
The Gospel of Mark: A Narrative Theology

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Setting the stage

When I first began studying the New Testament gospels seriously, I naively thought that Mark's gospel was not only primitive in language and style but also rather unsophisticated literarily and theologically. About the same time, historical, form, and redaction criticism of the gospels were beginning to give way in many corners to narrative and feminist analyses of these texts, and it quickly became apparent that my initial judgment about Mark was sorely inadequate. It is certainly not unsophisticated. If anything, it may be for many people too hot to handle because the gospel's claims about the reign of God and what it means to follow Jesus to the cross are intense and unrelenting. In the story world of Mark's gospel, the disciples are anything but stalwarts in the faith, often exhibiting misunderstanding and fear. And what appears to be the original ending of the text leaves the reader hanging, wondering what this unsatisfactory conclusion could mean (and we are easily tempted to turn to Matthew or Luke to see how the story comes out). But the text of Mark stubbornly refuses to relinquish its place and fall quietly in line behind Matthew and Luke. No, the Gospel of Mark holds its own and more. When this gospel comes around again in the lectionary cycle, I quietly sit back and brace myself for its call to join the journey to the cross.

However, if we are not careful the lectionary cycle of texts and the practicing preacher can effectively disassemble the narrative and make the Markan story of Jesus almost unrecognizable and certainly lose its edge. When congregants hear only disconnected snippets of the Markan text spread over the Sundays of the church year, it is perhaps inevitable that any clear sense of the narrative whole will be lost. It is analogous to having someone read a novel to you five pages a week over the course of a full year. Needless to say, it would be easy to lose the power of the story, with all its subtleties and nuances. To be sure, the impact on the listener would be greatly diminished. It is incumbent on preachers and teachers in the church to honor the Markan readings in their liturgical contexts and at the same time to teach and proclaim the narrative character and message of the Markan story in its literary context.¹ It is a literary text with its own storyline and

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plot, characters and settings, points of view and inner conflicts, message and pace. At the same time, it represents and conveys the "good news" of the reign of God that in Jesus has come near and moves inexorably toward the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. It is the divide between the Jesus of the ancient past and the Christ of the present moment that the Gospel of Mark invites the contemporary preacher and the teacher to bring into focus for those who claim to follow Christ on the journey of discipleship.

The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ

In 1:1-15, the reader enters immediately into the Markan story world and encounters a grand statement projecting a sense of seriousness and importance (people from the *whole countryside* of Judea and *all the people of Jerusalem* go out to see John the Baptizer). This is followed by Jesus' own baptism, the descent of the Spirit upon him, and a divine identification (Jesus comes up out of the water, the heavens are torn open [the same root word is used of the splitting of the Temple curtain in 15:38] and the Spirit descends on him whereupon a voice from heaven announces: "*You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.*"). Immediately upon his baptism Jesus is literally *thrown out* into the wilderness with the wild beasts, *tempted by Satan* for forty days, and *waited on by*

Mark, *The Gospel of Mark: A Liturgical Reading*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

1. Charles Bobertz, in fact, has proposed a liturgical reading of

the angels. With an economy of words and an unmistakable sense of immediacy and rapid pace, the storyteller draws the readers in and gives them not only critical information about Jesus, but a sense of the conflict between the things of God and the things of Satan that will play itself out in the story, finally culminating in the death of Christ. We are then told "... that the time is fulfilled and the reign of God (kingdom of God) has come near, repent and believe in the good news (1:14-15)." Whether this statement is the theological headline of the entire gospel or not can be debated, but clearly the reader is alerted that what follows in the story deals with the reign of God, a world with inverted values where those who seek their life will lose it and where the son of God will die on a cross.² Clearly this kingdom is a radically different kind of kingdom as the engaged reader of the story will soon discover.

Let the journey begin

In 1:16-28, the journey begins with the first four disciples who immediately drop their nets and follow Jesus. They neither hesitate nor have any clue what their following will actually involve. They simply go and follow Jesus into the Capernaum (Kefar Nahum) synagogue on the sabbath where he teaches and impresses those gathered with his authority, unlike the scribes. Whereupon Jesus is confronted by a man with an unclean spirit, and the spirit calls out: "What have you to do with us Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." Jesus silences the unclean spirit, and freeing the man from its grip, Christ casts out the spirit causing the assembled crowd to be amazed and ask: "What is this? A new teaching-with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him." With this vivid episode the journey has begun, and the reader here realizes that in the Markan narrative the things of the spirit world recognize each other. As in the wilderness scene, Jesus prevails in decisive fashion; the things of Satan are no match for the things of God. There may be conflict between God and Satan, Jesus and the unclean spirits, but the outcome hardly seems in doubt. This is a theme that plays itself out in the narrative, just as there will be conflict between Jesus and various human characters in the story. But here Jesus is a teacher with authority, and that authority is confirmed by his power over the unclean spirits. The assembled crowd is amazed by what they have seen and heard. However, lest the reader of the story think that Jesus is simply a wonder worker doing astonishing things, his journey to the cross will shatter this mistaken notion.

After a series of healings and exorcisms (1:29-2:12), Jesus comes upon Levi, the tax collector, and for the first time we, the readers and hearers, get an unmistakable clue that the kingdom of God is a radically different kind of kingdom, as Jesus and his followers sit down to a meal with tax collectors and sinners (cf. other Markan eating texts 6:30-44, 7:1-16, 7:24-30, 8:1-21, 14:3-8, 14:12-25). But why would he do this? "... I have not come to call

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righteous people but sinners.” The reign of God defies normal social and religious expectations, and the Markan narrative becomes increasingly explicit about this as the story continues. While his conflict with various authority figures continues to mount in the story (2:18-3:6), Jesus continues to expand his entourage when he goes up a mountain where he appoints and commissions his twelve disciples (3:13-19). His group of followers expands while at the same time his family thinks he has “lost his senses,” is literally “out of his mind,” and needs to be restrained (3:21), while only a few lines further on his mother and brothers try to see him. To which Jesus replies: “Who are my mother and brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (3:33-34). Rather than simply the words of an ungrateful son, these words redefine the nature of the “family” or we might say the nature of the emerging community of those who follow Christ on the journey. The boundary between who is in this community and who is not is dramatically redefined here. It is not, of course, a matter of family lineage or ethnic identity or national affiliation. For Mark, it is simply a matter of who does the will of God and everything that might imply for his church, as displayed later in the narrative: e.g., *following* the way of the cross, *gathering* at the common table, *sharing* the waters of baptism, and *including* the marginalized.

This brings us to one of the most interesting sections of the entire narrative: the so-called parable of the sower or soil types, which itself introduces a larger section devoted to Jesus’ parables. Jesus tells a parable to the crowd gathered on the shore about four different soil types, each representing a different type of response to the word (4:1-9). The meaning of the parable is then explained (4:13-20), after a brief but critically important interlude (4:10-12). This middle section makes clear that the setting has now shifted. Whereas the parable proper is told to the crowds, the scene now shifts and the explanation is given privately to the twelve and a few others. The insiders on the journey are distinguished from the larger group, the crowds. They are given special instruction. To them has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, as stated explicitly in 4:10-12, whereas to those outside everything comes

2. See David Rhoads, “Losing Life for Others in the Face of Death,” *Interpretation* 47 (October 1993), 358-364.

in parables. The difficulty of interpreting this text is compounded by Mark's use of *hina* in verse 4:12, which can be translated as either a result clause (*as a result* outsiders will see but not perceive, listen but not understand ...) or as a purpose clause (parables are told *for the purpose* that outsiders see but not perceive, listen but not understand...). While contemporary readers are apt to think of parables as teaching devices that help make things clear, the second translation option suggests that parables for Mark are more like riddles that may challenge, if not confuse, those without special instruction.³ Furthermore, if Mary Ann Tolbert is correct, the soil types in turn represent different characters in the Markan story and how they variously respond to the word.⁴ Following three more parables later in that same chapter, the narrator tells us that "with many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciple" (cf. also 7:14-23, 12:1-12).

Faith or fear, Jew or Gentile, sight or insight

In 4:35-10:52 with its many episodes and narrative turns, the irony and tension of the story builds. The conflict between Jesus and the disciples grows, the narrative settings shift revealing new dimensions of the story, and the provocative nature of the kingdom of God becomes more and more apparent. Immediately following the Markan parables in chapter 4, Jesus and his disciples are on the sea heading toward the land of the Gerasenes where, we are told, Jesus is met by Legion (4:35-5:20). This section of the story is filled with a biting sense of irony for on the sea the disciples cower as Jesus sleeps and the storm threatens to swamp the boat (cf. also 6:47-52). They exhibit fear not faith, and Jesus stills the storm with the words: "Quiet, Be still!" Having just received private instruction from Jesus into the nature of the reign of God, they question who this man is that the wind and sea obey. While the setting on the sea is a place of churning chaos, it also symbolizes a boundary between Jewish territory and Gentile territory. In the world of the story, crossing this boundary creates its own kind of chaos, as they discover when a man with a severe case of demon possession confronts Jesus. Once again, the demons know who Jesus is and his authority over them is clearly on display as they beg him not to send them out of the country. In a stroke of narrative irony, Jesus upon request sends them into the feeding swine (this is Gentile territory) which promptly run down the hill and drown in the sea—the herd is very large, numbering two thousand. While the swineherds are none too happy about this and beg him to leave, the healed man pleads to stay with Jesus. Interestingly, Jesus refuses and instead commands him to go and tell. There is no injunction to silence here, and the man goes and proclaims in

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the Decapolis as he is charged. Filled with irony, fearful disciples, boundary crossing, a bit of humor, and a surprising command to go tell what has happened, the Markan story moves forward as Jesus and the disciples now cross the sea in the opposite direction (there is no storm when crossing in that direction) and return to Jewish territory. They are met by Jairus, a synagogue leader, and this along with the repetition of the number twelve make clear they are once again among Jews. Jesus and the kingdom journey have moved into Gentile land and back again where he heals an ill woman and raises Jairus' daughter from the dead (5:21-43). For the Markan Jesus, the inclusion of Gentiles on the kingdom journey, and by implication also in the fledgling church, is critically important.

Jewish and Gentile imagery comes into play again in the two feeding stories that follow (6:30-44 and 8:1-9, both in deserted places). In the first, the imagery is presumably Jewish, whereas in the second the setting is undoubtedly Gentile, as just before this he is in the region of Tyre where he has encountered the Syro-phenician woman whose daughter is ill with an unclean spirit. Moreover, after the first crowd is fed twelve baskets are taken up, but after the second seven baskets are left over. The literary symbolism shows once again that for Mark the kingdom of God is not bounded by territory or by ethnicity or by familial lineage, but by those who do the will of God and perhaps, as in the case of the Syrophenician woman, those with a persistent kind of faith. Moreover, it is not defined by public respectability either as the calling of Levi the tax collector indicates. In Mark's narrative world, the reign of God reaches beyond traditional boundaries and beyond traditional expectations. In this world, things are radically redefined and expanded.

The nature of God's reign comes into still sharper focus in 8:22-10:52 where the entire section is bracketed by two blind men who have their sight restored by Jesus. While neither of these men is technically on the way or on the journey with Jesus, he still engages them and restores their sight. If we can agree that the account of Jesus and the disciples caught in the storm on the sea is not at some deeper level finally about meteorology, we can probably also agree that these two sight restoration stories are not really about ophthalmology either. For as we see, these two stories bracket the three passion predictions, the disciples' gross misun-

3. The RSV translated it as result clause, where the NRSV was translated it as purpose clause. While I'm inclined to read the *hina* clause as a purpose clause, different English versions translate this Greek word differently.

4. Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 127-175.

understanding about what they are told, and Jesus' explanation of what life in the kingdom of God is like (8:31-38, 9:30-37, 10:32-45). In the context of the first of these passion predictions, Jesus at Caesarea Philippi asks the disciples directly, "Who do people say that I am?" After some brief give and take, Jesus focuses the question still further, "But who do *you* say that I am?" To which Peter gives the right answer, but as the story indicates he has no clue as to the meaning of what he has just confessed. After each of the other two passion predictions, the disciples yet again show themselves to be without understanding. They may have sight but they do not have insight, despite being insiders on the "way." In the process of reading or hearing this part of the story, we not only learn where this journey will lead, but we learn in no uncertain terms how the values of God's reign are at odds with the values of the kingdoms of this world. The challenge for the followers of Jesus is direct and profound. And right in the middle of these predictions, Mark places the account of Jesus' transfiguration on the top of a mountain where the voice from heaven announces once again that Jesus is the beloved son of God (9:2-8). The literary juxtaposition between the three passion predictions and this mountain top experience is poignant, if not jarring, for those who enter into this narrative world.

On to Jerusalem

In chapter 11, the journey to Jerusalem begins in earnest, and the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities rises to a new level. Following his first triumphal entry into the city (11:1-11), he and his disciples enter a second time resulting in his encounter with the money changers in the temple. We are told directly that the religious authorities look for a way to kill him because of his popularity among the people (11:12-24). But the way Mark structures this text suggests that more is at stake here than mere conflict with the authorities and those who have defiled the temple with their buying and selling. Mark splits the fig tree part of the story into two parts and uses them to bracket the scene in the temple. On the way into the city, Jesus curses the fig tree and on the way out of the city after the temple encounter, they see that the fig tree has withered. As we know, this bracketing technique is a conspicuous feature of the Markan story and this text is no exception. Here, the two parts of the fig tree story interpret the temple scene. The fig tree corresponds to the temple, the cursing of the fig tree corresponds to the cursing (casting out of money changers) of the temple, and the withering of the fig tree requires that the reader supply the final piece of the puzzle. The temple, too, has effectively withered and come to an end. While not all readers of Mark would agree, to my literary mind this is clearly not a story of the cleansing of the temple, but an announcement of its end (cf. 13:1-2), which would make sense if Mark was written near the year 70 CE when the temple was in fact destroyed by the Romans.

Jesus' judgment on the authorities in the parable of the vineyard (12:1-12) continues his challenge to the Jerusalem religious establishment, and the sense of conflict rises still further as he

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engages with Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, scribes, and others. In language echoing apocalyptic imagery, he privately instructs his disciples once again about the distress that will befall them (13:3-37) and that they must remain alert for the coming of the Son of Man in power and glory. Interestingly, the passion of Jesus is bracketed on the frontend by an important identifying action: an anointing. He is the Christ, the anointed one (14:3-9). And on the backend after Jesus dies by the unlikely confession of the centurion, "Truly this man was God's Son" (15:39), and by the women who go to the tomb intending to anoint his body for burial (16:19). Not only do the anointing by the woman and the confession by the centurion provide the bookends for the passion proper, but they echo the terminology attributed to Jesus at the beginning of the story (1:1, 1:11). Jesus is both the Christ and the Son of God, and his journey reaches its culmination on the cross and in the empty tomb.

What's in an ending?

The common scholarly view that Mark's narrative ends at 16:8 leaves the reader hanging. The women come early on the sabbath to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body only to discover that the stone has already been rolled away. As they enter the tomb, they are alarmed by a young man sitting inside who announces, "Do not be alarmed, you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.... But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; There you will see him, just as he told you." Overcome by amazement and fear they flee and don't say anything to anyone. The time to go and speak has come, but instead they run away. In this Markan ending, there are no appearances of the risen Christ. But as the textual history of the gospel indicates, there were those who sought to correct this deficiency by adding appearances of the risen Jesus and in this respect bringing it more in line with Matthew and Luke. But it seems the Gospel of Mark is much more subtle, perhaps much more provocative, than that. For even as the narrative comes to an end, the story itself continues in the minds of sympathetic

readers who have followed Jesus to his crucifixion. The implicit questions that linger are: *Who* will speak and *what* will they say? *Will I* speak and *what will I say*? What at first blush appears to be an unsatisfactory ending is closer to an open-ended conclusion that begs for a response from those who have followed and who continue to follow Jesus on the journey of discipleship.⁵ As Mark's stories about the disciples suggest, those responses will always be a complex mix of hope and fear, mystery and misunderstanding, innocence and ignorance, good intentions and woeful inadequacies.

A theology in narrative form

One of the striking features about the Gospel of Mark is that its theology is carried not only by the narrator's words or by the spoken words of the characters, but also by the actions of the characters, by Jesus' actions most dramatically. We see, for example, that he eats with sinners and tax collectors, heals and shows compassion, allays fears and responds to Jairus, to the persistent Syrophenician woman, and to many others in their moment of need. Most dramatically he stays the course to the end, to his crucifixion, where God's reign reveals itself most poignantly. The disciples themselves display a complex and unsentimental view of discipleship, with all of the ambiguities and shortcomings that the Markan narrative can marshal. Yet at its core, discipleship is still a matter of following Jesus just as the word itself suggests. And the religious authorities of Jesus' world, too, are in conflict with him and his vision of God's reign. Opposition and conflict are part of Mark's theology, just as they intersect with the pastoral theologies of many, if not most, Christian congregations today. In short, this is Mark's theology in action.

But Mark's theology is announced in words as well as deeds. Jesus is the anointed one and the Son of God. He challenges Satan and the unclean spirits with words, with commands. The realm of God is not only powerful, but its system of values is inverted relative to the kingdoms of this world. This makes it both compelling and frightening. The reign of God looms large over the Gospel of Mark, and it is this expansive and inclusive theological vision of "good news" that the church seeks to bring to life in the face of the powers and principalities of this world.

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5. Cf. Donald Juel, *A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 107-121.