

# **Mark's Gospel**

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## Preface

The Second Gospel is at once the shortest and, at least in the majority opinion of scholars, the earliest. The general consensus is that Mark was written in about 65 A.D., probably in Rome. Even the casual reader is bound to notice that the four gospels are each distinct. Though one early attempt was made to merge the four into a single synthetic account, the *Diatessaron* by Tatian in about 170 A.D., it has been the practice of the church to keep them separate.

Each gospel was composed by selecting narratives, parables, miracles and so forth from the traditions about Jesus. We may assume that inasmuch as they were each written within and for specific communities, the selection of the material in each gospel reflects to some degree the situation of the church in which it was written. In other words, the elements which were selected by the evangelists with which to compose the gospels were chosen because they addressed a need in the community of faith. The selections were intentional, not haphazard. Each evangelist had at his disposal various resources, including the OT in Hebrew and Greek, the oral traditions which had been preserved about Jesus, the written traditions, if any, which had already preceded him, and the eyewitness accounts of those who had personally witnessed events in the life of Jesus. Whether or not there were any written materials at Mark's disposal is debated. Many scholars have conjectured for years that there was a "sayings" source underlying some of the gospels, though usually this source is thought to have been incorporated into Matthew and Luke rather than in Mark. In any case, each gospel presents a unique portrait of Jesus, somewhat different than a biography, at least in the modern sense, and certainly different than a diary or an epic. Instead, each gospel is a literary form that is unique in the history of sacred literature, and each one essentially seeks to answer a single question, "Who is Jesus?"

Mark is no exception. His portrait of Jesus begins with the lines, "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1), and near the end, he climaxes his account with the exclamation of the soldier at the foot of the cross, "Surely this man was the Son of God" (15:39)!

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## **Introduction**

Since the mid-1800's, Mark's Gospel has occupied center stage in NT studies after a long residence in the shadows of the other synoptics. Generally conceded to be the earliest gospel, the Book of Mark is also probably the simplest for the average reader. A great deal of scholarly study and debate has surrounded this book in recent years, though the emphasis in this study will be primarily exegetical. By way of introduction, some of the more significant background points are worth consideration.

### **Who is "Mark"?**

The Book of Mark is formally anonymous, that is, the author nowhere explicitly names himself. However, there is good reason to accept the early Christian tradition that the author was the John Mark mentioned in the NT.

### **John Mark as a Person**

John Mark's home was in Jerusalem and was a chief meeting place for Christians (Ac. 12:12). We know nothing of his conversion except that it seems likely that he was led to Christ by Simon Peter (1 Pe. 5:13). He emerges during a relief mission sent by the church in Antioch to the Jerusalem church (Ac. 11:27-30; 12:25). Shortly thereafter, he accompanied Barnabas, his first cousin (Col. 4:10), and Paul to Asia Minor (Ac. 13:2-5). Unfortunately, John Mark did not stay with them long; he returned home for reasons unknown (Ac. 13:13). We do know that whatever his reasons, Paul certainly took a dim view of them (Ac. 15:36-41). However, eventually the rift between Paul and John Mark was healed (Col. 4:10; Phlm. 24; 2 Ti. 4:11).

Certain legends have been handed down about John Mark, though they are of uncertain value. Epiphanius (4th century) said Mark was one who later rejected Jesus (Jn. 6:66). Theodosius (6th century) said that the home of Mary, Mark's mother, was used for the last supper and also contained the upper room mentioned in Acts 1 and 2.

Alexander (6th century Cypriot) said that Mark was the man anticipated by Jesus who would be found carrying the pitcher of water (Mk. 14:13). A long-standing tradition says that Mark established the church in Alexandria, Egypt (reported by both Eusebius and Jerome in the 4th century). Nicephorus Callistus (14th century) said Mark was martyred in Alexandria by a mob who dragged him to death. One tradition says that Mark was missing a thumb which he had cut off so as to avoid being eligible for the priesthood (cf. Ac. 4:36; Lv. 21:16-20).

### **John Mark as an Evangelist and Theologian**

The uniform and widespread testimony of the early church is that John Mark

composed his gospel on the basis of Simon Peter's witness. Papias (circa 70-150 A.D.) says: "Mark, having become Peter's interpreter, wrote accurately as many things as he remembered." Irenaeus (circa 140-203 A.D.) says: "Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, himself also transmitted to us in writing the things preached by Peter." Clement of Alexandria (circa 195 A.D.) says: "When Peter had publicly preached the word in Rome....those present besought Mark....to record his words." These testimonies are further supported by Justin Martyr (circa 150 A.D.), Origen (circa 200 A.D.), Tertullian (circa 200 A.D.), Eusebius (circa 326 A.D.) and Jerome (circa 400 A.D.).

Different theories exist as to how this record was composed, such as, the theory that Mark could have compiled and translated records written in Aramaic by Peter himself. Also, it has been suggested that Mark could have recorded things he had heard orally from Peter, either in Peter's preaching, his teaching or in private instruction. In the witness of Papias, the earliest testimony to John Mark as the interpreter of Peter, it says: "Mark, who was Peter's interpreter, wrote down accurately though not in order all that he remembered of what Christ had said or done. He followed Peter, who adapted his teaching to meet the needs of his hearers, but not as if he was giving a systematic compilation of the Lord's oracles. Mark, therefore, made no mistake, but he wrote down some things as he remembered them, for he had one purpose in mind, not to omit anything he had heard, and not to falsify anything in it." This statement seems to indicate that though one may see a general chronology in Mark's gospel, he/she should not look for a strictness of chronology. Mark's purpose was not chronology *per se* but accuracy in reporting the acts and words of Jesus.

## **The Origin of Mark's Gospel**

### *Place*

With one exception, all early witnesses agree that Mark's Gospel originated in Rome, the exception being Chrysostom (347-407 A.D.), who thought it originated in Alexandria, Egypt. 1 Peter 5:13 seems to correlate well with Rome as the place of origin, that is, if the term "Babylon" is taken as a cryptogram for Rome, a position generally shared by scholars (cf. Rv. 17:3, 5, 9a). Also, Mark alone identifies Simon the Cyrene as being the father of a Roman church member (Mk. 15:21; Ro. 16:13).

### *Date*

The date for Mark's Gospel has a fairly wide range of possibilities. Peter's Roman martyrdom occurred in 64 A.D., and if the gospel was not published until after Peter's death, than we may not date it earlier than that.

*Readers*

A variety of evidences in Mark's Gospel seem to point to non-Jewish readers, such as, the fact that Mark does not give nearly as many details of Jewish interest as does Matthew and that he translates Aramaic words, suggesting that his readers were non-Jewish (3:17; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 14:36; 15:22, 34). If Mark wrote his gospel in Rome, it would not be unlikely to assume that he did so for the benefit of the Roman Christians.

*Purpose*

Because Mark does not specifically explain it, the purpose of his gospel has long been debated. Granted, we know that his obvious purpose is to tell the story of Jesus. However, the way he selects and presents his material as distinct from the other Gospels suggests an underlying purpose beyond the obvious. Without going into the various academic theories, one may safely say that Mark's gospel was designed to persuade and give confirmation to his readers that Jesus of Nazareth, a lowly Jewish carpenter who was convicted of treason and executed on a Roman cross, was the Messiah, the Son of God.

**Canonization of Mark's Gospel**

The books of the NT canon were accepted as Scripture on the grounds of inspiration and apostolicity. Mark's gospel, as the record of Peter's witness of Christ, was so accepted from the very first.

**Characteristics of Mark's Gospel***His Literary Style*

Mark's gospel is written in the colloquial Greek of the common person. The narrative moves quickly and vividly. Mark uses the word *eutheos* (= immediately) some forty-two times, and he tells the story of Jesus in much less space than either Matthew or Luke. Furthermore, he either eliminates the long discourses of Jesus or presents them in a shorter form than do the other synoptics.

*His Portrait of Jesus*

Mark portrays Jesus as a man of action, sometimes even too busy to eat (3:20; 6:31). The humanity of Jesus is realistically painted as Mark shows him "angry" (3:5), "sighing" with dejection (7:34; 8:12), "filled with compassion" (1:41; 6:34), and stricken with deadly sorrow so that he cries, "My heart is ready to break with grief" (14:34, NEB). At the same time, Jesus is shown to be the divine Son of God, authenticated by a heavenly voice (1:11; 9:7), recognized by demons (3:11; 5:7), and discerned by a Roman centurion (15:39). In Mark's Gospel, Jesus' self-understanding

as the Son of God is clear (13:32; 14:61-62). His divine mission is exemplified in his power to forgive sin (2:5) and his self-sacrifice in yielding up his life as a ransom (10:45). In fact, Mark explicitly points out that Jesus' death was the result of his own self-chosen action. There was no circumstantial necessity that Jesus go to Jerusalem, humanly speaking, except that it was an integral part of the divine purpose (8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34; 14:21a).

### *The Messianic Secret*

Mark stresses Jesus' insistence that his messianic identity be kept secret. Demons were forbidden to reveal his identity (1:25, 34; 3:12) as well as those whom Jesus healed (1:44; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26). Jesus charged his own disciples to keep the secret until after the resurrection (9:9). The reason for this strange request is not obvious, but it was probably due to the prevalence of inadequate and misleading views about the messiah among the Jews. In non-Jewish locations, Jesus was not so reluctant to be recognized (5:19).

### *Relationship of Mark's Gospel to the other Synoptics*

It is obvious to the careful reader, particularly for those who can read the Greek text, that there is a literary dependency between the three synoptic Gospels. They are similar in structure, chronology and content, and in a number of places in the Greek text, they are virtually identical. Of the 661 verses in Mark's Gospel, some 600 of them are reproduced in Matthew and some 300 of them in Luke. Furthermore, Matthew and Luke never agree with each other when they diverge from Mark's wording. The Fourth Gospel, by contrast, is markedly different than any of the synoptics.

Several theories of composition have been put forward by biblical scholars.

- 1) There may have been a common source available to all three synoptic evangelists.
- 2) One gospel may have been composed first while the other two were composed by using the first one as a primary source (this is the theory most widely accepted). Here, if Mark was written first, Matthew and Luke used Mark's basic text but expanded it. On the other hand, if Matthew or Luke were written first, Mark is an abridgement.
- 3) Each synoptic gospel was originally quite different, but they were partially harmonized by a later hand.
- 4) All three synoptics were written by authors who collaborated.
- 5) Divine inspiration accounts for the common ground between them.

The most commonly accepted theory, but by no means the only one, is that Mark is the first gospel to be written and that Matthew and Luke used Mark as the basic structure for the writing of their own gospels.

### **The General Content of Mark's Gospel**

Mark's Gospel is somewhat like a drama in four acts which can be divided as follows:

**Act I (1:1-13)** This is the prelude which describes Jesus' preparation for and dedication to his divine mission.

**Act II (1:14-9:1)** This section describes the ministry of Jesus in Galilee and his periodic withdrawals from Galilee.

**Act III (9:2-15:47)** Here, Mark describes the last journey of Jesus to Jerusalem and the passion.

**Act IV (16:1-20)** Finally, Mark points his readers toward the enigma of the empty tomb.

### **The Prelude (1:1-13)**

This initial short section to Mark's Gospel describes Jesus' preparation for and commitment to his divine mission.

### **The Opening (1:1-3)**

The very first statement in Mark's Gospel is loaded with significant theological concepts.

### **The Gospel (euangelion = good news)**

Mark introduces his readers to a new literary genre which, unlike Paul's letters for instance, was not patterned after a style already existing in the Greco-Roman world.

*What a "Gospel" is not*

**It is Not a Biography** Biographical writing was quite well-known in the ancient world, but Mark does not give standard biographical information, such as, Jesus' antecedents, culture, national milieu, environment and so forth. Also, Mark does not attempt to analyze Jesus to see what forces may have influenced his behavior, as would most biographers.

**It is Not An Epic**: Epic writing was also familiar to the ancient world, that is, a narrative of heroic deeds. However, Jesus' condemnation and execution was

hardly the material for an epic, and many of his deeds would not be thought of as heroic.

It is Not a Memoirs: A memoirs is a collection of anecdotes or sayings about a famous figure, but Mark's Gospel does not seem to fit here either. A gospel is certainly more than a set of reminiscences.

### *What a Gospel Is*

A gospel is a unique style of writing which tells the story of God's saving action in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. These books called gospels are the preaching materials of the early church. They are called gospels because they give the substance of the gospel--the good news of what God did in Christ so that people could be saved (cf. Ro. 1:16).

### **The Christ**

The word *christos* (= anointed one or messiah) has its origin in the Jewish hope for the future, as exemplified in Psalm 2. Though there were many late Jewish conceptions of the role of messiah as primarily an eschatological king of David's line who would restore the Jewish monarchy and establish Jewish world supremacy, Mark sets out to prove first that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, but second, that his messiahship was something quite different from the popular notions.

### **The Son of God**

*Huios tou Theou* (= Son of God) is a phrase directly intended to describe the divine nature of Jesus. It suggests his divine origin and his unique relationship with God, the Father.

### **The Prophetic Base (1:2-3)**

In describing the ministry of the Baptist, Mark recalls prophecies from Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3. Both of these passages herald the eschatological advent of Yahweh. They are admirably suited to introduce John as the messianic forerunner and Jesus as the incarnation of Yahweh. The desert, the scene of John's ministry, is the wilderness area around the Jordan, just north of the Dead Sea.

### **John's Manner and Message (1:4-8)**

The good news about Jesus properly begins with the ministry of John the Baptist, Jesus' forerunner and herald.

### **John's Baptism**

Several words are critical for understanding the significance of John's ministry.

*Baptism:* to dip or plunge.

*Repentance:* a change of mind; a reorientation of the personality; conversion or life transformation; this word captures the idea of "turning" as found in the prophets (cf. Je. 4:28; Eze. 18:27; Jon. 3:9; etc.).

*Forgiveness:* translated as either forgiveness or remission.

*Confession:* to openly or publicly admit or to declare

John's baptism was a public declaration symbolic of three things. First, it signified the candidate's admission of his/her sinfulness before God. Second, it expressed the intention to turn from sin and to live in dedication to God's will. Third, it expressed cleansing--the fact that God's gracious mercy was extended to wash away guilt and iniquity. The outward expression of baptism represented the inward transformation.

### **John's Manner**

John's coarse clothing and food mark his lifestyle as that of a desert nomad--a manner reminiscent of Elijah.

### **John's Message**

John's preaching anticipated the coming of Jesus. He carefully established the priority of Jesus over himself and contrasted his own simple baptism in water with that of his successor, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

With the death of the last of the writing prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, the Holy Spirit was believed to have been quenched. However, the idea that in the end God would pour out the Spirit at the dawn of the time of salvation was an important OT prediction (Is. 32:14-17; 44:1-3; Eze. 37:11-14; Joel 2:28-32). John's message was that this glorious era was about to begin. To be "baptized" with the Holy Spirit is to be given the long-awaited gift of salvation.

### **Jesus' Baptism (1:9-11)**

The fact that Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River is significant, not only as a verification of the legitimacy of John's preaching, but also as a demarcation between Jesus' life in Nazareth and his public ministry.

### **Why was Jesus Baptized?**

This question immediately arises because Jesus is uniformly declared in the NT to be sinless. Only Matthew addresses this problem (3:15), but his phrase "to fulfill all righteous" remains ambiguous. Several interpretations have been offered:

*A Vicarious Act:* This idea suggests that Jesus was baptized for the sins of the

world as a substitution. However, there is no evidence that the primitive church considered proxy baptism to be valid.

*A Pattern:* This view sees Jesus as simply providing an example, so that as he himself was baptized, others should be baptized also.

*A Self-Commitment:* This line of thought views Jesus' action as his dedication to the divine mission, based on the fact that Jesus deliberately made the trip from Nazareth to the Jordan to commence his ministry.

### **Jesus, the Servant-Messiah**

Whether or not the dove and the voice were seen and/or heard by anyone other than Jesus and John is not certain (cf. Jn. 1:32-34; 5:37). What is certain is that the phenomenon of the dove and the voice bring together two extremely significant strands of OT prophecy.

*The Servant:* In the later chapters of Isaiah there appears a series of predictions about a "servant of Yahweh" who would be a light to the nations (49:6), who would be severely abused (50:6; 52:14), who would bear the sins of humans (53:4-6), and who would ultimately liberate the oppressed (61:1-3). This servant is described as one upon whom God would put his Holy Spirit (42:1; 61:1). The descent of the Spirit, embodied as a dove at Jesus' baptism, reveals Jesus to be this promised suffering servant (cf. Lk.4:16-21).

*The Messiah:* The other strand of prophecy that is captured here is built upon Psalm 2, where the messiah (2:1-2) is described as God's Son (2:7, 12). Other psalms further describe this messianic Son of God from David's line (cf. Ps. 89:20-27; 132:11-18). The voice from heaven which declared, "You are my Son, whom I love," directly identifies Jesus as the promised messiah.

The phenomena of the dove and the voice bring together two streams of prophecy in the person of Jesus--a union that the Jews and even Jesus' disciples had difficulty understanding. Jesus was both the kingly messiah as well as the suffering servant of Yahweh.

### **Jesus' Temptation (1:12-13)**

No sooner had Jesus dedicated himself to his mission than he confronted his arch enemy, Satan, in the Judean desert. The fact that the Holy Spirit with angels superintended this confrontation has long been a comfort to Christians in their struggles against evil. God does not tempt his people (cf. Ja. 1:13), but he does permit them to be tempted (1 Co. 10:13). The mention of wild animals could be either an attempt to emphasize the desolation of Christ's circumstances or perhaps his lordship over nature.

## **The Great Galilean Ministry (1:14--9:1)**

The bulk of Jesus' ministry was not in urban Jerusalem but in rural Galilee, a small region in northern Palestine which was also the area of Jesus' upbringing and early life. At the time of Jesus' ministry, Galilee and Perea were under the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas, one of Herod the Great's sons. Life in Galilee was largely determined by the mountains and the Lake of Gennesaret. Terraced farming, which included crops of olives, grapes, and grain, as well as fishing were the major occupations. Generally speaking, Galilean Jews were far less sophisticated than their Judean counterparts, and their allegiance to the temple and its rituals less intense.

## **The Good News of the Kingdom (1:14-15)**

Jesus' public preaching in Galilee dates from about the time of John's arrest (the actual account of John's imprisonment and execution will be detailed by Mark later, cf. 6:17-29). The heart of his message was about the "gospel of God," that is, the good news from God about the nearness of his kingdom.

The idea of the kingdom of God is an extremely important one and could hardly have been more arousing. Since the fall and captivity of OT Israel and the interpretation of this event by the prophets, it had become increasingly clear to the Jews that the ancient kingdom of Israel did not fit God's ideal. Though God had created the world, it had departed radically from his purpose and was opposed to him. Israel, also, had failed and had been judged by Yahweh for this failure. During the inter-testamental period, the idea that God would break into human history and overthrow the forces of evil became strong. This idea finds its roots in the OT (especially Da. 2:44-45; 7:27) as well as in a special body of Jewish intertestamental literature called Apocalyptic. The phrase kingdom of God, as used by John and Jesus, did not so much denote a realm (as of land) as it did the sovereign rule of God by which he would assert his authority and bring a rebelling world into conformity with his intended purpose. This assertion of God's authority could not be expected to occur without a battle, but nevertheless, God would win the bitter struggle.

Thus, when Jesus began preaching about the nearness of the kingdom and the arrival of the time of fulfillment, it is small wonder that his message caused a stir. The response for which Jesus called was simply, "Repent and believe the good news."

## **A Busy Day in Capernaum (1:16-34)**

The next several scenarios seem to be crowded into the span of a single day.

## **The Calling of Four Disciples (1:16-20)**

Jesus' first disciples were called from a small Galilean fishing enterprise. It is

possible that Jesus already knew at least Andrew and Peter (cf. Jn.1:35-42), while James and John were possibly his cousins (cf. Mt. 27:55-56; Mk. 15:40-41; Jn. 19:25). These very first followers exemplified the demands of discipleship in their immediate willingness to forsake family and possessions to go with Jesus.

### **Jesus' Authority (1:21-28)**

Early in his ministry Jesus made Capernaum, a fishing village on the northwest coast of Gennesaret, the home base for his Galilean mission (cf. Mt. 4:12-13).

#### *Synagogue Teaching*

Like any adult Jewish male, Jesus was eligible to teach in the synagogue, and here he exercised his privilege to do so. However, unlike the scribes who were lay copyists and interpreters of the Scripture and who generally commented on the OT by repeating the opinions of their predecessors, Jesus taught with personal authority. Such a method caused amazement in his audience.

#### *The Expulsion of the Evil Spirit*

The authority of Jesus was not only evident in his teachings but in his power over evil. A widely held belief in the first century was that a person could gain magical power over another if he could utter his name and his true identity. During the synagogue service, a demon-possessed man attempted to do this to Jesus, but Jesus commanded silence and expelled the unclean spirit.

Four things are important in this incident. First, Jesus refused to allow his messianic identity to be heralded by satanic forces. Second, the authority of Jesus over the evil spirit pointed to the coming downfall of God's enemies and the reality of the kingdom of God in Jesus' ministry and person (cf. Lk. 11:20). Third, Jesus' personal authority over evil caused amazement in the onlookers. Exorcism of demons was a known practice among certain Jewish sects (cf. Lk. 11:19), but such exorcists claimed power only by their identification with some higher deity or power who was invoked through a spell or magical action. Jesus did nothing like this; his authority was in his own person. Fourth, Jesus' fame began to spread throughout Galilee.

### **Jesus' Power (1:29-34)**

After the synagogue service, Jesus and his newfound disciples went to Simon's home. Again, Jesus' power was manifested as, without ceremony, he healed Simon's mother-in-law. Sundown marked the end of the sabbath, when people would have been free to carry their afflicted folks to Jesus without infringing on the commandment to refrain from working. Whether diseased or demon possessed, Jesus healed and delivered, seemingly without effort. Here, as earlier, Jesus refused to be openly recognized as messiah.

In the above descriptions of Jesus' activities, it is important to note that Jesus consistently showed his authority and messiahship in verifiable miracles rather than merely talking about it. Mark takes pains to point out that Jesus did not try to persuade the crowds of his identity. Rather, Jesus' identity was implicit in his actions. Furthermore, the evidence for Jesus' identity was not just one or two successful cures, but an abundance of supernatural power wielded without apparent effort.

### **The Galilean Mission (1:35-39)**

Two things are noteworthy in this passage. First, Jesus knew the necessity of private prayer, and apparently, the cool and quiet early morning hours were best for him, given the intensity of his daily ministry. Second, the nature of Jesus' mission is here clarified. Though Simon and the others were eager to repeat another exciting day in Capernaum, Jesus broadened the horizon of his mission to all the villages in Galilee. Furthermore, he emphasized the message of his mission. Though Jesus consistently healed people, this action in itself was secondary to his preaching of the gospel.

### **Jesus' Growing Popularity (1:40-45)**

The word leprosy, as used in the New Testament, is a broad term which may describe any of several skin diseases, such as ring worm and psoriasis as well as the more well-known form of Hansen's Disease.<sup>1</sup> Leprosy, in its more severe manifestation, was loathsome, disfiguring and incurable. The law could not help the leper; it could only protect the healthy and so demanded complete segregation (Lv. 13:45-46).

The fact that Jesus did not want to be known as just a local wonder-worker is further underscored in the healing of the leper. The leper's approach to Jesus broke all customary regulations. Yet in pity, Jesus did the unthinkable--he touched him (usually considered to be a sure method of contamination) and instructed him to go for an examination by the priests, who alone could declare him to be clean and fit for society (Lv. 13:2-32). Jesus prefaced his instructions with a stern warning for the man not to spread the news of the healing.

Two things are significant. First, Jesus discouraged the used of miracles simply to attract people, even though his miracles inevitably did attract people. In fact, by disobeying Jesus' injunction, the former leper forced Jesus to stay outside the villages in the open countryside to accommodate the crowds. Still, Jesus performed miracles from the motive of compassion, not popularity. Second, Jesus was not a revolutionary against the law of Moses, *per se*. In light of the sabbath controversies

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<sup>1</sup>For an extended discussion of skins diseases in the Bible, see K. and C. Mull, "Biblical Leprosy--Is It Really?" *BR* (April 1992/Vol. VIII No. 2) 32ff.

to come, the fact that Jesus here conformed to Mosaic law is instructive.

### **The Rise of Opposition (2:1--3:35)**

Now that Mark has introduced his readers to the beginning and character of Jesus' mission, he describes the mounting tension that arose between Jesus and the religious structure of Judaism. In many ways, though Jesus' was conscientious about observing the law of Moses, he cut directly across the oral tradition of the religious leaders.

The Jews believed that beside the Torah there was an Oral Law or Mishnah handed down from Moses through succeeding generations. However, as the Oral Law was continually expanded, it became so bulky as to prohibit memorization, and thus was eventually compiled and written down. This written record of oral tradition is known as the Talmud, and it reached its final form in about the 5th century A.D. The function of the Mishnah was twofold: it interpreted Torah, and it adapted Torah in accord with social, domestic and economic changes. Often, the Mishnah was enforced directly against common sense, and it was there that Jesus took open exception to it.

### **The Forgiveness Controversy (2:1-12)**

The first occasion for dispute arose back at Capernaum, when Jesus confronted a paralyzed man with the words, "Your sins are forgiven." This audacious statement shocked the scribes. First of all, the clear evidence of the OT indicates that God alone can forgive sins (cf. Ex. 34:6). Further, according to some scribes, even God did not forgive sins on the basis of free grace, but required that a sinner achieve merit by works of the Law.

Understanding their disapproval, Jesus responded with a conundrum, "Is it easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk?'" Obviously, the former is easiest to say because of the impossibility of verification. To publicly command the paralyzed man to arise immediately would expose Jesus as a fraud if the man was not healed. After declaring his authority to forgive sins, to everyone's amazement and praise, Jesus also healed the paralytic.

Besides the tension between Jesus and the scribes, two things are especially significant in this account:

#### *Authority*

Again, Mark shows how Jesus asserted his authority. This assertion, which began in his verbal teaching, continued in his power over sickness and demons. It was further evidenced in his forgiveness of sin as an implicit testimony to his role as the Servant-Messiah.

### *Suggestion of Deity*

In forgiving sin, Jesus stepped well beyond the miracles of the OT prophets. He assumed divine prerogatives, yet did so without being ostentatious. Not only was his heavenly origin implicit in his authority, as evidenced by his words of forgiveness, but it was explicit in the title by which Jesus referred to himself--the Son of Man.

This favorite title by which Jesus designated himself, the Son of Man, at first glance might seem to reflect Jesus' humanity. Its significance was much broader, however. The origin of the title is Daniel 7:13-14, where the figure of the Son of Man is directly related to the victory of the kingdom of God. In the intertestamental literature, the term son of man became a messianic title for the coming deliverer who would judge the wicked and save the righteous. In Mark's gospel, the title Son of Man is generally used in three distinct contexts:

- ♦ As a *figure of suffering* (8:31; 9:12, 31; 10:33, 45; 14:21, 41)
- ♦ As a *figure of authority* on earth (2:10, 27)
- ♦ As a *figure of end-time power* (8:38; 14:26, 62)

Thus, Jesus' use of this title calls to mind more than just his humanity. He was the Man from heaven who had power on earth (cf. 1 Cor. 15:47-48). He was the messiah, the Christ!

### **The Worldly Christ (2:13-22)**

After the calling of Levi (also called Matthew), Jesus attended a banquet given in his honor, where many tax collectors and "sinners" were present. Tax collectors were a most despised class, for they were considered traitors to the Jewish nation. Those whom the religious leaders considered "sinners" were simply the people of the land, who had no special interest in scribal tradition. To eat in such an atmosphere would be to invite defilement of all sorts (i.e., Jesus risked contact with unclean food, unclean garments, unclean dishes, unclean furniture, not to mention unclean people).

Much of the criticism against Jesus derived from the Pharisees (lit. "those separated"). They were the largest and most influential sect of Judaism in the synagogues and among the common people. Arising during the period of Jewish independence after 165 B.C., the Pharisees were characterized by a religious zeal that equally embraced the Torah and the Oral Law as binding. They considered the Israelite nation to be far superior to other nations, and thus they saw the Roman occupation as particularly obnoxious. God would show special favor, they believed, to those who were punctiliously devoted to legal observances. They believed in the resurrection of the body, the immortality of the soul and retribution at the end of time.

It is within this milieu that Jesus responded to two pointed questions, both of which inferred that he was "worldly" and not properly pious.

*"Why do you eat with sinners?"*

This first question presupposed the Pharisaical attitude that respectable rabbis should maintain a measured social distance from the common person. Jesus answered them with an irony. He did not come to heal the healthy (that is, those who considered themselves without need) nor to call the righteous (that is, those who thought they were righteous already). He came to minister to the sick and the sinners—those who knew all too well their desperate need.

*"Why do not your disciples fast?"*

The origin of fasting is obscure. Israel participated in an annual fast on the Day of Atonement (Lv. 16:29, 31), and various occasions of fasting may be found in the OT, though one can find no descriptive theology to regulate it. It was often an expression of grief, penitence and/or self-abasement. In later times in the history of Israel, fasting apparently was thought to be an aid for gaining God's attention, but the prophets declared that without right conduct, fasting is worthless (Is. 58:5-12; Je. 14:11-12). By the time of Jesus, strict Pharisees fasted every Monday and Thursday. The question posed by Pharisees might very well have been intended to drive a wedge between Jesus and John's disciples. Apparently, John's disciples also made much of the practice of fasting and may even have been doing so as an expression of mourning due to John's imprisonment. Jesus answered the question in two ways:

*The Saying About the Bridegroom:* No one goes to a wedding feast expecting to refuse to eat in the presence of the groom. Rather, it is a time for rejoicing and feasting. Not until the bridegroom is gone will the guests fast (a metaphor referring to Jesus' death and/or ascension).

*Patches and Wineskins:* Only a foolish person would attempt to put a new patch on an old garment or new wine into old and brittle skins. The shrinking of the new patch and the vitality of the new wine would be too great a strain! In like manner, the new life of the gospel of the kingdom would not fit into the old religious forms of Judaism.

### **The Liberal Christ--the First Sabbath Controversy (2:23-27):<sup>2</sup>**

On a Saturday, Jesus' disciples were availing themselves of the opportunity afforded them in the OT of casually picking from the standing grain in the open fields (Dt. 23:24-25). The Pharisees, however, were quick to interpret this action as "reaping," a practice expressly forbidden on the sabbath (Ex. 34:21). Interestingly enough, Jesus did not defend his disciples' actions by pointing out the extremism of the Pharisees' interpretation. Instead, he defended his disciples by a completely

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<sup>2</sup>It should be noted that the sabbath controversy recorded in John 5 may very well be the "first," but the chronology between John and the Synoptics is uncertain at this point.

different kind of argument, an argument which pointed out the relative value of needs.

### *David and the Holy Bread*

When Jesus recalled to the Pharisees the account of David eating the Bread of the Presence (cf. 1 Sa. 21:1-6), he stressed the fact that David was "hungry and in need." Even the law was not so inflexible that it could not bend to accommodate a desperate situation.

### *Humans, the Sabbath and the Lord*

Furthermore, the ultimate goal of the sabbath (and the law as well) was for human good. Human benefit stood above the pettiness of minute restrictions and interpretations. Jesus' final statement was an added assertion of his authority: "So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." As the Man from heaven, his lordship extended over even the sabbath instituted by Yahweh under the law. Implied in Jesus' authority over the sabbath is his authority over the law to interpret it as though it was his own.

### **The Irreligious Christ--the Second Sabbath Controversy (3:1-6)**

By the time of this second sabbath controversy, the tension between Jesus and the local leaders of Judaism had become so sharp that they were consciously looking for a reason to accuse him. Anticipating that they would seize upon any opportunity for discredit, Jesus instructed a man with a withered hand who was present to stand forth. He then leveled a simple question to the religious critics, "What is lawful--to do good or evil on the sabbath?" The question was double-edged. If the Jewish leaders responded with "evil," they would have condemned themselves. If they responded with "good," they would have destroyed their own argument against Jesus for having compassion on the man. Thus, they answered nothing, and their silence was more eloquent than words.

Jesus was angry and deeply grieved at this callous display of religiosity. He healed the man, but did so without touching him. His simple words, "Stretch out your hand," were so ordinary that they could have been spoken to anyone without incurring an accusation of breaking the sabbath. The Pharisees were so incensed by their failure that they began to plot against Jesus' life with the Herodians.

The group called the Herodians is more difficult to define than other of the better known sects of the time. Apparently, they were sympathizers and supporters of Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee. Their orientation was probably political rather than religious, but if they thought that Jesus posed any threat of agitation, they might well join the Pharisees in seeking to silence him.

At this point it might be well to stress the tension which Mark has been

developing along two important lines:

*Authority:* Jesus is now seen to be in direct conflict with the religious leaders over the question of authority. The authority of the scribes and Pharisees rested in their tradition. The authority of Jesus rested in his own person as the Son of Man as well as in the written Scriptures.

*Religion:* Jesus is also now seen to be in direct opposition to the inflexibility of pride in religion for religion's sake. To the Pharisees, Jesus appeared as irreligious, worldly and liberal, and it is well to bear in mind that often the theologian and religious-disciplinarian is more susceptible to hardness of heart than are more common folk.

### **Jesus' Popularity Expands Even More (3:7-12)**

Whether due to the breach with the Pharisees or due to the large crowds, Jesus withdrew once again to the beaches of Galilee. Crowds followed him from Jerusalem and Judea, Idumea (southeast of the Dead Sea), the Transjordan (Perea, Decapolis and Gaulanitus), and Phoenicia (Tyre and Sidon). He continued to heal, but as before he refused to allow the demoniacs to identify him (cf. 1:24-25, 34).

### **The Appointment of the Twelve (3:13-19)**

The selection of the Apostles<sup>3</sup> from among his followers marks an important transition in the ministry of Jesus. Since the Jewish religious community had rejected him, he began to build a new community. In one sense, the calling of the Twelve marks the beginning of the "New Israel." The twelve apostles have a correspondence to the twelve tribes (cf. Mt. 19:28; Lk. 22:28-30). Just as the old Israel had twelve founding fathers, the new Israel did also. The Twelve would form the nucleus of a new community of faith. Jesus' immediate purpose for this select group was two-fold. They were first to be with him, a phrase which encompasses their special training by Christ and which later figured as an important apostolic qualification (Ac. 1:21-26). They were also to have authority over demons, that is, they were to play an important role in the inauguration of the kingdom of God over the forces of evil.

*Simon* (son of John)

Renamed Peter or *Kephas* (= rock) by Jesus.

*James* (son of Zebedee)

*Boanerges* is Aramaic for "sons of thunder," though whether this

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<sup>3</sup>*Apostolos* (= apostle, one sent forth) means someone on a mission or an ambassador. In the NT, the word may be used in the narrow sense of one of the Twelve initially chosen by Jesus. However, in a broader sense, it is sometimes used of other church leaders (cf. Acts 14:14; Ro. 16:7; 2 Co. 8:23; Phil. 2:25; 1 The. 1:1; 2:6).

humorous title is a reference to the temperament of the brothers or their father is not certain. James was the first of the Twelve to be martyred (Ac. 12:2).

*John* (son of Zebedee)

In the Fourth Gospel, John is probably the one called "the disciple whom Jesus loved."

*Andrew* (son of John)

Initially, he brought his brother Simon to Jesus (Jn. 1:40-42).

*Philip*

He brought Nathanael to Christ (Jn. 1:43-51). Philip is not to be confused with the Philip in Acts 6:5; 8:1-40.

*Bartholomew* (lit., son of Talmi)

Elsewhere, he is also called Nathanael.

*Matthew* (Levi)

*Thomas* (called Didymus, meaning "the twin," Jn. 11:16)

*James* (son of Alphaeus)

He is sometimes referred to as James the Less (15:40), which could refer to either his stature or his age.

*Thaddaeus* (Lebbaeus in some manuscripts; also called Judas, Jn. 14:22; Ac. 1:13)

*Simon* ("Cananaean," or more properly "zealot," is an Aramaic surname meaning a patriotic, radical enthusiast, usually a freedom fighter).

*Judas* (Iscariot probably means "from Kerioth," though it might possibly mean "dagger-man").

Of special note in the list of the Twelve is that the first three, Peter, James and John, form a sort of sub-group within the larger group and were on occasion given special privileges. Also, there are two sets of brothers among the Twelve, two Simons, two Jameses, and two Judases.

### **The Beelzebul Controversy (3:20-30)**

The tension between Jesus and Judaism had become so strained by this time that even his immediate family was worried that he was losing his mental grip. His half-brothers, sisters and mother wished to take him home to avoid further embarrassment (cf. 3:31-35; 6:3; Jn. 7:5). To make matters worse, scribes from Jerusalem had become so disturbed that they apparently made the trip all the way to Galilee to hear and condemn him as a demoniac. In answer to this accusation, Jesus spoke in parables. First, it is obvious that a kingdom in perpetual civil war cannot hope to survive. Second, it should have been obvious that if Jesus were able to expel

demons, he must possess power and authority higher than that of Satan, which could only be the power of God. In short, the reign of God had begun! The invasion of Satan's kingdom was even then in process! Anyone who would dare to speak against this conquering work of the Holy Spirit could never be forgiven.

Regretfully, the topic of the unpardonable sin has received some frightful interpretations. It does not mean that someone who has previously spoken against God cannot turn to him later (cf. Mt. 21:28-32). It does not refer to something done accidentally, casually, trivially or unknowingly. Rather, it is a deep and willful rejection of God (Ro. 1:21-32; 2 Th. 2:10-12). It is apparently visible, public and obvious (1 Jn. 5:16-17). We should always remember that where there is an attitude to seek after God, there is hope for forgiveness (Jn. 6:37; 1 Jn. 1:9; Ro. 10:12-13). In the context of Mark's Gospel, Jesus warned the scribes about the eternal sin in view of their accusation that his delivering miracles were of the power of evil.

The name Beelzebul can have several connotations, depending on its spelling. The two most important are as follows. Beelzebub, the Philistine god mentioned in 2 Kings 1:2, means "Lord of the (carrion) Flies." Beelzebul means "Lord of the House" or possibly "Lord of Dung." In any case, to identify Jesus by such an epithet was a supreme insult.

The term "parable" means to put alongside for the sake of comparison. In the NT, the word typically describes a short, vivid story used by Jesus to illustrate his teaching, especially his teaching concerning the kingdom of God. However, lest one think of his parables as simply self-evident stories, it should be remembered that Jesus used parables to make his teaching obscure to his rejectors and detractors as well as to clarify the nature of the kingdom of God to his disciples (4:10-12).

Parables have been aptly described as earthly stories with spiritual meanings. There are several dangers to be avoided in interpreting the parables of Jesus. One is trying to make every detail mean something. Another is ignoring important features. Yet another is stripping the parable of its context, or trying to be overly systematic so that a given feature in one parable is forced to assume an identical role in another parable if it should appear there also.

### **The Family Tension (3:31-35)**

During this latest controversy, Jesus' family arrived and sent a messenger to slip through the crowd so as to bring Jesus out where they could restrain him (cf. 3:21). Jesus, however, made clear that his true family was not bound by blood, but by faith. His saying, "Whoever does God's will is my family," is perhaps a further indication of the new community, built not upon the bloodline of Abraham but upon a commonality of faith and obedience to God's will.

## **The First Great Group of Parables (4:1-34)**

### **The Parables of Jesus (4:1-2)**

More than one-third of Jesus' recorded teaching in the Gospels is parabolic, and there are about forty parables in all. It is generally conceded that the parables have at least three central characteristics:

1. They are examples of popular story-telling drawn from the real world.
2. They arise extemporaneously during Jesus' public encounters.
3. Either implicitly or explicitly, they call for a verdict, "What do you think?"

In attempting to understand the parables, it is of prime importance to see them in their true setting, that is, as describing the kingdom of God's invasion of the world through the ministry of Jesus. This is why so many parables begin with the phrase, "The kingdom of God is like...." The kingdom of God was not simply some human moral disposition nor a humanly constructed utopia. It was the decisive intervention of the living God into history for the salvation of humans. God's final purpose for human history was being inaugurated in the person and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

### **The Sower (4:3-20)**

This parable, probably the most popular of all Jesus' parables, appears in all three synoptics.

#### *The Parable (4:3-9)*

The modern farmer might well be surprised at the practice of seeding unplowed stubble, but in Palestine, sowing preceded plowing in the late summer. Only after the seed was scattered would the farmer plow the field to cover the seed and wait for the winter rains. Thus, in the scattering, some seeds would doubtless fall to hard-packed earth, other seeds would fall onto shallow soil surrounding the occasional limestone outcroppings, and still others would fight the thorny weeds for survival. A 10% crop was reckoned a good harvest, but 30%, 60%, or 100% was a veritable bumper crop. Jesus concluded his story with a warning about the grave responsibility of the hearers of the gospel.

#### *The Parabolic Paradox (4:10-12)*

The intention of Jesus' parables was paradoxical, that is, the parables were meant to be both puzzling and clear, a fact that was taxing even to Jesus' closest followers (cf. Jn. 16:29). Parabolic teaching was a sort of spiritual sifting between those who believed the good news of the kingdom and those who did not. Those who rejected Jesus were on the "outside," and no further instruction about the kingdom would be given to them.

The parables of Jesus, like the preaching of Isaiah (6:8-10) and the proclamation of the early church (2 Co. 2:15-16), was a strange mixture of both grace and judgment. For those who had "ears to hear," it was good news. For those who had a heart of unbelief, it was a deliberate veiling. In the setting of Jesus' parables, it is necessary to remember that his audience was not neutral. They were already polarized into accepters and rejectors.

#### *The Explanation (4:13-20)*

There are three distinct emphases in the parable of the Sower. One is on the hearing of the gospel of the kingdom (cf. 4:9; Mt. 13:19). Another is on the diversity of soils which represents the crowds and their responses to the teachings of Jesus. Ultimately, however, the parable stresses the success of the kingdom of God. Though there are rejections, failures, and setbacks, the message of the kingdom will yet triumph bountifully!

#### **The Lamp (4:21-23)**

This short parable points to the ultimate manifestation of the kingdom. In a bit of dry humor,<sup>4</sup> Jesus pointed out that a lamp is not to be put under a meal-tub or a mattress, but on a stand. So also, the kingdom of God which was hidden in the person and the teachings of Jesus would not remain forever obscure. It was ultimately intended to be vividly disclosed and brought into the open. Again, a solemn responsibility is laid upon the hearers.

#### **The Measure (4:24-25)**

Yet a third time Jesus stressed the cruciality of hearing (cf. Lk. 8:18). This idea of hearing was not just confined to auditory reception. Primarily, Jesus was referring to the perceptiveness and receptiveness of his audience. Those who heard him were to "measure" carefully the word of the kingdom, for their acceptance or rejection of the message would determine their place. If they received the proclamation, they would be given more. If they rejected the message, they would be stripped of everything.

#### **The Growing Seed (4:26-29)**

Here, in this parable peculiar to Mark's Gospel, Jesus emphasized that the assured growth of the kingdom was under God's care and sovereignty. It could not be humanly manipulated. While the "hiddenness" of the kingdom would surely be exchanged for a glorious "openness," the timing of this transition belonged to God

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<sup>4</sup>For a penetrating look at the humor of Jesus, see E. Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1964).

alone. The harvest was God's responsibility; the farmer must merely commit the seed to the soil. Immediate or visible results were not necessary to the one who farmed in faith. God, not circumstances, was the guarantor of the kingdom's success!

### **The Mustard Seed (4:30-32)**

The point of this parable is one of contrast--the smallness of the mustard seed and the great size to which it grows (to some ten feet in height). The "little flock" of Jesus (cf. Lk. 12:32) must not be dismayed at the small beginning. The weakness and apparent insignificance of the kingdom in its early Galilean stages would ultimately burst forth into a mighty finale!

### **The Summary (4:33-34)**

Mark closed his account of this first great group of parables by emphasizing the frequency with which Jesus used them and the private explanations he gave to his disciples.

### **Four Miracles (4:35--5:43)**

At this point in the narrative, Mark treats four miracles in detail. To be sure, he has already pointed out the authority and power of Jesus in his miracles, but now he emphasizes them even more. Generally, the miracles of Jesus may be categorized into two groups, healing miracles and nature miracles. The miracle stories usually are recounted in a similar pattern. First, there is a description of the condition followed by a plea for help or some evidence of faith on the part of those in need. Then, there is a description of the miracle followed by a comment on the effect.

A pertinent question to be addressed is concerning the purpose of miracles. Why did Jesus perform them? Two primary reasons seem to dominate the miracle accounts. One, emphasized greatly in the synoptics, is the compassion of Jesus toward those in desperate need (Mk. 1:41; 5:19; 8:2; 9:22). The other, emphasized primarily in John's gospel, is the sign value of miracles which pointed to Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God (Jn. 20:30-31; 2:11, 23; 3:2; 4:54; 6:2, 14; 7:31; 9:16; 11:47; 12:18, 37; 14:11).

### **The Calming of the Storm (4:35-41)**

Passing over to the eastern side of the lake, Jesus and the disciples were endangered by one of the frequent storms that arise on the Sea of Galilee due to its low elevation (-680 feet below the Mediterranean) and its location among some rather high mountains (Mt. Hermon to the north is some 9200 feet). That Jesus was exhausted is evident both by the fact that the disciples took him "as he was" and that he slept in spite of the heavy seas. In this miracle, Jesus asserted his authority over

nature. It may be noted that though faith is often encouraged in the miracles of Jesus (2:5; 5:34; 10:52), here Jesus performed a mighty work in spite of the disciples' weak faith.

### **The Healing of Legion (5:1-20)**

The region of the Gerasenes was in the Decapolis (lit., "league of ten cities") to the south and east of the Galilean Lake. In this region, Jesus met a demoniac who was severely afflicted. In the account of the healing, several things should be pointed out:

- ♦ *The request of the demons* (5:6-10) not to be banished seems to presuppose their knowledge of final judgment at the end of time (cf. Rv. 20:10).
- ♦ *A legion* in the Roman army (5:9) was 6000 soldiers, though some scholars suggest that perhaps a battalion (2,048 soldiers) was in mind.
- ♦ *The drowning of the pigs* (5:11-13) points to the destructive forces of Satan. The fact that the demons requested to enter the pigs may suggest that evil spirits seek embodiment (cf. Lk. 11:24-26) or simply that they seek to destroy. Why Jesus allowed the demons this privilege is not clear. One may at least say that the evil purpose of Satan becomes openly apparent in the death of the swine if it was not already so in the affliction of the man.
- ♦ *The reluctance of the populace to accept Jesus* (5:14-17) was probably due to their fear of his power and their resentment over the loss of the pigs. They could not see beyond these things to the wonder of a man now fully clothed and mentally stable.
- ♦ *The commission of Jesus to the former demoniac* (5:18-20) is unique in that usually Jesus enjoined silence about his miracles. Here, however, he encouraged the man to proclaim his healing. A reasonable suggestion is that inasmuch as the Decapolis was largely Gentile in population, the risk of a false messianic concept would have been minimal. Also, Jesus' commission may anticipate the Gentile mission of the church to come later.

### **The Healing of a Hemorrhage and a Dead Girl (5:21-43)**

The next two miracles are interwoven. After returning to the Jewish side of the lake, Jesus was confronted by Jairus, a prominent member of a synagogue. This supervisor of worship came to Jesus on behalf of his dying daughter. On the way to Jairus' house, another event occurred.

A woman in the crowd, by a simple act of faith, reached out to touch the robe of Jesus and was immediately cured of a chronic hemorrhage. A flow of blood such as this woman suffered was more than just a physical problem, for it brought accompanying social distress. Such a hemorrhage would render her ceremonially

unclean as well as anyone she contacted (cf. Lv. 12:1-5; 15:19-33). The focus of the story, however, was on more than the miracle. It centered upon both Jesus' awareness that a transmission of power had occurred and upon the woman's great faith.

While Jesus was still addressing the woman, word came that Jairus' daughter was dead. Ignoring the report, Jesus told Jairus, "Don't be afraid; just believe!" Upon arriving at the home, they saw that the funeral preparations were already in progress. The Jews did not practice embalming, and consequently, burials were quickly executed. Minstrels and professional mourners were already performing their duties in accordance with social custom. However, the artificiality of this display is sharply pointed up in the change of the doleful antiphony into scornful laughter at Jesus' words, "She is only sleeping." Shutting out these skeptics, Jesus allowed only the parents and the inner circle of his disciples in the room (cf. Lk. 8:51), where he simply spoke, "Talitha cumi" (Aramaic). The girl was immediately brought back to life.

### **Significant Points in the Four Miracles**

Two things stand out in the foregoing accounts. Jesus' miracles were performed in the presence of great personal faith as well as in its absence. Inside Jewish culture, Jesus was reluctant to have his miracles broadcasted (5:43), but in Gentile communities he was not (5:19).

### **Ministry in and Around Galilee (6:1--9:1)**

The next four chapters in Mark's Gospel continue to develop the three emphases which have already been introduced, that is, the teachings of Jesus, the miracles of Jesus, and the ever-growing tension between the religious leaders of Judaism and Jesus. This section further details the Galilean mission up until the time that Jesus left for Judea to the south.

### **The Rejection at Nazareth (6:1-6)**

From the lakeside villages, Jesus moved inland to Nazareth. His own people, though they could not refute his authority, were nevertheless offended by it. Amazed at their unbelief, Jesus did not do many miracles there. The problem was not his lack of power, but their lack of faith (cf. Mt. 13:58).

It is Mark's Gospel that describes Jesus as a *tekton* (= artisan in wood, stone or metal). Inheriting his trade from Joseph (Mt. 13:55), Jesus was either a village builder or a smith, a maker of plows, yokes and furniture. Joseph presumably was dead by the time of Jesus' public ministry, for there is no mention of him beyond the time of Jesus' pre-teen years (Lk. 2:41-52). Some uncertainty exists concerning Jesus' siblings. The more likely view is that they were half-brothers and half-sisters,

children born to Joseph and Mary after Jesus' birth. The other views, that the siblings were either children of Joseph by a previous marriage or that they were cousins, seem to have arisen as an attempt to safeguard the Roman Catholic doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity.

### **The Mission of the Twelve Apostles (6:7-13)**

The sending out of the apostles by twos into the Galilean villages was simply a multiplication of Jesus' own ministry. Apparently, their commission was threefold: they were to have authority over evil spirits, they were to heal the sick, and they were to proclaim the advent of God's reign (cf. Mt. 10:8; Lk. 9:2). It seems probable that this Galilean mission was a preparation for and an anticipation of the more extensive mission of the church after Pentecost. Jesus' instructions for the journey demanded that the apostles completely trust God to supply their needs. The authority for miracles which Jesus gave to the Twelve was added to their apostolic qualification of being "with him" (cf. 3:14). Later, Paul was to call signs, wonders and miracles "the things that mark an apostle" (2 Co. 12:12).

- ♦ The phrase "shake the dust off your feet" was a well-known symbol in Judaism of disassociation (cf. Ac. 13:50-51).
- ♦ The practice of "anointing with oil" was common as both medicinal and cosmetic. However, the use here is more likely symbolic, a sort of visible parable of the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. Ja. 5:14).

### **The Death of the Baptist (6:14-29)**

This part of the narrative serves as an interlude between the sending out of the Twelve and their return (6:30). Herod, the Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, heard of Jesus' works even in his palace. Though the rumors about Jesus' true identity were mixed, Herod agreed with those who thought that Jesus was John *redivivus*. At this point, Mark produces a quite complete account of John's death, which is verified, incidentally, by Josephus.<sup>5</sup> The story is replete with the intrigue and vindictiveness of royalty. John was executed because of his outspokenness concerning the illicit affair between Herod and Herodias.

### **The Feeding of the Five Thousand (6:30-44)**

The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle Jesus performed that appears in all four gospels. The setting of the miracle occurred just after the Twelve had returned from their preaching tour of Galilee. Apparently, their mission was a huge success. So many people were seeking them that they had no time even to eat.

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<sup>5</sup>*Antiquities of the Jews*, XVIII, 5, 1-2.

Jesus wisely called them aside for rest.

The crowds, however, thwarted this intention. After teaching them, Jesus instructed the apostles to feed them. In spite of their protest that two hundred denarii would not be sufficient to buy enough bread, Jesus made preparations for a meal on a grand scale. With only five loaves and two fish, Jesus fed the entire crowd with much food left over!

### **Jesus Walks on the Water (6:45-56)**

Many scholars believe that Bethsaida (lit., "House of Fish") was a split village that lay on the east and west banks of the Jordan River, where it emptied into the Sea of Galilee. The western suburb was in Galilee, and the eastern city was in the jurisdiction of Herod Philip. Jesus sent his disciples in that direction while he retired to the hills for prayer.

Whether or not the fact that Jesus saw his disciples struggling against a heavy headwind is intended to suggest a supernatural wind, as some have suggested, the fact that Jesus came to them walking on the waves certainly was supernatural enough! Several points should be remarked upon in this story:

*Fourth Watch:* The night was divided into four segments (watches) of three hours each between sundown and sunrise. The fourth watch would have been about 3:00--6:00 A.M.

*He was about to pass by them:* This phrase, describing an action similar to when Jesus was on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:28), seems to suggest that Jesus wanted his disciples to confess their need of him.

*Their hearts were hardened:* That the disciples did not understand the miracle of the loaves is a curious comment. Some have thought that the disciples had completely missed the fact that a miracle had happened at all, but this seems hardly likely in view of the fact that they well knew the limited resources of five loaves and two fish. More likely, this statement means that they did not understand the far-reaching implications of the miracle as a sign which pointed beyond itself. The nature miracle of multiplying bread and fish implied that Jesus was the complete master over nature, that he was divine, and that he would supply their needs if they would trust him.

*Gennesaret* is the fertile plain south of Capernaum and takes its name from the lake itself. From the whole region, people brought their sick, and Jesus healed them. The final passage in 6:56 summarizes Jesus' healing power during the entire Galilean mission.

### **Teaching Concerning Defilement (7:1-23)**

The distinction between what was "clean" and "unclean" was a very pervasive

teaching among the Jews. The issue at stake in this passage was holiness versus worldliness, not hygiene. In the phrase, "...eating food with unclean....hands," the word unclean quite literally meant "common" or "secular" as opposed to "holy." Kosher regulations had flourished in the Oral Tradition, especially due to the thinking that in order to safeguard the law of God one must go well beyond it in strictness. Their reasoning was very close to modern religious extremists who say, "I would rather be too strict than not strict enough." Such legalism is based on two premises: 1)...that true righteousness is something that one must produce for him/herself before he/she can win God's favor, and 2)...that holiness is primarily an external matter of obeying rules. When the Jerusalem scribes and Pharisees observed Jesus' disciples failing to match up to the traditional holiness standards, they were offended. Jesus' answer was on three levels.

#### *The Accusation of Hypocrisy (7:6-8)*

Quoting from Isaiah 29:13, Jesus denounced the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites. Any system of legalism which monitors holiness standards in this way is a false system of worship, a sentiment echoed by the Apostle Paul (cf. Col. 2:20-23). To be too strict is just as much a departure from God's commandment as to be too lax. It is in this vein that Paul later says, "Do not go beyond what is written" (1 Co. 4:6).

#### *The Manipulation of God's Law for Personal Reasons (7:9-13)*

The word *corban* (= given to God) refers to something set apart for God. The Torah clearly demanded that children had a solemn duty to honor their parents (a command that implied parental support in their old age). However, by designating as *corban* the money or property which should have gone to the support of parents, the scribes and Pharisees were able to evade their parental responsibility and satisfy their financial obligations to God at the same time. In short, they were using their own human standards to set aside the commands of God. "And you do many things like that," Jesus said!

#### *The Source of Defilement (7:14-23)*

Holiness and worldliness are not external matters, Jesus said, but internal matters. To be sure, holiness and worldliness may have external implications, as Jesus points out in 7:22-23, but the real source of defilement is in the thinking, the attitudes and the motives of men and women.

#### **The Syrian Phoenician Woman's Faith (7:24-30)**

Withdrawing from Galilee to the northwestern Phoenician coast, possibly for a time of rest or perhaps to avoid Herod, Jesus encountered a Gentile woman who begged deliverance for her demon-possessed daughter. The seeming harshness of

Jesus' initial refusal must be viewed against the background of the nature of his mission. In keeping with the covenants God established with national Israel (Ro. 9:4-5; Ep. 2:11-12), Jesus' earthly public ministry had a Jewish priority (cf. Mt. 15:24; 10:5-6; Ro. 1:16; Ac. 1:8; 13:44-48). However, the woman recognized that such a priority did not eliminate her from the blessing of Messiah's mission, and she persisted in her request until Jesus answered her. This account seems to emphasize the importance of Gentile faith.

### **The Cure of a Deaf Mute in the Decapolis (7:31-37)**

Still avoiding Galilee, Jesus again journeyed to the eastern side of the Galilean lake, where he was confronted by a deaf mute. After securing privacy, Jesus spoke the Aramaic word *Ephphatha* (= be unloosed) and healed the man. As was usually the case, Jesus required silence about the miracle, but to no avail (though see the comments on 5:18-20).

### **The Feeding of the Four Thousand (8:1-13)**

The feeding of the four thousand was similar to the feeding of the five thousand, though obviously there are differences. This miracle, like many others, was an act of compassion. Still there is a curious selectivity to Jesus' miracles that assumes the sovereignty of God, a selectivity that Jesus himself explained by pointing to the OT (Lk. 4:25-27). Jesus neither healed every sick person in Israel nor fed all the hungry. Often, as in the case of Jairus' daughter and the deaf mute, Jesus performed miracles in semi-privacy. Usually, he required that no one give publicity to his miracles. All this points to the fact that Jesus' miracles were not simply "signs on demand," as 8:11-13 makes clear.

At Dalmanutha (back on the west side of the lake), the Pharisees asked for such a staged miracle. Jesus' response was a deep sigh (probably expressive of impatience or aggravation) and a negative question, "Why does this generation look for a sign? No sign will be given!" In comparing several gospel passages (John 4:48; Mt. 16:4; Lk. 11:29), it appears that seeking miracles for their own sake is directly opposed to God's purpose. Though God performs miracles, he does not do so purely on the basis of human volition but also on the basis of his divine sovereignty, as Paul also shows (cf. 1 Co. 12:11).

### **The Saying About Yeast (8:14-21)**

Mark has already commented on the spiritual dullness of the disciples (6:52), but here the description is even more pointed. In spite of two stupendous miracles in which Jesus performed creative acts to feed thousands, the disciples were worried because they had no bread. They still had not grasped the fact that if Jesus was with them, they needed never to be anxious. The saying about yeast, as Matthew clarifies

(16:12), was a simple metaphor for the mind-set of the Pharisees and Herod (cf. Lk. 12:1).

### **The Healing of a Blind Man at Bethsaida (8:22-26)**

Back at the northern tip of the lake in Bethsaida (Peter's home town, cf. Jn. 1:44), Jesus was approached by friends of a blind man who sought healing for their companion. Again securing privacy, Jesus healed the man and gave the usual charge, "Don't go into the village" (i.e., go home and keep the matter to yourself). However, and unusual feature of this account is the man's healing in two stages. As curious as this is, there is nothing in the text to enlighten us as to the factors involved, nor is there any other gospel parallel.

### **The Confession of Peter (8:27-30)**

Still moving in and out of Galilee, Jesus traveled north with the Twelve into the jurisdiction of Herod Philip to Caesarea Philippi. Enroute, Jesus asked them about the public's opinion of himself. Though there were several popular ideas (see also 6:14-16), the one common feature was that Jesus was not generally recognized as messiah. If he were John *redivivus* or Elijah *redivivus*, he could have been a forerunner of messiah, but as yet the outside world had not guessed his true identity. Even among his followers, Jesus' messianic identity was not always clear (Lk. 24:19). Thus, Peter's confession of faith is all the more remarkable in that he neither received it from popular notions nor even from Jesus himself but, as Matthew records, from God the Father (cf. 16:17).

The word "warned" is a strong one, carrying the idea of sternness. That Jesus commanded the Twelve so sharply not to tell anyone that he was the Christ is extremely significant. It was absolutely essential that the disciples not be allowed to fill the content of the word "messiah" with either popular political notions or inventions of their own. Only in the days ahead would Jesus define for them what kind of messiah he really was.

### **Jesus Predicts His Death (8:31-9:1)**

Up until this time, references to Jesus' coming passion have been few and largely oblique (cf. Lk. 2:35; Jn. 1:29; 3:14-15). Now, directly on the heels of Peter's messianic confession, Jesus began to speak of his coming death in a clear and direct way (see also: Mt. 16:16-21; Lk. 9:20-21). Apparently, the open recognition of Jesus' messiahship by Peter and the other apostles was a watershed in the ministry of Jesus. From that moment on (cf. Mt. 16:21), Jesus began to prepare the Twelve for the crisis of the cross. This crisis would include:

- ♦ Suffering (in Jerusalem, cf. Mt. 16:21);

- ♦ A full rejection (lit., "failure to pass scrutiny") by the religious leaders of Judaism;
- ♦ Death; and
- ♦ Resurrection

Such a pronouncement was shocking in the extreme. The popular ideas of messiahship within Jewry carried no such predictions. There is no question that the disciples failed to comprehend the events of the future in light of Jesus' prophecy, and the continuing narratives show their lack of comprehension, even up until the actual post-resurrection appearances.

Of special note are the facts that Jesus stressed the necessity of his death and that his death was not merely to be an eventuality. It was something that must happen in the sovereign purpose of God. Also, the title "Christ" in Peter's confession is directly tied to the title "Son of Man" in Jesus' response. This, too, was hard for the disciples to understand, for the title Son of Man, as it arises in Daniel 7:13-14, gives no indication of suffering. Here, very probably, is the reason for Jesus' sharp refusal to be recognized as the Messiah until after his death (cf. 8:29-30; 9:9). He was adding new content to the titles Messiah and Son of Man as he combined in himself these streams of prophecy along with those of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh.

Peter, impetuous and confused, took Jesus aside and rebuked him for even saying such preposterous things. But Jesus responded with the scathing, "Out of my sight, Satan!"

On the basis of his coming death, Jesus began to issue a call for discipleship among the crowds that required of them self-denial. The explicit reference to the cross, though apparently not explained by Jesus, would have been well enough known to the audience. Most certainly they would have been familiar with the Roman method of execution, a procedure which required the condemned criminal to carry the crossbeam of his cross to the crucifixion sight. The fact that discipleship demanded "following Jesus" in this way graphically illustrates ultimate self-denial. Jesus enforced his call to discipleship by:

1. Stressing that it was a matter of spiritual life and spiritual death (8:36-37).
2. Stressing that it was a matter which figured in the eschatological judgment to come. To be ashamed of Christ and his cross in the present world would result in being rejected by him in the consummation of the ages.

It should be noted that although Jesus added content to the title Son of Man (via the Suffering Servant motif), he did not eliminate any of its original force in Daniel's prophecy (7:13-14). Though the Son of Man "must suffer," he would also come in sovereign glory. Here is the germinal concept of the first and second advents of the Son of Man, something of which the apostles as yet had no inkling. Later, Jesus

would more clearly describe the glorious advent of the Son of Man at the end of the age (13:26-27). At this time, however, it is unlikely that the disciples understood very much. They had only just learned of the coming death and resurrection of Christ, and as far as we know, had no knowledge whatever of the coming ascension and the succeeding events that would eventually bring about the close of human history.

Jesus' final statement regarding the coming of the kingdom of God in power has given rise to much discussion. The most obvious inference to be drawn is that although the kingdom of God was already present in the person and ministry of Jesus (as the first great group of parables seem to show), the full and final form of the kingdom was yet future. Apparently, though, there was a climax in the very near future, since its coming in power would occur before the end of some of their own lifetimes. Explanations of this passage have far-reaching consequences:

*Mistaken Christ Theory:* Moderate to liberal theologians have simply concluded that Jesus was mistaken. They hold that Jesus expected the end of the world either in his own lifetime or perhaps shortly afterward, and they attribute his erroneous prediction to his human limitations (cf. Mt. 24:36). Such a conclusion is unacceptable to an orthodox understanding of Jesus.

*Realized Theory:* Other theologians have suggested, on linguistic grounds, that the kingdom of God had already come in its full and final power in the person of Jesus, but that only later would the disciples be aware of that fact. What was coming was not so much the kingdom in power as much as the disciples' full understanding of the kingdom and its power.

*Spiritual Death Theory:* Building on Jesus' sayings about death in a spiritual sense (cf. Jn. 5:24 and 8:24), some interpret Jesus' words as meaning that among the crowd of listeners there would be those who would believe and thus not spiritually die before they had seen the arrival of the kingdom in power.

*Transfiguration Theory:* Many interpreters take the phrase "see the kingdom of God come with power" to refer to the transfiguration which immediately follows. In the transfiguration, it is argued, Peter, James and John were given a glimpse of the power of God's kingdom.

*Resurrection Theory:* Other interpreters believe that the phrase "come with power" alludes to the resurrection of Jesus, after which he claimed for himself all power in heaven and on earth (Mt. 28:28).

*Descent of the Holy Spirit Theory:* A popular view relates the "power" of the kingdom to Pentecost and thereafter, when the disciples received heavenly power after the descent of the Holy Spirit (Ac. 1:3, 8).

*A Totality Theory:* This view sees the coming of the kingdom with power as that which began with the resurrection and extends to the end of human history. It would also include the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as well as

the evangelistic success of the early church. Some of those listening to Jesus would not die before they had seen the inauguration of this era.

## **The Last Journey to Jerusalem (9:2--15:47)**

At this point in the narrative, the reader enters what might be termed Act III in the drama of Mark's gospel. The First Act was the prelude that described Jesus' preparation for and dedication to his divine mission. The Second Act was the great ministry of Jesus in and around Galilee. Now, after the watershed of Peter's messianic confession and Jesus' candid prediction of his coming passion in Jerusalem, Jesus will close his Galilean ministry and turn toward the south, the scene of his upcoming rejection.

### **The Close of the Northern Ministry (9:2-50)**

The ninth chapter of Mark records the closing events of Jesus' ministry in and around Galilee.

### **The Transfiguration (9:2-13)**

That the account of the transfiguration follows hard on the heels of Peter's messianic confession is not incidental. What Peter had realized implicitly and confessed, God would now reveal explicitly. However, the private nature of the transfiguration should also be noted, for it is in keeping with Jesus' warning to tell no one that he was the messiah, the Son of God (cf. 8:30). Only the inner circle of Peter, James and John were privileged to witness it (cf. 2 Pe. 1:16-18).

*The high mountain* could have been any of several mountains to the north of the Galilean Lake. A popular but uncertain designation is Mt. Hermon.

*The word transfigured* means "to be transformed" or to "change one's form." What the three amazed disciples saw was a glimpse of the final state of Christ's Lordship to which he eventually would be exalted after his resurrection.

*Moses and Elijah* probably represent the law and the prophets. The prediction which Jesus made regarding his death was to be a fulfillment of the OT law and prophets (Lk. 24:44), and it is of this that Moses and Elijah spoke (cf. Lk. 9:31).

*The reference to the shelters or booths* which Peter suggested that they build might possibly refer to a popular idea in Judaism that when the day of salvation arrived, God would "pitch his tent" with his people as he had done in the

wilderness sojourn.<sup>6</sup> In some way, Peter hoped to capture the glory of the moment. Whatever Peter intended, it was patently inappropriate.

*The divine voice* confirmed Peter's confession that Jesus was the Son of God. Furthermore, it emphasized that the disciples were to heed and not to dispute Jesus' predictions of the passion ahead.

*The warning* that Jesus gave is again in keeping with the essential privacy of the transfiguration and Jesus' desire that his messiahship and deity not be proclaimed until after the resurrection (cf. 8:29-30). The phrase "rising from the dead" puzzled the disciples, for their only conception was of a general resurrection, not a selective resurrection out from among the dead.

*The question about Elijah* arises from Malachi 4:5-6, a passage from which the scribes deduced a teaching of Elijah *redivivus*, who would precede the messiah. Obviously, if the appearance of Elijah at the transfiguration was the fulfillment, Elijah had come late! Jesus responded that the prophecy concerning Elijah had already been fulfilled (in the ministry of the Baptist, cf. Mt. 17:11-13). From this comment by Jesus, there may be drawn a very important point concerning the fulfillment of prophecy. God not only inspires predictions, he also interprets them, sometimes in ways that are not immediately apparent. Was John Elijah? He certainly came with the force of Elijah (Lk. 1:15-17). Yet when asked point-blank if he was Elijah, John himself said, "I am not" (Jn. 1:19-21). Yet, Jesus said that he was Elijah (Mt. 11:13-15)! In view of this paradox, Christians ought to be reserved in their confident assertions about how prophecy may or may not be fulfilled!

### **The Healing of a Demoniac Boy (9:14-32)**

As soon as they descended from the mountain, Jesus and the three disciples were faced with a situation which contrasted sharply with what had just happened a little while before. At the foot of the mountain, they faced a sorely afflicted child with severe symptoms, much like epilepsy. The nine disciples had been unsuccessful in attempting to cure the boy. Now, the appeal was made to Jesus. With his usual compassion, he delivered the child. Several things are worthy of special note:

1. Jesus' rebuke, "O unbelieving generation," seems directed toward everyone present--to the father for his lack of faith (9:23), to the disciples for their lack of prayer (9:29) in spite of the fact that they had been given authority to heal such cases (3:14-15; 6:7), and finally, to the callousness of the scribes who were gloating over the impotence of the disciples (9:14).
2. The father's plea, "If you can, will you...." suggests his own uncertainty, and his

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<sup>6</sup>D. Nineham, *Saint Mark* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 237.

plea subtly contrasts the plea of the leper, "If you will, you can...." (1:40)! The question was not of Jesus' power but of the father's faith, and the father responded with the whimsical paradox that almost every Christian has experienced, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

3. The catalyst that brought the incident to a quick close was a gathering crowd. Jesus wanted to avoid publicity, so he quickly cured the lad.
4. Jesus turned south and passed through Galilee for the last time. He was anxious to remain unnoticed, for he was again teaching the Twelve about his approaching death. Still, the disciples continued in their lack of understanding.

### **The Paradox of Greatness (9:33-37)**

The whole character of the mission of Christ revolves around servanthood (cf. 10:45). Humility was a very important part of the way to the cross. The bickering of the Twelve about greatness shows quite clearly how far they were from understanding the nature of Christ's kingdom. Using the example of a small child, Jesus emphasized the importance of welcoming the kingdom in lowliness and simplicity (cf. Mt. 18:4). The disciples wanted pomp and circumstances, but Jesus called them to humility!

### **The Exorcist Who Was Not in the Group (9:38-41)**

A further evidence of the disciples' spiritual pride comes out in John's statement that they had forbidden a man to expel evil spirits in Christ's name because he was not a part of their circle. Apparently, the man was having success in his cures, which would seem to indicate that he was a believer (compare this with the situation in Acts 19:13-16). In any case, Jesus rebuked the disciples' exclusivistic tendencies. Sectarianism must not be allowed to constrict the gospel or the powerful work of the Holy Spirit! Even the simplest acts of kindness in Christ's name would be rewarded, regardless of who does them!

### **Warning Against Stumbling Blocks (9:42-50)**

The phrase, "one of these little ones," is likely a play on words referring both to the children previously mentioned (9:37) and believers who are child-like in their simplicity. Jesus took a very harsh view of anyone causing a "little one" to sin. No doubt, when the disciples had forbidden the man to expel evil spirits, they were bordering on doing that very thing! It would be better by far to be drowned with a millstone tied to one's neck. Such executions had been performed on occasion in Galilee by the Romans. The loss of physical life is virtually unimportant, however, when compared to the loss of spiritual life. Entering the kingdom, even if maimed, is far better than being cast whole into hell!

The word *gehenna* that Jesus used is usually translated "hell" or "hellfire."

Quite literally, it referred to the Valley of Ben Hinnom, just south of Jerusalem. This valley had in ancient times been the scene of child sacrifice (2 Chr. 28:3; 33:6), and Jeremiah had pronounced a terrible judgment upon it (7:32; 19:6). By the time of Jesus, it was the place where citizens of Jerusalem burnt their garbage, a deep ravine filled with continually smoldering refuse. *Gehenna*, as such, had become a living parable of eternal punishment, a place comparable to what is described in the last verse of Isaiah (66:24).

Jesus' statement, "Everyone will be salted with fire," has long been an enigma. Most commentators regard the saying as a prediction of persecution so that the verb "salted" carries the force of being tested. The verb itself forms a bridge to the concluding saying about salt. The disciples must not lose their potency in the world. If they did, they would be like salt that had been cut with gypsum or some other substance, either accidentally or perhaps by some unscrupulous retailer. Such salt was useless. In like manner, if the disciples continued to quarrel about greatness and restrict the work of the Holy Spirit in others, they would be losing their "saltiness." Instead, they should live in peace!

## **On the Way to Jerusalem (10:1-52)**

### **Jesus Leaves Northern Palestine (10:1)**

Now that Jesus had made clear to the Twelve that his mission was to be fulfilled by rejection and death in Jerusalem, he proceeded to travel in that direction. Leaving Galilee and the surrounding area, Jesus traveled into the regions of Perea (the transjordan area of Jewish population) and Judea. Crowds continued to follow him, and he, as usual, continued to teach them. Luke's gospel, incidentally, contains a rather lengthy narrative of this ministry (see Luke 9-18).

### **The Question on Divorce (10:2-12)**

The closer Jesus came to Jerusalem, the sharper the tension grew between him and Judaism. Here, the Pharisees attempted to entrap Jesus with a question about divorce. The context is important. Jesus was not dealing here with an actual divorce, but rather, with the possibility of divorce before it happened. After it happened, Jesus' basic attitude was healing and forgiveness (cf. Jn. 4:17-26; 8:1-11).

#### *The OT Citation (10:2-4)*

By the time of Jesus, rabbinic discussion concerning divorce had polarized into two camps. Though both agreed that divorce was permissible on the basis of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, each fostered different ideas about the grounds for divorce when they interpreted the Mosaic phrase, "He finds something indecent about her."

- ♦ *The School of Hillel* offered a liberal interpretation in which a woman could be divorced by her husband for almost any reason, even as trivial as annoyance or embarrassment.
- ♦ *The School of Shammai* maintained stricter standards and defined indecency as being something morally shameful, such as adultery.

In either case, the option for divorce lay open only to the man under Jewish law (though under Roman law a woman could initiate divorce proceedings).

When the Pharisees posed the question, Jesus responded with another question. Notice that his words, "What did Moses command you," were intended to call attention to God's will in the matter. In other words, the Pharisees wanted to know how far they could go and still be within the parameters of the law (cf. Mt. 19:3). Jesus wanted them to consider what God's intentions were! They obviously could not cite a commandment concerning divorce, for there weren't any! The best they could do was cite a concession.

*Jesus' Statement on the Bond of Marriage (10:5-9)*

Jesus' next statement shocked his audience (cf. Mt. 19:10)! He stated that the very concession they cited was, because of its very nature as a concession, antithetical to the purpose of God. Divorce, even when given as a concession, destroys God's purpose for the institution of marriage. God's intent, as is clear from the creation account (cf. Ge. 1:27; 2:21-24), is one man for one woman for life. Marriage is not a social union controlled by society alone. It is a union effected by God. Since God joins the man and the woman in marriage, society ought not break that bond. (In this context, it might be well to point out that the joining of a man and woman in the holy estate of matrimony is not something the state, the Justice of the Peace, the church or even the minister can do in and of themselves. It is something God does! Humans solemnize and recognize this union in accordance with the customs and laws of the land.)

*The Exception in Matthew 5:31-32; 19:9:* Matthew 19:3-9 parallels the foregoing account in Mark. In Matthew's narrative, Jesus stipulated that although divorce and remarriage normally should be considered adulterous, there was an exception, the exception being divorce and remarriage on the grounds of marital unfaithfulness.

*The Exception in 1 Corinthians 7:12-13, 15:* Paul, under somewhat different circumstances, addressed the problem of a marriage in which the spouses are spiritually divided, one being a believer and the other an unbeliever. If the unbeliever was not willing to remain in union with the believer and initiated the divorce, the believer was not obligated to the marriage bond.

However, in neither of these exceptional cases does the Scriptures advocate

divorce and/or remarriage as preferable. In the former, divorce and remarriage may not be adulterous, but that in no way means that it is ideal. Forgiveness and reconciliation must be considered as well. In the latter, the believer is specifically instructed to maintain the marriage if at all possible.

### **Jesus and the Children (10:13-16)**

Children in the ancient world were often mistreated. Many areas of the Hellenistic world practiced child-exposure, that is, the right of a parent to kill or abandon an unwanted child. Daughters, especially, were considered inferior and were often destroyed or raised to stock the brothels of Rome. Many were sold as slaves. Others were maimed in order to become beggars. In a famous papyri letter, dated Alexandria, June 17, 1 B.C., Hilarion wrote to his expectant wife, Alis: "If--good luck to you!--you bear a child, if it is a boy, let it live; if it is a girl, throw it out." Though certainly not so extreme, the disciples' callousness toward the children simply reflected the popular standards of the day.

Jesus was indignant! Earlier, he had used a child to illustrate the character of one who belongs to the kingdom (9:36-37), but evidently the Twelve had missed the point. Now Jesus was more explicit. "The kingdom belongs to children also! It must be received as a child would receive it!"

### **The Rich Young Man (10:17-31)**

While still traveling toward Jerusalem, Jesus was accosted by a young rich ruler who wanted to know what he could do to merit life eternal. His question stood in sharp contrast to what Jesus had just said with regard to the children. Jesus had said that the kingdom must be "received" as a helpless child would receive it. The rich young man asked how the kingdom could be "achieved" by doing good things (cf. Mt. 19:16).

After discounting any flattery that might have been in the young man's address, Jesus called his attention to the decalogue. It is instructive to notice that the commandments which Jesus enumerated were the more obvious, external ones--ones which the man doubtlessly had scrupulously kept. After the young man confirmed that this was so, Jesus then directed him toward the two greatest commandments, total love to God and love to others. To be sure, Jesus did not quote these two commandments, as he did on other occasions (12:28-34). He merely told the young man to sell everything, give it away and come follow. Yet, the effect was the same!

### *The Problem with Achievement Religion*

Again and again in the gospels and the epistles, the insufficiency of trying to earn God's favor is pointed out. Here the rich young man, like so many of his

religious counterparts, would have preferred to rest his salvation on what he could do. The problem with this sort of approach is that it rarely, if ever, touches the real heart of God's righteous requirements. Achievement religion can never generate love; rather, genuine love springs from a simple acceptance of God's loving graciousness (cf. 1 Jn. 4:19).

### *The Great Difficulty of Riches*

The young man's sorrowful rejection prompted Jesus' words, "How difficult it is for the rich to enter the kingdom!" His statement amazed the disciples, because it cut directly across their own social values. They were not rich, but they no doubt wished they were! Judaism, generally, saw no objection to material prosperity. In fact, prosperity was often interpreted as direct evidence of God's favor. Jesus, however, knew well the deceitfulness of wealth (4:18) and declared that it was very hard for the materially prosperous to enter the kingdom. In bewilderment, the disciples asked, "Who can be saved then?" Jesus responded that salvation is beyond human possibility and means. Every attempt at achievement religion will utterly fail. The only salvation that is possible is that which originates with God!

### *The Rewards of Discipleship*

As the customary spokesman for the group, Peter offered a statement that was at once a declaration and a question:

"We have left everything" (will it be worth it?)!

"Absolutely yes," Jesus responded. The cost of discipleship will be repaid many times over in both the present and the future ages. However, in the present age, blessing and persecution will be strangely mixed. Furthermore, many who seem to be first or who wish to be first will not be first!

The phrase translated, "I tell you the truth" (NIV), or "Verily, I say unto you" (KJV), is a peculiarity of Jesus' sayings and found only on the lips of the Lord. Quite literally, it should be rendered "Amen, I tell you...." In normal usage, the word "Amen" was a Hebrew idiom which denoted affirmation or approval toward the words of another. In Jesus' usage, the Hebrew *amen*, *amen* before the Aramaic phrase denoted the reliability and certainty of his own words as one who was the true witness of God. It is roughly equivalent, at least in intent, to the OT oath formula, "As I live," says Yahweh."

### **Another Prediction of Death (10:32-34)**

Mark here gives us a penetrating insight into the psychology of Jesus' followers. Though Mark does not specify exactly what, something about Jesus' demeanor or teachings or the trip to Jerusalem caused astonishment and fear. The fact

that Jesus walked "leading the way" is suggestive of Jesus' resolution toward his coming passion (cf. Lk. 9:51; Is. 50:7) as well as the disciples' reluctance to follow him there. In even more detail than before, Jesus predicted his death privately to the Twelve, including the betrayal, the Jewish condemnation, the Gentile ridicule and execution, and the resurrection.

### **A Teaching on Authority and Ministry (10:35-45)**

However imperfectly the disciples understood Jesus' passion predictions, it seems evident from the question of James and John that they sensed an impending crisis. Their question, "...we want you to do for us whatever we ask," was completely open ended, a sort of plea for *carte blanche*. They wished for authority, rank, privilege and power. Jesus' response was particularly sharp.

#### *The Baptism of Suffering*

The idea of "sharing the cup" is an idiomatic expression of the first century which means the sharing of one's fate. In the OT, the metaphor of the cup is commonly used to symbolize divine judgment on sin (Ps. 75:8; Is. 51:17-23; Eze. 23:31-34; Hab. 2:16; Zec. 12:2). In Jesus' question, then, he implied that the cup he would drink would be his vicarious suffering and death for the world's sins. The use of the word "baptism" (lit., a dipping or plunging) also may denote suffering as it draws its meaning both from the OT (Job 22:11; Ps. 42:7; 69:2, 15; Is. 43:2) and from a contemporary usage which meant being "overwhelmed by disaster or danger."<sup>7</sup>

In joining these two words, Jesus was pointing to the nature of his upcoming suffering and death and asking if the brothers would be willing to follow him to martyrdom. Their easy response, "We can," may suggest their limited understanding of Jesus' words or else their complete commitment to Jesus regardless of the future, though probably the former. If they had seen what Mark would later record in the end of his gospel, how that the left and right of the messiah would be occupied by two crosses (15:27), they might have thought twice about such a request. However, Jesus said that they would indeed follow him into suffering. As we know, James was martyred (Ac. 12:2), and if this same John was the author of the Revelation, he was banished to Patmos (Re. 1:9). Nevertheless, the final positions of honor in the eschatological glory of the Son of Man were to be awarded by God the Father.

#### *The Cure of Bartimaeus (10:46-52)*

Jesus was now ready to cross into Judea, the province of which Jerusalem was the capital. Jericho lay near a much-used ford over the Jordan. After crossing the river and passing through the city, Jesus was arrested by the shouts of a blind man.

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<sup>7</sup>W. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 380.

The appellation, "Son of David," was an OT designation for messiah (cf. Is. 11:1; Je. 23:5; Eze. 34:23). Though the crowd tried to quiet the man, their efforts were to no avail. He kept shouting until he had received an audience with Jesus. After Jesus healed him, Bartimaeus followed the pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem, some eighteen miles to the southwest.

## **Jesus Arrives in Jerusalem (11:1-26)**

### **The Triumphant Entry (11:1-11)**

The crowd of pilgrims (presumably Galileans and Pereans) with which Jesus traveled were going toward Jerusalem to celebrate the annual Passover. At the outskirts of Jerusalem near the Mount of Olives, Jesus arranged to ride a colt into the holy city, an act that had strong messianic overtones, both in terms of the Mount of Olives itself, which was already associated with the coming of messiah (Zec. 14:4), and also the animal upon which Jesus sat (Zec. 9:9). Though Jesus had previously been very careful not to broadcast his messiahship and though he had commanded silence from his apostles in this regard until after the resurrection, here Jesus acted out publicly what he had refused to say. The pilgrims responded in spontaneous homage.

#### *The Antiphony*

Psalms 113-118, called the Egyptian Hallel Psalms ("Hallel" meaning "praise"), were traditionally sung at the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles and Dedication. These Psalms, which were thought to have been composed by Moses, depicted God's mighty acts from the exodus until the time of Messiah and were used liturgically as a focus for prayer and praise. Often, as is apparently the case here, they were sung antiphonally, that is, as a call and response between two groups. As Jesus was approaching the city, the pilgrims began to shout the refrain from Psalms 118:25-26. The word "hosanna" (lit., "save us" or "save now") was an invocation for God's saving action. The reference to the kingdom of David is messianic, and the phrase "hosanna in the highest" (or, "save us, you who dwell on high") is a further appeal for God to inaugurate the time of salvation.

How much the pilgrims understood about the significance of their words in relation to Jesus is not clear, but certainly Peter (and Mark as his interpreter) later saw the strong sense of divine fulfillment to the very appeal they were making.

#### *Jesus Surveys the Temple*

The passage in 11:11 is especially significant in light of the verses to follow (11:15-19). Jesus was not just sight-seeing, but carefully observing the abusive system of merchandising sacrificial animals. Since it was late, he did nothing at the time but returned to Bethany, about two miles to the east. This quiet calculation was

the lull before the storm!

### **The Cursing of the Fig Tree (11:12-14)**

The next day, as they headed back toward Jerusalem, Jesus produced a sort of living parable for the Twelve. It is more than incidental that the two halves of this narrative, the cursing of the fig tree (11:12-14) and the withering of the fig tree (11:20-21), surround the cleansing of the temple, for the one event is germane to the other. At first glance, it might seem that the cursing of the fig tree was just an act of vindictiveness, but the fact that it was not even the season for figs suggests a deeper explanation. Probably, Jesus intended the fig tree to symbolize the nation Israel (or perhaps the city of Jerusalem) which had many "leaves" of religion but no genuine fruit (cf. Lk. 13:6-9). The temple merchandising of sacrificial animals was a particularly flagrant example.

### **The Cleansing of the Temple (11:15-19)**

In the Court of the Gentiles, the largest and outermost of four concentric courts surrounding the temple, traders had set up booths for selling wine, oil, salt, birds and possibly larger animals for sacrifice. Also, there were money-changers who could serve those needing to exchange their Greek and Roman currency into Jewish or Tyrian money, the required currency for the temple dues that all males were to pay annually.

Into this court came Jesus. The fact that he had observed this commercial sacrilege on the previous evening is indicative of the deliberate nature of his action. He drove out the venders, tipped over the booths and exchange tables, and halted the traffic, proclaiming that the temple was to be a place of prayer for the nations (cf. Is. 56:7). The one place where Gentiles were allowed in the temple had become infested with thieves!

This violent action by Jesus was the immediate occasion which incited the teachers and priests to plot his death. Obviously, due to Jesus' popularity, they could not arraign him publicly, and in the evenings he disappeared from the city.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Withered Fig Tree (11:20-26)**

The next morning, the disciples noticed that the fig tree had withered (11:12-

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<sup>8</sup> It is well known that although the synoptics place the cleansing of the temple after Jesus' triumphant entry, John describes it at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (2:13-17). Most conservative interpreters regard these narratives to be independent of each other and maintain that Jesus cleansed the temple twice, once at the beginning and once at the close of his ministry. However, it may also be that one or the other of the evangelists were simply not intending to be chronological, cf. C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1987) 170-173.

14). Jesus now used the incident as an illustration of faith in God. Faith in God, that is, faith that rests in God's sovereignty and holy purpose, cannot at all be thwarted. The idea of "removing mountains" was an idiomatic expression used by the rabbis for doing things of great difficulty (cf. Zec. 4:7; 1 Co. 13:2). Whatever mountains of difficulty seem to obscure or obstruct God's purposes can be removed by unwavering faith! Whatever is requested by prayer and faith will be done. However, prayer may be hindered if one harbors resentment in his/her heart, so forgiveness is imperative.

### **The Final Days of Controversy (11:27-12:44)**

Earlier in the Galilean Ministry, a growing tension between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders had developed, because in their eyes Jesus was worldly, liberal and irreligious. The question about divorce, which was posed on the way to Jerusalem, and the cleansing of the temple after Jesus arrived only served to sharpen this conflict. To complicate matters even more, Jesus was a highly popular figure among the crowds. In the face of his miracles and teachings, the Jewish religionists came off looking badly. Since the sabbath controversies in Galilee, the Pharisees and Herodians had been plotting Jesus' death (3:6). After the temple furor, they were joined by the chief priests and scribes (11:18). Now, they were to be joined by the other sects until virtually every religious faction of importance in Jerusalem would ultimately be arrayed against Jesus. This next section of Mark's Gospel describes how, one after another, the various sects publicly challenged Jesus in his discourses.

### **The Challenge Over Authority (11:27-33)**

The issue over authority had been festering for many months. Jesus' very manner in teaching, in forgiving sins, and in exorcising demons had contrasted starkly with the rabbinical appeals to tradition (1:22, 27; 2:10; 3:15). On one occasion, the scribes had retorted that Jesus' authority was Satanic, but this sally had not impeded Jesus at all. Now the question arose again in point-blank fashion. The specific point of concern was the cleansing of the temple, but no doubt Jesus' other actions and teachings were implied as well.

Answering a question with a question was common rabbinic practice, and Jesus now took the battle onto his opponent's own ground. His counter-question put the Jewish leaders on the horns of a dilemma. His answer now depended on theirs, and either way they answered, they would be at a disadvantage. Jesus placed his own authority in solidarity with John's. If John's authority was "from heaven," so was that of Jesus. If John's authority was merely human, Jesus' authority was no better. Yet, however badly they wished to discount Jesus through John, they could not afford to do so due to John's popularity. In the midst of a volatile group of pilgrims, it simply

would not do to disclaim a martyr! So they said, "We don't know."<sup>9</sup>

### **The Parable of the Wicked Tenants (12:1-12)**

Once again, Jesus resorted to parables in his teaching. Here, however, his teaching took on an ominous note as it pointed to the passion crisis near at hand. The format of the story immediately would recall to the Jewish mind the Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah's prophecy (5:1-7), a passage which pronounced doom upon the Jewish nation. The imagery of the vineyard, the tower and the press all comes from this OT song.

#### *The Story*

A landowner planted a vineyard. He walled it in (to protect the tender shoots from animals, cf. Song 2:15; Ps. 80:12-13), built a press for making wine, and fortified it with a guard tower as protection against thieves. He then leased the vineyard to some sharecroppers, who could expect his support until the vineyard began to produce (on the average, in about four years). The venture was thus long-range, not a quick speculation.

At about the time for the initial harvest (probably in the fifth year), the landowner sent a slave to collect some of the produce. The sharecroppers beat this slave and sent him away. Another slave was sent, and he, too, was abused. Still another was sent, and they murdered him. Yet others were sent, only to receive the same treatment. Finally, the landowner sent his son, and the sharecroppers murdered him, throwing his corpse over the wall without even a decent burial. The only recourse left to the landowner was swift and sudden vengeance.

#### *The Meaning*

The fact that Jesus drew the imagery for the story from Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard made the meaning hard to miss, and indeed, Mark says plainly that the Jewish leaders understood only too well that he referred to them (12:12). The landowner obviously represented God. The sharecroppers were the religious leaders, the vineyard was the people of the land, and the slaves were the prophets. In John the Baptist, these self-willed leaders had rejected their final witness. The death of the landowner's son anticipated Jesus' own death. Swift retribution would be meted out!

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<sup>9</sup> The designation Chief Priests and Elders refers to divisions within the Sanhedrin, the highest tribunal of the Jews, which came into prominence during the inter-testamental period. It was made up of Sadducees, Pharisees, scribes, prominent priests and elders (tribal and family heads), seventy members in all, and was presided over by the high priest. Under the Romans in the time of Jesus, the Sanhedrin held wide powers, including jurisdiction over some internal governmental affairs in Judea (though not in Galilee), areas of civil and criminal jurisdiction (though capital crimes required confirmation by the Roman procurator), and religious affairs. They maintained their own police force and could order arrests.

The wicked tenants would be executed (probably referring to the coming destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.), and the vineyard would be rented out to other tenants (probably referring to the Gentile church).

### *The Quotation*

All the passover pilgrims would have been well acquainted with Psalm 118, the last of the Egyptian Hallel Psalms and the one from which they had chanted in antiphony when Jesus had arrived in Jerusalem shortly before (11:9-10). Now, however, Jesus quoted the passage from 118:22-23, how that the stone passed over by the masons had finally become the most important one in the building.<sup>10</sup> The landowner's son, whom the tenants were even then rejecting, would ultimately become the prophetic fulfillment of the valuable capstone.

### **The Question About Taxes (12:13-17)**

All Roman subjects of Judea, Samaria and Idumea, since 6 A.D., had been required to pay a poll-tax (as distinct from property taxes or customs dues). It was extremely unpopular, and in fact, had been the cause of a revolt at its institution, a revolt which had been suppressed forcefully. It served as a constant reminder that Jews were slaves of Rome. The zealots refused outright to pay it, the Pharisees tolerated it, and the Herodians supported it. In any case, the poll-tax was a heavily loaded subject to be asking questions about, and whatever answer Jesus gave, whether "yes" or "no," he stood to lose.

Jesus, however, was well aware of the flattery and hypocrisy that lay behind the question. Specifically asking for a denarius (apparently because it was minted with Caesar's profile), he used it to give his simple yet profound reply. The way he responded not only avoided offending the sensibilities of the various Jewish factions, it also subtly called attention to the fact that, even as coins are minted with image of Caesar and therefore belong to him, humans are "minted" in the image of God their Creator, and therefore belong to Him!

### **The Question About Marriage in the Resurrection (12:18-27)**

The next controversy arose from the Sadducees.<sup>11</sup> The question was intended

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<sup>10</sup>A capstone or cornerstone refers respectively either to the central stone in the top of an archway, the topstone in a defense tower, or a large stone placed at the foundation of a wall angle where two walls meet.

<sup>11</sup> The Sadducees were a priestly aristocracy which had arisen in the inter-testamental period following the Maccabean revolt. They generally were favorable toward Hellenism and were supporters of the status quo under Rome. They held the Torah alone as authoritative, maintained a lesser view of the Prophets and the Writings, and rejected Pharisaic oral law altogether. Both Josephus as well as the NT agree that the Sadducees denied the teaching of an eschatological resurrection and eternal life (cf. Ac. 4:1-2). Furthermore, Josephus adds that they also denied future punishment and reward as well as any concept of foreordination. Luke tells us that they denied the

to foil Jesus as well as to show that levirate marriage prevented a belief in resurrection. If what happens in this life is to be perpetuated in the life to come, they reasoned, then the commandments for levirate marriage were absurd. Thus, their question was double-edged. Not only did it present Jesus with a difficulty, it also called into dispute the credibility of the resurrection. It has been suggested that this question may have already become a classic conundrum with which the Sadducees had previously stumped the Pharisees.

In any case, Jesus gave two lucid answers. First, he pointed out their mistaken assumption that a resurrection could only occur in a state analogous to normal life on earth. If they had known the Scripture, they would have known that Deuteronomy 25:5-6 said nothing about applying levirate marriage to the hereafter. Had they known the power of God, they would not have restricted him to a resurrection that simply duplicated the present conditions of life. Second, he recalled for them Yahweh's self description at the burning bush (Ex. 3:6). Though this event occurred many years after the deaths of the patriarchs, God still said, "I *am* (not, I *was*) the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," the implication being that the patriarchs were yet in some sense alive.

### **The Greatest Commandment (12:28-34)**

A scribe who stood nearby observing the foregoing duel now interjected a question.

"What is the most important of all the commandments?"

Matthew's account implies that he was a spokesman for the Pharisees (22:34-35). This type of question had previously been debated by Jewish theologians, and such discussion usually aimed at finding a basic principle from which all the rest of the law could be deduced (rather than an attempt at isolating a certain commandment as binding and leaving the others as of no consequence). Jesus answered with the *Shema* ("Hear O Israel....", Dt. 6:4) and the command in Leviticus 19:18 to love one's neighbor as oneself. The *Shema* was a confession of faith made by every Jew in his morning and evening prayers each day. Upon hearing the scribe's agreement, Jesus simply responded, "You are not far from the kingdom," a response which would encourage reflection and self-examination. After that, the questions ceased.

### **How Is David's Son Also David's Lord (12:35-40)?**

Now, in his last public discourse, Jesus himself proposed a theological question, a question as to how the messiah could be both the descendent of David and the Lord of David at the same time. That the Christ was to be the Son of David was

correctly deduced by the scribes (cf. 2 Sa. 7:12-13; Ps. 89:3-4, 28-29, 34-37; Am. 9:11, etc.), and yet David, inspired by the Holy Spirit, called the messiah not "my son" but "my Lord" (Ps. 110:1)! This question strongly suggested that the messiah was infinitely more than just a second David, and it also suggests that his kingdom was of a higher order! The Pharisees were speechless (Mt. 22:46), and the crowds were delighted!

In this final discourse to the crowds, Jesus warned them of the hypocrisy of false religion. Matthew gives by far the most complete account of this teaching (chapter 23). The essence of scribal religion was externalism--an externalism based on standards of dress, positions of importance, public recognition, a greed for materialism (even at the expense of the disadvantaged), and an ostentatious piety. Such a religion deserved overflowing condemnation!

### **The Widow's Offering (12:41-44)**

Before leaving the temple, Jesus sat and watched those who were giving offerings into the temple receptacles of which, according to the Mishnah, there were thirteen placed around the walls of the women's court. The wealthy patrons gave large offerings, but a widow in poverty gave only two *lepta* (the smallest coins in circulation) which, for the benefit of his Roman readers, Mark explains were worth only a fraction of a *kodrantēs*.<sup>12</sup>

Jesus commented to his disciples that the widow had given more than all of the others--not in terms of amount but in terms of relative worth. They gave but had much left; she had only two small coins and gave them both. The value of gifts must not be reckoned by the amount given, but they must be reckoned by the amount one leaves for oneself!

### **The Olivet Discourse (13:1-37)**

In Mark 13, the reader enters a different world than the rest of Mark's gospel. Whereas everywhere else stress is given to the hiddenness of the kingdom of God in the present, here stress is given to the cosmic events of the last days leading up to the revelation and triumph of the kingdom at the close of history. Just as was hinted at in the parables of the sower, the growing seed, and the mustard seed (4:3-20, 26-32), the kingdom that had begun in a small way would ultimately have a glorious finale. This discourse, the only one of length recorded in Mark's gospel, is apocalyptic in tone and makes frequent use of OT eschatological allusions and references. Essentially, it reads like a brief three act drama featuring the signs of the end, the appearance of the anti-christ, and the glorious advent of the Son of Man.

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<sup>12</sup> Sixty *kodrantēs* make a *denarius*, which in turn was an average day's wage for a common laborer.

The term "apocalyptic"<sup>13</sup> refers to a literary genre that is especially characteristic of a body of literature which was written during the troubled intertestamental period. Apocalyptic works, though not part of the canon of Scripture, nevertheless give insight into a style of communication which was developed and used, at least partly, by Isaiah (chaps. 24-27), Daniel (various places), Jesus (the Olivet discourse), and John (the Revelation) in the canon of Scripture. To be sure, all of these areas of Scripture are not exclusively apocalyptic. They vary in their amount of apocalyptic language and style. Still, they are similar enough so that for purposes of historical background a brief understanding of apocalyptic as a literary style familiar to the Jews should help the reader to see how Jesus' words were given and understood.

*Aim:* The apocalyptists desired to explain why the kingdom of God had not immediately materialized in the post-exilic community. Whereas OT prophecy was oriented more toward the prophet's own time, apocalyptic was oriented toward the close of history, which was thought to be in the near future.

*World View:* The apocalyptists saw the world as engaged in a death struggle between the forces of good and evil, light and darkness. At the close of history, total victory would come for the forces of good. The terms "kingdom of God" and "Son of Man" are especially characteristic of these good forces.

*The Present Age:* Apocalyptists never lost confidence in God's ultimate victory; however, they did not see any triumph in the present age--only in the age to come. The present age, which was dominated by evil, would run a predetermined course to its conclusion. The hope of the righteous was primarily to be focused on the end of history.

As can be seen, many of these elements and themes strongly parallel the things Jesus said in Mark 13.

### **The Setting (13:1-4)**

Peter's pride in the second temple was evident in his exclamation over the sizeable stones and magnificence of the structure. According to Josephus, the hard white stones were each twelve feet high, eighteen feet wide and over thirty-seven feet long. Thus, Jesus' prediction was shocking in the extreme! The force of the two emphatic negatives in the Greek text has the force of saying "There will absolutely not be left one stone on another which will not be absolutely thrown down!"

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<sup>13</sup> For a brief and readable introduction to apocalyptic, see: L. Morris, *Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

After arriving at the Mt. of Olives, which overlooked the Kidron Valley and the temple area, the two sets of brothers among the Twelve requested more information about this stupendous event.

The Olivet Discourse is at once ethical and practical. Jesus was especially concerned to suppress apocalyptic speculation. This restraint is to be seen in the parenetic phrases of verses 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 21, 23, 33, 35, and 37. Though the discourse certainly describes a number of future events as precursors to the end of history, the primary purpose of the discourse is not to be a calendar of events. Rather, it is a strong warning against misunderstanding intermediate events as though they were final ones, and it is a strong call to perseverance in the face of persecution! In the discourse, there are warnings against great spiritual dangers, the danger of deceptive and false religion (13:5-6, 21-22), the danger of undue alarm over world catastrophes (13:7-8, 19-20), and the danger of one's faith succumbing under severe persecution (13:9-13). Thus, the primary function of Mark 13 is not esoteric but pastoral.

This message would have had profound meaning for the Roman recipients of Mark's gospel, who were undergoing persecution from Nero in the 60s A.D. and who had already witnessed the martyrdom of Peter. One further comment is significant concerning the frequent use of imperatives in the discourse, that is, direct addresses of command. There are nineteen in all,<sup>14</sup> such as, "watch out," "don't be alarmed," "be on your guard," "look," "pray," "flee," and so forth. This form of direct address treats the disciples not only as a group in and of themselves but also as a group which is representative of the entire community of faith which shall live until the close of history.

### **The Course of the Present Age (13:5-13)**

It should be initially noted that a rather common characteristic of prophecy (and apocalyptic) is the bringing together of two events under the scope of one prediction. This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as "prophetic foreshortening" or "the principle of double reference," seems to be germane to the Olivet Discourse. The two key events in view here are the afflictions preceding and surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem's temple and, also, the afflictions preceding and surrounding the close of history and the final advent of the Son of Man. It should not be thought that the two events can be neatly dissected within Mark 13 by parceling out the various phrases of the chapter, some to this event and some to that one. Rather, the discourse should be seen as a single treatment of two parallel streams of prediction.

Therefore, what Jesus says has application to the smaller course of events

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<sup>14</sup> Lane, 446.

preceding the fall of Jerusalem as well as to the larger course of the present age as it runs to the conclusion of history.

*False Religion (13:5-6)*

The first warning Christ gives is against deception, especially deception that comes in the cloak of Christianity and which, by all appearances, gives allegiance to Christ. Those who would come claiming either to be messiahs or else claiming to be representatives of messiah would in fact be imposters (cf. Ac. 5:36-37; 21:38; 1 Jn. 2:18-25; 2 Jn. 7-8).

*Catastrophes (13:7-8)*

Natural and social disasters have often been interpreted throughout church history as harbingers of the end. Ironically, superficial interpreters too often appeal to statistics regarding war, unrest, famine and earthquakes as "signs" of the end, and by so doing, they miss entirely the thrust of Jesus' statement. Jesus did not say that such things were immediate "signs" of the end, or that if they occurred one could know with certainty that the end was near. Rather, these things will occur as a matter of course, and when they do occur, the believer is not to be alarmed nor to mistakenly assume that the end is near. These catastrophes are only the beginning of labor pains, and the birth itself (i.e., an implied metaphor referring to the end) would come somewhat later. Intermediate events must not be misinterpreted to be final ones!

**Persecution (13:9-13)**

Furthermore, the course of the present age would be characterized by periods of intense persecution. Without question, such persecution broke out very early against the Christian community (cf. Ac. 4:1ff.; 5:17ff.; 6:11ff.; 8:1-4; 12:1ff.; see also Paul's missionary journeys). Just as the apostles had been filled with the Holy Spirit in order to answer their accusers during their mission prior to the death of Jesus (Mt. 10:19-20; Lk. 12:11-12), they were now assured that they would continue to experience the infilling of the Holy Spirit during their persecutions yet to come (cf. Ac. 4:8; 7:55-56; 13:9-10).

However, persecution would not destroy God's purpose that the gospel should go out to the nations. The consummation could not occur until that necessary condition had been satisfied. Precisely how the phrase "all the nations," or alternatively translated "all the gentiles," is to be taken, Jesus did not explain. Matthew's gospel uses another phrase, "preached in the whole (inhabited) world," to describe the event (Mt. 24:14). Paul used similar terminology to describe the spread of the gospel (Col. 1:6, 23), and it is interesting to note that he considers the gospel already to have spread universally. In light of this, the words of Jesus seem best interpreted in a broad rather than a narrow sense.

In the time of persecution, there will be treachery among even the immediate family. Perseverance will be essential to salvation!

### **Great Distress(13:14-23)**

In the next section of the discourse, Jesus shifts from the general character of the age to a specific time of affliction which would center around Judea, and according to Luke's gospel, the city of Jerusalem (21:20-24).

#### *The Desolating Sacrilege (13:14)*

The cause of distress will be the "abomination that causes desolation" or "the desolating sacrilege." This term, borrowed from the prophecies of Daniel (9:27; 11:31; 12:11), is especially difficult and cryptic. Daniel's prophecies were normally interpreted by the Jews to have been fulfilled in 168 B.C., when Antiochus IV Epiphanes offered a pig in sacrifice to Zeus in the Jewish temple (1 Maccabees 1:54-59; 6:7). However, while there is no doubt that the Jews were at least partly correct in this application, it is equally certain that Jesus intended his disciples to understand that what had happened two centuries before did not exhaust Daniel's prophecy. A desolating sacrilege was still to appear in the future!

The phrase "standing where he (it) does not belong" is a peculiar one. In the first place, the tense in the Greek text shifts from neuter (the desolating sacrilege) to masculine (standing where "he" does not belong), and this deliberate shift seems to personify the abomination as a concrete historical figure. Second, Matthew clarifies Mark's account by adding the words "holy place," that is, the innermost room in the temple (24:15), and certainly, the place above all places where sacrilege does not belong! Flight will be absolutely imperative for survival in this time of distress!

According to early tradition,<sup>15</sup> the Jerusalem Christians interpreted Jesus' prediction to refer to the Romans' destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. In 66 A.D., Jewish zealots had defeated the Roman Twelfth Legion, but many Christians (as well as others) realized that defeat was inevitable. It is recorded that they fled between 66 and 68 A.D. to Pella, a city in the foothills of the Transjordan. Other refugees perhaps fled to other cities also.

The precise fulfillment of the desolating sacrilege in a personal and historical sense is still debated. Many take it to refer to the Roman armies generally, others to Titus, the Roman general, and still others to Phanni, a false high priest of the period.

Apart from an historical fulfillment of Jesus' prediction, many interpreters see an application at the close of history, especially since 13:19 is virtually a quotation from Daniel 12:1, which certainly seems to refer to the end of the ages. If this is so,

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<sup>15</sup> See Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, III.V.3.

and it is reasonable to assume that it is, then there are at least three great crises from the time of Daniel which are prophetically foreshortened into the description of the desolating sacrilege: the sacrilege of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (168 B.C.), the sacrilege of the Roman armies (70 A.D.), and the sacrilege at the end of the ages which, according to Paul, is spearheaded by the man of lawlessness (2 The. 2:4).

*The Flight (13:15-18)*

In the era of the desolating sacrilege, instant flight would be crucial to survival. There would be no time to pack belongings--only time to flee. Those who would be impeded by weather or personal circumstances (due to a pregnancy or responsibility for a small child) might very well not escape at all. This great time of distress would be the most severe the world has ever known or ever shall know.

*The Great Tribulation (3:19-20)*

In an historical sense, the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. was brutal in the extreme. According to Josephus, 97,000 Jewish prisoners were taken, and 1,100,000 Jews perished, many by crucifixion. While these "figures may be exaggerated, they must have been enormous."<sup>16</sup>

However, as brutal as was the seige in 70 A.D., many feel that it could not compare to the holocaust in World War II, and therefore, that in and of itself the fall of Jerusalem cannot qualify for the greatest time of distress in all of history. If this is so, then another time of great distress still remains prior to the coming of Jesus, an era usually described as the "great tribulation" (taken from Re. 7:14). However one wishes to interpret this period of distress, it shall be so severe that if God did not cut it short, it would result in total annihilation. Only for the sake of God's chosen people would the time be made short.

The question immediately arises as to who are "the elect," and it is a particularly thorny one. Quite obviously, the term refers to people chosen by God and is taken from the remnant concept of the OT. Here are the options of major import:

1. *If one interprets the "great distress" to refer to the seige of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.....then the elect would refer to the Jewish church which was centered in Jerusalem and was forced to flee.*
2. *If one interprets the "great distress" to refer to a tribulation at the end of history....then the elect could be either:*
  - a. *The Jewish nation, which some think will be brought back into the redemptive plan of God in an ethnic sense (the dispensational*

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<sup>16</sup> W. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) 938-939.

interpretation)

- b. *The Christian church*, which will be enduring this time of distress prior to Christ's return (the non-dispensational interpretation).

In any case, the assurance which Jesus gave that whatever persecution came would not destroy the people of God but would be controlled and shortened for their survival must have been a great comfort to the church at Rome while they were experiencing such devastating persecution in the mid-60s A.D.

*Antichrists (13:21-23)*

These verses amplify 13:6. In the time of the great distress, false messiahs will proliferate (and it should be noted that both the terms "false Christs" and "false prophets" are pluralized). False Christs are those who claim to be messiahs. False prophets are those who claim to be able to identify messiahs. These deceivers will be capable of performing signs and miracles, so that if possible, they might deceive God's people. John wrote that even in the apostolic age, such imposters had already come (1 Jn. 2:18-23; 4:2-3; 2 Jn. 7-8).

The thrust of Jesus' warning must be understood in light of the following verses, which depict the coming of Jesus as a cosmic event. The genuine coming of Christ is not to be qualified by signs and miracles, nor yet is it to be thought of as a private event only for a select group (cf. Mt. 24:26-27). Rather, it will be world-shaking and universally recognized (cf. Re. 1:7).

Many have seen a direct connection between the false Christs and false prophets spoken of here and the two beasts of the Apocalypse, the one from the sea (Re. 13:1-10) and the one from the earth (Re. 13:11-18), especially inasmuch as the second beast is referred to as the false prophet and performs deceptive miracles and signs (Re. 16:13; 19:20; 20:10). Paul also spoke of the eschatological man of lawlessness as one who would display counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders (2 Th. 2:8-10). Again, when John writes concerning the many antichrists which are already in the world, he does so only after acknowledging the commonly understood idea of an ultimate, particular antichrist (1 Jn. 2:18). Thus, there does seem to be a legitimate connection between what Jesus says here and what the other NT writers have predicted. However, it should be noted that Jesus' comments are of a general nature (as evidenced by the plural terms "false messiahs" and "false prophets") and must be taken in a broader frame of reference than the other passages. What Jesus refers to shall occur not just once, but many times. It is therefore proper to distinguish between the personal antichrist (i.e., John's beast from the sea and Paul's man of lawlessness) and the spirit of antichrist (that is, "the secret power of lawlessness already at work," 2 Th. 2:7; or alternatively, "the spirit of antichrist which even now is already in the world," 1 Jn. 4:3). The spirit of antichrist permeates the course of the

age. The personal antichrist comes at the consummation of the age.

### **The Coming of the Son of Man (13:24-27)**

The coming of Christ at the close of the age will be immediately preceded by awesome cosmic events. The language of 13:23-24 draws heavily upon OT imagery (Is. 13:10, 24:23; 34:4; Eze. 32:7-8; Joel 2:10, 30-31; 3:15; Am. 8:9), and this same imagery is later picked up in the revelation (6:12-14). Far from being a private event, the coming of the Son of Man in great power and glory will be the most public of events, universally recognized (cf. Da. 7:13-14).

When Christ comes, he shall gather his elect from the four winds (i.e., from everywhere, cf. Mt. 24:3). This gathering seems to parallel Paul's reference to the resurrection and catching away of God's people (1 Co. 15:51-52; Th. 4:15-17) and John's references to the victory of God's redeemed people as described in the Apocalypse (7:9-17; 11:15-18; 14:1-5).

### **The Lesson of the Fig Tree (13:28-31)**

The parable of the fig tree has received about as varied a treatment as any other symbol in the gospels. The comparison between a budding fig tree heralding summer and the signs pointing to a near event is not difficult. The difficulty lies in the thorny questions of what are the signs, what is the event, and what is meant by the expression "this generation." In brief, there are three major lines of interpretation.

#### *The Fall of Jerusalem Theory*

This position sees a correspondence between the phrase "these things" in 12:29 and the question asked in 13:4. As such, the signs would refer to the things described in 13:5-23 (not in 13:24-25), the event would refer to the destruction of Jerusalem, and the phrase "this generation" would refer to the people living at the time Jesus was speaking (i.e., those who would live to see the destruction of Jerusalem some forty years away).

#### *The Mistaken Christ Theory*

Appealing to the succeeding statement in 13:32, some have posited that Jesus was mistaken about the time of the coming of the Son of Man. Accordingly, the signs were those things mentioned in 13:5-25, the event was the glorious second advent of Christ, and the expression "this generation" referred to the current generation. As might be expected, conservative interpreters reject this position on theological grounds.

### *The Second Coming of Christ Theory*

Due to Luke's statement that these things herald the nearness of the kingdom of God (21:31), many have taken the parable to refer to the advent of Christ at the close of the age rather than to the fall of Jerusalem. However, though this group generally agrees on the event, its adherents are divided over their interpretation of the signs and the meaning of "this generation."

*The Signs:* Some take the signs to refer only to 13:5-23, some only to 13:24-25, and some to both. Dispensationalists often interpret the budding fig tree to directly represent the State of Israel as established in 1948.

*"This Generation:"* With their narrow interpretation of the fig tree, dispensationalist often fall into speculation over the length of a generation (i.e., how long must one wait from 1948 until Christ comes).<sup>17</sup> Other interpreters understand the phrase "this generation" to refer to the Jewish nation as a whole which would not pass from existence in spite of national tragedies. Some interpret "this generation" to refer to the human race and some to the community of faith (i.e., the church embodied in the nucleus of the Twelve). It is worth noting that a generation, idiomatically speaking, need not be confined to one life span but can be taken to refer to several lifetimes, as is evident from the Qumran literature.<sup>18</sup> Finally, some simply understand "this generation" to refer to the generation which sees the solar cataclysms of 13:24-25.

### **The Parable of the Owner (13:32-37)**

The conclusion of the discourse is a final suppression of speculation. No one (except the Father) knows when the consummation will occur any more than the servants of an estate-owner know when he will return from a journey. In ancient times, itineraries would of necessity be only approximate because of uncertain travel conditions. The owner could return at any time (actually, at any of the four watches of the night, as specified in 13:35b). Preparedness, not speculation, is what is essential!

### **The Passion Preparation (14:1-42)**

With chapter 14, Mark begins the passion narrative. What Jesus had repeatedly predicted, since the time of Peter's great confession of Jesus as the Christ, would now come to pass. The word "passion," incidentally, comes from Acts 1:3 in

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<sup>17</sup>H. Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) 53-54.

<sup>18</sup>E. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 246-247; Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 110; Morris, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 300-301.

the KJV. It simply means suffering.

### **The Setting (14:1-2)**

By the time of Jesus, the two festivals of Passover and Unleavened Bread had been combined. The Passover, the day on which the paschal lamb was slain as a commemoration of the Exodus, opened the week-long festival during which the Jews would purge their homes of leaven (Ex. 12:6-20, 48; 23:15; 34:18; Nu. 9:2-14; Dt. 16:1-8).

People have long debated the chronology of Jesus' last days in Jerusalem, and especially thorny is the day of the crucifixion. The crux of the issue involves harmonizing Matthew's record that Jesus would be three days and nights in the heart of the earth (12:40) with the various statements that Jesus arose from the dead on the third day. Three views are held: that Jesus was crucified on Wednesday, that he was crucified on Thursday, and that he was crucified on Friday. While no attempt at dogmatism will be made, the evidence seems best to indicate that Friday is the day of crucifixion.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Anointing at Bethany (14:3-11)**

Bethany was a village at the foot of the Mount of Olives some two miles from Jerusalem, and apparently Jesus spent the night there while he was in Jerusalem (11:11; cf. Lk. 21:37). The story in John 12:1-8 seems to be a parallel account, and if so, the woman who anointed Jesus was Mary, sister to Lazarus (Jn. 12:2-3). The occasion was a dinner given in Jesus' honor (Jn. 12:2) by Simon, a former leper. Nard, the expensive perfume, was an aromatic oil taken from an Indian root. It was common to preserve such perfume in small alabaster flasks with a slender neck, which would be broken at the time of use.

The significance of this gesture is twofold:

1. *Judas' Treachery:* Judas Iscariot now became a spokesman for the disciples' critical attitudes, and he asked why the perfume was not sold for 300 denarii (about a year's wages) and the money given to the poor (cf. Mt. 26:8-9). John adds the penetrating remark that Judas' concern was not for the poor, but for himself, because he was the treasurer for the Twelve and had been embezzling funds (Jn. 12:6). Jesus' defense of the woman's actions apparently was the catalyst that moved Judas to bargain with the Sanhedrin to betray Jesus.
2. *The Symbolism:* The woman's gesture was probably more significant than even she herself realized, for executed criminals would not

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<sup>19</sup> H. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977) 65ff.

normally be anointed for burial. Since Jesus anticipated his death as a criminal, he interpreted the woman's act as an anointing for burial before the execution.

### **The Lord's Supper (14:12-26)**

What is universally called "the Lord's supper" (from Paul in 1 Co. 11:20) occurred at the annual celebration of the passover meal.<sup>20</sup> In preparation, Jesus sent two disciples (Peter and John, cf. Lk. 22:8) to secure a private room. They were to find a man carrying a waterjar, and he would show them a room already furnished with the customary carpets or cushions for reclining. Here, the two disciples prepared the unleavened bread, wine, bitter herbs and lamb. Traditions going back to the sixth century A.D. say that the upper room was in John Mark's home and that John Mark himself was the carrier of the waterjar, but this information is of unknown validity.

#### *The Prediction of Betrayal*

The actual passover meal was not begun until sunset, which was the point of Jewish transition between one day and the next. The meal was in memory of the first passover, but it was also a time of anticipation that God would once more intervene in history on behalf of his people. At the meal, the Hallel (Psalms 113-118) were recited within a liturgical framework that explained the meaning of the meal. At a certain point in the liturgy, the bread would be broken by the host and distributed to the company. They would then dip the bread with bitter herbs into a bowl of stewed fruit and eat it together. At this moment, Jesus shocked them with the announcement that one who was even then dipping into the bowl would betray him.

#### *The Sacrament of the Communion*

The actual institution of the ordinance which Christians call the Lord's Supper occurred during and after the meal. The breaking and distribution of the bread would have come during the meal itself. Four cups of wine would have been drunk, and Jesus made special comments at one of the first ones and also at the last one (cf. Lk. 22:17-18, 20). He instructed his disciples to continue to observe this ritual until his second coming (Lk. 22:19; 1 Co. 11:23-25), and they did so regularly in the early church (Ac. 2:46; 20:7, 11). The symbolism of this sacrament is rich:

#### *The Bread Represents....*

... *the presence of Christ.* Hence, the sacrament is called "the Lord's Supper," not only because he instituted it, but also because when one shares the elements of bread and wine, he/she shares with Christ.

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<sup>20</sup> For the difficulty of harmonizing the Synoptics' festival chronology with John, see: I. Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 57-75.

... *the broken body of Christ*. The breaking of the bread represents the breaking Christ's body or the giving of Christ's body in behalf of sinners (Lk. 22:19; 1 Co. 11:24).

... *the unity of believers*. The fact that all participants eat of one loaf represents the unity of all believers in Christ (1 Co. 10:16-17).

#### *The Cup Represents....*

... *the shed blood of Christ*. The pouring out of Jesus' blood alludes to the sacrificial blood at the institution of the Old Covenant (Ex. 24:6-8). However, now there had been instituted the new covenant predicted by Jeremiah (31:31-34). The new covenant would not be a covenant of legal demand, like the old one, but a covenant of forgiveness (cf. He. 8:12; 9:14).

... *the believer's participation in the saving work of Christ*. It is in this sense that the participation of the believer in the communion ordinance represents his/her access to the benefits of the cross (1 Co. 10:16).

#### *The Nature of the Lord's Supper: The Lord's supper is a celebration. It is:*

*A Memorial....*by which Christians remember the Lord's death.

*A Sacrament....*in which Christians confront the real presence of Christ.

*A Fellowship....*by which Christians share together with Christ and each other. The word "communion" comes from 1 Corinthians 10:16 in the KJV and means fellowship.

*A Thanksgiving....*for the finished work of Calvary (1 Co. 10:16). The term "eucharist" is derived from the Greek word for thanksgiving.

*An Anticipation....*of the return of Christ for his people (1 Co. 11:26). Jesus said that he would not eat or drink with his people any more until that final day when he would do so anew in the consummation of the kingdom of God.

When the supper was over, Jesus and the Twelve (except for Judas, who had now gone, cf. Jn. 13:27-30) closed the liturgy by singing the second part of the Hallel. They then departed for the Mount of Olives.

### **Jesus Predicts His Disciples' Desertion (14:27-31)**

Presumably while in the street or perhaps while ascending the Mount of Olives, Jesus made a second startling prediction. The earlier one concerning Judas had been unsettling enough, but this one surely struck at their very hearts!

"You will all take offence at me," Jesus said. The meaning of this expression in the Greek text carries the force of being "scandalized by" or "alienated from." Jesus asserted that the disciples' desertion was a fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy (13:7).

However, the scattering of the disciples was not final, and Jesus assured them that he and they would meet again back in Galilee after his death and resurrection.

Peter emphatically insisted that he would remain steadfast to Jesus, even if no one else would. But Jesus knew more about Peter than Peter did about himself, and he predicted Peter's denial on that very night! There is no reason to doubt Peter's sincerity when he said he was willing to die with Jesus, especially in light of his attempted armed defense of the Lord in the garden (Jn. 18:10-11). However, while Peter was willing to die with sword in hand, he was ashamed to meekly submit to ridicule and a passive death. Peter's offense at Jesus was not only bound up in the fact that Jesus would die but also in the manner in which Jesus would die. Ignominious execution on a convict's gibbet did not seem very heroic!

### **Gethsemane (14:32-42)**

Gethsemane (meaning "oil press") was an olive orchard somewhere near the Mount of Olives, and it is to this familiar place that Jesus retired with his disciples to pray (Lk. 22:39; Jn. 18:2). Jesus' psychological trauma is lucidly described by the phrase rendered "deeply disturbed and troubled" or "appalled and profoundly troubled." The Greek here is very difficult to render with equivalent intensity in English. It is "suggestive of shuddering awe" and "depicts the greatest possible degree of infinite horror and suffering."<sup>21</sup> The NEB captures the force of 14:34 well, when it says, "My heart is ready to break with grief!"

Besides being described in the gospels, Jesus' prayer is alluded to in the Book of Hebrews where it speaks of his "prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death" (5:7).<sup>22</sup> In his customary way, Jesus addressed God as *Abba*, the child's word for Father in the Aramaic language. The prayer itself centered around "the cup," a metaphor for his atoning death (cf. 10:38-40). The words of Jesus' prayer are usually taken to mean that he shrank, not so much from physical death, but from the horror of sin-bearing. In light of his later outcry on the cross (15:34), this may well be the case. However, another possibility is worth considering, that is, the possibility that Jesus was asking for strength to reach the cross rather than for a way to escape it. He already felt himself to be at the point of death (14:34), and perhaps his prayer was to be saved from death (temporarily) so that he could complete his mission of death by crucifixion. Such a prayer may well have been answered by the ministering angel (cf. Lk. 22:42-43; He. 5:7).

In either case, Christ submitted himself to the Father's will. In the words of Paul, he "became obedient to death--even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8)! Just as Jesus predicted, the disciples did not share his agony with him but succumbed to sleep at the hour of crisis. They failed to watch and pray, and in so doing, they surrendered to

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<sup>21</sup>D. Nineham, *St. Mark* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 391.

<sup>22</sup>See discussion: T. Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960) 99-101; F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 99-102.

the temptations of their weakness.

### **The Arrest and Trial (14:43--15:20)**

At this point in the story of Jesus, the accounts of the Synoptic Gospels and John begin to run parallel. Until this point, John's gospel has focused on the unique events and discourses of Jesus (over 90% of John's gospel is not found in the Synoptic Gospels). Now, with the arrest of Jesus, the witnesses of the four evangelists merge into a stream of common testimony

#### **The Arrest (14:43-52)**

After finding his disciples sleeping for the third time, Jesus arose from prayer in anticipation of his betrayal (14:41-42). The kiss was a familiar greeting of honor among rabbis and their students (note the salutation in 14:45), and it is by this method that Judas had arranged to identify Jesus. The question naturally arises as to why Jesus needed to be identified at all, since he was such a popular figure, but one may put this down to either the darkness (it was probably about 3:00 A.M.) or to the fact that the arresting party did not know Jesus by sight, only by reputation.

The arrest itself was made not by Roman authorities but by the temple police, a force maintained by the Sanhedrin (this is evident in that Jesus was taken to Annas' house, not the prison, cf. Jn. 18:12-13). Such a police force would normally have been authorized by Rome to maintain civil order. The brief resistance offered by Peter was quickly rebuffed (cf. Jn. 18:10-11). Jesus offered a few words of indignation at the show of force and the surreptitious character of the night arrest, and he commented on the fulfillment of Scripture. His followers ran for their lives, just as he had predicted (cf. 14:27-31).

The curious description of the young man who also fled has traditionally been thought to be of John Mark himself, a sort of personal signature to his gospel, but this guess is not made explicit in the text.

The evangelists describe the trial of Jesus as proceeding in two stages, a Jewish stage first and a Roman stage last.<sup>23</sup> The Jewish stage was primarily occupied with sorting through the testimonies of witnesses against Jesus so as to reach a verdict. There are three different scenes in this Jewish stage:<sup>24</sup>

1. The preliminary examination before Annas, the high priest emeritus (Jn. 18:12-14, 19-23).

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<sup>23</sup>For a graphic description of the last hours of Jesus based on substantial historical research, see: J. Bishop, *The Day Christ Died* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1957).

<sup>24</sup>A. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels for Students of the Life of Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950) 209-215.

2. The informal examination by the Sanhedrin, probably before dawn (Mk. 14:53, 55-65; Mt. 26:57, 59-68; Lk. 22:54, 63-65; Jn. 18:24).
3. The formal trial resulting in the guilty verdict (Mk. 15:1; Mt. 27:1; Lk. 22:66-71).

The Roman stage was primarily occupied with the Jews' attempts to secure an execution sentence. Although the Sanhedrin had wide judicial authority, a capital crime had to be channeled through the Roman authorities who were very jealous of their rights to the sword.<sup>25</sup> This stage also has three scenes.

4. The first appearance before Pilate (Mk. 15:1-5; Mt. 27:2, 11-14; Lk. 23:1-5; Jn. 18:28-38).
5. The appearance before Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee, and Perea (Lk. 23:6-12).
6. The second appearance of Jesus before Pilate (Mk. 6-15; Mt. 27:15-26; Lk. 23:13-25; Jn. 18:39-19:16).

### **Before the Sanhedrin (14:53-65)**

From Gethsemane, the temple police brought Jesus to the Sanhedrin. (Mark does not describe the preliminary examination by Annas.) Peter followed at a safe distance and gained entrance to the high priest's courtyard through the help of an unnamed disciple (cf. Jn. 18:15-16). The purpose of this early hearing was to assemble evidence against Jesus, and it functioned as a sort of grand jury. Capital cases required at least two agreeing witnesses (Nu. 35:30; Dt. 17:6; 19:15), and the Sanhedrin was hard pressed to satisfy this requirement. The only substantial thing they could summon was the misinterpretation of a comment Jesus had made near the temple (cf. Jn. 2:19), and the Sanhedrin might well treat a threat of violence to the temple as a capital offense. However, the witnesses contradicted each other. Furthermore, Jesus refused to oblige them by making any comment or defense. Finally, Caiaphas, the High Priest, took another direction.

"Are you messiah?" he asked.

Though Jesus had previously been reserved about using such a title, probably due to the distorted understanding which would be attached to it (cf. 8:29-30), he now simply admitted, "I am." Then, as if to oblige them to the full, Jesus made the most stupendous remark. He brought together Ps. 110:1 and Da. 7:13 and claimed them for himself.

*The "Right Hand of Power":* The word "power" is simply a metonymy for God (16:19). It denotes not so much a physical location, as though God were

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<sup>25</sup>A. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) 1-47.

corporeal, as it does Christ's exaltation and his sharing in honor, glory, power and deity with the Father.

*The High Priest's Symbolic Act:* By tearing his garment in the way precisely prescribed by the Talmud,<sup>26</sup> Caiaphas signified that Jesus had committed blasphemy, an act worthy of death (cf. 2 Ki. 18:37; 19:1-4). This condemnation was followed by repeated indignities.

### **Peter's Denial (14:66-72)**

The sequence of events surrounding Peter's denial of Jesus is not easy to reconstruct, for although each evangelist records it, each one offers different details. We may certainly say that several people questioned Peter about his relationship to Jesus, but each time Peter disowned his Lord. On the third occasion, Peter resorted to an oath in his emphatic denial of Jesus, and while he was still speaking, the rooster began to crow for the second time (cf. Lk. 22:60). The combination of the rooster's crow and the glance Jesus gave to Peter (cf. Lk. 22:61) brought back vividly Jesus' earlier prediction of this very denial (14:29-31), and Peter fled, deeply ashamed.

### **Jesus Before Pilate (15:1-20)**

After the formal verdict that Jesus was guilty of a capital offense, blasphemy, the Sanhedrin took him to Pilate, the Roman Procurator of Jerusalem, to seek an order for execution. However, it is significant that they were forced to change their indictment. Roman law certainly did not consider Jewish blasphemy to be a capital crime, and if the Sanhedrin were to build their case before Pilate on grounds of blasphemy, he might well throw it out of court (cf. Jn. 19:10). Therefore, they brought Jesus to Pilate on the charge of high treason (cf. Lk. 23:2).

Pilate's first question, "Are you the king of the Jews," presupposes his knowledge of the charge. However, beyond the simple affirmation that he was indeed the king of the Jews, Jesus made no defense.

### *The Release of Barabbas*

Mark does not describe Pilate's action of sending Jesus to Herod, which action was probably a ploy to rid himself of a very difficult situation, but he does describe Pilate's later attempt to gain amnesty for Jesus. After examining the prisoner, Pilate was very well aware of Jesus' innocence of high treason against Rome. At the same time, he was faced with a very determined Sanhedrin. Therefore, he sought escape through *abolitio*, the Roman form of amnesty for a prisoner not yet condemned. Apparently, Pilate believed that Jesus' popularity with the rabble would be sufficient

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<sup>26</sup>W. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975) 613.

to overturn the indictment, and since a crowd had gathered to make their annual request for an amnesty, Pilate seized the opportunity. However, he had underestimated the influence of the Sanhedrin. They had infiltrated the crowd with the notion to ask amnesty for Barabbas, a zealot convicted of treason, and when Jesus was presented, they shouted for a crucifixion. Pilate capitulated.

Roman scourging or flogging, called the "halfway death," was a brutal punishment that often ended in death. The victim was tied to a short post, and blows were applied to the back, loins and sometimes even the face and bowels. Unlike Jewish flogging, with its limit of thirty-nine blows (cf. Dt. 25:1-3; 2 Co. 11:24), there was no limitation in a Roman flogging. It was administered until the victim was close to expiration. The whip itself, called a flagellum, was a handle to which several cords or straps were tied, each one weighted with jagged pieces of bone or metal. Josephus records that some scourgings were carried on until the victims entrails and bones were exposed.

#### *Special Significance for the Roman Readers*

Without question, the trial, conviction and execution of Jesus would have had deep meaning for Mark's Roman audience. Many of them had already faced martyrdom, and others would follow. The statement that Jesus was "handed over" (15:15) would have been especially significant in light of Jesus' earlier prediction that his disciples would also be "handed over" (13:9). The courage of their Lord and his ultimate triumph in resurrection was no doubt a strong buttress to their faith.

#### *The Soldiers' Mockery*

The Praetorium was Pilate's official headquarters when in Jerusalem (his residence was in Caesarea). Away from public view, a detachment of soldiers mocked Jesus with pseudo-emblems of royalty, a purple robe, a crown of thorns and a reed scepter (Mt. 27:29). They abused him and fell on their knees in mock submission, after which they led him away for execution. Normally, the prisoner would be led naked to the crucifixion sight and would be scourged along the way, but inasmuch as Jesus had already been scourged, the soldiers gave back to him his own clothes.

### **The Death of Jesus (15:21-47)**

Roman crucifixion was essentially a penalty for slaves and enemies of the empire. Unknown in the Old Testament, it was probably invented by the Persians. It was adopted by Alexander the Great and later the Phoenicians. From them, it was taken over by the Romans, for whom it became almost a grisley art form. The cruelty of crucifixion lay in its public shame and its drawn-out torture.

The victim was usually scourged along the public roads while forced to carry the transverse bar of the cross (*patibulum*) to the site of execution. The crucifixion site was nearly always in a prominent, public place. Around his neck, the convict frequently wore a tablet stating the reason for his conviction.

In the New Testament, there are two words that particularly refer to the instrument of death.

*stauros* (= cross)

*xylon* (= wood, timber, tree)

Crosses appeared in several forms, of which the two most common were the *crux immissa* (where the upright pole projected above the crosspiece) and the *crux commissa* (where the crosspiece rested in a groove on the top of the stake). Usually, crosses were no more than seven feet high, but if the convict was intended to be seen from a distance, a higher cross could be used. The more common, shorter cross often enabled dogs and other animals to approach the victim.

At the scene of execution, the victim was stripped naked, if this had not already been done, to add to his shame. He was then laid on the ground, both forearms or wrists were nailed or tied to the cross-piece, and he was raised by the crosspiece which was then affixed to the stake. His feet would be tied or nailed. The number of nails used could vary. (Incidentally, the footrest often pictured in Christian art is not accurate.) Crucifixion damaged no vital part of the body. The victim's weight was born by his nailed or tied wrists and feet and by a short peg (*sedile*) which was fixed to the middle of the stake and which fit under the victim's pelvis. In this way, the victim "sat" on the cross.

Death by crucifixion could be caused by a number of factors. Since no vital injury was inflicted to the body, the victim often languished for days before succumbing. He was suspended immobile, unable to cope with heat, cold, insects or bodily needs, the latter of which contributed greatly to his indignity. Hunger, extreme thirst, fatigue, cramped and inflamed muscles, minor bleeding, fever, and not infrequently tetanus tortured the convict. Victims usually did not die before thirty-six hours. Death was probably through gradual asphyxiation. Sometimes to hasten death, the victim's lower thighs were shattered (*crurifragium*).

### **Jesus' Crucifixion (15:21-32)**

#### *Simon of Cyrene*

When Jesus was led outside the northern wall of the city to be crucified (cf. He. 13:12), he was apparently so weak that he was unable to continue carrying the *patibulum*. Though tradition says that he "fell beneath the cross," this is nowhere explicitly stated in the New Testament. Mark mentions that Simon, the one chosen to

carry the crossbeam and a visitor from the North African port of Cyrene, was the father of two apparently well-known individuals to the Roman church, Alexander and Rufus. Paul later includes a certain Rufus and his mother in his greetings to the Roman church (Ro. 16:13), and there may well be a direct connection.

### *Golgotha*

The exact location of Golgotha (a name meaning "skull" and possibly referring to the configuration of the hill) is not known. Upon reaching the execution site, Jesus was offered a narcotic of wine and myrrh, but he refused it. He was crucified in the traditional manner (and probably on a high cross inasmuch as the soldier was later only able to reach his mouth with a sponge on a stick, cf. 15:36). The Roman executioners gambled for the remnants of his clothes.

### *The First Three Hours on the Cross*

The crucifixion occurred at about the third hour of the morning (about 9:00 A.M.). The tablet bearing the crime of high treason was attached to the top of the cross in three languages, and Pilate was willing to indulge in a bit of irony at the expense of the Sanhedrin (cf. Jn. 19:19-22). Two other criminals were executed with Jesus, and the crucifixions attracted a large crowd who insulted the victims. Even the Sanhedrin members were not above vulgar spite. The phrase, "...shaking their heads," in 15:29 is reminiscent of Psalm 22:6-8. Even the criminals insulted Jesus, though one of them later repented (cf. Lk. 23:39-43).

## **Jesus' Death (15:33-41)**

### *The Second Three Hours on the Cross*

At about noon (the Jewish sixth hour), it became dark, an occurrence which recalled Amos' words of eschatological doom (8:9). The darkness lasted for three hours. At about 3:00 P.M. (the Jewish ninth hour), Jesus gave a most unusual outcry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This address to God in Aramaic, "Eloi, Eloi," was misconstrued to be a call for Elijah, but in reality, the words come from Psalm 22:1 and seem to express Jesus' identification with sinners under the holy judgement of Yahweh. Someone nearby brought Jesus a sponge soaked in wine vinegar, a common beverage for workmen and soldiers which was appreciated for its thirst-quenching qualities. Soon after, Jesus died with a final outcry.

### *After the Death*

Mark makes three comments after describing Jesus' expiration. First, he describes the rending of the woven temple veil which hung between the two inner rooms of the temple. Later, the author of Hebrews, interprets this event as symbolic

of the believers' direct access to God apart from human mediators (cf. He. 10:19-22). Matthew records other remarkable phenomena that occurred at the same time (cf. Mt. 27:51-53). Second, Mark describes the confession of the Roman officer, a confession that uniquely ties together the opening statement of the gospel (1:1) and Peter's great confession (8:29). Third, Mark mentions the women watching from a distance who became significant eyewitnesses of Jesus' death, women who had assisted him in a material way and who had been healed by him (cf. Lk. 8:1-3). These included Mary of the Galilean fishing village Magdala, Mary who was the mother of James the Less and Joses, and Salome. Other lists of the women are given (cf. Mt. 27:55-56; Jn. 19:25), but it is difficult to tell whether they refer to the same individuals or to some from among the "many others" whom Mark mentions.

### **Jesus' Burial (15:42-47)**

All burial honors were normally lost to an executed criminal, and sometimes even burial itself was neglected. Frequently, the bodies were simply left on the crosses to rot. However, Joseph of Ramah (the city of Samuel), a wealthy member of the Sanhedrin who was secretly a follower of Jesus (cf. Mt. 27:57), boldly requested permission for burial since the weekly sabbath was about to begin (cf. Dt. 21:22-23). Pilate, though surprised at the quickness of Jesus' death, gave to Joseph the corpse. Joseph, in accord with Jewish tradition and with the help of Nicodemus (cf. Jn. 19:41), washed and wrapped the body in linen and laid it on a stone bench in a burial cave cut from the nearby hillside (possibly an abandoned quarry). The tomb was sealed with a stone, and the watching women noted the location.

### **The Empty Tomb (16:1-20)**

No one observed Jesus rise from the dead. When the four evangelists give witness to the resurrection of Jesus, they do not do so from the standpoint of observers of the event itself, but rather, from the standpoint of those who were convinced by overwhelming evidence that Jesus was alive.

The evidences for the resurrection of Jesus come in two forms, indirect and direct. The first fact pointing toward the resurrection, as described by all four evangelists, is the empty tomb. Each gospel writer describes the women who discovered the empty tomb on their early morning visit. All four accounts note that the stone was rolled back by the time the women arrived. These facts, especially in light of the detachment of sentries who were guarding the tomb (cf. Mt. 27:62-66), are indirect evidences that Jesus arose. Direct evidences that Jesus arose are to be found in his post-resurrection appearances.

## The Empty Tomb (16:1-8)

Mark's description of the empty tomb begins with the women's purchase of spices late Saturday night. (Since the Jewish sabbath ended at sundown on Saturday, the clause, "When the sabbath was past," means Saturday night by our reckoning.) Early Sunday morning, the women went to the tomb to complete the anointing of Jesus' corpse (cf. Jn. 19:39-40), though they were uncertain whether or not they could get in. Upon their arrival, they were amazed to find the stone rolled back and the body of Jesus gone. It is worth noting in passing that the stone seems not to have been rolled back to allow Jesus to escape; rather, it was removed to allow Jesus' followers to look into the empty cave! A young man (Matthew specifies him to be an angel, cf. Mt. 28:5) stilled their fears and asserted that Jesus had risen. The words of the angel were explicit. Jesus not only was alive, he intended to meet his disciples in Galilee. Peter, especially, was to be informed, no doubt because of his recent denial. Frightened and confused, the women fled in mute fear. The fact that the first witnesses of Jesus' resurrection were women is unusual and significant inasmuch as Jewish interpretation of the law discounted women as witnesses in matters of careful fact.<sup>27</sup>

## The Text of Mark 16:9-20

The text of the closing of Mark's Gospel has been debated since the era of the early church. There are four distinct endings that appear in the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament.<sup>28</sup>

### The Short Ending

In many of the oldest and best manuscripts, Mark 16:9-20 is not to be found at all. Many of the early fathers were apparently unaware of the passage, and Jerome (4th century) says that in his time "almost all Greek copies do not have this concluding portion."<sup>29</sup> Thus, most English versions make a clear separation between Mark 16:8 and the concluding section.

*Revised Standard Version:* ....all verses beyond 16:8 are in italics

*American Standard Version:* ....footnote as to the fact that the two oldest manuscripts do not have 16:9-20 (Codices Vaticanus and Sinaiticus)

*New American Standard Bible:* ....brackets are around the longer ending which is entitled "Addition"

*New International Version:* ....heading before 16:9-20 indicating that the most

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<sup>27</sup>W. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 589.

<sup>28</sup>B. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968) 226-229.

<sup>29</sup>N. Geisler and W. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968) 372-373.

reliable early manuscripts do not have the passage

*New English Bible:* ....contains footnotes regarding the textual problem surrounding 16:9-20

*Weymouth:* ....contains 16:9-20 in parentheses

*Phillips:* ....entitles 16:9-20 as "An Ancient Appendix"

### **The Intermediate Ending**

Several manuscripts from the seventh through the ninth centuries add the following after 16:8 and so conclude Mark's Gospel:

*But they reported briefly to Peter and those with him all that they had been told. And after this Jesus himself sent out by means of them, from east to west, the sacred imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.*

### **The Long Ending**

Most of the later manuscripts contain the passage 16:9-20 as one is accustomed to seeing it in the King James Version. The problem, of course, is that while the late manuscripts contain these verses, the early ones do not.

### **The Expanded Long Ending**

One manuscript (Codex W) contains the long ending but expands verse 14 as follows:

*And they excused themselves, saying, 'This age of lawlessness and unbelief is under Satan, who does not allow the truth and power of God to prevail over the unclean things of the spirits. Therefore reveal thy righteousness now' -- thus they spoke to Christ. And Christ replied to them 'The term of years for Satan's power has been fulfilled, but other terrible things draw near. And for those who have sinned I was delivered over to death, that they may return to the truth and sin no more; that they may inherit the spiritual and incorruptible glory of righteousness which is in heaven.'*

In summary, almost all scholars feel that someone other than Mark wrote 16:9-20. Since 16:8 would seem to make too abrupt an ending, many have suggested that the original ending of Mark has been lost altogether and that the extended endings were simply added as an appendix based on independent ancient traditions. Even if Mark did not write 16:9-20, it does not follow that the passage must be rejected as unreliable. Virtually all the information contained in the longer endings may be found in the other gospels except 16:17-18.

## The Long Ending (16:9-20)

16:9-11

The appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene is described fully in John 20:11-18. In view of the popular harshness towards Thomas' lack of faith (cf. Jn. 20:24-25), it is interesting to observe that the other disciples did little better.

16:12-13

These verses summarize Jesus' appearance to Cleopas and his companion, an appearance which is detailed in Luke 24:13-35. Again, the unbelief of the disciples is evident. The words "different form" are curious. Possibly they mean that Jesus' appearance was somehow different to these two from Emmaus than to Mary Magdalene (i.e., Jesus appeared to Mary as a gardener and to Cleopas as a wayfarer). Perhaps it means that in his resurrection body Jesus was capable of altering the visible image of himself.

One thing that comes through with great force is that the disciples of Jesus did not believe in the resurrection simply because they were gullible. They had a very difficult time accepting that Jesus was alive! Nevertheless, the evidences of the resurrected Christ convinced them completely!

16:14-16

Whether these verses are intended to refer to the great commission as given in Galilee (cf. Mt. 28:16-20) or to the same commission as repeated in Judea (cf. Lk. 24:44-53) or to a summary of both is impossible to tell.

16:17-18

Five signs were listed which were to characterize believers, and with one exception (the drinking of deadly poison), all of them occurred in the first century.

*Exorcisms* (cf. Ac. 16:18)

*New Tongues* (Some have contended that this phrase refers to a new convert's godly language as opposed to his former ungodly language before conversion. While such an interpretation is not impossible, it seems more natural that the reference is to the phenomena of other tongues as described in Acts, cf. 2:4, etc.).

*Miraculous Protection from Venomous Snakes* (cf. Ac. 28:3-5)

*Miraculous Protection from Poison*

*Healing the Sick* (cf. Ac. 3:6-8, etc.)

One ought not to interpret that any one of these supernatural occurrences

should occur as a regular practice of Christian believers (as some have done with the handling of snakes and the drinking of poisons). Such extremes go well beyond the intent of the passage. The passage simply indicates that God would be active in a miraculous way among the community of believers.

*16:19-20*

These closing verses summarize the ascension of Jesus into heaven (cf. Lk. 24:50-52; Ac. 1:9) and verify that God did confirm the proclamation of the gospel by supernatural signs.