

Mark's Portrait of Jesus

What follows is adapted from a study of Mark I made some years ago. In these notes it will not be possible to examine every detail of Mark's story of Jesus. The analysis will concentrate on the overall plot of the story, the relationship of the audience to the various characters especially Jesus, and the effect of the story as a whole on the audience.

A. THE OPENING

The opening of Mark is not subtle: "The beginning of the Gospel (good news) concerning Jesus Christ, the Son of God" states quite clearly what the story is about. 'Beginning' may refer just to the introduction to the story or (more likely) to Mark as a whole (i.e. this whole story tells us about how the Good News began). This distinction is not critical, however.

St. Mark uses just about every trick in the book to make it plain that Jesus is the hero of this story. This is confirmed by John's witness (1:7-8) and by God Himself (1:10-11). This latter is particularly important because it means Jesus knows who he is. But note the voice is addressed to Jesus alone, which implies he is the only one as yet who knows this identity. We, as the audience, are also in on this 'secret'. Jesus is then 'immediately' sent out to be tempted in the desert. We are not actually told the outcome of this temptation - presumably because it is obvious (1:12-13). This also introduces another 'character': Satan.¹

B. THE BEGINNING OF THE MINISTRY

Jesus arrives at the place where he is to begin his ministry - the region from which he came - Galilee. John had said that someone was coming, Jesus says the time has arrived, and his message links to the first sentence (good news or 'gospel' - the word appears three times in these opening verses) and to John's preaching (repentance), while at the same time introducing a new concept, the 'Kingdom of God' - a concept which will not be mentioned again until 4:11! Also rather open ended here is the reference to John's arrest. Thus in 1:12-15 St. Mark has introduced a fair collection of events and ideas, most of which are as yet rather obscure. Hence the audience's attention and imagination is well and truly caught.

Next we are told of the call of four disciples in two virtually identical incidents, This is our first meeting with any followers of Jesus. Most notable about the event is the immediacy of their response. Indeed, the word 'immediately' (*euthus*) is beginning to become a feature of the narrative. He then arrives in the synagogue in Capernaum. Here we learn that he teaches with 'authority', in contrast to the scribes. Further, we discover that he has the ability to cast out unclean spirits, and that the unclean spirits know who he is. The general populace do not have this information, however, and hence are rather taken aback at the events, so news about him travels fast. There then follow a number of healing miracles - which indicate that Jesus has power over the physical world. A large

¹Actually, God and Satan are not so much characters in the story as forces that lie behind it. Both are introduced at this early stage, indicating the nature of the ensuing struggle.

number of people now come to him, and as a consequence of this he appears to need to re-assess his mission and decides to extend his activity. We also learn that Jesus is reluctant to reveal his identity (1:25.34.44), but that reluctance is to some extent thwarted, making it difficult for him to move about.

Most striking about this section is the speed (indicated by the use of 'immediately' in 1:16.18.28) and scale (noted three times: 1:28.33.45) of the initial response. Also, we have been introduced to the four main 'characters' of the story, Jesus (the hero), the disciples (who follow him), the opponents (who have been mentioned but have not yet actually appeared) and the crowd (who are enthusiastic). Further, we are told three times that he both heals the sick (31.34,41-42) and casts out demons (25-26.34.39). Those who already know the end of the story might also note the 'early in the morning' of verse 35.

So far Jesus has met with no resistance. However when he returns to Capernaum hints of trouble begin to emerge. The scribes (who were already written off in 1:22!) are not happy with his behaviour. Aligned with the scribes we have the Pharisees (2:16.24,3:6) and the Herodians (3:6). The controversies appear to be structured chiasmatically around two parables:

- A 2:1-2: The size of the crowd
- B 2:3-12: Healing on the Sabbath
- C 2:13-17: Eating
- D 2:18-20: Parable on fasting
- D' 2:21-22: Parable - wineskins
- C' 2:23-28: Eating
- B' 3:1-6: Healing on the Sabbath
- A' 3:7-12: The size of the crowd

This seems to centre on 2:20 - the bridegroom will be taken away - which would appear to tie in with the beginning of the plot to get rid of Jesus, which is mentioned for the first time in 3:6. The controversies centre on the interpretation of the Law. Other features of this section are: the ever increasing crowd, Jesus' self-identification as the Son of Man, and the indication that as such he can forgive sins and is lord of the Sabbath. There is also a third call to discipleship (2:13-14) in much the same terms as the first two (1:16-19), and a third note about demons identifying Jesus (3:11).

After this activity Jesus again leaves the crowd behind him and chooses twelve men to be with him and to be sent out to do what he has been doing. So far we have been told frequently about the proclamation of the message or word or Gospel, but little about its content - except for 1:16. Four of the disciples get singled out for special mention, three by nicknames: Simon gets called Peter (Rocky!) and James and John are called 'Sons of Thunder' Peter's nickname will be seen ultimately to be ironical. We are also told that Judas Iscariot is 'the one who was to betray him'. This statement, being in the aorist, is effectively an authorial intrusion indicating something that happened. Thus it has been indicated three times that something is going to go wrong (2:20,3:6.19),

The following two intertwined stories underline the opposition to Jesus' ministry. His family comes to take charge of him because of reports that he is acting strangely - this is in a sense understandable if it is considered that he has not been home since his baptism and is now attracting large crowds. It is worth noting that the same word used in 3:21 to

describe Jesus - *exese* translated in the NRSV as 'gone out of his mind' - is used to describe the reaction of the crowd in 2:12, and appears in a similar context in 5:42 and 6:51. His family are given short shrift but not actually condemned, The scribes, on the other hand, are condemned as being guilty of an eternal sin for failing to recognise the work of God. These stories are the first of a number of instances where St. Mark interweaves two stories to get his point across.

Note the reference to Satan and binding the strong man, which looks back to the temptation in 1:12-13 and to the 'stronger one' of 1:7. Note also the fact that the scribes have come from Jerusalem. We have already heard that people are coming from Jerusalem (3:8), but this is the first time they have played an active part. We are also given a favourable impression of the crowd.

C. SOME RIDDLES

The narrative now changes tack - we are given some teachings of Jesus with very little action. The importance of the parable of the sower (4:1-9.13-20) is underlined by the amount of space it is given, and also by the fact that it seems to be presented as the key to all the parables. The specific narrative purpose of this parable would seem to be to explain the different responses to Jesus' teaching. At this stage the audience would probably want to identify with the 'seed on fertile ground', and may also be inclined to put the disciples into this group, However, we also have the first hint that the disciples are not quite in tune with Jesus ('Do you not understand?' verse 13). The scribes and Pharisees are obviously the seed on the path. The seed on rocky ground will be seen to be a better representation of the disciples, and the seed among thorns is difficult to identify with anyone in the story at this stage.

A further explanation of the differing reactions to Jesus is given between the parable and its exposition (4:10-12), with the distinction between the inner circle ('those who were around him along with the twelve'), to whom has been given 'the secret of the Kingdom of God', and the rest (those outside') to whom everything comes 'in parables'. *parabolas* is usually translated (or, more accurately, transliterated), as here, by the word parable. However, in the context of Mark it is probably better rendered as 'riddle', since Mark presents them as an oblique way of presenting the truth. This parable and the parables which follow underline the fact that things are not always what they seem, and things progress in ways which are not always easy to understand. But the implication is that all will work out in the end (4:8.20,22,28,32). The distinction between the crowd and the disciples is underlined at the end of the section (4:33-34).

D TRAVELS IN GALILEE

Having told us that Jesus is making a special effort to explain his message to the disciples, the story moves on to the first of three 'boat' incidents, the calming of the storm (4:35-41). Here the fact that the disciples' comprehension of events is slipping becomes clearer, The audience can perhaps sympathise with the disciples, especially if they link the boat on the storm-tossed sea with a church under persecution in which Jesus seems to be 'sleeping'. This is the first time that the disciples exhibit the astonishment which characterises the crowd's response to Jesus' action. Indeed, reactions of profound

emotional disturbance at events are common in Mark.² It is also the first time that they ask questions about Jesus' identity, the answer to which the audience already knows.

There next follows a series of incidents that do little more than describe the continuation and extension of Jesus' ministry and the reaction to it. The main new theme here is that of faith, which seems to be a prerequisite for Jesus' ministry to be effective. This is seen positively in the cure of the woman with the haemorrhage and the raising of Jarius' daughter (5:21-43) and negatively in the reaction to him in his home town (6:1-6). In the latter incident it is Jesus' turn to be amazed. The theme of Jesus' unsuccessful attempts to limit the reports about himself is also still present. A particularly subtle example of this is seen in 5:19-20: the man is told to go home and tell his *friends* what *the Lord* has done, and instead he goes into *the whole of the Decapolis* and says how much *Jesus* has done for him. There may also be a deliberate move here to identify Jesus' action with that of 'the Lord' (God).

Despite the setback at Nazareth he chooses this moment to send out the twelve on the mission, hence fulfilling the second part of their commission (6:7-13, cf. 3:13). While they are away we hear of further speculation about Jesus' identity (6:14-16), which leads into a 'flashback' concerning John the Baptist (6:17-29), which explains 1:14 Herod is probably an example of the seed sown among thorns, but the story also underlines the identification of John with the Old Testament prophets, an identification already hinted at by the opening verses of the gospel. John suffers the fate of the prophets.³

After this the disciples return Jesus once again tries to escape the crowds (cf. 1:35, 3:13). This time he is unsuccessful, however, and this leads to the first of three 'bread shortage' incidents - the first multiplication of the loaves. It should be noted here that the disciples' reactions in this story are not entirely unreasonable, though by now they should have learnt to expect the unexpected. This is followed by the second 'boat' incident, Jesus walking on the water (6:45-52), in which the disciples' reaction is more dramatic than before. Their reaction is presented as negative, and due to the fact that they did not understand about the loaves. The audience might well ask "What about the loaves?", and it is perhaps at this point that the audience begins to realise that it is not only the disciples who cannot quite follow the thread of events. The audience is also told something that Jesus appears not to be aware of; that the disciples' hearts are hardened.

After this Jesus returns to his more usual practice of wandering around the towns, curing people, and antagonising the authorities. The scribes and Pharisees re-appear in 7:1 after a prolonged absence (they were last heard of in 3:22) in the context of a fairly lengthy discussion on clean and unclean (7:1-23). They are further condemned by Jesus (verses 6-12). The crowd continues to follow him, and this leads to the second 'bread shortage' incident, the second multiplication of the loaves (8:1-9), which is basically the same as the first. This time the disciples ought to know better; they seem to have extremely short memories! After this there is a brief confrontation with the Pharisees (8:11-13) leading to the third 'bread shortage' incident, which is also the third 'boat' incident (8:14-21). While the disciples' reaction to Jesus' comments is particularly stupid here, nevertheless Jesus'

² e.g. 1:22.27, 2:12, 5:15.20.33.42, 6:2.51

³ As Elijah suffered at the hands of Ahab on account of Jezebel, so John the Baptist suffers at the hands of Herod on account of Herodias.

explanation is rather obscure; what *is* the meaning of the loaves? If the question of verse 21 was addressed to the audience the answer would probably have to be 'not entirely'!

E. ON THE WAY

To summarise so far, Jesus is seemingly in control of events, though the audience is not quite sure what he is trying to say. The crowd are still enthusiastic. The disciples are sticking with Jesus, although they have far less idea of what is going on than the audience. Finally the authorities are implacably opposed to Jesus. The next section, framed by two healing stories about blind men (8:22-26, 10:48-52), is characterised by the phrase 'on the way' (8:27, 9:33.34, 10:32.52) and a general sense of journeying.

After the first, two stage, healing, Jesus asks his disciples about his identity (8:27-30), firstly enquiring about the general opinion about him. The response to this is in the same terms as 6:14-16. When asked about their own opinion Peter gives a correct title (cf. 1:1!) but is immediately silenced. Jesus then gives the first of three 'passion and resurrection' predictions (8:31), to which Peter reacts negatively, causing Jesus to rebuke him sternly (8:32-33). The reason for Peter's failure to understand is that he sets his mind on human things rather than the things of God. This may be a key for the audience to begin to understand the otherwise obscure elements of the preceding narrative, though precisely how is as yet unclear.

The images in the following verses have become rather tame with overuse. Taking up the cross and losing one's life for the sake of Jesus and the Gospel could have a very literal meaning under Roman persecution. Thus 8:34-9:1 are almost certainly addressed to the audience. 8:31-9:1 contains three major predictions: that Jesus will die as a result of being rejected by the religious authorities, that he will rise, and that he will return in power and glory. Whether 9:1 and 8:38 refer to the same event remains to be seen, though first impressions would seem to suggest they do.

'And after six days' is the first indication in Mark of a specific time interval except for the passion prediction (8:31) and very general phrases like 'the next day'. The best explanation I have seen is to link it with Moses' six days on the mountain (Ex 24:15-18) but even that is tenuous. In the transfiguration the disciples discover what Jesus and the audience (and the demons) already know: that Jesus is the Son of God. The reaction of Peter is misconceived but positive. The injunction to listen to Jesus after he has been seen speaking with Elijah and Moses seems to imply that Jesus' words come before the Law and the Prophets. Jesus takes over from Moses and Elijah, and this perhaps explains the 'authority' seen earlier. On the way back down there is a further injunction to silence (cf. 8:30), coupled with a reference to Jesus' resurrection, which the disciples do not grasp, despite all their inside information. Next comes the question about Elijah. Apart from the transfiguration Elijah has been mentioned twice before, both in connection with the identity of Jesus (6:14-16, 8:28). In both these cases John the Baptist is mentioned, and the former precedes the story about John's execution. This, coupled with the fact that John has been presented as a Prophet, makes it clear that St. Mark intends the audience to identify John the Baptist with Elijah. However, he leaves the audience to make the link.

Another healing story underlines the continuing failure of the disciples (9:14-29), and this leads to Jesus intensifying his efforts to enlighten them. It should be noted here that this is

the only healing story within this section, a marked change from the first half of the Gospel. The story includes the second passion prediction which, however, the disciples still do not understand, but they now seem unwilling to ask questions (9:30-32), and instead resort to arguing among themselves. The subject of their discussion illustrates the extent of their failure to understand, and Jesus thus sets out once again to teach them the nature of discipleship (9:33-50).

There now follows a series of incidents which include conflict with the authorities and the disciples misunderstanding, but which basically serve to present Jesus' teaching on various matters. Particularly notable is that Jesus commends the disciples (10:28-31) despite their frequent failure. The final verse, however, adds a twist to this commendation.

In 10:32 we eventually hear of their destination. Up to this point they seem to have been wandering about aimlessly, but now we hear that they are in fact going to Jerusalem. The people with him are apprehensive and bemused, and Jesus once again predicts his passion and resurrection, this time in considerably more concrete terms than before (10:33-34), yet still the disciples do not get the message and have to be told once again the meaning of discipleship (10:35-45), which culminates in a fairly explicit identification of Jesus with the suffering servant of Is 53.

As the journey is coming to an end there is a second healing of a blind man, this time 'immediately' successful (10:46-52). This must be ironic: Jesus can open the eyes of the blind but fails to make his disciples understand. It is notable that here the blind man comes of his own accord, whereas at Bethsaida the blind man was brought (8:22-26). Further, he gives a new identity to Jesus - he describes him as Son of David.

F. JESUS IN JERUSALEM

This identity is confirmed when Jesus, after giving instructions to his disciples which involve accurate foresight of events, enters Jerusalem on a colt (11:1-11). This is a fairly obvious reference to Zec 9:9. Jesus enters the temple for the first time in the story, looks around (a bit like a tourist!) and goes out to spend the night in Bethany. The next day he returns to the temple, this time throwing out the dealers and occupying it (11:15-19). Jesus gets an enthusiastic reception from the crowd and for this reason invites the antagonism of the authorities, who seek to kill him. The story of the expulsion of the dealers is further illuminated by the fact that it is surrounded by the story of the cursing of the fig tree (11:12-14,20-21). Although this is presented as a story about faith (11:22-25), it also seems to imply a negative judgement on those who do not bear fruit - probably the chief priests and scribes and perhaps the temple as well. This leads to conflict on the third day with the chief priests and scribes over Jesus' authority, a conflict which culminates in Jesus directing the parable of the tenants against them (12:1-12). So they try to trap him into condemning himself, but fail (and note here we have four elements of the opposition involved: the chief priests and scribes send Pharisees and Herodians). This question leads to two further enquiries (12:18-27,28-34), both of which underline Jesus' authority and control of the situation - a fact which is emphasised in 12:35-37 in a riddle which is fairly obscure not only to the characters in the story but also to the audience.

G. TROUBLE TO COME

On his way out of the temple Jesus, in response to the comment of one of his disciples about its grandeur, predicts its destruction (13:1-2), Not surprisingly four of the disciples - the first four (1:16-19) - ask about this. Jesus replies with an extensive and graphic description of universal upheaval, This upheaval seems to be divided into two sections: the first terrestrial, in which the disciples will be persecuted (cf., esp, 13:9-13), and the second cosmic. The features of this latter are that it is not immediate - 13:7-8 - and it will not happen until the time after the suffering (13:23) when the Gospel has been preached to all nations (13:10), The exact time of this is unknown to everyone except the Father (13:32). In the context of the audience, who has probably witnessed or suffered persecution already, the first section has come true, possibly including the first Jewish war and the destruction of the temple in 70AD, 13:14 with its specific appeal to the 'reader' may refer to the presence of the Roman standard in the temple, or some similar event. This would lead the audience to believe that the end is 'at the gates' (13:29) for the audience, and hence it is the audience who must stay alert (13:23,33,35,37) and endure to the end (13:13). The reliability of Jesus' prophecy is underlined by 13:31. A final point to note about this section is that it presents an essentially positive view of the disciples - the implication is that they will endure.

H, Passion

After another temporal reference (14:1) we return to events in the 'present', and are immediately reminded of the plot to kill Jesus (14:12). This is underlined by the anointing at Bethany (14:3-9) which Jesus describes as anointing for his burial. Almost in response to this, Judas goes off to betray him. The reference to Judas casts the audience right back to 3:19.

The preparations for the Passover meal involve further accurate predictions by Jesus (14:12-18), and during the meal we discover that Jesus is aware that he will be betrayed (14:17-21). 14:22 is clearly reminiscent of the two miracles of the loaves (takes bread, blesses, breaks, gives to the disciples) and therefore the audience should find here the answer to the question "what about the bread?" raised before. It is Jesus' body which is broken and given for the salvation of many (cf. 10:45!). This is further underlined by the very specific reference to the Passover lamb in 14:12, and the reference to the cup as containing his blood of the covenant - a clear adaptation of Ex 24:8. The audience, with Jesus, now knows exactly what is going on. Jesus is deliberately giving himself up to a sacrificial death for the benefit of 'many'.

The disciples have not understood, a fact of which Jesus is perfectly aware of this but about which he seems unconcerned, He predicts (i) that they will run away (14:27) and (ii) that Peter will deny him three times before the cock crows twice (14:30). He also states that he will meet them in Galilee after he has risen (14:28). The disciples, led by Peter (here living up to his nickname!), profess their loyalty.

Despite Jesus' self assurance up to this point, his prayer in Gethsemane indicates that he is still struggling (14:32-42). Rhetorically this serves to keep the sympathy of the audience. If Jesus was presented as completely indifferent to his passion the audience would fail to be touched by it. The reference to the cup is reminiscent of 14:23-24 and 10:38-40. The passage also indicates the hollowness of their protestations in verses 29,31, Jesus is

disappointed but not surprised, Next follows the betrayal by Judas, confirming the prediction of 14:17-20 and the expectation generated by 14:10-11 and 3:19, The response of Jesus to those arresting him is one of contempt. The disciples run away as predicted (14:50). The reference to a 'young man' wearing only a linen cloth is curious, As it stands it appears to be just a graphic emphasis of the disciples fear - nakedness being quite disgraceful, Jesus is taken off for trial, and Peter follows at a distance.

In the trial story we have St, Mark's technique of combining two incidents to throw light on both. On the one hand we are presented with Jesus' dignity under duress (14:55-65), on the other with Peter's total failure (14:54.66-72), underlined painfully by the separate mentions of the cock crowing (verses 68.72), which serve to make the audience aware of exactly what is happening. To hammer the message home, we are reminded of Jesus' prediction in 14:30 (verse 72). Though Peter has failed, indicating that his nickname was ultimately ironic, the fact that Jesus expected it and that he at least followed after the others had fled, combined with the description of his remorse, serve to keep the audience basically in sympathy with him.

'As soon as it was morning' (15:1) reminds the audience that all the previous events (Passover, Gethsemane, arrest, trial, denial) took place the previous night. Jesus refuses to defend himself to Pilate (15:2-5), who is rather taken aback (15:5) and seeks to release Jesus. He appeals to the people (15:9), knowing, as the audience does, that it is the religious authorities who have accused him out of jealousy (15:10 cf. 11:18), but the authorities have succeeded in turning the crowd against Jesus (15:11), and so he eventually hands Jesus over ('betrays him' the same word used for Judas' betrayal cf. e.g. 14:44) to be crucified (15:15).

The actual way of the cross emphasises two things: the dignity of Jesus, and the brutality of his executors and tormentors. It is heavily loaded with irony - especially in the taunts about him being King of the Jews and the Christ, cf. e.g. 15:18.26.32. There are repeated references to time (15:25.33.34, cf. 15:1.42) which bring out the drama of the event. Just before he dies Jesus cries out using the opening line of psalm 22, and even if the audience has not already noticed, this will make plain the links between the passion and this psalm:

	Ps 22	Mk 15
Holes in hands and feet/crucifixion	18	24
Casting lots for his clothes	18	24
Deriding/shaking heads	7	29
Be saved/save himself	8	30-31
My God my God	1	34

To a modern audience this could be considered a reason for doubting the historicity of the account, but to an ancient audience it would probably have the effect of confirming that what happened to Jesus was part of God's plan. Jesus eventually dies (verse 37) and the veil of the temple is torn in two (verse 38). There is a very clear tie here with the baptism of Jesus at the beginning of the story (1:10-11): a 'voice' comes from heaven and Jesus cries out with a loud 'voice'; the spirit comes on Jesus and Jesus breathes his last breath; the heavens are torn open and the temple veil is ripped. This latter is even more striking if it is noted that (i) in Jewish cosmology of the time, the sky (or heaven) was the barrier between the divine and human spheres, and the veil divided the holy of holies from the profane world and (ii) these are the only two times that the verb 'tear apart' is

used in Mark. Jesus death is so dramatic that even one of his executors realises who he is, and this is the third time within the story (not counting the introduction or the ravings of unclean spirits) that Jesus is revealed as Son of God - another feature which connects this to the baptism.

J. RESURRECTION

We are now introduced to a group of women who we are told have been with him since the beginning in Galilee, once again casting us back to the beginning of the story. They observe the death and burial by a sympathetic outsider, his friends having fled (15:44-47). The double mention of 'linen cloth' (verse 46) may well remind the audience of the young man's garment in 14:51-52. The one who is embarrassed now becomes a proclaimer of the resurrection. The women return after the Sabbath - i.e. three days in Jewish counting from the death and burial - to anoint the body (16:1-2). This may alert the audience to some inconsistency in the women's behaviour as Jesus has already been anointed (14:8). Further, the women should also must be aware of Jesus' predictions of his resurrection if they have been with him all the time.

When they arrive they find the tomb open (16:4), and are startled to find a young man in white in the tomb (16:5 - is this the same young man as in 14:51-52? Cf. above on the 'linen cloth'). The young man tells them not to be afraid, announces that Jesus is risen (16:6), and tells them to remind his disciples that he will meet them in Galilee (16:7 cf., 14:28). All the threads are now being pulled together. Jesus is risen as he said, and the disciples are to be rehabilitated after their failure. There is hardly a loose end in sight. It is very important here to note that everything is going according to the plan set out from the very beginning of the Gospel. But by telling us that the women, rather than going joyfully to tell the disciples as in Matthew (Mt 28:8), run away frightened and say nothing to anyone. Why has Mark suddenly confounded all the expectations he placed in the audience's mind?

Arguably it is to make them go back to the beginning. There are many pointers back to the beginning in the final chapters, the 'tearing apart' of the heavens, the mention of the women, the description of the clothing of the young man. But above all the words of the young man "He is going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him" (16:7). The 'popular novel' which is Mark does not have its expected happy ending, forcing the audience to reflect more deeply on message and life of Christ.