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The Gospel of Mark as Theological Allegory

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A number of unorthodox scholars in recent years have argued persuasively that the Gospel of Mark is best understood as a theological allegory. This essay explores the meaning of Mark's allegory by attending to its three central elements. First, the Gospel aims to promote Paul's 'inclusive' message of openness to both Jews and Gentiles on an equal basis. Second, the Gospel functions as a polemic against the Jewish-oriented faction of the early Church opposing Paul's message. Third, the Gospel is a polemic against the Judean Jews who, according to Mark, have had their hearts hardened and are now subject to God's judgement.

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1. Understanding Mark's Gospel

I initially got interested in the Gospel of 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 almost two thousand years of scholarship and study, the meaning and message of the gospel has largely been misunderstood.

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 2014: 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 in what follows 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 been sadly, I believe, lost in translation?¹

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 also must say that Mark could be the subject of an entire course. There is much more than could be said about it and which will not be covered in this essay. 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. a promotion of 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.

¹Throughout this study, I have used the NRSV translation of the Bible.

2. The Gospel of Mark in Context

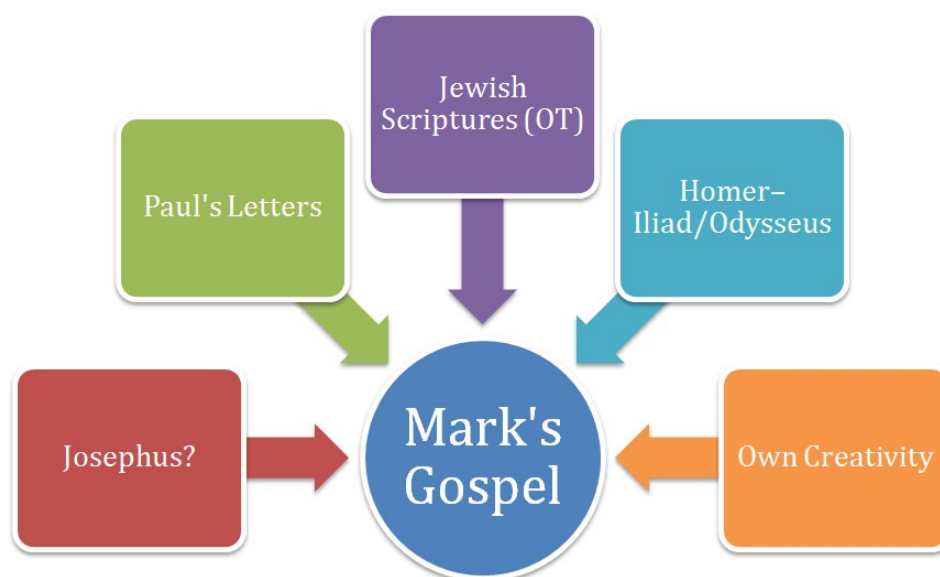
2.1 Mysterious Composition

We don't actually know anything certain about who, when or where the Gospel of Mark was composed. Scholars have made educated guesses about these things, but very little is known for certain. We don't even know whether 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 based entirely on what can be deduced from analyzing the text itself. Despite this, for convenience, I will continue to refer to 'Mark' throughout this essay.

2.2 Literary Sources

The dominant view within New Testament scholarship is that Mark constructed his gospel out of 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, Mark's *main* sources, and perhaps his only sources, were not oral but literary. That is, Mark drew primarily on pre-existing written sources to construct his gospel. This can actually be demonstrated very clearly by analyzing the themes, ideas and language common to Mark's gospel and the texts Mark used. Importantly, all these texts, apart from one—Paul's letters—originally had nothing to do with Jesus. Mark had just creatively used them, in various ways, to construct his own narrative. The diagram below illustrates the literary sources used by Mark.

Figure 1 – Literary sources used by the author of the Gospel of Mark



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

Another important source was the letters of Paul. Scholars know that Paul wrote seven letters, which are found in the New Testament (NT). 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 I will explain in a moment, that he made extensive use of Paul's letters to construct his gospel.²

There are two other likely sources. Mark had very likely used themes and motifs drawn from Homer's classics, Iliad and Odysseus (see MacDonald [2006]; Price [2011]). This should not be surprising as Mark would have received a Greco-Roman education in which the teaching of Homer was very prominent. I also think it's quite probable that Mark had 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 in this essay.

There is one other 'source' in the above diagram. While it is not a prior literary source, it is very important to mention because it is often overlooked. This is 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, plot 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 cobbled together. As Dykstra [2012: 65] 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'.

2.3 *The Jewish–Roman War*

Despite the uncertainty around Mark's composition, scholars are fairly sure it was written sometime after the Jewish war with Rome. The war began in AD 66 with a Jewish uprising against the Roman Occupation and concluded in AD 70 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

²I 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 Jesus–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, for example, Price [2011]; Carrier [2014]; Price [2014]). 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 allegory, as argued here, do *not* subscribe to this theory. Most accept the mainstream view that Paul and the early Christian movement were responding to a man named Jesus of Nazareth.

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 the destruction of the temple 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’ [Mk 13: 2]. This suggests knowledge of the temple’s destruction and thus that Mark was writing after these events. I will return to the significance of this later in §3.3 below.

2.4 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 (see Dykstra [2012: ch. 2]; Tarazi [1999: ch. 1]). Later works, such as 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.

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 (see Sanders [2001: 103]). 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. For Paul, 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. This arose 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 his 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 God’s 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 centred on spreading the faith to the Gentiles and he believed that this 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 writes, ‘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.

3. Meaning and Purpose of Mark's Gospel

3.1 Promoting Paul's Gospel

A key aim of Mark's narrative is to promote Pauline theology and values. As one scholar put it, 'the gospel of Mark may be described as narrative presentation of the Pauline Gospel' [Svartvik 2000: 34]. Some scholars have gone 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 (see Tarazi [1999]; Adamczewski [2014]). Currently, I am not convinced of this. I am convinced, however, of the more limited thesis that Mark is constructing narrative from Pauline theology.

Mark's gospel suggests deep familiarity and agreement with Paul's letters (see Tarazi [1999]; Marcus [2000]; Dykstra [2012]; Adamczewski [2014]; Price [2014]). 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 Gentile sinners [Mk 2: 17; Gal 2: 11–14] and downplays the importance of keeping the Sabbath [Mk 2: 23–8; 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: 28–9; Rom 13: 9–10]. This idea, that the Jewish law can be 'summed up' by the commandment to love, is 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 makes Jesus teach that 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 skilfully designed to climax at the crucifixion (see Marcus [2000]; Dykstra [2012: ch. 5]). For example, the famous messianic secret theme within Mark—in which Jesus insists that people keep his identity disclosed—is probably a literary technique used by Mark to reinforce the centrality of the cross, where Jesus is finally revealed to be the suffering sacrificial messiah (see Dykstra [2012: 95]).

The similarities with Paul 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]. In Mark, Jesus says something very similar: '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 parallels with Paul,³ but I want to look more closely at one, which is central to 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 (see 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 Old Testament book of Isaiah, Galilee is referred to as 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 reject Jesus (see Dykstra [2012: 75]). In light of this, some scholars have suggested that in Mark, Galilee is symbolic of the cosmopolitan Roman Empire as a whole (see 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 has 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 waterway 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 (see 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 [Mk chs 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 the Mark narrative promotes the Pauline Gentile mission can be seen in the two feeding scenes. Most of us can recall the famous feeding miracle, in which Jesus turns a few loaves into enough food for crowds of people. There are actually

³Other parallels with Paul 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: 23–4], agreement about sinful deeds or 'works of the flesh' [Mk 7: 20–3; Gal 5: 19–20], a common strategy in dealing 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 keep alert for the coming end times [Mk 13: 32–7; 1 Thess 5: 1–6].

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 Mark's 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 4: 43–4 as well as the Homeric Epics (see MacDonald [2006]). And, secondly, because when you read the two stories closely you notice several differences. These differences 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 from 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 [2012: 80] points out 'the number five recalls the five books of the Torah, and the number twelve recalls the twelve tribes of Israel'. 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 (see Tarazi [1999]; Price [2007]; Dykstra [2012]). In my view, the best explanation consistent with Mark's promotion of the Gentile mission is that the number four alludes to the 'ends of the earth', meaning the whole known world (see Tarazi [1999]; Dykstra [2012]). This is confirmed even within the text. In Mark 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', 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 discuss in the next section) 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 (see Tarazi [1999]). In the first scene, the disciples find two fish, which is symbolic of their misguided attempt to 'preserve two separate communities' [Tarazi 1999: 182]. At the second scene, by contrast, we are told 'there are a few fish' [Mk 8: 7]. This represents 'undifferentiated individuals, since there is no longer a difference between Jew and Gentile' [Tarazi 1999: 182].

Whether or not you agree with my interpretation, there can be little doubt that Mark intended his readers to interpret these feeding scenes symbolically. This is evident from the dialogue that takes place between Jesus and the disciples following the second feeding [Mk 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.

3.2 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 in §2.4 above, 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 representative 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, the three pillars known to Paul 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, continually 'misunderstand and lack faith in Jesus' [Dykstra 2012: 110]. A classic example of this occurs when Jesus teaches the disciples that they must welcome 'little children' [Mk 9: 42–8, 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 (see Dykstra [2012: 111–12]). 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 (for example, [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.⁴

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.

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. Tolbert [1996] has shown how 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. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away [Mk 4: 5–6].'

⁴The 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, to the unquenchable fire' [Mk 9: 43]. Challenging words indeed, but not because Mark/Jesus 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.

Further on, Jesus explains that the seed that had fallen 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 [Mk 4: 16–17].'

This is actually a perfect summary of what happens to the disciples throughout Mark's narrative. In the beginning, the disciples respond to Jesus' call very enthusiastically. They immediately drop their fishing nets and follow him [Mk 1: 18, 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 [Mk 4: 35–41].

At the last supper, Jesus predicts that all of 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 him, 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 singled 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, which is the very essence of the gospel, according to Paul. To this refusal, Jesus responds by calling him Satan [Mk 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 recognize Jesus as the 'Son of God', which, as Dykstra [2012: 120] notes 'can hardly be an oversight given the title "Son of God" features so prominently in the prologue of Mark'. Ironically, the only human character to recognize Jesus as the Son of God is the Roman guard, immediately after Jesus had died [Mk 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 [Mk 14: 31]. However, Peter does fall away, and far worse than anyone else. He not only fails to stay awake at Gethsemane [Mk 14: 32–44], he alone denies Jesus three times in the courtyard, before the cock crows [Mk 14: 66–72]. And this happens despite the fact that Jesus had earlier warned his disciples to keep alert for the cry of the cock crow when waiting for the lord [Mk 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 [Mk 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 himself and take up his cross [Mk 8: 35–6]. But Peter ends up doing the exact opposite. As Goulder [1995: 18] 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 up his cross, who did not deny himself but instead denied Jesus? Well so could Mark.' Ironically, it is the unknown Gentile, Simon of Cyrene, not Peter, who *literally* takes up Jesus' cross [Mk 15: 21].

The question is, why did Mark single out Peter as such a poor disciple? If the Gospel of 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 for rebuke. 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.

3.3 A Polemic against the Judean Jews

I have argued in the previous section 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 'takes offense at him' [Mk 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 [Mk 11: 8–10, 15: 6–14]. And, of course, the Jewish religious and political authorities plot to have him arrested and killed [Mk 3: 6]. Even Jesus' very own Jewish family suspects him of being mad [Mk 3: 21]. In Mark 6: 4–6, Jesus himself sums up the complete rejection of his own people: 'Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.'

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 analyze closely the allusions that Mark makes to the Jewish scriptures, viz., the Old Testament. There is actually a distinct pattern to these allusions. Below is a table reproduced from Price [2014] that lists most of them. A large proportion (about one-third) refers directly to passages about God's coming judgment and punishment of Israel (see Price [2007]). I have italicized the subjects of these passages.

Table 1 – Gospel of Mark literary allusions to the Old Testament

| Scene | Reference | Subject of Reference |
|--|---|--|
| The Proclamation of John the Baptist | Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 40; 2 Kings 1 | <i>Judgment of God on Israel</i> ; 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 | <i>Punishment of Israel</i> |
| 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 | <i>Punishment of Israel</i> |
| 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 |

| Scene | Reference | Subject of Reference |
|---|--|--|
| 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 | <i>Admonition of the Jews, Punishment of Israel</i> |
| The Parable of the Wicked Tenants | Isaiah 5 | <i>Admonition of the Jews, Punishment of Israel</i> |
| The Destruction of the Temple Foretold | Isaiah 13, 14, 19 | <i>Admonition of the Jews, Punishment of Israel</i> |
| The Desolating Sacrilege | Daniel 9, 11, 12 | <i>Admonition of the Jews, Destruction foretold</i> |
| The Coming of the Son of Man | Isaiah 13, Daniel 7 | <i>Destruction, Punishment of the world; Coming of an eternal ruler</i> |
| The Anointing at Bethany | 2 Kings 9; 1 Samuel 10 | Anointing of the ruler of Israel |
| Judas Agrees to Betray Jesus | Amos 2 | <i>Admonition of the Jews, Punishment of Israel</i> |
| 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 | <i>Admonition of the Jews, Punishment of Israel</i> |
| 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 | <i>Judgment on Israel; Prayer for deliverance from suffering; Admonition of the Jews, Punishment of Israel</i> |
| The Burial of Jesus | Isaiah 53 | Suffering Servant |

The Destruction of the Temple and the Fig Tree

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

[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!**'

[Mark 11: 12–21 (contracted and bold mine)]

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 and temple scene is part of an extended allusion to Hosea chapter 9, which is a fiery Old Testament text about God's coming judgment on Israel (see Price [2007, 2014]).

Here is the passage in Hosea.

[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.** . . . [17] My God will reject them because they have not obeyed him . . .

[Hosea 9: 1–17 (contracted and bold mine)]

From the first bolded lines [Hos 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 are coming . . .'

Further on, in verse 10, this picture of judgement is contrasted with the founding fathers of Israel who are likened to the 'early fruit on the fig tree'. This passage has clearly inspired Mark's own fig tree scene, except notice how he has reversed the imagery. In Mark, unlike Hosea, the fig tree does *not* bear early fruit; hence Jesus curses it. Mark is effectively saying that Israel, unlike the founding fathers, is no longer faithful to God.

In Mark 11: 15 we read, 'because of their sinful deeds I will drive them out of my house'. This text has clearly inspired Mark's temple scene. Finally, in the next verse, we have

the haunting metaphor in which a disobedient and unfaithful Israel is compared to a 'withered fig tree, bearing no fruit.' This corresponds to Jesus and the disciples finding the cursed fig tree 'withered' outside the temple [Mk 11: 21].

There is no way all of these similarities can be a coincidence, especially given that Mark's allusions to the Hosea passage are made in the same order.⁵ 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 examples running through Mark's gospel (see Turton [2004]; Price [2007]; Price [2011]).

How do we interpret this? As we have seen, Mark was written in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem. But Mark was not just writing *after* this event. He is also providing a theological commentary on *why* it occurred. As we have seen the narrative is a tale about how the Jews rejected Jesus and the text frequently alludes to Old Testament passages about God's coming judgment on Israel. As Price has argued, Mark is effectively saying that the destruction of Jerusalem was God's punishment on the Jews for their unfaithfulness. According to Price [2007: 107], Mark's view was that the Jews 'had brought the calamity of the Roman war upon themselves' 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; for both Jew and Gentile. But, as Paul reveals in his letter to the Romans 9–11, the early Church struggled to convert the Jews to the new faith. Paul, quoting scripture, accuses Israel of being a 'disobedient and contrary people' [Rom 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 the 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 of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that **they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand**; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.

[Mark 4: 11–12 (bold mine)]

So, according to Jesus, the purpose of the parables is actually to *prevent* 'outsiders' from understanding the gospel. This passage has stumped Christian scholars for centuries! The key to understanding it 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

⁵Although, when alluding to Old Testament 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 (compare, for example, Mk 15: 24–39 with Psalms 22: 1–30). For commentary, see Price [2007].

Jews jealous so that, eventually, many of them would accept the gospel and be saved. To illustrate this point, Paul writes: 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that should not see and ears that should not hear, down to this very day' [Rom 11:8]. In Mark's parable scene, 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.

Mark further illustrates the point about the Jews throughout his narrative: the Jews are mostly irresponsible to the message of Jesus, whereas the Gentiles are responsive. For Mark, following Paul [Rom 11: 7], God had hardened the hearts of Israel. And yet, in spite of this, neither Paul nor Mark doubted that the Jews were individually and collectively responsible for choosing to reject the Gospel.⁶ For them, 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 Price [2007: 105] points out, 'one of the overarching themes of the Hebrew prophets in the Old Testament 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'.

Furthermore, Mark's interpretation of the destruction of Jerusalem as a God's punishment was a popular one among Hellenized Jews. The Jewish historian, Josephus, for example, interpreted the event in exactly the same way, albeit more explicitly through historical-political writing, rather than allegory (see Sanders [2001: 47]). Finally, it is likely that Mark shared Paul's view in Romans 11: 26 that God would ultimately ensure that the Jews would be reconciled to Christ. As a Christian, Mark would have believed that there was hope for God's chosen people.

⁶As Sanders [2001: ch. 5] has shown, most Jews, including Paul and Mark, held firm to 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.

4. Conclusion

As many commentators have noted, Mark's narrative is full of irony. Perhaps the ultimate irony is that the gospel begins by announcing its central concern with the 'good news of Jesus Christ' [Mk 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. Here, his 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 [Mk 16: 4–8]. As I mentioned in §3.1, 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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