

Chapter 3

The Gospel According to Mark*

Begin with the text. Read the Gospel of Mark, and note important themes and details that come to mind.

Author: traditionally, John Mark of Alexandria, the former companion of Paul

Audience: believers in Jesus among Greek-speaking audiences

Time: ca. 70 CE, around the time of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem

Place: possibly Rome or another setting in the Gentile mission

Message: The kingdom of God is at hand; turn around, believe, and follow Jesus.

The Gospel of Mark describes the ministry and message of Jesus with a great sense of urgency. At the outset, Jesus declares: “Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!” (Mark 1:15). John the Baptist is presented as fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah as “*a voice shouting in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight!’*” (1:3), and when John’s ministry comes to an end, that of Jesus is launched (1:14). Jesus’s ministry then continues in Galilee and finally makes its way to Jerusalem, where he cleanses the temple and is tried, crucified, and buried. He then appears to his follows after the resurrection. Mark’s is the shortest and the roughest of the four canonical Gospels, and the Greek text is punctuated with *kai euthus* (“and immediately”) thirty-nine times. As well as conveying the urgency of the message, this device may also reflect the piecing together of disparate units of material – the sort of editorial process involved in gathering traditional material from preachers and others in telling the story of Jesus.

*Paul N. Anderson, *From Crisis to Christ: A Contextual Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon 2014, 51-74; published with permission).

I. Crises and Contexts

Assuming that Mark was finalized around the time of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, several contextual issues are worth noting at the outset. With the ministry of Jesus being heralded by John the Baptist, considering how Jesus and John would have been perceived by the populace, as well as by Roman and Jewish leaders, is of value. Thinking also about Nero's persecution of Christians in Rome and the Roman siege of Jerusalem, especially if those crises posed something of a backdrop for the delivery and finalization of some of Mark's material, may also be helpful in understanding some of the emphases and nuances of Mark's story of Jesus.

Messianic Pretenders According to Josephus

Parallel to the first century Jewish messianic leaders mentioned by Luke (Theudas, Judas the Galilean, the Egyptian – Acts 5:36-37; 21:38), Josephus mentions several other first century messianic figures, which might help the reader understand how the ministry of Jesus was perceived by himself and by others – both similarly and contrastively. First, while not explicitly referred to as a messianic figure, *Simon of Peraea*, a tall and robust slave of Herod the Great, led a revolt in 4 BCE, claiming to be king and putting a diadem crown on his head as soon as Herod died. He burned and ransacked Herod's palace in Jericho and welcomed his followers to help themselves to the spoils (Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.10.6-7; *Wars* 2.4). Coming to his aid were forces from Peraea to the east, but they were no match for the head of Herod's army, Gratus, who joined forces with Roman troops from Syria. When Simon's forces were routed, he escaped for a while but was then beheaded after being captured.

Another kingly pretender, *Athronges the shepherd*, launched with his four brothers a series of attacks against the forces of Herod's successor Archelaus and Roman soldiers, but after a couple of years his forces were either killed or disbursed. Gratus again won out. Josephus also mentions *Judas son of Hezekiah*, who, following the death of Herod in 4 CE, raided his palace in Sephoris and confiscated weapons to use against the Romans. Reportedly, Varus of Syria punished the revolt by crucifying two thousand Jews as a disincentive to rebellion (*Antiquities* 17.10.10; *Wars* 2.5.2). Josephus describes this time period as full of chaos and banditry.

After Herod's son Archelaus was exiled in 6 CE and replaced by the first of fourteen Roman prefects, Quirinius the prefect of Syria was put in charge of gathering Roman taxes in the region. He liquidated the resources of Archelaus in Jerusalem and instituted a census whereby Jewish subjects would be

required to pay their taxes in Roman currency. This was problematic for two reasons. First, it was more difficult for farmers and herdsmen to convert their goods into currency; paying in goods was easier for common folk, and this left many susceptible to infractions and thus punishment. Second, because Roman coins displayed the image of the Roman governor, this was seen as idolatrous by righteous Jews. This led to a tax revolt by *Judas the Galilean* (originally from Gamala) and a Pharisee named Zadok (from the school of Shammai). Judas declared that this new system of tribute was the first step toward enslavement, and that God's people needed to be free from Roman rule (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.4-5). He called for devout loyalty to God and declared that God would reward opposition to Rome, either in this life or the next. According to Josephus, the rebellion of Judas laid the ground for the Zealot movement, which Josephus viewed as the primary reason for economic instability and famine over the next half-century or so. Three decades after the death of Judas, his sons Jacob and Simon were crucified by Tiberius Alexander as insurrectionists (Josephus, *Wars* 2.5.2). This may be why Luke dates the work of Judas after Theudas, different from the order presented by Josephus.

The next Messianic leader on the scene is described by Josephus as *the Samaritan prophet* (ca. 36 CE), who gathered hundreds of followers at the base of Mount Gerizim, promising to retrieve the hidden relics of Moses. Whether this Samaritan leader was claiming to recover the contents of the lost Ark of the Covenant, which in Hebrew scripture led to being victorious in battle, or whether the leader saw himself as the prophet like Moses predicted in Deuteronomy 18:15-22 (in Samaritan tradition, the *Tahib*, a prophetic Messiah) is unclear. Nonetheless, Pilate intercepted the expedition and blocked their way to the mountain. Many were killed, and of the leaders that were captured, many of them were also put to death. This caused a Samaritan council to appeal to Vitellius, prefect of Syria, and he had Pilate removed to Rome for consultation. In the meantime, Pilate was replaced as prefect of Judea by Marcellus (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.4).

Less than a decade later, *Theudas* (ca. 45 CE) sought to reenact the conquest of Canaan by gathering an "army of conquest" on the east side of the Jordan River (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.5). At his command the waters would part and God would deliver the city (and the rest of the promised land) into their hands. The Roman Procurator Fadus, however, refused to play the role of the soon-to-be-conquered Canaanites, and sent a garrison of soldiers in for a surprise attack. The rebellion was quelled, and the head of thwarted Theudas was paraded in Jerusalem on a pole as a disincentive to further reenactments of the biblical conquest narratives.

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According to Josephus, an anonymous leader simply described as the *Egyptian prophet* (ca. 55 CE) again gathered a group of insurrectionists numbering around four thousand men on the Mount of Olives, preparing for another conquest like that of ancient Jericho. He declared that at his command the walls of Jerusalem would crash down and God would deliver them into the city. However, the Roman Procurator Felix refused his role in the drama, and Roman soldiers and cavalry once again thwarted the plan (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.8). Four hundred were killed, and another two hundred were captured, but the Egyptian leader himself escaped, leading to rumors that he might return to Jerusalem at any time for an encore. Note that in Acts 21:38, the Roman officials ask Paul if he might be the returning Egyptian; Paul clarifies that he is not.

Josephus also mentions *John the Baptist* (ca. 26–28 CE), who came proclaiming repentance from sins and a call to righteous living; some historians might thus associate him with other first-century messianic Jewish leaders, interested in overthrowing the Romans. Given his clear association with Jesus, some scholars have guessed that Jesus was thus a failed zealot whose followers spiritualized his mission rather than regarding him as a defeated political revolutionary. Josephus, however, clearly distinguishes John the Baptist from messianic pretenders before and after him, referring to John as a good man who called people to virtue and righteousness (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.5). Josephus even speculates on the view of many Jews at the time that Herod's defeat at the hand of Aretas, King of Arabia, was a punishment from God because he had beheaded John, an authentic prophet of the Lord.

With these sorts of diverse messianic perspectives in the air, it is easy to understand some of the diverse ways Jesus and his followers would have understood their mission, and how they might have been perceived by others. Luke numbers among the Twelve "Simon the Zealot" (Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13); note that Jesus has to instruct his disciples to put away the sword (Matt 26:52; John 18:11). Consider also that at the feeding of the five thousand in the wilderness, Jesus seats the crowd in groups (companies?) of fifty and a hundred; the number of the crowd includes only the men (potential soldiers? Mark 6:40-44). Given that the Passover (celebrating deliverance from Egypt) was near, might this large gathering have been perceived as a nationalistic march to Jerusalem, joining thousands of others against the Romans as a march to liberation? Is that why the crowd seeks to rush Jesus off to make him a "king," believing he was the messianic prophet Moses had predicted (John 6:1-15)? One can even sense the palpable fear of Roman retaliation among the chief priests and Pharisees after the crowd welcomes Jesus in his

triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In their exchange with Caiaphas, he worries that “the Romans will come and take away [as in, *destroy*] both our temple and our people” (John 11:47-50).

Therefore, Jesus is “sacrificed” in Jerusalem in more ways than one – “it is better for you that one man die for the people rather than the whole nation be destroyed” (John 11:50). As rebellion in Jerusalem had broken out during the early reign of Archelaus, one can understand why tensions were high and why Pilate had come to Jerusalem from his seaside palace in Caesarea Maritima. Might the insurrectionist legacy of Judas the Galilean have played a role in Peter’s denying his being a follower of Jesus when bystanders in the courtyard asked him if he were a *Galilean* (Mark 14:70-71)? Given that Judas Iscariot is from Kerioth – the only Judean among the Twelve (Mark 14:10) – one wonders how he might have perceived the prophet from Galilee. Most remarkable among these perceptions, however, is the consistent way Jesus asserts that he is *not* a political or military leader; his mission is other. Still, nationalistic expectations and hero-laced associations would have been hard to overcome, which helps us understand what Jesus was up to and what he wasn’t. In the light of these many pretenders, the warning of Mark 13:21-30 becomes acutely relevant: “Then if someone says to you, ‘Look, here’s the Christ,’ or ‘There he is,’ don’t believe it. False christs and false prophets will appear, and they will offer signs and wonders in order to deceive, if possible, those whom God has chosen. But you, watch out! I’ve told you everything ahead of time.” In Mark, Jesus takes great pains to distinguish himself from violent revolutionaries and nationalistic leaders.

Nero’s Persecution of Christians in Rome

Within a decade or two the Jesus movement reached Rome, and Emperor Claudius became so concerned over debates among Jewish members of society over “*Chrestus*” (Christ) that he expelled a good number of Jews from Rome in 49 CE. Actually, he did not technically expel them all; he simply forbade their worshipping together in their synagogues, causing many to leave. Therefore, many also returned in 54 CE, after his death, as Nero was more tolerant. By 60 CE, thousands of Christians inhabited the Roman capital, but transcending the memory of being responsible for the earlier expulsion of Jews must have been a challenge for Jesus adherents. Upon their return, many would worship with Jewish family and friends in the synagogues on the Sabbath (Saturday), but they would also hold meetings in house churches on the first day of the week (Sunday). Paul’s greetings to many households

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of believers in Romans 16 documents this type of gathering. Because of the egalitarian character of the movement, slaves and masters would worship and share fellowship together – a rare phenomenon that was offensive to Roman aristocratic sensibilities. Further, their worshipping of Jesus as the Christ – a man who was put to death as a common criminal – raised suspicion among those who found the movement puzzling.

In 64 CE a fire broke out in Rome, just happening to coincide with the clearing of an area on which Nero (reigning 54–68 CE) hoped to build his new palace. The fire got out of control and destroyed, by some estimations, two-thirds of the city, burning for six days or more (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 62.16-18). Of course, Nero was then happy to build his villas and palace on the Palatine Hill, although the new construction came at great cost to those who had lost their homes and livelihoods in the process. As a means of diverting the blame, Nero accused Christians of setting the fire and began persecuting them as scapegoats. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, Nero not only blamed Christians for the incident, but he also began rounding them up and killing them in the Coliseum for entertainment. As followers of Jesus were committed to nonviolence, they offered little resistance, which made their capture and persecution a fairly manageable diversion.

Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed. (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44)

It was during this time that many Christian leaders lost their lives, and according to tradition, this is when Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome. Imagine, though, the preaching of Peter and others on the practical relevance of the way of the cross for believers. It might have been much easier to deny being a follower of Jesus or to try to avoid suffering for one's commitments. Especially in the Gospel of Mark, though, the cost of discipleship is clear, and within Rome and in other parts of the emerging Christian movement, its message would have had considerable existential value.

The Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem

One of the great devastations in Judean history is the Great War with Rome (66–73 CE) in which Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian (all Roman generals who then became Caesars – the Flavian Dynasty) intended to teach the Jews a lesson, culminating with destroying the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. Josephus laments this chapter in Israel’s history, blaming the “fourth philosophy” of the Zealots for the events leading up to an unfolding set of cataclysmic disasters (*Antiquities* 18.7-9). The numbers may be inflated, but according to Josephus, 1,100,000 Jews were killed during the siege of Jerusalem, and nearly a hundred thousand other Jews were captured and forced into slavery. He recounts terrible stories of starvation inside the city, even including the story of a starving mother cannibalizing her baby – things were that bad (Josephus, *Wars* 5.3)! Jesus’s apocalyptic discourse in Mark 13, about the sun and the moon being blotted out and the warning of pregnant women needing to flee the city must have been pressingly relevant for Mark’s audiences. They were likely experiencing the horrors described, and yet they were being called to faithfulness and trust despite the onslaught.

In those days, after the suffering of that time, the sun will become dark, and the moon won’t give its light. The stars will fall from the sky, and the planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken. Then they will see the Human One [Son of Man] coming in the clouds with great power and splendor. Then he will send the angels and gather together his chosen people from the four corners of the earth, from the end of the earth to the end of heaven. (Mark 13:24-27)

II. Features of Mark

Mark has no birth narrative; it simply begins with announcing “The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God’s Son” (Mark 1:1). Good news, of course, is what the word *gospel* means. As a herald would sound a declaration of the emperor, so the first of the Gospel writers declares the good news of what God has done through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus. This is similar also to Paul’s language. Yet Mark does far more than outline the Christ Events; Mark also constructs an engaging story of God’s redemptive work in the ministry and work of Jesus as the Christ.

While it is difficult to know what parts of Mark’s story of Jesus originate with tradition being used and what is a factor of the narrator’s crafting, Mark

groups stories in threes,¹ includes both individuated reports and general summaries of Jesus's ministry, and tends to group material together in terms of categories (agrarian parables, controversy stories and dialogues, types of miracles, judgment sayings, and eschatological discourses). One of Mark's most interesting features is inclusion and intercalation: the posing of one theme, interrupted by another, and then followed by the original theme.² This shows a constructive intentionality underlying Mark's narrative approach as an original gospel narrative.

Sharing the Jewish Jesus with Gentile Audiences

Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark explains Jewish customs and translates Hebrew and Aramaic terms into Greek for his non-Jewish audiences. The purification customs of Jews regarding the washing of their hands and ritual cleansing baths are explained, as well as rules about washing containers and sleeping mats (7:2-4), noting also that Jesus broke those codes (v.5). All foods are declared "clean" by Jesus (7:19). The value of the two copper coins is calculated (worth a penny) to contrast the value of the widow's contribution to that of the wealthy (12:42). The first day of the festival is noted as being when the Passover lamb was sacrificed (14:12), the "Day of Preparation" is contextualized as being "just before the Sabbath," and Joseph of Arimathea is introduced as "a prominent council member who also eagerly anticipated the coming of God's kingdom" (15:42-43). In these ways, Mark provides a bridge between oral Jesus tradition in Palestine and Gentile audiences in the diaspora.

Aramaic Terms Translated into Greek

- Jesus calls James and John *Boanērges* – "Sons of Thunder" (3:17)
- Taking her by the hand, Jesus says: *Talitha koum* – "Young woman, get up." (5:41)

1. Note the three callings of the disciples (1:16-20; 2:14-17; 3:13-19), the three predictions of Jesus's death and resurrection (8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34), Jesus's three interrogations of his sleepy disciples at Gethsemane (14:32-42), and the mentions of the three leading disciples – Peter, James, and John (9:2; 14:33).

2. For instance, see the website of Felix Just, outlining ten examples of inclusion and intercalation in Mark: "The Gospel according to Mark: Literary Features & Thematic Emphases," last modified June 22, 2012, <http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Mark-Literary.htm>.

- Irresponsible adults wrongly diminish their responsibility to care for their parents by claiming their possessions are *corban* — “a gift I’m giving to God” (7:11)
- Jesus heals the man who was deaf, declaring *Ephphatha* — “Open up” (7:34)
- The site of the crucifixion is listed as *Golgotha* — “Skull Place” (15:22)
- At the ninth hour (3:00 p.m.) Jesus cries out in a loud voice: *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani* — “My God, my God, why have you left me?” (15:34)

The Son of Man as the Son of God

While Mark presents Jesus as God’s Son, Jesus calls himself the Son of Man.³ At the outset, the narrator describes the subject of his Gospel as being “Jesus Christ, God’s Son” (1:1). At his baptism a voice from heaven declares: “You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness” (1:11), and at the Transfiguration a voice sounds from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!” (9:7). Demoniacs and evil spirits declare Jesus’s authority: “I know who you are. You are the holy one from God” (1:24), “You are God’s Son!” (3:11), and “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” (5:7). When the centurion sees how Jesus dies on the cross, he exclaims: “This man was certainly God’s Son” (15:39). So Jesus is clearly attested to be God’s Son by the narrator and the characters within the narrative.

Then again, it is not only third-person references that affirm Jesus’s Sonship in Mark. When the high priest asks him if he is “the Christ, the Son of the blessed one,” Jesus responds, “I am. And you will see the [Son of Man] sitting on the right side of the Almighty and coming on the heavenly clouds” (14:61-62). Jesus also speaks of God as his Father in intimate terms; in Gethsemane, he prays: “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible. Take this cup of suffering away from me. However — not what I want but what you want” (14:36).⁴ And a pivotal parable by Jesus in Mark is that of the owner of the vineyard and the reception of his son:

3. The translators of the Common English Bible render the title “the Human One.”

4. *Abba* is an intimate and familiar way of referring to a parent (like “daddy” or “papa”); Paul also uses that language when referring to the Spirit of Adoption and the Spirit of God’s Son making believers children of God through Christ Jesus (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6).

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A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the winepress, and built a tower. Then he rented it to tenant farmers and took a trip. When it was time, he sent a servant to collect from the tenants his share of the fruit of the vineyard. But they grabbed the servant, beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. Again the landowner sent another servant to them, but they struck him on the head and treated him disgracefully. He sent another one; that one they killed. The landlord sent many other servants, but the tenants beat some and killed others. Now the landowner had one son whom he loved dearly. He sent him last, thinking, They will respect my son. But those tenant farmers said to each other, "This is the heir. Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." They grabbed him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

So what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others. Haven't you read this scripture, *The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this, and it's amazing in our eyes?* (12:1-11)⁵

While "Son of God" and "Son of Man" are often thought of as emphases upon Jesus's divinity and humanity, such a distinction doesn't quite fit the facts of the biblical text. While "Son of God" becomes an increasingly meaningful confession for believers,⁶ Jesus's Sonship in Mark is primarily a reference to his agency in doing God's work. And this is precisely what his being the "Son of Man" also conveys. While the use of this term is also expanded in Matthew and Luke, in Mark the Son of Man has the authority to forgive sins (2:10), is Lord of the Sabbath (2:28), must undergo great suffering and be killed by the Jewish leaders and after three days rise again (8:31), will be ashamed of those who are ashamed of him when he comes in glory (8:38), will rise from the dead (9:9), will suffer mistreatment and contempt (9:12), comes not to be served but to give his life as a ransom for many (10:45), will be seen coming in clouds with great power and glory (13:26), is woefully betrayed into the hands of sinners (14:21, 41), and will be seen seated at the right hand of God's power and coming with the clouds of heaven (14:62). In this last reference, the Son of Man is equated with "the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One" in the previous verse. The emphases here are not exactly upon Jesus's humanity.

5. The irony of the rejected building block becoming the cornerstone ties in Ps 118:22 with the mission of Jesus. It also is referenced in the preaching of Peter in Acts 4:11 (cf. also Eph 2:20 and 1 Pet 2:6).

6. Over the two or three explicit times it is used in Mark, "Son of God" occurs seven times in Matthew and Luke and eight times in John.

Therefore, both terms are references to Jesus's divine agency, and as Son of Man language never made it into the confessions of the early church or any of the epistles, its origin probably lay with the way Jesus referred to himself, as portrayed in all four Gospels. What, though, did it mean? Daniel 7:13-14 sketches a vision of one like a Son of Man, who on behalf of the Ancient of Days comes on heavenly clouds and is given dominion over all the kingdoms of the earth. Then again, the Son of Man in Ezekiel (mentioned over ninety times!) names the prophet addressed by God and called into humble service, charged with speaking God's truth and judgment to Israel in parables and riddles. Both of these images sound like the way Jesus speaks in the Gospels, different though they be. Scholars debate which meaning might have been closer to Jesus's self-understanding; some wonder if he used the term as a prophetic challenger of the religious leadership of his day, while others wonder if it represents more of an apocalyptic mission overall. Still others wonder if Jesus chose this sort of self-reference precisely because of its ambiguity – making it hard to categorize what Jesus came to do in neat and tidy boxes. Whatever the case, the Sonship of Jesus refers to his divine agency, and in Mark it focuses on the cross.

The Works and Words of Jesus in Mark

While Matthew and Luke present additional miracles and teachings of Jesus, Mark's story of Jesus nonetheless gives a robust sense of Jesus's ministry. While modernists will either dismiss or pose naturalistic explanations for the wonders, Mark presents them as evidence of Jesus's divine agency. Of course, claims to wondrous feats were not unique to the Jesus movement, as purported miracles were a not uncommon subject of rhetoric, but Mark's story of Jesus would certainly have evoked an appealing resonance in the Greco-Roman world in which it was delivered. Note that Jesus's wonders tend to be grouped into three categories, the first of which involved healings of the sick, beginning with the healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law in Capernaum and a few general references (1:32-34; 3:10; 6:5, 13, 53-56).

Jesus's Healings in Mark

- Simon Peter's mother-in-law (1:29-31)
- The man with a skin disease (1:40-45)
- The paralytic in Capernaum (2:1-12)
- The man with the withered hand (3:1-5)

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- The daughter of Jairus and the woman with an issue of blood (5:21-42)
- The deaf man with a speech impairment (7:31-35)
- The blind man at Bethsaida (8:22-25)
- Blind Bartimaeus in Jericho (10:46-52)

Interestingly, most of these healings are performed either on the Sabbath or in conjunction with a synagogue. It is as though Jesus is challenging Sabbath regulations, showing that Sabbath is not simply about what one does not do but about furthering the redemptive work of God. When he and his disciples are challenged by the Pharisees about picking a bit of grain to eat on the Sabbath, Jesus cites the example of David and his men eating the bread of the priest in the temple (2:23-26), then declaring: "The Sabbath was created for humans; humans weren't created for the Sabbath. This is why the [Son of Man] is Lord even over the Sabbath" (2:27-28).

Jesus further demonstrates his divine agency by casting out demons and delivering the mentally and emotionally afflicted from their inward sources of torment. He was not the only exorcist of his day, and many of the exorcisms were performed upon people in neighboring regions—from the "other side" of the sea, pig herders and the like, those among the Hellenistic villages of the Decapolis. Upon being accused of having a demon himself, Jesus reports that he is binding the "strong man" and plundering the household of the adversary in performing these works of spiritual power (3:22-30). Not all of his disciples are comfortable with exorcising work, though, as John the Son of Zebedee asks whether those casting out demons in Jesus's name should be stopped. Jesus is not threatened, however, and he responds that "Whoever isn't against us is for us." Further, "I assure you that whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will certainly be rewarded" (9:38-41).

Jesus's Exorcisms in Mark

- The man in the Capernaum synagogue with an unclean spirit (1:23-27)
- The Gerasene demoniac (5:1-20)
- The daughter of the Syrophenician woman (7:25-30)

- The mute boy with an unclean spirit (9:17-29)
- General references (1:34, 39; 3:11, 22-30; 6:7-13)

In addition to demonstrating power over physical ailments and spiritual affliction, the Markan Jesus also demonstrates his power over nature. Two primary types of miracles are performed here: two feedings of multitudes and two calmings of the sea. Matthew follows Mark's four nature miracles rather closely, but Luke only includes one feeding, and he even moves the confession of Peter to follow the other feeding, that of the five thousand. Interestingly, Luke's work there and in over six dozen other instances happens to coincide with John's account.⁷ The impact of these accounts, however, is made explicit in the narrative. As a result of Jesus's calming the storm, his disciples exclaim: "Who then is this? Even the wind and the sea obey him!" (4:41). After both of the feedings the narrator declares that everyone "ate until they were full" (6:42; 8:8).⁸

Jesus's Nature Wonders in Mark

- Calming the wind and the waves (4:35-41)
- The feeding of the five thousand (6:31-44)
- Calming the wind and the waves (6:47-53)
- The Feeding of the four thousand (8:1-9)

Of course, if a feeding and a sea crossing occurred once, they could also occur a second time, although the events in Mark 6 and 8 are quite similar. One difference involves the number of baskets used to pick up the fragments after the feedings: twelve in one case and seven in the other. If the first instance represents the way the story was told affirming the twelve apostles within Jewish Christianity, might the second represent the way the story was told in supporting the seven deacons who were appointed to minister to Hellenistic believers (Acts 6:1-7)? Another insight also follows from noting Mark's account. While Jesus's warning about being wary of the "yeast of the

7. For a full analysis of the feeding and sea-crossing narratives among the Gospels, see Paul N. Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John 6*, 3rd printing (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010).

8. This same result is recorded in the other three feeding narratives in Matthew and Luke (Matt 14:20; 15:37; Luke 9:17). John's Jesus, however, challenges those who seek him the following day, claiming, "I assure you that you are looking for me not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate all the food you wanted" (John 6:26).

Pharisees and Sadducees” in Matthew refers to their teaching (Matt 16:1-12), and the “yeast of the Pharisees” in Luke refers to their hypocrisy (Luke 12:1), the warning in Mark 8:11-21 regarding the “yeast of the Pharisees as well as the yeast of Herod” seems to refer to the lust for signs and wonders. Or, as Jesus in John might have put it, “Happy are those who don’t see and yet believe” (John 20:29). Therefore, despite the wonder-attestations in Mark, Jesus calls for modesty and non-ostentation; his work is redemptive rather than sensationalistic, and this theme is developed more fully elsewhere.

The teachings of Jesus in Mark are less developed than they are in Matthew and Luke, but they nonetheless make strong points about the ways of God and the character of the kingdom. Something new is in the works, beyond what older structures can contain, and the kingdom is like nature: it cannot be stopped, and it continues to grow with explosive power, even if out of sight or unnoticed. Rather than serving as illustrations of abstract truth, however, the parables in Mark function as vehicles of judgment. They expose the ignorance of outsiders and confirm the knowledge of those who really do get it. After telling the parable of the soils, Jesus says to his followers: “The secret of God’s kingdom has been given to you, but to those who are outside everything comes in parables” (4:11). In that sense, the parables in Mark expose incomprehension as much as they illuminate the truth – an emphasis that is softened in Matthew and Luke.

Parables of Jesus in Mark

- The Doctor and the Sick (2:17)
- The Wedding Guests and the Bridegroom (2:19-20)
- Patches and Wineskins (2:21-22)
- Plundering the Divided Household and Binding the Strong Man (3:23-30)
- The Sower and the Soils (and its interpretation, 4:2-20)
- Lamps and Measures (4:21-25)
- The Subtly Growing Seed (4:26-29)
- The Mustard Seed (4:31-32)
- Purity and Food (and its interpretation, 7:14-23)
- Body Parts and Temptations (9:43-48)
- Salt and Saltiness (9:50)

- The Vineyard, the Tenants, and the Son (12:1-12)
- The Fig Tree (13:28-31)
- The Alert Doorkeeper (13:33-37)

At the outset of his ministry, Jesus's teaching in Capernaum is hailed as having new authority – unlike that of the scribes and Pharisees (1:21-28), and Jesus is called “teacher” (4:38; 9:17, 38; 10:17, 20, 35; 12:14, 19, 32; 13:1) and “rabbi” (9:5; 11:21; 14:45) by his disciples and others numerous times in Mark. Nonetheless Mark also features with prominence the confusion and lack of understanding among Jesus's disciples and others (4:11-13). His disciples often fail to understand his teachings (7:17-19; 9:30-32), and at times they do not grasp the meaning of his works (6:51-52; 8:17-21). At other times, they simply do not know how to respond or are afraid to expose their confusion (9:6; 14:40). In Mark 11:30-33 Jesus turns the tables and asks the legal experts a hard question himself: whether John was from heaven or not. To evade the implications of their not having heeded John's message, while the populace sees John as an authentic prophet, they simply claim not to know. In addressing the Sadducees' and Pharisees' squabbles over the resurrection, Jesus puts his finger on the source of their miscomprehension: “Isn't this the reason you are wrong, because you don't know either the scriptures or God's power?” (12:24). And of course, this lack of comprehension is only explicable as a fulfillment of Isaiah's prediction long ago, that people would neither see nor perceive the message of the prophet (Isa 6:9-10).

Did Jesus Predict His Death and Resurrection?

Given that the death and resurrection of Jesus are so central to the preaching of the apostles, one can appreciate that historical scholars question whether Mark's three presentations of Jesus's references to his death and resurrection originate in Jesus's historical self-understanding or in later theological perspectives on his mission (cf. John 2:22). After Peter's confessing of Jesus to be the Christ, Jesus declares: “The [Son of Man] must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts, and be killed, and then, after three days, rise from the dead.” At this, Peter rebukes him, but Jesus then rebukes Peter for thinking in human terms instead of understanding God's ways (8:29-33). As they travel through Galilee, Jesus says again: “The [Son of Man] will be delivered into human hands. They will kill him. Three days after he is killed he will rise up.” Yet, his disciples not only do not

comprehend; they are described as being afraid to know what he was talking about (9:30-32). Jesus's third prediction of his suffering and death comes as he and his disciples travel to Jerusalem. "Look!" he says, "We're going up to Jerusalem. The [Son of Man] will be handed over to the chief priests and the legal experts. They will condemn him to death and hand him over to the Gentiles. They will ridicule him, spit on him, torture him, and kill him. After three days, he will rise up" (10:33-34). Demonstrating the epitome of miscomprehension, James and John then ask to sit at his right and left in glory, whereupon Jesus declares: "You don't know what you're asking! Can you drink the cup I drink or receive the baptism I receive?" (10:35-38). Like Peter, they mistake Jesus's glorification as triumph rather than embracing his anticipated suffering and death.

While the theological meaning of Jesus's suffering and death gets developed later, what if Jesus's words represent political understandings rather than theological ones only? For anyone aware of two thousand Jews having been crucified following the plundering of the Roman armory in Sepphoris three decades earlier, the reality of a Roman cross was anything but a spiritualized abstraction. Given the parable of the vineyard and the killing of the owner's son (12:1-12), Jesus's speaking in blunt terms about his own suffering and death cannot be limited to these three predictions alone; they likely reflect at least some aspect of missional consciousness, despite the reported miscomprehension of his followers. They also receive distinctive corroboration in John, including references to Jesus's being paradoxically "lifted up," implicitly on a Roman cross, as the glorification of the Son of Man (John 3:14-15; 6:51; 8:21-30; 12:23-36; 13:31-33; 18:32). Thus, the theme is attested in multiple ways among the gospel traditions, despite bearing theological associations.

Even more problematic, some historians will argue, is the possibility that Jesus also anticipated his being raised from the dead in three days, and that theme is also reported to have been totally miscomprehended in the Gospels (see especially Mark 9:9-10). In all three of the predictions of his death in Mark, Jesus also references his being raised up in three days (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34), and yet the theme presents itself in several other ways, as well. First, challenging the unbelief of Sadducees, the reality of the resurrection is confirmed on the basis of Moses before the burning bush – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the God of the living, not the dead (Exod 3:15; Mark 12:26-27). Second, after the shepherd is stricken and the sheep scattered, Jesus will go before his disciples into Galilee, where he will reunite with them later (Mark 14:27-28; 16:7). Third, the prophet must perish in Jerusalem, and on the third day Jesus will complete his work (Luke 13:31-33). Fourth,

the emphasis upon the third day is alluded to as “the sign of Jonah,” who was in the belly of the fish for three days (Matt 12:39-41; 16:4; Luke 11:29-30). Fifth, when the Jewish leaders in John ask by what authority Jesus purges the temple, he replies: “Destroy this temple and in three days I’ll raise it up” (John 2:18-21). Interestingly, while that saying is not recorded in the Synoptics, it is alluded to twice in Mark (Mark 14:56-59; 15:29-30). Sixth, Jesus’s followers are reminded twice after the event that he and the scriptures had predicted his rising on the third day (Luke 24:1-9, 44-48), and it is on account of Jesus’s having predicted such that the Jewish leaders ask for an armed guard and an official seal on the stone of Jesus’s tomb (Matt 27:62-66) – an odd thing to do if there had not been previous discussions of after-death developments.

Whether historical memory shaped theology or whether theology shaped historical memory may be impossible to determine. The Apostle Paul passes along what he feels was “most important” regarding the death, resurrection, and appearances of Jesus as the Christ in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, and yet the diverse and corroborative anticipations of Jesus’s *fi* days make them seem more than mere projections of an eventual set of beliefs. Whatever the case, the tension between the disciples’ miscomprehension and later fuller understanding draws later audiences into the story, inviting them to become members of Mark’s insider-community – those who see things from the narrator’s perspective.

Messianic Secrecy and Disclosure

One of the most puzzling features of Mark is the Messianic Secret. On one hand, Jesus sends his disciples out by twos, commissioning them to preach the gospel, cast out demons, and heal the sick (Mark 6:7-13). On the other hand, after healing the deaf and speech-impaired man in the Decapolis, Jesus commands witnesses to be silent about it, but they proclaim it all the more (7:36). Messianic secrecy is sharply muted in Matthew and Luke, but why would Mark’s Jesus proclaim the kingdom of God, perform wonders and call for a response to the good news, but then command people to secrecy?

The Messianic Secret in Mark

- Jesus silences the demon before his first exorcism (1:25).
- Jesus forbids the demons to speak because they recognize him (1:34).

Part I

- After healing the man with a skin disease, Jesus commands him to say nothing to anyone but to show himself to the priest and to offer a sacrifice (1:44).
- Jesus commands the demons not to tell who he is (3:12).
- After raising the daughter of Jairus, Jesus strictly orders that no one should know about it (5:43).
- Jesus enters a house in Tyre but does not want anyone to know he is there (7:24).
- After healing the deaf man with a speech impairment, Jesus commands people to tell no one about it (7:36).
- After healing the blind man in Bethsaida, Jesus says, “Don’t go into the village” (8:26).
- After Peter’s confessing him to be the Christ, Jesus commands the disciples to tell no one (8:29-30).
- After beholding Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration, Jesus orders Peter, James, and John not to tell what they have seen until after the resurrection of the Son (9:9).
- Jesus ministers throughout Galilee but does not want anyone to know about it (9:30).

Extensive debates have raged on how to interpret these injunctions to secrecy in Mark. Over a century ago Wilhelm Wrede argued that the Messianic Secret in Mark was not historical, but Mark’s invention to explain the distance between the relatively modest impact of Jesus’s ministry and later Christian beliefs about Jesus as the Messiah.⁹ However, in the light of diverse messianic expectations of the first century CE, a more plausible inference is that the secrecy motif in Mark coheres with Jesus’s challenging “the yeast” of the Pharisees, which in Mark refers to the seeking of sensationalistic signs and their popular implications. If Herod and others were interested in signs and wonders, and if people flocked to Jesus when they heard of his deeds of power and teaching with authority, this would have skewed an understanding of his mission toward an uprising against Rome in ways that Jesus himself sought to avert. Perhaps he did not see Rome or Herod as the enemy, but violence and domination; he clearly did not see zealotry as the answer, as he called for

9. Wilhelm Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, trans. J. C. G. Grieg (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 1971).

forgiveness and reconciliation. If Jesus of Nazareth sought to end the spiral of violence, perhaps he came to bring a different sense of God's dynamic leadership, and his counterviolent, nonnationalistic, antipartisan representation of the kingdom required distancing from conventional revolutionary approaches precisely because of their predictable appeal – a reality that could only be apparent after his death and resurrection (Mark 9:9).

Indeed, the press of the crowds and the challenges of celebrity status are featured more extensively in Mark than in Matthew and Luke. After healings and words of power, crowds gathered from far and near, posing something of a hindrance to Jesus's ministry in Mark (5:21-34). Because the healed leper does not keep quiet, Jesus can no longer go into towns (1:45), and when word gets out that Jesus is once again in Capernaum, so many people pack the house that a paralyzed man has to be lowered through the roof to get to Jesus (2:1-4). Several times Jesus gets into a boat to teach because of the press of the crowds (2:13; 3:7-10; 4:1), and sometimes Jesus boards a boat or goes off into the wilderness to pray – simply to get away from the crowds (4:35-36; 6:32, 45-46). When he enters a house the crowd is so large that he and his disciples cannot get anything to eat (3:20), and sometimes Jesus has to get away from the crowd to minister to people effectively (7:17, 33). Then again, Jesus at times has compassion on the crowd, for they are "like sheep without a shepherd," and he exhorts them to follow him, just as he does his disciples (6:34; 8:2, 34). The power of the crowd is noted in Mark, but so is its fickleness. Religious leaders are said to fear the crowd (11:18, 32; 12:12), and while the crowd is delighted with Jesus to begin with (12:37), they eventually turn on him, calling for the release of Barabbas and the crucifixion of Jesus. Even Pilate is afraid of the crowd (15:8-15), so Mark's secrecy motif points to Jesus's commitment to his mission in the face of competing visions and agendas. Here Mark demonstrates a good deal of political realism, not simply theological concern.

Conversely, Jesus's messianic disclosure is also explicit in Mark. In response to the question of the high priest, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the blessed one?" Jesus says, "I am. And you will see the [Son of Man] sitting on the right side of the Almighty and coming on the heavenly clouds" (14:61-62). He rides into Jerusalem on a donkey's colt, fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9 as an unmistakable identification with the Davidic Messiah typology (Mark 11:1-10), and he calls himself the Son of Man. Nonetheless, part of his disclosure appears to relate to the timing of his mission, pivoting upon its culmination in Jerusalem (10:32-34).

III. The Message of Mark

In addition to the urgency of Mark's presentation of Jesus, Mark calls the reader to consider the value and cost of discipleship – what it means to follow Jesus, which will inevitably involve the way of the cross. Rather than revealing the character of God's kingdom, Mark's parables show how its mysteries might be grasped by insiders but are often missed by outsiders. After all, God's ways are fraught with paradox: "Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant. Whoever wants to be first among you will be the slave of all, for the [Son of Man] didn't come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people" (Mark 10:43-45).

"Follow Me!" Says Mark's Jesus

Discipleship in Mark is emblemized by Jesus's inviting people to follow him. To follow Jesus as a teacher is to become a learner – a disciple – and several callings to follow Jesus are featured in Mark. After being baptized by John and being tested in the wilderness, Jesus comes across two sets of brothers (Simon and Andrew, and James and John, sons of Zebedee); he calls them to become *fish* of persons (1:16-20). Jesus later comes across Levi, son of Alphaeus, at a tax booth and issues a similar invitation (2:14). A bit later Jesus ascends a mountain and calls the Twelve as apostles (3:13-19), and after Peter's confession Jesus invites his would-be disciples to deny themselves and take up their crosses in following him (8:34). He pointedly calls the rich man to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor on his way to following him (10:21), and the invitation to follow Jesus is replicated in other gospels, as well.¹⁰

Note that in the calling of the Twelve in Mark 3:13-19, it is Jesus who calls his followers. It is not a result of their ambition or scheming; it is his initiative and vocation to which they are invited to respond. Second, they are called to be with him, learning from the Master as a first-hand venture. Third, Jesus then sends them out as *apostles* – meaning ones who are sent – with authority to preach and to cast out demons. Later the Twelve are commissioned by Jesus on an apostolic mission (6:7-13), continuing in his teaching (4:10; 9:35) and in his traveling ministry (3:7; 8:10, 27; 10:32; 11:11; 14:17, 20). Jesus commissions two of his disciples on special tasks (11:1; 14:13), and he

10. In addition to the four passages in Mark, Matthew and Luke add "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead" (Matt 8:22; Luke 9:59-60) and "Those who don't pick up their crosses and follow me aren't worthy of me" (Matt 10:38; Luke 14:27). In John, Jesus calls Philip, saying, "Follow me" (John 1:43), and twice in the last chapter he calls Peter to "Follow me" (John 21:19, 22).

takes Peter, James, and John with him on several special occasions (9:2; 13:3; 14:33). Women also accompany Jesus in some of his ministry;¹¹ notably, it is they who are present at the crucifixion, while members of the Twelve are not.

The Secret of the Kingdom

While most of Jesus's parables are best interpreted as conveying one primary meaning, the parable of the sower and the soils is different. It is an allegory, with distinctive meanings connected to each of the main elements explained by Jesus. First, the "seed" scattered by the farmer is the *word* of the gospel. The hardened path might pose initial openness, but Satan steals the word away. The rocky ground is like rootless people, who respond quickly but cannot endure distress or abuse; therefore, they fall away easily. Others are like the soil infested with briars; they receive the seed, but it is crowded out by the worries of life: "the false appeal of wealth, and the desire for more things break in and choke the word, and it bears no fruit." The good soil, however, receives the seed and embraces it, yielding ratios of thirty, sixty, and a hundred to one (4:14-20).

This grand opening parable in Mark explains why some respond to the gospel and others do not. Distractions and lesser concerns obstruct the effect of the word, yet when it is received, the harvest is multiplied. The point is to foster faithfulness in broadcasting the seed of the good news and to also trust the results to God. This is where the Markan understanding and misunderstanding motif also connects with Mark's use of scripture. In contrast to Matthew, which cites the Old Testament to demonstrate Jesus's fulfilling Moses and the Prophets as the Messiah/Christ, Mark tends to cite scripture to show how people get it wrong. John the Baptist heralds the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3-4, raising up the valleys and bringing down the mountains (Mark 1:2-3); Isaiah 29:13 is cited to show how hypocritical people are – honoring God with their lips while their hearts are far away (Mark 7:6-7); the Ten Commandments are best followed in the love of God and neighbor (Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18) rather than a legalistic approach (12:29-31); the lack of belief in Jesus is explicable as fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 6:9-10 – that people will look but not see and hear but not comprehend (Mark 4:12; 8:18).

Mark also shows the fulfillment of prophecy of Malachi 4:4-5 in presenting the coming of Moses and Elijah, signaling the Day of the Lord. First, Elijah and Moses (the prophet) are associated with the ministry of John the Baptist, who

11. Women feature even more pronouncedly among Jesus's followers in Luke and in John.

prepares the way for Jesus (Mark 6:15-16; 8:28; 9:11-13). His pointing to Jesus (1:2-11) as an authentic prophet (11:27-33) is complemented by Jesus, who continues his work even after John's death. A second way the coming of Elijah and Moses anticipates the coming Day of the Lord occurs at the Transfiguration, when these two prophets of old appear with Jesus, and his garments become radiant (9:2-8). While the report of the Transfiguration is not to be shared until after the resurrection, responses to John the Baptist are measures of people's authentic faith, and Herod and the Jewish leaders fail that test.

The character of the kingdom in Mark is not elaborated as it is in Matthew; rather, Jesus's parables heighten its hiddenness and ironic discernment. Like a quietly growing seed, the kingdom continues to advance, and from small seeds great things happen (4:26-32). Some of the kingdom parables in Mark emphasize entry and the lack thereof. If one's body parts lead to forfeiting the kingdom, one is better off without them – a clearly hyperbolic point (9:47). Children are welcomed by Jesus, for God's kingdom belongs to such as these, and one must become like a child in order to enter (10:14-16). The wealthy will find it hard to enter the kingdom – as difficult as a camel passing through the eye of a needle (10:23-25). And the legal expert who affirms the love of God and neighbor over burnt offerings and sacrifices is not far from the kingdom (12:32-34). In these and other ways, the reality of the kingdom is a paradoxical one, glimpsed by some but exposing the blindness of others.

The Way of the Cross

Mark's Jesus calls people to follow him, but the way is problematic; it will inevitably involve the way of the cross. Whether one's heart has been ransacked by the deceiver (4:4, 15; 8:33-38), whether one's shallow faith cannot withstand the rocky path of trials and persecution (4:5-6, 16-17; 13:9-13), or whether one's reception of the gospel is choked out by the thorny material worries of life (4:7, 18-19; 10:21-25), the choice is clear. To protect one's life is to forfeit it; the only way to attain the gift of life is to risk losing everything in reckless abandon. Says Jesus: "All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me" (8:34). Therefore, the way of the cross for disciples is charted unmistakably by the Master.

Because Jesus Will...

- suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts, and be killed (8:31)

- suffer much and be rejected (9:12)
- be delivered into human hands and killed (9:31)
- be handed over to the chief priests and the legal experts, condemned to death, handed over to the Gentiles, ridiculed, spit upon, tortured, and killed (10:33-34)
- have come not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (10:44)
- be grabbed, killed, and thrown out of the vineyard (12:8)
- be betrayed into the hands of sinners (14:41)

Jesus's Followers . . .

- must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow him (8:34)
- must be willing to release their lives for the sake of the good news if they want to save them (8:35)
- will share the martyrological cup and the baptism of Jesus (10:38-39)
- must be willing to be the servant of all (10:43-44)
- will be handed over to councils, beaten in synagogues, and stand before governors because of Jesus (13:9)
- will be betrayed by family members and will be hated because of Jesus's name (13:12-13)

Just as the predictions of what will happen to Jesus come true by the end of the narrative, so will it be regarding the path ahead for his followers. And yet, the way of the cross is a paradoxical one, as undeserved suffering yields redemption, and death finally leads to life. After the cross comes the resurrection, and divine action in the mission of the faithful servant becomes the hope of believers who follow Jesus faithfully toward Golgotha. Those who have left family and friends to follow Jesus will be welcomed into his new family, receiving "one hundred times as much now in this life – houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and farms (with harassment) – and in the coming age, eternal life" (10:30). And, at the time of trial, they need not worry about what to say, for it will be given them by the Holy Spirit, and "whoever stands firm until the end will be saved" (13:11-13).

IV. Engaging Mark

The original ending of Mark shows the disciples being afraid (16:8), and Mark's "second ending" provides a more upbeat conclusion, added some time in the second century (16:9-20). Nonetheless, this post-Markan addition is canonical, and one of the themes that comes through authentically is *hardness of heart* (*sklērokardian* in Greek, like "cardio-sclerosis"). Mark 16:14 refers to the refusal of some disciples to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead (a reference to Thomas in John 20:24-29?) despite the testimony of the faithful. Hardness of heart, however, is also described in two of Mark's earlier passages, which shed light on Jesus's overall ministry. The hardened hearts portrayed in Mark 3:1-6 refer to the theologically conservative, who advocate keeping Sabbath laws at all costs — looking on suspiciously as Jesus heals the man with the withered hand. Those with hardened hearts in Mark 10:1-12 are challenged by Jesus because they stretch the law to accommodate their building a case for divorce, even at the expense of the vulnerable. Therefore, the actions of Jesus in Mark challenge both conservatives and liberals, calling for concern for the needy and the vulnerable as the heart of the Mosaic Law.

As you consider Jesus's prophetic ministry in its original settings as portrayed in Mark, how would Jesus challenge hardness of heart today, as people might be tempted to ignore others' needs out of concerns to be biblically correct or to stretch biblical teachings to accommodate their selfish interests also at the expense of the vulnerable?

Second, how might an understanding of messianic secrecy in Mark illumine the way Jesus saw his mission as a striking contrast to the political and violence-oriented zealotry of contemporary messianic pretenders in first-century Judaism? Further, can God's ways ever be furthered through popularistic or political agendas, or do these set back one's endeavor to be faithful to the dynamic activity of God's leadership? Does the transvaluation of God's kingdom relate to political realities as well as religious ones? If so, what does following Jesus look like in later generations?

Third, what might the way of the cross have implied for Jesus's followers during his ministry (ca. 30 CE), during Nero's persecution of Christians in Rome (ca. 64-67 CE), and during the Roman destruction of Jerusalem (ca. 66-73 CE)? How might believers then have been challenged in seeking to follow the pattern and teachings of the Master, and how might that impact an understanding of authentic discipleship in later generations? If the way of the cross really is a paradoxical venture, how much faith does faithfulness require, and how does the empowerment of grace make a difference?

