

A GOSPEL PORTRAIT:

Mark's Jesus in the Reign of God

The Gospel of Mark is not for the squeamish. It intends to get you killed, in a thoroughly nasty way.

At least Mark is honest about it. It is the principal character of Mark's story, Jesus, who tells his disciples that capital punishment is their fate if they continue to follow him (see Mark 8:34-37). Mark's narrator breaks into the story at this point to tell us that Jesus said this "plainly." 'Gentle reader, take note.'

That is, Mark seems to be honest and open-handed. In fact, Mark plays with the emotions of his readers, aiming to get us so caught up with Jesus and his project that even the threat of death pales beside the desire to see Jesus achieve his goal.

What is that goal? How does Mark get us involved in it?

Before we can easily see these things, there are some important ideas to get clear at the outset. These ideas all relate to the fact that the Gospel of Mark, like all the New Testament Gospels, is about Jesus of Nazareth, a person who lived in history. Yet the Gospels are not conventional history.

First, therefore, we need to be clear about the distinction between historical events and various possible ways of writing about history, depending on what a writer wants to do with that history. Second, we need to think about the particular kind of writing about history that the Gospels of the New Testament are. They are history done in story-telling mode to make a theological point. Third, therefore, we need to see how a story-telling approach to historical events does its work. Finally we will be able to read Mark as theology in the form of narrative which catches up its listeners in the story of Jesus.

1. History and History Writing

Every historian is doing something with the history he or she is commenting on. This is because it is impossible to tell *everything* that actually happened. The historian cannot always know some of the truly important aspects – evidence gets lost, witnesses misrepresent the truth or the shifting inner feelings, motives or understanding of important individuals may not ever be known to anybody. Therefore, every historian must first select what he or she considers the most significant aspects of the event and then present that selection in a way that makes persuasive sense. Making these choices inevitably includes value judgments. For this reason, no historical writing is solely factual, value-free or unbiased. When we read history we are reading what one historian considers to be the important aspects of an event, organized in a certain way so that a particular impression of it will take shape in our imaginations.

2. The New Testament Gospels as History Writing

Beginning with the Gospel of Mark, each of the New Testament Gospels sets out to create an image of Jesus in our imaginations. These images are created not just to put Jesus on the historical record but to affect us powerfully in our lives. The Gospels of the New Testament make characters such as Jesus particularly vivid for us, so that we can feel with them, understand them from the inside and identify with their hopes. The Gospels thus are as biased and value-laden as any historical account. Compared with many apparently objective historical accounts of events, however, the Gospels are open about their commitment to a certain viewpoint. The Gospels are honest about the fact that they want to persuade us to trust Jesus as their writers do and to change our lives because of that trust (see Luke 1:1-4). They promise that the unquenchable life Jesus gave to the people he met is available to anybody who trusts the Jesus that the story makes alive for its readers.

While the whole of the New Testament is about actual history, it is interested primarily in the *significance or meaning* of that history. It is not primarily interested in establishing the matters-of-fact of Jesus' life of ministry, death and resurrection, as though for a legal, public record. The New Testament writers, readers and hearers were close enough to the events, or to witnesses to the events, to be able to take the matters of fact 'as read.' The matter-of-factness of Jesus' history was not a problem for them. They pressed on to the far more burning issue of what these events meant for them in their lives.

People today tend to place a great deal of value on "the facts." But the original authors of the New Testament Gospels regard 'facts' – Did Jesus really say that? When did that happen? How many miracles did Jesus perform? – as relatively uninteresting. Instead, they concentrate on what they find much more urgent, namely what the facts mean, in God's scheme of things. The way the Gospels do this is to create faith portraits of Jesus, within a story-telling account of his life, death and resurrection. The Gospels thus encourage Christians in their faith so that they may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah (John 20:31).

To trust Jesus as the Gospels present him and to trust God as Jesus in the Gospels talks about God is a major decision in life. The trustworthiness of Jesus or of God cannot be proven in a scientific way, just as no one can ever prove that they love someone or are loved by someone. Relationship, which is what faith is, is based on trust. Trusting means taking a risk, on the basis of reliable, experienced evidence. Trusting the Gospel means taking

a risk that God is as big-hearted and passionate about life as Jesus says God is. It means finding that what matters to me is what matters to Jesus – do I have the same passion about justice as Jesus does; do I get the same thrill as Jesus did to see someone who was oppressed, scared or defenseless, set free to live a decent life? When I trust Jesus' God to bring life out of death, in ways beyond my ability to organize, I am living by faith.

3. How a Story-telling Approach to Historical Events Works

The Gospel of Mark aims to bring us, through the story, to an experience of Jesus and of God as the one in whose reign there is always enough for everyone and no-one is to be shut out from life. Travelling along with the characters in the story our faith can be challenged, woken up and brought to new maturity. The gospel story engages our faith in many ways. Sometimes we see things from Jesus' angle, at other times we feel with people who need to be healed, or yet other times we watch Jesus' disciples struggling to 'get' Jesus' idea of the reign of God. Of course, for that to happen, we have to let Mark work on us.

If Mark is going to have any impact, we have to be prepared to 'go with' his story. The very nature of the story-form that Mark uses means that we have to let him take us through an emotional discovery journey, in a world that he makes up for us. That is how stories work, from the simplest to the most complex.

Therefore, it is a fundamental rule in reading Mark's Gospel (as in reading any story or watching any movie) that we know only what Mark has told us, as he tells it to us. Of course we may guess at what will happen next or how it will happen – that is just what Mark wants his readers to do. However, we have to speculate on the basis of what *Mark* tells us, not on what Luther's Theses or the Council of Trent said a millennium and a half later. Mark works best when we read his story without importing ideas or terms that had not come into Christian thinking at that time. If we go outside Mark's story-world for other ways of making sense of Jesus as he appears in Mark, we have shattered Mark's world and it no longer functions for us. It becomes instead a dry, rather clumsy and not very informative collection of bits and pieces about Jesus. This does nothing for faith. No one could dance within inches of death for the sake of the reign of God, on the basis of writing like that.

However, Mark is written in such a way that a reader who goes with the story gets a very engaging drama that challenges faith in a really serious way. As you know from studying modern literature, stories have characters and plots; they are set in particular times and places which lend atmosphere; they deal with themes; and they can be told in very many different ways and from equally as many different points of view. All of these aspects of stories operate in the four New Testament gospels. We will now investigate how the development of one major theme in Mark, the Reign of God, is part of the way Mark constructs Jesus, his main character.

4. Mark as a Story-telling Form of Theology

The character Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

One of the ways Mark establishes Jesus as a character

is to give him a goal. This goal gives Jesus as a character some purpose, so that he has something to pursue energetically. This makes Jesus interesting and gives the story its plot: will Jesus achieve his goal? Will it be easy to achieve (very boring story) or will he have to meet difficult challenges (much more interesting story)? If Jesus achieves his goal, how will he do so? To what lengths will he have to go? All of these questions arise for the attentive reader of Mark's Gospel who reads the opening chapter alert to Mark's cues

Jesus' goal in Mark is to convince people to trust in the reign of God. One of the most prominent character traits of Jesus in Mark is that he believes utterly in the reign of God as a reality coming into the lives of people, here and now. We can trace Jesus' comments on the Reign of God from the beginning to the end of the Gospel; as we do so we can also trace the progress of Jesus as a character in the story.

As in all well-told stories, the introduction or first entrance of the major character is filled with drama, to let us know how significant this person is. Jesus' entrance in Mark is suitably dramatic. It is prepared for with a triple lead-up.

Preparation for Jesus' Entrance (Mk 1:1-8)

First, the opening line tells us who Jesus is – an anointed one ("Christ") who is the son of God (Mk 1:1). Part of the way Mark chooses to tell his story (quite different from the strategies that the other three NT gospels will later use) is to let *only us*, the readers or hearers, hear this. Nobody else in the story is 'on stage' when the narrator tells us this. From the very first line, the author has set us up with inside knowledge that nobody else in the story has. Thus, we are in a position to watch various characters in the story as they try to decide for themselves who this striking, often very disruptive person called Jesus, is. We get caught up in the drama of watching people puzzle over Jesus, some coming close to seeing who he really is, some completely missing the point. This process, set in motion by the opening verse, operates through the whole Gospel.

Second, quotations from the Hebrew prophets, the word of God for Jesus and his followers, are used to explain that a predecessor, John the Baptist, prepared the way for Jesus' appearance (Mk 1:2-3). Third, John is depicted in the desert as a man from the wilderness who has a huge impact yet says plainly that somebody else is coming who far outstrips him in power (Mk 1:4-8).

All of this has happened in eight short verses. As westerners, used to thick, blockbuster novels, we need to learn to let a small amount of Gospel story convey a lot of meaning. We tend to scan quickly with our eyes, looking for what's next. When we read these brief ancient stories, we need to slow our reading pace and let each line of the story have an impact. If a character only speaks once or twice, each speech has to carry a great deal. If we are only told the bare minimum about a character, every small detail contributes in some way to the scene Mark is creating. One of the best ways to read Mark is to let the story take shape in your visual imagination, as though it were being acted on a stage. That is why I am using the language of drama to explain Mark's story-telling.

Jesus' Entrance (Mk 1:9-13)

By the end of Mark 1:8, we have been 'warmed up' for the appearance of Jesus. We know that he is special to God, that the prophetic word of God explains something about him and that an intense, prophetic figure who galvanizes people to repent is preparing the ground for him. Suddenly, Jesus appears and is baptized by John in the river Jordan (Mk 1:9). This is a major event in the Gospel. Mark shows Jesus coming up from the near-drowning that is baptism, into a new stage of his life. He sees into heaven; a spirit comes down on him alone and marks him out and there is no doubt that the voice from heaven is God, who declares Jesus to be a well-beloved son. Jesus is cast as somebody very special and *our* unique knowledge that Jesus is God's son has been confirmed by God's own self (Mk 1:10-11). Great things can be expected from this -but what might they be?

Strangely, Jesus does not go from here to glory. Instead, a spirit drives him out into the wilderness. There Satan tempts him for forty days, he is with the wild beasts and the angels of God care for him (Mk 1:12-13). Scholars debate about these two enigmatic verses but nobody has really settled what they mean. They certainly affect the atmosphere of the story, close to its beginning. Jesus is marked as the son of God in a very distinctive way, but it is not simple; he is thrown into a wild and otherworldly experience, for a lengthy period of time. And we still do not know what being the son of God will mean for Jesus in this story.

Jesus' Opening Lines (Mk 1:14-15)

Then, the story tells us. When John the Baptist was arrested, *then* Jesus came to Galilee and started his life's real work (Mk 1:14). This is not a coincidental sequence of events. Rather, it is very possible that when John was taken off the scene, Jesus stepped in to take his place, but with his own message about God, honed in the desert.

When was John arrested? The story has not told us this piece. Either we are supposed to know about this from outside the story, or we are meant just to accept it. The Romans who occupied Palestine might well have suspected somebody like John, attracting large crowds of religiously enthused people to a wild, desert place, of trying to stir up trouble. People from the first century would have been aware of this political situation and understood without comment why "John was arrested." Mark's readers are certainly supposed to remember that enthusing large crowds by preaching a religious message gets you arrested. Yet, the story says, precisely in the teeth of this fact, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching a stirring religious message.

Most translations of Mark 1:14-15 will say that Jesus "proclaimed the good news of God," calling people to "repent and believe in the good news." Our ears can grow tired from hearing these verses - they are so flat from overuse. Yet Mark means them to be riveting. These are Jesus' opening lines. They say what Jesus is going to pursue as his goal for the whole of this story - and we have just heard a hint that Jesus' story could end up in arrest, as John's did. Arrest by the Romans did not mean a quiet rest in gaol. The Romans did not conduct a long-term stay prison system. Arrest in the ancient world meant rapid trial, with either acquittal for the lucky or brutal punishment, slavery or death for those convicted. In the

light of this ancient-world knowledge, which Mark's original audience would have known, Jesus' action is very dangerous.

Why does the beloved son of God who has just survived forty rugged days in the wilderness risk his life like this? It is because he has something wonderful, exhilarating and liberating to say, and he must say it. Mark's Jesus is no goody-goody announcing a tired, pious message to make people submissive. Mark's Jesus tears open people's minds and spirits as the heavens were torn open at his own baptism. It is much closer to the original language of Mark (ancient Greek) to hear Jesus say, "The time [for waiting] is completed. The reign of God has come close to us. Be prepared to have your mind changed and trust that God is as good as I will tell you God is."

I base this rendering of Mark 1:14-15 on meanings inherent in the Greek words Mark uses. The word usually translated "fulfilled" means to "fill up or complete." The word usually translated "repent" is a combination in Greek of two words that mean "change" and "mind." Therefore I translate it "change your mind (your mindset or worldview)" which is more sympathetic to Jesus' whole approach than "repent" in the sense of resolve to stop being a sinner. The word most often translated "believe" has a very strong sense in Greek of trusting or relying on someone. Jesus is talking about trusting God to be as good as he maintains God is. Mark's Jesus announces change, for the better, based on a wonderfully good God, NOW.

Thus, Mark has brought Jesus onto the stage, establishing him as a character in a range of ways. The narrator (the 'voice' inside the story who tells the story to us) has told us about Jesus, has quoted Scripture about him, and has explained how another character's relationship with Jesus shows who Jesus is. The narrator next shows us Jesus himself silently undergoing a religious ritual during which God's own self declares Jesus' identity. Finally the narrator describes an intense experience Jesus has in the desert and at last Jesus speaks in his own voice, announcing his goal in life. In at least seven different ways, Mark has created impressions in our minds of this character Jesus, culminating in his association of Jesus with the theme of the reign of God. There is a sense of rising excitement as all these impressions build to the moment when Jesus himself speaks.

Mark's use of the 'Reign of God' image

From this first connection between Jesus the character and the theme of the reign of God, Mark has Jesus talk about it twelve more times through the course of the narrative, right up to the moment before he goes to the garden of Gethsemane. The 'reign of God' is an image or metaphor Jesus uses to talk about how things go when God is given free reign in human life.

In Mark's narrative, Jesus' use of this idea helps to construct him as a character but it is very important not to expect him to be a character in the way of the modern novel. Jesus is not developed psychologically, growing into wisdom or maturity. In both the ancient world and its literature, living people and characters in narratives were seen as much more static. A major character did not *become* himself; rather, he remained his true self all through life. So, Jesus will not *become* the son of God in Mark's Gospel; rather, he remains authentically the son of God even into

DIALOGUE AUSTRALIA

death itself. The narrative simply keeps showing us more and more how truly Jesus is God's son.

Jesus talks about the reign of God having definite patterns in the way it functions or the way people connect with it. First, early in his preaching, Jesus announces the reign of God as something dynamic that is making its way into the lives of people now (1:15) – but he also talks about it as something he looks forward to in the future (9:1; 14:25). Second, Jesus describes the reign of God as very mysterious, something that is beyond human manipulation and is best understood as growing under God's control (4:11, 26,30). The reign of God is God's way of doing things which is able to work powerfully in Jesus because he respects its mystery. He knows that it grows, often from very small, unpromising beginnings, to great power (see all of Mark 4). This establishes Jesus as someone with great spiritual authority (see Mark 1:21-28).

Jesus' whole ministry is a double form of preaching this view of God acting in the world. Jesus' teaching comments on his actions, claiming them for God; Jesus' actions of healing demonstrate the power of God present among people. Jesus heals by the power of God, so that people may know in a very clear, embodied experience, that God is really present and truly desires them to enjoy the life God has created for them. As Jesus teaches and heals, he is revealed more and more as having both spiritual authority and power (see Mark 2:1-12).

A third feature of the reign of God is that it works on a logic quite foreign to ordinary human experience. For one thing, it produces extraordinary results. The parable of the sower in Mark 4:1-9 is about the almost unimaginable yield of 100 fold that God's word produces in receptive soil. For pre-industrial farmers for whom a 30 fold yield was a bumper crop, a 100-fold return was something only God could do. For another, the reign of God works with people normally considered unimpressive – 'mustard seed' material, like children and poor people (Mark 10:14-15, 23-25).

Because that is so hard for people of any culture to believe, Jesus often speaks in a very exaggerated fashion, deliberately aiming to shock his listeners. Mark's Jesus is a prophet-like figure, who shocks people's everyday notions so that they will let go of imprisoned, conventional thinking and risk believing in a God as radically generous as Jesus says God is (see Mark 9:47, 10: 14-15, 23-25). Jesus' shocking language makes sense when we relax enough with the Gospels to let Jesus make jokes. Like any effective teacher, Jesus used humor a great deal, especially in the parables, to break through stodgy thinking about God to suggest other possibilities. Nothing kills the Gospels more than a refusal to enjoy Jesus' jokes. As he conveys this fourth feature of the reign of God, its disruption of established 'wisdom,' Mark's Jesus is also constructed for us as a bold thinker who sees a very different world from most people.

Finally, the reign of God is something that people of good will can search out earnestly and come close to. In his tussle with the scribe in Mark 12:28-34, Jesus recognizes the reign of God where he sees it at least in potential and affirms it, even if with a twist of irony.

By this stage in Mark's story, Jesus' authoritative, powerful, shocking proclamation of the reign of God has brought about another reality at which this article has only hinted. It has brought him into increasing conflict with leadership both religious and political, which fears his power and popularity. From small hints (1:14; 27-28; 2:6-12),

occasional reminders (6:14-29) and outright statements (3:6; 11:27-33; 12:1-13), Mark builds our awareness that Jesus' characteristic way of proclaiming the reign of God brings him into deeper and deeper conflict with people who will kill Jesus. It is also part of the character of Mark's Jesus that he is fully aware of this enmity, yet presses ahead with his mission because he believes in it (see Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34). As I hope is now clear, what this really means is that Jesus trusts in God to expect wholehearted commitment from him and to respond with the ultimate commitment of raising Jesus from death. Both of these parts of the Jesus-God relationship are expressed in Jesus' triple anticipation of his death, in the references given just above. Mark's Jesus knows where he is going and moves ahead deliberately, because he ultimately stands by what he preaches about God.

Conclusion

The Gospel of Mark is not for the squeamish. It intends to get you killed, in a thoroughly nasty way. It also intends to fill you with hope that Jesus' vision of God is true and powerful, worth risking your life to trust it and tell other people about it. One of the best ways to do this, as Mark found, was to follow the story of Jesus whose passion for justice, wit and courage catch us up.

The Gospel of Mark is only one way of preaching the story of Jesus who proclaimed the Reign of God. Many other people also wrote Gospels – theologies of the Reign of God based on telling the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. The early Christian community found from experience that three of these helped people to be authentic Christians; they are the Gospels that we know as Matthew, Luke and John. They each have something distinctive to offer in the way that they present the Reign of God that Jesus proclaimed. They are not just slightly differently colored clones of each other. They are highly creative pieces of theological work, done in the mode of a narrative, in an attempt to help people who never met Jesus, to get some sense of him and particularly of his theological value, his meaning in God's scheme of things.

Most individuals and even groups of Christians tend to find that they like some kinds of New Testament writing more than others do. This is fine. Most of the New Testament writings were intended for particular groups with specific issues to deal with. There are many different ways of accounting for what God was doing in Jesus. Each New Testament book has its own character or 'feel.' So it is quite reasonable that some writings appeal to some people and not others or that they have more to offer one kind of situation than another does.

You may really like Mark; or you may find his vision too intense, his pace too hectic. What is important is that the informed, mature Christian gives each New Testament writing its chance to speak to him or her. You will find the expression of Christian faith that most relates to your own faith. It is important to allow all these different expressions to speak to the diversity within the Christian community. To help you find your own place in the New Testament, the following exercises suggest a variety of ways of looking closely into Mark, so that you can discover for yourself, how this Gospel works.

The sequence of references to the reign of God in Mark is: 1:15; 4:11, 26, 30; 9:1, 47; 10:14, 15, 23, 24, 25; 12:34; 14:25; 15:43. Jesus speaks of it in all these places except the last, where the narrator mentions it.

Ways to look closely into Mark



As you do these exercises, keep reminding yourself to know only what Mark tells you. When you really stick to this rule firmly, the drama becomes much more interesting, which in turn often makes the story make more sense

1. Act out a single scene or a sequence of scenes from Mark. For example, you could try anything from Mark 1:16-45; 2:1-3:6; 5:1-43. Look for a way to highlight a strong idea or feeling or value that you think the story communicates. Remember to read slowly and let every word have its dramatic impact.

2. Create a prayer ritual around either a Markan story or any one of the characters or a line or phrase from the Gospel. Some texts that show Jesus praying or talking about prayer are 1:35-39; 6:30-44; 7:31-37; 8:1-10; 9:14-29; 11:15-19; 11:12-14, 20-24; 11:25; 14:22-25; 14:32-42; 15:33-39.

3. You are a movie production agency. You have a *very limited* budget for special effects or travel to exotic locations. However, any movie star is available to you (you have an outstanding director and screenplay). Your job is to plan a cast of actors to film the Gospel of Mark, or any section of it. Draw up your casting list; prepare to explain to your director why this cast will work; prepare notes on where in your local area you would shoot this movie and what particular effects you want to achieve.

4. From early in the Gospel, the narrator starts using the word "betray." It is often translated in English with other terms like "hand over," which tend to disguise how often the word is used. In the latter part of the Gospel, "betray" occurs very frequently. Use the following list of references to track how the word is used throughout the narrative, from beginning to end.

1:14; 3:19; 4:29; 7:13; 9:31; 10:33; 13:9,11,12; 14:10,11,18,21,41,42,44; 15:1,10,15.

Look for who betrays who; the reason for the betrayal; what feeling the word conveys in each scene; the overall cumulative impact of the word by the time of its last use. Find an interesting way to present your findings to your class.

5. Take a story or sequence of stories and focus on other characters' reactions to Jesus. Find a way to express these reactions:

- mime the story / sequence, with Jesus being fairly low-key and the big focus being on the people reacting to him;
- make a recording of lines from songs that express the reactions: work them into a reading of the story / sequence.
- Use paint, clay, collage or some other visual way of expressing these reactions. Present them so that people can get a sense of this often-ignored part of the story.

6. Write a character assessment of Jesus as a character in Mark. For either a single story, sequence of stories or the whole Gospel, ask the following questions about Jesus:

- What traits does Jesus have as a character? From what Jesus says and does and from what either the narrator tells you directly or what other people say about Jesus, what kind of a person is he constructed to be? Which comments do you believe and why?
- What is Jesus like in relationship with other people – for example, his family, his disciples, officials in his own religious tradition, people he meets in his preaching, people with political or military authority? What appear to be Jesus' values – what does he believe about life, about God, about the meaning of his life?
- What is Jesus like in pursuing his project in life – preaching what he calls 'the Reign of God.'? Does Jesus ever waver or falter? Are there any complications in his path? How does Mark's character Jesus deal with success and failure and how does this make people feel about him?

Use these questions to work-up a character assessment of any other individual or group of individuals, such as Peter, the disciples as a group, the unclean spirits who know Jesus, the authority figures (religious and political) who oppose Jesus.



FURTHER READING

Anderson, Janice C. and Stephen D. Moore (Eds), *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992).

Powell, Mark A., *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998)

Powell, Mark A. (Ed.), *The New Testament Today* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999).

Powell, Mark A., *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990).

Rhoads, David and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

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