of the central passage (2:18–22). Jesus' statement in 2:20 on his being taken away is the central message of the passage and contrasts with the references to raising in the first and last episodes. These details, italicized above, indicate that 2:1–3:6 is a "chiastic" use of traditional material, or better, an instance of ring composition.⁴

Ongoing themes develop further with each new episode. Jesus' opponents initially object "in their hearts" (2:6). They speak to the disciples (v. 16), then to Jesus (v. 18). They next dispute with him over Sabbath law (v. 24). Finally, in silence they watch so that they might accuse him (3:2) and plot his destruction (v. 6). Representatives of Israel are found in descriptions of the opponents: scribes (2:8), scribes of the Pharisees (v. 16), people (v. 18), the Pharisees (v. 24), "they" (3:2), and the Pharisees and the Herodians (v. 6). The first two episodes deal with sin and sinners (2:1–12, 13–17), and in the final two episodes Jesus performs actions that question a traditional understanding of the Sabbath (2:23–28; 3:1–6). The unveiling of Jesus' role and authority also develops, from the first miracle, where the Son of Man is shown to have authority to forgive sins (2:10), to the two final scenes, which show that the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath (2:28). This development, however, takes place under the shadow of the cross: "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them" (2:20), and that day is already being plotted as Pharisees and Herodians plan his destruction (3:6). The presence of a chiasmic structure becomes obvious only at the end of the reading process. Only when the reader reaches the second miracle story does a sense of repetition generate a looking back across the passage. Meanwhile, the linear development of the story continues as Jesus announces the gospel of the kingdom only to meet increasing opposition, which will lead to his death (see 2:20; 3:6).

The overall structure of 1:14–3:6 can be presented in the following fashion:

- 1:14–15 Summary: Jesus announces the advent of the kingdom and calls for repentance and belief in the gospel.
- 1:16–45 The kingdom comes with power.
 - 1:16–20 Disciples are called and respond.
 - 1:21–28 An unclean spirit is vanquished.
 - 1:29–31 Sickness and taboo are vanquished.
 - 1:32–34 Jesus' healing and exorcizing authority is summarized.

⁴Some New Testament scholars trace chiasms in the text and interpret the passage in the light of the chiasm. See, most recently, J. Breck, *The Shape of Biblical Language: Chiasmus in the Scriptures and Beyond* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994). No doubt ancient authors wrote in this way, but readers do not read in chiasms. A printed page and a scholar's desk are needed to "lay out" a chiasm. Readers come to the end of a passage and are aware of a reprise of an earlier passage, its thought and its language. It may be better to call these literary patterns "ring compositions." The reader becomes aware of having come full circle. The temporal and linear development of the story must be allowed to proceed. See the remarks of R. M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 151–52.

- 1:35–39 Jesus is led away from prayer to preach and cast out demons throughout Galilee.
 1:40–45 Sickens and taboos are vanquished.
 2:1–3:6 The kingdom is opposed.
 2:1–12 Jesus cures and is questioned.
 2:13–17 Jesus calls disciples and is questioned.
 2:18–22 Jesus is questioned over fasting.
 2:23–28 Jesus is questioned over Sabbath law.
 3:1–6 Jesus is watched that he might be accused, and his death is plotted.

This “list of events,” however well articulated, does not indicate the richness of Mark 1:14–3:6.⁵ As Jesus’ words and deeds demonstrate the power of the kingdom, yet raise opposition, there is a subtle interweaving of an increasing interest and wonder in Jesus’ person. Characters in the story, who have not read the prologue, encounter Jesus and raise questions: “What is this? A new teaching?” (1:27); “Everyone is searching for you” (1:37); “We never saw anything like this!” (2:12). The narrator informs the reader who has read the prologue: “They were astonished at his teaching” (1:22); “His fame spread everywhere” (1:28); “And the whole city was gathered together about the door” (1:33); “People came to him from every quarter” (1:45); “They were all amazed and glorified God” (2:12). Yet Jesus forbids the demons, who know who he is, to speak (1:34) and insists that his deeds not become the focus of attention (1:44). Mark 1:14–3:6 vigorously addresses the question of Jesus’ identity.

Summary (1:14–15)

There is progression as Jesus actively preaches the gospel. Throughout 1:1–13 the storyteller speaks directly to readers, telling them who Jesus is. The first major section of the Gospel begins with a summary, followed by material on the disciples (vv. 16–20). It also begins with a geographical reference to Jesus’ coming into Galilee, where he will remain until 10:1. There is a decisive break in vv. 14–15 with the period of John the Baptist, and the place of his ministry. John announced the coming of Jesus (vv. 2–8) and baptized him (vv. 9–11), but as Jesus begins his ministry, that period is closed. John has been violently swept from the scene. The verb used to speak of John’s arrest (παροδοῦναι) means both “rest and imprisonment, and it will be used later in the Gospel to speak of Jesus’ being “delivered up” to authorities, and to scourging and crucifixion (9:31; 14:10; 15:1, 15).⁶ The relationship between John and Jesus is maintained across the Gospel (see especially 6:14–29; 9:13), but in the Markan telling of Jesus’ story, the former has already fallen into

⁵ Some commentators regard any attempt to trace a literary structure in Mark as a lost cause. See, for example, Anderson, *Mark*, 32–40. M. D. Hooker (*St. Mark*, 109, and elsewhere) regards divisions as “arbitrary.” However, although differing in detail, a number of commentators follow the above general division. For a sampling, see Taylor, *St. Mark*, 107; Lohmeyer, *Markusevangelium*, 29–70 (see also p. 7ⁿ); Schweizer, *Mark*, 44–77; Lane, *Mark*, 29; Pesch, *Markusevangelium*, 33–34; Gnilka, *Markus*, 1:71; Waetjen, *Reordering*, 77–95. For a different approach, see B. M. F. van Iersel, *Reading Mark* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1988), 43–68; Guelich, *Mark*, xxxv–xxxviii; Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, viii–ix; Painter, *Mark’s Gospel*, ix–x.

⁶ See Lührmann, *Markusevangelium*, 39. On the development and use of this verb to speak of a saving death of Jesus, see N. Perrin, “The Use of (*Para*)*didonai* in Connection with the Passion of Jesus in the New Testament,” in *A Modern Pilgrimage in New Testament Christology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 94–103.

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violent hands as Jesus begins a ministry that will end in the same fashion.⁷ The report of the death of John the Baptist in 6:14–29 is the Markan use of a long analeptic flashback, set between the sending out (6:6b–13) and the return (6:30) of the Twelve. Not only is John off the scene because of his “handing over,” but his ministry to all Judea and many from Jerusalem (see v. 5) is left behind as Jesus goes to Galilee (v. 14). There he will exercise the major part of his ministry (1:14–9:50).

John proclaimed a baptism of repentance (v. 4) and the coming of “the stronger one” (v. 7). Jesus also proclaims (v. 14), but he points away from himself to announce the gospel of God (v. 14). In v. 1 the narrator stated that the book that follows is “the good news” about Jesus, and the content of that good news is that he is the Christ, the Son of God.⁸ What eventually emerged in the prologue is restated in the words of Jesus. The “good news,” however, is not primarily about what Jesus did but about what God did in and through his Son, Jesus, in whom he is well pleased (see v. 11).⁹ “The content of this ‘gospel’ is set forth in the message of 1:15 that is exegetical to 1:14.”¹⁰ The long-standing Jewish understanding of God as king, vindicator, and champion, so often thwarted by the events of history and the frailty of the people and their leaders, is proclaimed as “at hand” (ἤγγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ). Jesus’ announcement creates a sense of urgency. The reigning presence of God is “at the door”—there, but not fully present, and this summons forth a response,¹¹ indicating an unresolved tension between the present and yet to come kingdom. The rest of the Gospel will tell a tale of different responses to this tension as various characters in the story encounter the reigning presence of God in the person and teaching of Jesus.¹² The long wait has come to an end: “the time is fulfilled.” The expression ὁ καιρὸς is used to speak of “the time.” In prophetic-apocalyptic language this word points to a time measured by God’s design (see Dan 7:22; Ezek 7:12; 9:1; 1 Pet 1:11; Rev 1:3). There is ordinary time (ὁ χρόνος), which measures human events, and a God-directed opportune time (ὁ καιρὸς). It is the latter that is fulfilled as Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee.

Jesus’ presence, however, demands a twofold response: repentance and belief.¹³ The reigning presence of God, found in the person and teaching of Jesus, his Son (see 1:1–13),

⁷It is likely that there was a period when the ministries of John and Jesus overlapped (see John 3:22–30). The decisive separation of the two ministries serves Mark’s purposes. Gnlika (*Markus*, 1:65) describes it as “a salvation-history scheme.” See also Lane, *Mark*, 63.

⁸See Gnlika, *Markus*, 1:42–43.

⁹This interpretation understands the genitive τοῦ θεοῦ as a subjective genitive. It is good news “from God” rather than good news “about God” (objective genitive). See Hooker, *St. Mark*, 54; Marcus, *Mark*, 172.

¹⁰Guelich, *Mark*, 43.

¹¹C. H. Dodd (*The Parables of the Kingdom* [London: Collins, 1936], 34–80) argued from an examination of the LXX use of the verb ἐγγίζειν that it could mean “to arrive.” His suggestion has not been widely accepted. See a summary of the discussion in Guelich, *Mark*, 43–44. On the position taken above, see Gnlika, *Markus*, 1:68–69. Lane (*Mark*, 65) puts it well: “The coming of the Kingdom remains future, but it is certainly present because God has begun to bring it to pass in the coming of his Son.” See also Marcus, *Mark*, 172–73.

¹²My words “the reigning presence of God” are an attempt to translate the active meaning of the Aramaic behind Jesus’ expression ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ. The “kingdom” must not be understood as a “place where God rules,” but a new situation in the lives of men and women unconditionally open to God, made possible by Jesus’ teaching and person. See Ernst, *Markus*, 51–54.

¹³See C. D. Marshall, *Faith as a Theme in Mark’s Narrative* (SNTSMS 64; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 44–56.

has been proclaimed as the “good news” (1:1, 14). The basic meaning of “repent” (μετανοεῖτε) is a radical turning back.¹⁴ The history of God’s people, long believers in God as their lord and king, is eloquent proof that false directions can be taken. The “good news” of the reigning presence of God is lived (1:11) and proclaimed (1:14) by Jesus Christ (1:1). Despite the brevity of the summary an almost physical image is conjured up, disclosing an urgent need to stop in one’s tracks, turn from all that leads away from the kingdom, and become part of that kingdom by believing in the good news. It “thus properly represents the structural uniqueness of Jesus’ concept of repentance . . . the sense of the beginning of a turn toward Christian faith.”¹⁵ In many ways 1:14–15 is a summary of the Gospel of Mark.¹⁶ The rest of the narrative tells of Jesus’ unflinching proclamation, in both word and deed, of the reigning presence of God.¹⁷ It also tells, however, of the ambiguity of the response of the other characters in the narrative, especially the disciples.

The Kingdom Comes with Power (1:16–45)

Disciples are called and they respond (1:16–20)

There is widespread agreement that the bulk of 1:16–20 has come to Mark from earlier tradition.¹⁸ Among the few Markan additions, the use of “the sea” (τὴν θάλασσαν) to describe what was generally known as “the lake” (λίμνη [Luke 5:1, 2; 8:22, 23, 33]) introduces this symbolic “sea” from the beginning of the narrative.¹⁹ The form of the passage is highly stylized, based on the model of the prophetic vocation of Elisha in 1 Kgs 19:19–21.²⁰ In fact, there are two, not one, vocation stories here. A structured presentation of the text will make this clear.

¹⁴ In Greek the basic idea is a change of attitude affecting one’s inner self, but the Hebrew notion of repentance (*shuv*) means to turn around in one’s tracks and to resume the right path, from which one has strayed. In Judaism it was understood as a return to the law. See H. Merklein, “μετάνοια,” *EDNT* 2:416.

¹⁵ Merklein, *EDNT* 2:417. The non-Markan expression πιστεύετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ indicates the primitive (pre-Markan) nature of this call to repentance and belief (see Gnlika, *Markus*, 1:65; Guelich, *Mark*, 44–45). Marcus (*Mark*, 174) suggests that it may come from a pre-Markan baptismal formula.

¹⁶ “A sort of manifesto which sums up the substance and the essential meaning of the whole public ministry” (Nineham, *St. Mark*, 68).

¹⁷ This summary serves an important Markan literary and theological purpose. Gnlika (*Markus*, 1:65) soundly remarks: “What we find here is hardly an *ipsissimum verbum* of Jesus but rather, surely, a significant new formulation of his preaching of the kingdom.” See also Pesch, *Markusevangelium*, 1:107.

¹⁸ R. Pesch, “Berufung und Sendung, Nachfolge und Mission: Eine Studie zu Mk 1,16–20,” *ZKT Markusevangelium*, 46–47.

¹⁹ The “sea” of Galilee will play an important role in subsequent episodes. See E. S. Malbon, “The Jesus of Mark and the Sea of Galilee,” *JBL* 103 (1984): 363–77; idem, *Narrative Space and Mythic Meaning in Mark* (New Voices in Biblical Studies; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 76–79. On the Markan use of θάλασσα rather than λίμνη, see “The Jesus,” 363–64, *Narrative Space*.

²⁰ For a summary, see E. LaVerdière, *The Beginning of the Gospel: Introducing the Gospel according to Mark* (2 vols.; Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 1:41–42.

²¹ See Pesch, “Berufung und Sendung,” 9–12, for a detailed comparison of the two passages.

Disciples A

And passing along by the sea o
he saw

Simon and Andrew the
casting a net into the se
“Follow me and I will make
And immediately they l
and followed him.

And going on a little farther,
he saw

James the son of Zebed
who were in their boat
And immediately he called the
and they left their father
and followed him.

Jesus never rests. A glance a
tinal motion: Jesus came from
into Galilee (1:14); and passing
they went into Capernaum (1:2
and went out (1:35); and he wen
(2:1); he went out again (2:13).]
evangelist, and show the Marka
sion.²¹ Within this context, car
asked to “walk behind him.”

The use of δεῖτε ὀπίσω ποί
tion of the movement and the l
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(SANT 6; Munich: Kösel, 1962),
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Mark, 181–83.

²¹ See van Iersel, *Reading Mark*

²² See J. Donaldson, “Called to

²³ See J. Donaldson, “Called to

Testament and the early church, see

²⁴ See Hengel, *The Charismatic*