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THE ANCHOR BIBLE

MARK  
1-8



A New Translation  
with Introduction and Commentary

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## THE PLACE OF MARK IN CHRISTIAN LIFE AND THOUGHT



### MARK IN THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

We have seen that Mark may have originally been written to play a role within a particular setting in the life of the church. But where more generally does it fit within the history of Christian life and thought? And where does it fit, even more generally, within the history of religions?

The first thing to be said about Mark's Gospel is that it is an eclectic writing. As we have already seen, some of its descriptions of Jesus as a miracle worker correspond to tales that were told not only about Old Testament prophets and Palestinian rabbis but also about wonder-workers in the larger Hellenistic world. Other motifs, such as several involved in the story of John the Baptist's execution, seem to be borrowed from the folklore of Greco-Roman paganism, and some of the Markan Jesus' proverbial wisdom and instructions to his disciples are akin to snippets of popular Hellenistic philosophy (see the NOTES on "The strong don't need a doctor, but the sick" in 2:17, on "staff" and "provision bag" in 6:8, and on "two tunics" in 6:9, and the COMMENT on 6:14-16 and on 6:21-28). Even if, as has been argued above, Mark was a native of Palestine, that does not mean that he (and Jesus before him) were untouched by Hellenistic influences, since first-century Palestine was Hellenized to a significant extent (see Hengel, *Judaism*); and if Mark subsequently became a member of a Syrian Christian community, he would have been exposed to such influences even more. And even if, as I shall argue below, he was an apocalyptic thinker, that still does not remove him from the Hellenistic realm, since apocalypticism itself was a general phenomenon in the Greco-Roman world (see Hellholm, *Apocalypticism*).

But this important observation about Mark's cosmopolitanism, and that of the New Testament in general, has its limits. One of them is pointed out at the beginning of Stauffer's *New Testament Theology* (17-18): the only writing that is extensively quoted in the New Testament is the Old Testament. The Old Testament—not Homer, Plato, or Cicero. It is only the Old Testament books that are called "the writings" (*hai graphai*; Mark 12:10, 24; 14:49); it is only to them that the significant perfect passive verb *gegraptai* ("it has been written") is made to refer (Mark 1:2; 7:6; 9:12-13; 11:17; 14:21, 27; cf. 12:19).

Mark's particular way of interpreting these writings, moreover, follows in the footsteps of the Old Testament exegesis of Jewish writers (see Marcus, *Way*, 199-202). The God whose advent the Markan Jesus announces, to whom he calls his hearers to turn in penitence and faith, the God whom he trusts to raise him from the dead (an un-Hellenistic concept), is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (cf. 12:26), and not of the philosophers (cf. Pascal, "Memorial," *Pensées*). The basic Jewishness of the outlook in Mark's Gospel, then, is apparent from its opening verses; whatever we may think of Mark's own ethnoreligious background and the ethnic makeup of his community.

### MARK'S APOCALYPTIC ESCHATOLOGY

Mark's mode of OT interpretation is particularly close to that found in Jewish apocalyptic writings, since he like the Jewish apocalypticists sees the OT prophecies being fulfilled in the events of his own day (see Marcus, *Way*, index s.v. "apocalyptic eschatology" and "eschatological interpretation of OT"). Nor is this the only way in which Mark is an apocalyptic thinker. His outlook can be termed "apocalyptic" because his narrative is from start to finish set within the context of the approaching end of the world (on the definition of "apocalyptic eschatology" and "apocalypticism," see Hanson, "Apocalypse, Genre" and "Apocalypticism"; J. J. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 2; de Boer, "Paul"). The Markan Jesus' inaugural sermon announces that the time has been fulfilled and that the dominion of God is at hand (1:14-15). Later he tells his hearers that some of them will not taste death before they see that dominion come in power (9:1); for Mark's audience, hearing these words forty years after Jesus' death, the impression that the time was growing short would be unavoidable. Nor would they want to escape it, since the cutting short of the present time of tribulation is the basis of their hope (13:19-20): the horror they are experiencing cannot last long; soon the Son of Man will return on the clouds of heaven and send his angels to gather the elect (13:24-27).

At the same time, however, Mark holds this note of imminent expectation in tension with a sense of present fulfillment. This he does both by including individual sayings and stories that imply the presence of salvation already in Jesus' ministry (2:19-22, 27-28; 3:27; 4:35-41, etc.) and by juxtaposing stories about Jesus' earthly life with eschatological predictions. Thus the Markan Jesus' powerful revelation of his divine glory to three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration (9:2-8) immediately follows his prophecy about some not tasting death before they see the arrival of God's dominion with power (9:1), and the correlation between the two suggests that the Transfiguration is some sort of foretaste of the dominion of God. Similarly, the juxtaposition of the eschatological prophecies in chapter 13 with the passion narrative that immediately follows suggests that Mark wants his readers to see the latter as in some sense a fulfillment of the former (see R. Lightfoot, *Gospel Message*, 48-59). As Jesus has prophesied will happen at "the end," some disciples cannot

stay awake and are unready when "the hour" of eschatological crisis comes (14:32-42; cf. 13:35-37); even the elect are led astray and desert (14:50-52; cf. 13:22); the climactic events unfold in three-hour intervals (15:25, 33-34; cf. 13:35); and the good news makes its way to the Gentiles (15:39; cf. 13:10).

The Markan correspondences between prophecies and narrative fulfillments, however, do not eliminate the note of future expectation. In fact, for Mark the belief that the eschatological fulfillment began in Jesus' ministry probably feeds the sense of imminent expectation, as it already did for Jesus himself (cf. Kümmel, *Promise*, on the combination of present and futuristic elements in Jesus' eschatology). The redemptive events of a generation ago were the start of the final age; if that generation is now seen to be drawing to a close, the end must surely be in sight (cf. Ravitzky, *Messianism*, 140, for a parallel from modern-day Jewish apocalypticism).

## THE COSMIC BATTLE

But Mark's expectation of a near end is not the only way in which he is an apocalyptic thinker. A certain type of apocalypticism, which de Boer ("Paul") terms "cosmic apocalyptic eschatology," is characterized by the notion that the earth is in subjection to cosmic forces of evil, which human beings are helpless to combat through their own efforts, and that the only hope for them is an eschatological act of God that will utterly transform the conditions of human existence and defeat the oppressive powers. This description fits Mark's narrative perfectly. The situation before the advent of Jesus is one in which the realm of the human is sharply opposed to the realm of the divine (cf. 8:33). The human condition is one of bondage to a "strong man," a demonic power that humans are incapable of countering until Jesus, the "Stronger One," arrives on the scene to free them (3:27). As in this passage, Mark often uses the verb *dynasthai*, "to be able," or the cognate adjective *dynatos*, "possible," to emphasize what God and/or Jesus alone can do (1:40; 2:7; 5:3; 8:4; 9:3, 22, 28; 10:26-27; 14:35-36) or what human beings can do only through the power of God (9:23, 29). The whole issue is summed up in the terse pronouncement in 10:26-27: salvation is impossible for human beings, but not with God.

For Mark as for other Jewish apocalypticists, this salvation is above all a liberation of humanity from the cosmic powers that oppress it; Jesus' main mission is to clear the earth of demons (Käsemann, *Jesus*, 55), and even his teaching is a weapon in this struggle (cf. 1:27). It is not accidental, therefore, that the Markan Jesus' first action after his baptism is a life-or-death struggle with Satan (1:12-13), that the first extended passage in the Gospel is a description of a dramatic exorcism (1:21-28), that subsequent exorcisms are also dramatically highlighted (see 5:1-20 and 9:14-29 and the summaries in 1:32-34, 39; 3:11-13), that exorcistic ability is recognized as a sign of apostolic au-

thority (3:15; 6:13), and that even some healings take on exorcistic features (1:31, 41-43; 7:33-35). Moreover, as Robinson has shown in an important monograph (*Problem*, 91-94), for the evangelist the human opposition to Jesus, which is visible, for example, in the controversy stories, is an extension of the cosmic opposition, which is visible especially in the exorcisms (cf. the COMMENT on 5:14-17 and 6:1-3).

This intertwined demonic/human opposition culminates in Jesus' crucifixion. Mark probably means his readers to understand that the Jewish leaders' conspiracy to liquidate Jesus (3:6; 11:18) reflects the demons' fear that he will liquidate *them* (1:24); the verb *apolesai* is used in both cases and resurfaces in the description of a demon's intention to destroy a human being in 9:22. This demonic interpretation of Jesus' death is supported by the way in which Mark portrays it as a scene of cosmic darkness (15:33); darkness suggests demonic powers elsewhere in the NT (e.g. Eph 6:12) and in Jewish sources (e.g. IQS 3:15-4:26), and Mark himself links an apocalyptic darkening of the sun with the disturbance of cosmic (demonic?) powers (13:24-25). In his passion narrative, moreover, Mark uses exactly the same words to describe Jesus' death-cry (*phōnē megalē*, "a loud cry"; 15:34, 37) as he has employed previously to describe the screams of demoniacs (1:26; 5:7). This apparent defeat of Jesus by Satan, however, actually turns out to be Jesus' victory over him (15:38-39; cf. 1 Cor 2:8).

How does Mark come by this cosmic apocalyptic eschatology, which is simultaneously so pessimistic (about human capabilities) and so hopeful (about divine possibilities)? We cannot ignore the possible influence of Mark's religious background (did he perhaps grow up in a Jewish apocalyptic milieu, such as the Qumran sect?) and personal temperament. Apocalyptic modes of thinking, moreover, are often accentuated in situations of war, persecution, and other forms of stress, such as the Markan community apparently experienced in the wake of the Jewish War. But it is hard to agree with Mack (*Myth*) that Mark simply *invented* Christian apocalypticism out of his own psychological needs and the stress his community was undergoing. A line of Christian apocalyptic thinking, rather, can be traced back to Jesus himself, through the earliest Christians, and on to Paul and other first-generation Christians (cf. Allison, "Plea"; Hurtado, "Evolutionary," 19-25; Wedderburn, "Paul and Jesus"). And Mark could theoretically have been influenced by all of these sources, since he followed them in time.

## MARK AND PAUL

The really controversial issue here is whether or not Mark was influenced by Paul. We could be confident that Mark had been exposed to Paul's influence if we knew that he really was the John Mark of Acts, but unfortunately we cannot be sure of that (see the discussion of Markan authorship above). Certainly,