

Understanding the Gospel of Mark

Sea of Faith Talk

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Introduction:

I initially got interested in Mark through my study of the historical Jesus. Mark is important for study of the historical Jesus because it is the first gospel written, and therefore the first account of Jesus we have. As anyone with an interest in history will know that makes Mark a very valuable historical source.

As I studied Mark, however, I become more fascinated by it as a work of literature. I now have no hesitation in calling it a literary masterpiece. I also have come to the view that, despite thousands of years of scholarship and study, the meaning and message of the gospel has largely been misunderstood. Hence why I wanted to speak tonight and share with you my thoughts about Mark.

The conclusion I have come to, along with a few unorthodox scholars, is that Mark is a *theological allegory*. Mark is an allegory because although it appears to be a straightforward account of the life of Jesus, 'the content and structure of the narrative are carefully arranged to convey deeper, non-literal meaning' (Carrier, 2014; 390). This is accomplished through the use of symbolic keywords, ironies and literary allusions (Carrier, 390). According to this view, Jesus is more like the lead protagonist in a symbolic drama designed to communicate non-literal theological meaning and values, as opposed to the focal individual of a historical biography.

My purpose is not to assess the value of Mark as an historical source for Jesus. Instead I want to focus on the possible symbolic meaning and message underlying the narrative. If Mark is an allegory, what were the

hidden truths he wished to convey? What non-literal messages did he intend his ancient readers and listeners to pick up on, and which have, sadly I believe, lost in translation?

I must also warn that my intention is not to suggest ways in which Mark may be relevant for us today. My interest is in understanding what Mark wished to communicate with his first century audience. This may, or may not, hold relevance to us. For me, it holds minimal relevance, but I still find it fascinating - I hope you agree. I also must say that Mark could be the subject of an entire course. There is much more than could be said about it, which I will not cover tonight and, I am sure, I still have much to learn.

With that said, I will argue that there are three central elements to Mark's allegory:

- 1) Promoting Paul's Gospel
- 2) A polemic against the Jerusalem based Christian Church
- 3) A polemic against the Judean Jews

Before I elaborate on these three elements, it is important to provide some context, which is important for understanding Mark.

Background Context:

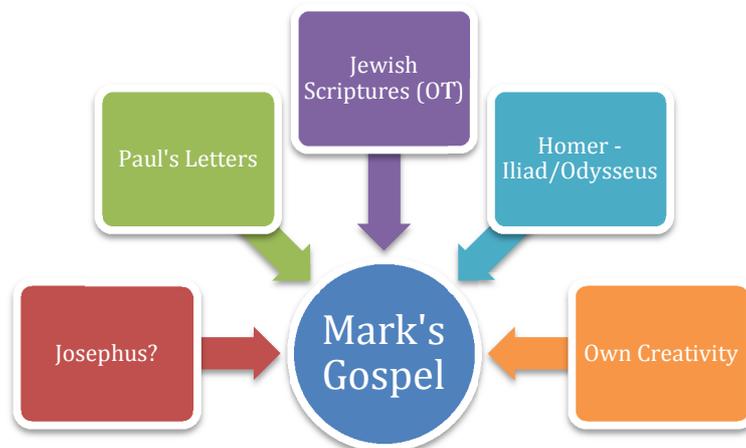
Mysterious Composition:

We don't actually know anything certain about who, when or where 'Mark' was composed. Scholars have made educated guesses about these things, but very little is known for certain. We don't even know that somebody named 'Mark' wrote the gospel. This is just a later attribution based on the guesswork of the second century church. What we do know is entirely based on what can be deduced from analyzing the text itself. Despite this, for convenience, I will continue to refer to 'Mark' tonight.

Literary Sources:

The dominant view within scholarship is that the main source Mark used to write his gospel was oral tradition - that is, stories about Jesus that had been passed down to Mark from people who knew Jesus. However, although it is possible Mark drew *partly* on oral sources, Marks' *main* sources, and perhaps his only sources were not oral but literary. That is, Mark primarily drew on pre-existing written sources to construct his gospel. This can actually be demonstrated very clearly by analyzing the common themes, ideas and language between Mark and the texts he used. Importantly, all these texts, apart from one - Paul's letters - originally had nothing to do with Jesus. Mark has just creatively used them, in various ways, to construct his own narrative.

Here is a diagram, which illustrates the literary sources used by Mark.



The most important source was the Jewish Scriptures, or what Christians refer to as the Old Testament. Large chunks of Mark are based on direct allusions to stories and passages found in a range of texts within the OT (R.G Price, 2007; R.M Price 2011).

Another important source were the letters of Paul. Scholars know that Paul wrote seven letters, which are found in the N.T. These letters constitute our earliest source of Christian evidence. They were written around the middle of the first century to Christian churches throughout the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Importantly, Mark was writing well after Paul and there is very good reasons for thinking, as will explain in a moment, that he made extensive use of Paul's letters to construct his gospel.¹

There are two other likely sources. Mark has very likely used themes and motifs drawn from Homer's classics Iliad and Odyessues (Macdonald, 2000; R.M Price, 2011). This should not be surprising as Mark would have been received a Greco-Roman education in which the teaching of Homer was very prominent.

I also think its quite probable that Mark has drawn on the famous Jewish historian Josephus. This is quite controversial so I have put a question mark against it, and won't elaborate further on it tonight.

There is one other 'source' in that diagram which is not a prior literary source, but is very important to mention because it is often overlooked - Mark's own creativity. In my view, the author of Mark should be given credit as a competent and creative storyteller. His gospel contains all the elements of a good story including: narration, settings, character development, themes, plots development and suspense. The dominant oral tradition paradigm has often viewed Mark as made up of previously unrelated units of oral tradition, which Mark has more or less randomly

¹ I would argue that Paul's letters are Mark's main source of information about Jesus. This is itself quite interesting because, as many scholars have pointed out, Paul's authentic letters actually tell us very little, if anything, about Jesus, the man. Indeed, according to the Christ-myth theory, Paul, as well as the early church as a whole, never knew of Jesus as an *earthly* man and instead worshipped a heavenly/celestial Jesus (See e.g Carrier, 2014; R.G Price, 2014; R.M Price, 2011). If this theory is correct, Mark actually had *no* information about Jesus of Nazareth - indeed Mark invented Jesus out of whole cloth. In other words, via the creative pen of Mark, the heavenly Jesus of Paul is transformed into the gospel character Jesus of Nazareth. It should be stressed, however, that most scholars who view Mark as an attempt to narrativize the Pauline gospel, as argued here, do not subscribe to the Christ-Myth theory, and accept the mainstream view that Paul knew, even if he does not tell us much about, Jesus of Nazareth.

cobbled together. As Tom Dykstra points out, this has tended to obscure the way in which Mark is a 'cohesive literary work, in which each part is carefully crafted and organized to serve the author's overall purposes' (Dykstra, 2011, 65).

The Jewish-Roman War:

Despite the uncertainty I mentioned, scholars are fairly certain that Mark was written sometime after the Jewish war with Rome. The war began in 66 AD with a Jewish uprising against the Roman Occupation and concluded in 70 AD following a devastating Roman siege on Jerusalem, and the complete destruction of the Jewish temple. Prior to its destruction the temple was *the* central place of Jewish worship and ritual. In humiliating fashion the Romans not only destroyed the temple, but also built a new pagan temple in its place.

The reason we know Mark is writing after the war is that he alludes to it several times within the narrative. In chapter 13, for example, Jesus says: *Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down'* (13:2), which is a pretty clear reference to the temple. I will return to the significance of this later in my talk.

Early Church Politics:

Finally, it's important to understand something about early church politics.

Paul's letters indicate that there was major division and disagreement within the early church (Dyskstra, Ch 2; Tazari, Ch 1). Latter works like the Acts of the Apostles, attempt to portray a more harmonious picture, but actually we know from Paul himself that fierce disputes were a feature of the church from the outset. The early church was a little bit like the Australian Labor party...

There was a basic dispute over the mission to the gentiles - that is, the mission to convert non-Jews. Paul believed passionately that the Christian gospel was open to both Jews and Gentiles, on an inclusive and equal basis. In practical terms, this meant the gentiles did not need to observe key aspects of the Jewish law - particularly circumcision, dietary laws and the Sabbath - in order to become Christians (Sanders, 2001 p103). While Jews should keep practicing the Law, according to Paul, it was not necessary for gentiles to do so. Faith in the saving work of Jesus was enough to guarantee their salvation. As long as they had faith, they did not need to become fully-practicing Jews.

Paul, however, faced opposition from a Jewish oriented faction of the church based in Jerusalem - particularly from the leadership, or 'pillars' as Paul calls them: Peter, James, and John. We don't have the writings of this group, so we only have Paul's side of the story, as he recounts it in the letter to Galatians. According to Paul, the pillars preached 'another gospel' to the one that he was preaching. What he meant was that they were refusing to recognize uncircumcised gentiles as Christians, or at least as first class Christians, equal with the Jews. While they agreed with Paul that 'faith in christ' was Gods new mode of salvation, they thought the Jewish law also still applied, and that gentile converts should uphold it.

Paul passionately opposed this. His life work centered on spreading the faith to the gentiles and that mission would be irrevocably harmed if the gentiles were required to observe the Jewish law. For Paul, both Jew and Gentile were part of the *one* church worshipping the *one* God. As he says, 'There is no distinction between Jew and Greek (meaning gentile); the same lord is lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him (Rom 10:12; see also, Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 12:13; Col 3:11).

Where does Mark fit in here? Well, as we will see, Mark takes Paul's side in this dispute. Mark endorses Paul's inclusive gospel for the gentiles.

Meaning & Purpose of Mark's Gospel

1. Promoting Paul's Gospel

A key aim of Mark's narrative is to promote Pauline theology and values. As one scholar has put it, 'the gospel of Mark may be described as narrative presentation of the Pauline Gospel' (Svartvik, 2000, 34).

Some scholars have further by arguing that Mark's gospel, though appearing to be about Jesus, is really a disguised narrative of Paul's apostolic ministry, as he recounts in his letters (Tazari 1999; Adamczewski, 2014). Currently I am not convinced of this. I am convinced, however, of the more limited thesis that Mark is narrativizing Pauline theology.

Mark's gospel suggests deep familiarity and agreement with Paul's letters (See: Adamczewski, 2014; Price 2014; Dykstra, 2012; Marcus 2000, Tazari, 1999). In Mark, Jesus promotes Pauline teaching. For example, like Paul, Jesus takes a liberal approach to the Jewish law. Thus, Jesus engages in table fellowship with gentiles sinners (Mk 2:17; Galatians 2:11-14), he downplays the importance of keeping the Sabbath (Mk 2:23-28; Galatians 4:10; Romans 14:5-6), and observing food laws (Mk 7:18-19; Rom 14:19-20). He teaches that the Jewish law can be summed up with the 'Commandment to love' (Mk 12:28-29; Romans 13:9-10). The idea that the Jewish law can be 'summed up' by the commandment to love is a view found nowhere else in the Bible except Paul's letters.

Mark's narrative also reinforces Pauline theology. For example, Paul's theology is heavily focused on the significance of the cross. According to Paul, God ironically achieved his salvation for humanity through a suffering crucified Messiah. Those who have faith in Christ are also mysteriously united with him, and therefore should expect to share in Christ's sufferings (Rom 8:17), at least until the end of the age when Christ appears (1 Cor 15:35-44). For Paul, 'to live is Christ, and to die is gain' (Phil 1:21). Mark

shared this view and thus, Jesus' teaches the disciples must 'take up the cross' and sacrifice their own life for the sake of the gospel (Mk 8:35). Furthermore, Mark's entire narrative is skillfully designed to climax at the crucifixion (Marcus, 2000; Dykstra, 2011, Ch 5).

The similarities extend to common language and grammar, which can only really be explained in terms of a direct literary relationship. To give just one example, in Corinthians Paul says, 'I have made myself a *slave to all*' (1 Cor 9:19), which is reflected in the words of Jesus, when he says, 'whomever wishes to be first among you must be *slave to all*' (Mk 10:44). The common phrase, 'slave to all,' is found nowhere else in the bible apart from Paul and Mark.

Defending the Pauline Mission to the Gentiles:

There are many more parallels², but I want to look more closely at one, which is central the meaning of Mark's gospel. As I mentioned, Paul preached an inclusive gospel, open to both Jews and Gentiles. Mark promotes this message in several ways (Dykstra, 2012).

a) Geography in Mark

One way Mark does this is through the use of symbolic geography.

Jesus conducts most of his ministry in Galilee. Galilee was known at the time as a region that contained a mixed Jewish-Gentile population. In the OT book of Isaiah, Galilee is referred to a region that was representative of all the nations (Is 9:1). In Mark's narrative, Galilee is the region where Jesus interacts with both Jews and Gentiles. Galilee is also clearly contrasted with Jerusalem, the epitome of Jewishness, and the place where the Jews

²Others include: the requirements, struggles and hardships of Christian missions (Mk 6:6-9; 1 Cor 4:11-13; Mk 13:9-13; 2 Cor 11:23-24); Agreement about sinful deeds or 'works of the flesh' (Mk 7:20-23; Gal 5:19-20); a common strategy in dealings with the Roman state (Mk 12:13-15; Rom 13:7); similar beliefs about the future resurrection body (Mk 12:25; 1 Cor 15: 35-40); and the need to kept alert for the coming end times (Mk 13: 32-37; 1 Thess 5:1-6).

reject Jesus (Dykstra, p75). In light of this, it has been suggested that Galilee, in Mark, is symbolic of the cosmopolitan Roman Empire as a whole (Tarazi, 1999; Dykstra, 2012).

If Galilee represents the Roman Empire, the Sea of Galilee, is a microcosm of the Mediterranean Sea. As many have pointed out, it is very odd that Mark uses the phrase 'sea of Galilee.' No other writer before Mark ever referred to this small body of water as a 'sea'. Some have therefore suggested that Mark was a poor geographer. A better explanation is that the reference to 'sea' is a deliberate allusion to the Mediterranean, which of course was the central strategic water system of the entire Roman Empire.

Finally, to complete the symbolic metaphor, the boat that Jesus travels on with the disciples, across the 'sea', is meant to symbolize the Christian church (Borg, 2001, 206-9). The sea journeys play a crucial role in the middle parts of Mark's narrative. Jesus and his disciples travel by boat from one side of the sea to the other, first to predominantly Jewish areas, then to predominately Gentile areas (see: Mk ch 4-8). Here it is significant that the disciples are afraid and fearful of crossing to the other side, despite Jesus calming the 'storms' and leading the way.

The underlying message being conveyed through all this symbolism is that the church must follow the example of Paul, who fearlessly travelled across the Roman Empire, in order to spread the gospel to all, both Jew and Gentile.

b) Feeding Scenes:

Another key way that Mark narrative promotes the Pauline mission can be seen in the two-feeding scenes. Hands up if you remember the famous feeding miracles, in which Jesus turns a few loaves into enough food for crowds of people? Well there are actually two of these feeding scenes in Mark, both of which appear, at first glance, to be almost identical. Many

have thought Mark must have gotten confused and reported the same story twice. But this is not likely firstly because Marks' source for the feeding scenes is not oral testimony going back to Jesus, but prior literature - particularly the very similar tales about Elisha found in 2 Kings (2 Kgs 4:43-44) as well as the Homeric Epics (See Macdonald, 2000). And secondly because when you read the two stories closely you notice several differences, and these turn out to be crucial for understanding the symbolic meaning Mark wished to convey.

The first feeding scene occurs in mainly Jewish territory. We know this because we are told it takes place not far the hometown of Jesus, which in Mark is symbolic of Judea as a whole. In the story the numbers five and twelve are prominent. There are five loaves and five thousand men and twelve baskets of bread left over. As Dykstra points out 'the number five recalls the five books of the Torah, and the number twelve recalls the twelve tribes of Israel' (Dykstra, p.80) - these are very Jewish numbers. There are also more subtle indications in the use of language. For example, the Greek word used for baskets is reflective of a Jewish context. So this is a miraculous feeding to the Jews.

The second feeding scene takes place a few chapters later after Jesus has journeyed through gentile territory. The setting is suggestive of a more mixed Jewish-Gentile audience because some of the crowd had 'come from afar' (Mk 8:3). Again the numbers are significant. This time four and seven are prominent. There are four thousand people, seven loaves, and seven baskets left over. Commentators have interpreted this in various ways (Dykstra, 2012; Price, 2007; Tazari, 1999). In my view, the best explanation, consistent with the Mark's promotion of the gentile mission, is that the number four alludes to the 'ends of the earth,' meaning the whole known world (Tazari, 1999; Dykstra, 2012). This is confirmed even within the text of Mark for in 13:27 Jesus says 'he will gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens' (13:27) - meaning the whole known world. The number seven represents divine completeness,

calling to mind scriptural texts such as the Genesis story with its seven days of creation.

Mark's ordering of the two scenes is significant, first a feeding to the Jews and then a feeding to a mixed Jewish-Gentile crowd. The message being conveyed is that the disciples - whose symbolic significance I will talk more about shortly - must move from a church based on Jewish exclusivism to an inclusive church, as advocated by Paul. The number of fish in each scene further reinforces the point (Tazari, 1999). In the first scene the disciples find two fish, which is symbolic of their misguided attempt to 'preserve two separate communities' (Tazari, p.182). At the second scene, by contrast, we are told 'there are a few fish' (8:7). This represents 'undifferentiated individuals, since there is no longer a difference between Jew and Gentile' (Tazari, p.182).

There can be little doubt that Mark intended his readers to pick up on the symbolism of the feeding scenes. This is evident from the dialogue that takes place between Jesus and the disciples following the second feeding (8:14-21). Jesus asks the disciples to recall the number of baskets left over at each feeding: twelve baskets at the first, seven at the second. When the disciples predictably fail to compute, an exasperated Jesus cries out: "Do you *still* not understand?" Mark gives us no indication that the penny ever drops. But the question is really addressed, to us, the reader. Mark hopes that, unlike the disciples, we will be a little more discerning...

2. A Polemic against the Jewish faction of the early Church

Mark is not just promoting Paul's gospel. He is also engaging in polemics against the Jewish oriented Jerusalem Church.

As I explained earlier, some within the Jerusalem church were insisting that the gentiles observe the Mosaic Law in order to become fully fledged Christians. In Mark, the twelve disciples are represented of Jewish oriented

Christians. In his letters, Paul also explicitly names the three leaders of the Jerusalem Church, or 'pillars' as he calls them: Peter, James and John. In Mark's narrative, these three pillars become the three leading disciples of Jesus also named Peter, James and John.

As anyone who reads Mark closely will notice, the three pillars as well as the twelve disciples, as a whole, continually 'misunderstand and lack faith in Jesus' (Dykstra, p110)

A classic example of this occurs when Jesus teaches the disciples that they must welcome 'little children' (9:42-48; 10:13-16). In direct disobedience, a few verses later, the disciples prevent little children from coming to Jesus. Jesus responds, not for the first time, by getting very upset at them (Mk 10:13-16).

Mark is not actually making a literal point about Jesus' attitude to little children. The 'children' represent the gentiles (Dykstra, p111-112). Mark would have been inspired to use such symbolism by Paul, who frequently referred to his gentile congregations as children who have been adopted by God through Christ (e.g. Gal 3:26; 4:19). Mark's allegorical point is that the Jewish faction of the church, as represented by the disciples, are actively hindering the gentiles from full communion with Christ, by trying to make them conform to Jewish laws and customs.³

It is significant that Judas is the one who ends up betraying Jesus. The name Judas is a Hellenized version of the Hebrew name 'Judah'. This is Mark's way of saying that the Judean Christian church was responsible for betraying the true spirit of the inclusive Pauline gospel.

³ The message is reinforced through the parable that Jesus tells immediately following the children episode. Jesus famously declares: *If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell,^[1] to the unquenchable fire (9:43)*. Challenging words indeed, but not because Mark wanted people to chop their hands off! The metaphor is directed at the Jewish oriented church. And the message is that they might well have to be cut off, if they continue to act as a barrier to full gentile participation.

The Parable of the Sower:

The role of the disciples in Mark is actually beautifully summarized in the parable of the sower told by Jesus in Mark chapter 4. Mary Tolbert has shown the main parables in Mark function as condensed summaries of the overall plot.

The parable is about a sower who sows seeds and each seed falls in different places with different results. I want to focus on the seed that falls on rocky ground. Jesus says: *'Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. ⁶And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away (4:5-6).'*

Further on, Jesus explains to the disciples, the seed that falls on 'rocky soil' is like the people who: *'hear the word and immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away (4:16-17).'*

This is actually a perfect summary of what happens to the disciples throughout the narrative. In the beginning the disciples respond to Jesus' call very enthusiastically. They immediately drop their fishing nets and follow him (Mk 1:18; Mk 3:13). But from that point on everything goes awry. Immediately after the parable, they are seen to lack faith in Jesus, as they cross the stormy Sea of Galilee (4:35-41).

At the last supper Jesus predicts that all the disciples will 'fall away'. The verb used for 'falling away' is exactly the same as the one used to describe those like 'rocky soil' in the sower parable. And, of course, Jesus' prediction comes true. The very next evening when the Roman guards arrest Jesus, the disciples, rather than show faith in Jesus, as he taught them to

do, flee in terror. When trouble and persecution arise, the disciples fall away, just as the parable predicted.

While all twelve disciples are 'rocky' one is signaled out as particularly rocky - this is, Peter. It is no coincidence that Peter is Greek for 'the rock'. Poor old Peter is the epitome of a 'rocky' disciple. He can never get it right. He refuses to accept that Jesus must be crucified - the very essence of the gospel according to Paul and Mark - and to which Jesus responds by calling him Satan (8:33). Some scholars try and temper this by pointing out that Peter recognizes Jesus as the Messiah. But the recognition is more significant for what it lacks. Peter crucially fails to acknowledge that Jesus is the 'son of God,' which as Dykstra notes 'can hardly be an oversight given the title 'Son of God' features so prominently in the prologue of Mark' (Dykstra, p.120). Ironically, the only human character to recognize Jesus as the Son of God is the Roman Guard, immediately after Jesus has died (15:39).

Most serious of all, Peter is revealed to be an outright hypocrite. At the Passover meal, Peter declares that even though all the others might 'fall away' he will never do so (14:31). But, Peter does fall-away, and far worse than anyone else. He not only fails to stay awake at Gethsemane (14:32-44), he alone denies Jesus three times in the courtyard, before the cockcrows (14:66-72) - and this, despite the fact that Jesus had earlier warned his disciples to keep alert for the cry of the cockcrow when waiting for the lord (13:35). To add insult to injury, Peter's denial of Jesus before the *maids* of the high priests is carefully contrasted with Jesus' self-declaration as the Son of God before the *actual* high priests (14:53-62). Peter's betrayal, in other words, amounts to a denial of Jesus as the Son of God.

Jesus teaches that anyone who wants to follow him must deny him and take up his cross (8:35-36). But Peter ends up doing the exact opposite. As Michael Goulder rhetorically asks: 'Can you think of anyone in the Gospel story who wanted to save his life, who refused to come after Jesus and take

us his cross, who did not deny himself but instead denied Jesus? Well so could Mark' (Goulder, 1994, 18). Ironically, it is the unknown gentile, Simon of Cyrene, not Peter, who *literally* takes up Jesus cross (15:21).

The question is why did Mark single out Peter as such a poor disciple? If Mark is an allegory, what is the message? The answer goes back to Paul and his dispute with the Jerusalem leaders. In Galatians 2, Paul is recounting his version of the dispute, and singles out Peter. Paul accuses Peter of 'hypocrisy' because whereas once he had shared fellowship with the gentiles, now he was refusing to do so under the influence of the leadership in Jerusalem (Gal 2:11-14). It seem likely therefore, that Mark's portrait of Peter the 'hypocrite' is a reference to the conflicts between the apostles Paul and Peter, as recounted in Paul's letters.

3) A polemic against the Judean Jews

I have argued above that Mark is polemicizing against the exclusivist, insular, Jewish faction of early Christianity. But Mark's gospel also functions as a broader theological polemic against the Judean Jews as a whole.

Mark's gospel is a tale of how the Judean Jews rejected Jesus. Every major Jewish group in the story rejects Jesus. His own hometown 'take offense at him' (6:3). The fickle Jewish masses demand to have him crucified having only a week earlier praised him like a Messiah on his entry to Jerusalem (11:8-10; 15:6-14). And, of course, the Jewish religious and political authorities plot to have him arrested and killed (3:6). Even Jesus very own Jewish family suspect him of being mad (3:21). In chapter 6, Jesus himself sums up the complete rejection of his own people: 'Prophets are not without honor, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house' (6:4-6)

Mark's message, however, is not simply that the Jews rejected Jesus. Recall again that Mark is written in the aftermath of the Jewish-Roman war and

the destruction of the temple. To see the significance of this, we need to closely analyze the allusions that Mark makes to the Jewish scriptures, or the Old Testament. There is actually a distinct pattern to these allusions. Here is a table constructed by R.G Price (Price, 2014), which lists most of them. A large proportion - about a third - refers directly to passages within Jewish Scriptures about God's coming judgment and punishment of Israel (Price, 2007). I have bolded these passages.

Scene	Reference	Subject of Reference
The Proclamation of John the Baptist	Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 40; 2 Kings 1	Judgment of God on Israel; Comfort to Israel for fulfillment of punishment through destruction; Identification of Elijah
The Baptism of Jesus	Isaiah 11; Isaiah 42	Identification of God's servant
Jesus Calls the First Disciples	Jeremiah 16	Punishment of Israel
The Man with an Unclean Spirit	Isaiah 65	God's people don't recognize him
Jesus Heals a Paralytic	2 Kings 5	Elijah/Elisha healing miracles
The Purpose of the Parables	Isaiah 6	Punishment of Israel
Jesus Stills a Storm	Psalms 107	Identification of the Lord
Jesus Heals the Gerasene Demoniac	Isaiah 64	Punishment of Israel
A Girl Restored to Life and a Woman Healed	1 Kings 17; 2 Kings 4	Elijah/Elisha healing miracles
Death of John the Baptist	2 Kings 2	Transfer of Spirit from Elijah to Elisha
Feeding the Five Thousand	2 Kings 4	Elijah/Elisha feeding miracles
Jesus Walks on Water	Isaiah 43	Identification of the Savior of Israel
Feeding the Four Thousand	2 Kings 4	Elijah/Elisha feeding miracles
Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection	Isaiah 53	Suffering Servant
The Transfiguration	Daniel 12	Description of eternal life and shining like a star for the righteous

Temptations to Sin	Isaiah 66	Description of punishment for opponents of God
Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem	Zachariah 14; Zachariah 9; Psalm 118	Identification of the ruler of Israel
Jesus Curses the Fig Tree and Clears the Temple	Hosea 9	Admonition of the Jews, Punishment of Israel
The Parable of the Wicked Tenants	Isaiah 5	Admonition of the Jews, Punishment of Israel
The Destruction of the Temple Foretold	Isaiah 13, 14, 19	Admonition of the Jews, Punishment of Israel
The Desolating Sacrilege	Daniel 9, 11, 12	Admonition of the Jews, Destruction foretold
The Coming of the Son of Man	Isaiah 13, Daniel 7	Destruction, Punishment of the world; Coming of an eternal ruler
The Anointing at Bethany	2 Kings 9; 1 Samuel 10	Anointing of the ruler of Israel
Judas Agrees to Betray Jesus	Amos 2	Admonition of the Jews, Punishment of Israel
The Passover with the Disciples	1 Samuel 10	Preparations for kingship
Jesus predicts his Betrayal	Psalm 41	Invocation for revenge against transgressors
Peter's Denial Foretold	Zechariah 13	Wrath against betrayers
The Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus	Amos 2	Admonition of the Jews, Punishment of Israel
Jesus before the Council	Isaiah 53; Psalm 110; Psalm 35	Suffering Servant; Prayer for deliverance from enemies; Prayer for retribution on oppressors
Jesus before Pilate	Isaiah 53	Suffering Servant
The Soldiers Mock Jesus	Isaiah 50	Suffering Servant
The Crucifixion of Jesus	Amos 2; Psalm 22; Amos 8	Judgment on Israel; Prayer for deliverance from suffering; Admonition of the Jews, Punishment of Israel
The Burial of Jesus	Isaiah 53	Suffering Servant

The Destruction of the Temple and the Fig Tree:

A powerful example of literary illusion is found in Mark's Temple Scene, which is enveloped within a strange little story about a fig tree.

Mark 11:12-21 (edited)

12 The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. 13 Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. 14 Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it. 15 On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. ...20 In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. 21 Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"

The scene begins with Jesus doing something very odd: he curses a fig tree for *not* producing figs, even though the fig tree is out of season! Then a very angry Jesus famously storms the temple overturning the tables and denouncing the moneychangers. The next day, Peter points out that the cursed fig tree has withered to the roots. All this is very strange until you understand that the entire fig tree & temple scene is part of an extended allusion to Hosea chapter 9, which is a fiery Old Testament text about God's judgment on Israel (See: Price, 2007; 2014).

Here is the passage in Hosea.

Hosea 9: 1-17 (shortened):

1 Do not rejoice, O Israel; do not be jubilant like the other nations. For you have been unfaithful to your God; ... 7 The days of punishment are coming, the days of reckoning are at hand.... 10 'When I found Israel, it was like finding grapes in the desert; when I saw your fathers, it was

*like seeing the early fruit on the fig tree. 15 "Because of all their wickedness in Gilgal, I hated them there. **Because of their sinful deeds, I will drive them out of my house. I will no longer love them; all their leaders are rebellious. 16 Ephraim is blighted, their root is withered, they yield no fruit. Even if they bear children, I will slay their cherished offspring.**'17 My God will reject them because they have not obeyed him;*

From the first bolded lines (9:1; 9:7) you can see that this is a passage about God's punishment. The text reads: *Do not rejoice o'Israel for you have been unfaithful to your God...the days of punishment is coming.*

Further on, in verse 10 this dark picture is contrasted with the founding fathers of Israel who are likened to the 'early fruit on the fig tree'. Mark has clearly drawn on this passage to construct his fig tree scene, except notice how he has reversed the imagery. In Mark, unlike Hosea, the fig tree does *not* bear early fruit and that is why Jesus curses it. In Marks' eyes, unlike the founding fathers, Israel is no longer 'ripe'; no longer faithful.

In verse 15 we read: 'because of their sinful deeds I will drive them out of my house' (11:15). This is the text that has Marks' temple scene. Finally, in verse 16, we have the haunting metaphor in which a disobedient and unfaithful Israel is compared to a 'withered fig tree, bearing no fruit (v16).' This corresponds, in Mark, to Jesus and the disciples, finding the cursed fig tree 'withered ' outside the temple (Mk 11:21).

There is no way all these similarities can be a coincidence; especially given Mark's allusions to the Hosea passage are made in the same order.⁴ The entire temple/fig tree scene in Mark is very clearly a direct and deliberate allusion to Hosea 9. This, I need to stress, is just one of several similar

⁴ Although, when alluding to OT passages, Mark sometimes reverses the order in which each line originally appeared, usually as a deliberate way of making an ironic point. A classic example is his use of the Psalms in the crucifixion scene - see Mk 15:24-39 compared with Psalms 22:1-30. For commentary see R.G Price, 2007.

examples running through Marks' gospel (See R.G Price, 2007; R.M Price, 2011, Turton 2004).

How do we interpret this? As we have seen, Mark was written in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem. But it seems likely that Mark was not just written *after* this event, but is also a theological commentary on *why* it occurred. As we have seen the narrative is a tale about how the Jew rejected Jesus and the text frequently alludes to OT passages about Gods coming judgment on Israel. As R.G Price has argued, Mark is effectively saying that the destruction of Jerusalem was Gods punishment on the Jews for their unfaithfulness. In the view of Mark the Jews 'had brought the calamity of the Roman war upon themselves' (R.G Price, 2007), through their disobedience and unfaithfulness to God.

How had the Jews been unfaithful, according to Mark? Once again Mark shared the view of Paul. Paul preached that faith in Christ was God's new mode of universal salvation for all, both Jew and Gentile. But, as Paul reveals in his letter to the Romans, the early church struggled to convert the Jews to the new faith (Romans 9-11). Paul, quoting scripture, accuses Israel of being a 'disobedient and contrary people' (Romans 10:21). Mark shared this view and thought the destruction of Jerusalem was God's resulting punishment for their lack of faithfulness.

Mark also shared Paul's theological explanation for why the Jews had rejected Christ. To see this we must return to parable of the sower. After telling the parable, Jesus pulls the disciples aside and explains the purpose of the parables. He says.

"To you has been given the secret^[a] of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; ¹² in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'"

So, according to Jesus, the purpose of the parables is actually to *prevent* ‘outsiders’ from understanding the gospel. This sounds very odd, until you see that the inspiration is Paul’s letter to the Romans.

In Romans, Paul is grappling with how God could have allowed Israel to reject the gospel. Paul’s answer is that this was God’s plan all along. God foreordained that the Jews would reject the gospel while the gentiles would accept it. This in turn would make the Jews jealous, so that, eventually, many of them would accept the gospel and be saved. To illustrate this point Paul loosely quotes a passage from Isaiah, which reads: *God gave (the Jews) a spirit of stupor, eyes that should not see and ears that should not hear, down to this very day.* In Mark, Jesus says virtually the same thing. The eyes that don’t see and ears that don’t hear, in Paul, parallel the seeing but not perceiving and hearing but not understanding, in Mark.

The relationship between these two texts is particularly clear because both Mark and Paul reverse the original order found in Isaiah where the ‘hearing’ is followed by the ‘seeing’. It appears, therefore, that Paul has used the Isaiah text in his letter to the Romans, and then Mark, drawing on Paul, has placed the words in the mouth of Jesus. Mark’s further illustrates the point throughout his narrative - the Jews are mostly irresponsible to the message of Jesus, whereas the gentiles are responsive. For Mark, following Paul, God had hardened the hearts of Israel (Rom 11:7). And yet in spite of this, neither Paul nor Mark doubted that the Jews were individually and collectively responsible for their own choice to reject the Gospel.⁵ This was why God was now punishing them through the destruction of the temple.

You may, understandably, be concerned that this interpretation of Mark is effectively anti-Semitic. This is a misunderstanding. Mark is actually working within a long Jewish tradition of self-criticism. As R.G. Price points out, ‘one

⁵ As E.P. Sanders has shown most Jews, including Paul/Mark, held firm the two fundamental theological convictions, even when they were in tension. First, that God was sovereign and controlled the course of history. Second, that humans were responsible for their own actions, including obedience and disobedience to God (E.P. Sanders, 2001, Ch 5).

of the overarching topics of the Hebrew prophets in the OT is the lack of faith of the Jewish people and how their god's wrath would destroy the Jews because of their lack of faith' (R.G Price, 2007). Furthermore, Mark's interpretation of the destruction of Jerusalem as a Gods punishment was a popular one among hellenized Jews. The Jewish historian Josephus, for example, interpreted the event in the exact same way as Mark did, albeit more explicitly through historical-political writing, rather than allegory (Sanders, 2001, 47). Finally, it is likely that Mark shared Paul's view that God would ultimately ensure that the Jews would be reconciled to Christ (Rom 11:26). As a Christian, Mark would have believed there was hope for God's chosen people.

Conclusion

As many commentators have noted Mark's narrative is full of irony. Perhaps the ultimate irony is that the gospel begins by announcing itself as concerned with the 'good news of Jesus Christ' (1:1). But a close study of the symbolism, metaphors and literary allusions suggests it contains very *bad news* - at least for the Judean Jews and the Jewish oriented Christian church. As we have seen, as well as promoting the Pauline Gospel, Mark is a biting tale of judgment and criticism against both these groups.

Mark concludes his gospel with a final challenge to the Jerusalem church. The focus is on the three women at the tomb. A mysterious young man informs them that Jesus has risen. The women are instructed to go tell the disciples that Jesus can be found in Galilee (16:4-8). As I mentioned earlier Galilee is symbolic of an inclusive Church, open to all both Jew and Gentile, based on 'faith in Christ' alone. This was the gospel that Paul preached. To follow Jesus, the Jerusalem church must go to 'galilee', by following the example of Paul and embracing the inclusive universal church.

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