PARALLEL GUIDE 8
The Gospel According to Mark

Summary

This chapter presents a study of the Gospel According to Mark, when it was written, and to what audience. Mark's Gospel has a definite structure and character as it moves from the prologue to the final scenes of the Passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Learning Objectives

• Learn the structure of the Gospel According to Mark

• Remember the meaning of the following terms:

asyndeton

chasidim

euaggelion

qorban

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. You have now had an opportunity to look a second time at the opening Gospel of the New Testament. What does this evoke for you? What feelings does it generate? What are key phrases or stories that stand out for you?

2. What might the emphasis at the end of the Gospel on the first witnesses to the Resurrection mean today?

Preparing for Your Seminar

Be prepared to relate to your seminar what this Gospel evokes for you. Consider the ways in which the Gospel According to Mark remains fresh and informs our lives and our times.

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Chapter 8
THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK

We have used questions raised by Mark's text to introduce a number of questions about the world in which Christianity came into being. It is now time for us to examine Mark's Gospel in its own right and as a whole. You are advised to work straight through the following outline with the Gospel According to Mark at hand, reading the NT text and the outline together. A similar procedure should be followed for every chapter that contains an outline. By using this method, you should be able to get some feel for the Gospels as individual documents, which is how they were originally heard.

Part I—Prologue: Mark 1:1-8*
Witness to the Coming One: In the Wilderness

The Announcement of Good News 1:1

Mark begins by characterizing the story he is about to tell as euaggelion that is, "the gospel" or "the good news." "Gospel" is not here (as it was later to become in Christian tradition) the name of a kind of literature; it is simply a description of content (cf. Rom. 2:16). Mark is not just telling a story; he announces good news. His audience would have been familiar with imperial proclamations announcing events such as the birth of an heir to the imperial house as euaggelion, "good news." Mark's, however, is good news about "Jesus" who is the "Christ," that is, God's anointed, one in whom God's promises to Israel begin to find their fulfillment.

The Announcement is Rooted in the Ancient Prophets 1:2-3

Despite Mark's words, the first part of the prophecy seems to be not from Isaiah, but (loosely) from Malachi 3:1. Even evangelists can make mistakes! Possibly Mark is using an earlier collection of "testimonies" from Hebrew Scripture that linked the Malachi passage with the verse from Isaiah. The Isaiah verse itself had been used as a proof text by the Essenes in the Manual of Discipline. They used it to explain why their members separated themselves and went into the wilderness (Community Rule 8). In any case, Mark's citations of scripture are generally quite loose—allusions rather than direct quotations—suggesting that he may have cited from memory.

The Baptizer 1:4-8

John the Baptizer is presented as the new Elijah (cf. 2 Kings 1:8). Of course, in Hebrew tradition Elijah is a forerunner of the day of the Lord and the new age (Mal. 4:5). So the description of the Baptizer as Elijah tells us not just about the Baptizer, but also about the importance of the coming of Jesus. John proclaims "a baptism of repentance." Behind the English word "repentance" lies a Greek word, metanoia, meaning "a change of heart" or "changing one's mind"; and behind that, perhaps, the Hebrew word shub, meaning "turn back (i.e., to God)." So John's baptism is to be the sign of a life redirected. Why should life be so redirected? "For (Greek: eis) the forgiveness of sins," or perhaps better, "with a view to the forgiveness of sins" (1:4). John demands that his followers lead their lives on a new basis because the last word in the universe has to do not with power, possession, wisdom, success, or any of the other values the world exalts, but with God's mercy.

Part II—Mark 1:9-8:21
The Ministry of Jesus: In and Around Galilee*

Jesus is Baptized 1:9-11

At his baptism Jesus is named by the heavenly voice as God's son. So were other chasidim, according to the rabbis, and indeed, "son of God" or "daughter of God" in Hebrew usage means no more than "righteous person." But the heavenly voice says something more about Jesus: he is "my beloved son." Jesus is a chasid, but something more than that. He is the new Isaac, the lamb whom God will provide (Gen. 22:8, 13).

Jesus is Tested 1:12-13

This story about Jesus presents him as the true human being (Hebrew: `adam) who, in the words of John Henry Newman, unlike the first Adam

> Should strive afresh against the foe,
> Should strive, and should prevail.

"The wilderness" is by tradition the place of testing and spiritual struggle (Deut. 8:2; 1 Kings 19:4-18). At the end of this section Jesus is in the position of Adam before the fall, as the rabbis portrayed him. The angels are his servants and the beasts, his companions. (Note: there is no indication that the beasts are hostile.)

Jesus Begins to Preach 1:14-15

Jesus' summary of his preaching emphasizes first that what has gone before is being completed in the present: "the time is fulfilled" (1:15a). A new thing is happening: "the kingdom" (or "reign") "of God has come near" (1:15b). What does Mark understand by "the kingdom of God"? He never says clearly. He seems to assume that his readers know what he means. The first-century synagogue seems generally to have used the phrase with reference to God's active, personal intervention to redeem and restore Israel. This is what is "at hand" in the coming of Jesus. In the light of this imminent redemption: Jesus calls those who hear him to "repent" and "believe in the good news" (1:15). We note also, however, that the shadow of a cross hangs over even this first summary of the preaching, which Mark says was given in Galilee "after John was arrested" (1:14).

The First Disciples 1:16-20

The account of Jesus' ministry begins with the call and following of Jesus by certain disciples. Perhaps this is a story that came from Peter. Note the vivid detail (e.g., 1:16b, 18, 20b).

1:21-39

Here are four stories that perhaps belonged together from the beginning. There is justice in Johannes Weiss' suggestion that possibly "Peter was wont to relate of the day in which Jesus came forward in his native town" (Taylor 1957, 171), and there is more than one touch here of what may be Peter's own memories (e.g., 1:29-31, 35-39). Mark emphasizes the authority of Jesus (1:25-27, 37-38). Note what happens when Peter tries to tell Jesus what he should do (1:37)! Jesus is not a tame Messiah. Twice in this section we have instances of what biblical critics have referred to as the "messianic secret" (1:24-25, 34). According to Mark, even the demons know that a new thing is in their midst, but Jesus will not allow testimony from them. Why? At this point Mark does not tell us. We are simply aware that even when people (or

demons) say what seems, on the surface, to be the right thing, there is something about it that is wrong. Just what that is remains to be seen.

Jesus Reveres the Torah 1:40-45

This is a miracle-story that in some ways also looks like a pronouncement-story. The saying of Jesus shows his respect for the Law. It is important for Mark to establish this in view of what comes next.

Jesus in Conflict 2:1-3:6

This is a series of stories that shows Jesus in ministry—healing, forgiving, and teaching—but also in mounting conflict with the authorities, generally over the interpretation of the Torah. It is important to see that the Gospel gives no hint of any idea that Jesus "abolishes" the Torah. For Jesus, as for his opponents, the Sabbath is important. The issue between them is: How is the commandment to be understood and applied?

Nothing like Jesus' ministry has been seen before. His presence with his followers is like that special, brief time when the bridegroom is still with the wedding guests (2:19-20). The relationship between what is happening now and what has happened before is like that between old cloth and new, or old wine and new (2:21-22). Twice Jesus refers to himself as "the Son of Man." The meaning of this phrase is among the most hotly debated issues in the field of New Testament interpretation. Mark seems to understand it as a self-designation denoting authority—in this particular section, authority to forgive sins (2:10) and to act as David did—in other words, a messianic authority (2:25-28). This section ends with the pious Pharisees and the worldly Herodians conspiring together, "how to destroy him" (3:6). Doubtless the irony of this curious alliance was not lost on Mark.

Further Conflict: Further Polarization 3:7-35

Mark gives a summary of Jesus' ministry and healing (3:7-12), including details that seem like the fruit of memory. He presents Jesus calling twelve "whom he wanted" to be with him and to share his ministry (3:13-19a). ("Twelve" is a deliberate allusion to the twelve tribes of Israel. The followers of Jesus are understood to constitute a renewal or reformation of Israel.)

Mark then describes a misunderstanding even by Jesus' own family, sinister accusations against Jesus by scribes from Jerusalem—remember, we are in Galilee!—and Jesus' fierce rebuttal of them (3:19b-30). The rebuttal has two parts. First there is the parable of the strong man's house, with the implication (again) that in Jesus' ministry a new thing is happening—the binding of Satan. Second, there is the comment on blasphemy

against the Holy Spirit (3:28-30). This passage has caused much difficulty, but in this context is clear enough. Jesus uses the phrase, says Mark, because his critics alleged that he had "an unclean spirit" (3:30). What, according to Mark, have these critics actually seen? They have seen Jesus preaching and healing. They have seen nothing less than the work of reconciliation, the work of the Holy Spirit. Yet they have described this as demonic (3:22). Those who reject reconciliation can never have reconciliation, for how can they have what they reject? This does not rule out the possibility of a change of heart, but it does state uncompromisingly the spiritual consequence of certain attitudes. It is the other side of Jesus' response to John the Baptizer as described by Matthew and Luke: "Blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me" (Matt. 11:6 // Luke 7:23). The section aptly concludes with a story about the true kindred of Jesus, namely, those who do the will of God (3:31-35).

Parables of the Kingdom 4:1-29

After giving a selection of Jesus' activities in ministry, Mark presents a selection of Jesus' most characteristic teachings, his parables. We note two things about parables as they are presented to us here. On the one hand, they seem to be teaching aids, a means by which Jesus "spoke the word to them [the crowds], as they were able to hear it" (4:33). On the other hand, since by their nature parables demand that those who hear them interpret them, they also can hide their truth from us if we will not open ourselves to hear them (if we insist on remaining "outside") (4:10-12). So parables both help and challenge us.

The parables that Mark ascribes to Jesus draw attention to two things. First, something new is happening now in the life and work of Jesus. Like seed scattered by a farmer (of which much is wasted) or like a grain of mustard seed, what is happening may, for the present, seem to be very little, but the results will be incalculable. Second, that the way things are is not the way they will be. Light has not come into the world in order to be hidden, nor is grace to be squandered forever. There is also a not yet about the kingdom, and those who accept it will live at once in acceptance of the marvel of what has happened and is happening, and in constant longing for what should and shall be.

The Mighty Acts of the Kingdom 4:30-5:43

Four miracle stories show Jesus as master of the elements (4:35-41), the demons (5:1-20), sickness, and death (5:21-43). (Speculation as to whether the girl was "really" dead is quite irrelevant here; Mark clearly thought she was.) All four stories are marked by vivid detail that seems most likely to be the result of personal (Peter's?) testimony. Particularly striking is the mingling of the narratives of the raising of Jairus' daughter and the healing of the woman with the issue of blood. All four stories point, implicitly if not explicitly, to the question posed at the end of the first: "Who then is this?" (4:41b)

A Ministry to Israel 6:1-7:23

This section of Mark consists of a series of units: the rejection at Nazareth (6:1-6a), the mission charge to the twelve (6:6b-13), Herod's fears and the death of John the Baptizer (6:14-29), the feeding of the five thousand (6:30-44), the crossing of the lake (6:45-52), the landing at Gennesaret (6:53-56), the question of the washing of hands (7:1-8), the question of qorban (7:9-13), and sayings on defilement (7:14-23). The section begins, "He left that place" (Greek: ekeithen—a word that Mark seems to use to indicate the start of a new section). What follows is in a general sense geographically descriptive. Jesus came "to his home town" (6:1) and this is a clue to the content of the section. The units following all seem to be connected in one way or another with Galilee or at least with the reaction of Jesus' own people to him. First we have the lukewarm reaction in the synagogue at Nazareth (6:1-6a). Although the passage has been explained in other ways, the evangelist seems to assume that Jesus has brothers and sisters. Note also the interesting admission that Jesus "could do no deed of power" in Nazareth (6:5). This is followed by the mission of Jesus and the twelve "among the

villages," that is, to the surrounding area (6:6b-13).

Then we have the speculations of Herod, the false king of Israel, and his court— speculations that are strikingly parallel to those the disciples will soon offer about Jesus' role (6:14-16; cf. 8:27-30). These lead in turn to the story of how John died, with its underlying implication: this is how Israel treats its prophets! Next come the stories of the feeding and the crossing. Jesus, like Moses, can feed his people and has mastery of the waters (6:30-51). The people's arrangement "by hundreds and by fifties" is strikingly similar to the organization by Moses of the Israelite tribes (perhaps an example of the rabbinic expectation that "the latter deliverer will act as the former" (Koheleth Rabbah, 1.9). Jesus, like Moses, suffers questioning and rejection, so that even the disciples "did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened" (6:52).

Another summary account of Jesus as healer (6:53-56) is followed by debate with Pharisees "from Jerusalem" (7:1). Mark's parenthesis on Pharisaic and Jewish practice is itself the subject of considerable debate among scholars. Were "the Jews" referred to in Mark 7:3 priests who had joined the Pharisees and adopted the strict rules of levitical purity instituted by the rabbis? Or had the rule already been adopted by pious lay people? In any case it is clear that "all" can hardly be pressed. It means at most "generally" rather than "universally." In the debate the Judean Pharisees accuse Jesus of ignoring halakhah and are in their turn fiercely rebuked with a quotation from Isaiah 29:13 (Mark 7:6,7).

"Corban*" (or qorban; 7:11) transliterates a Hebrew word meaning "gift devoted to God." It refers to gifts that were consecrated for religious purposes. Qorban carries something of the implications of a "ban" or tabu and was used as an oath. The Mishnah refers to the Jewish tendency to use such oaths, for example, "Qorban if you will be profited by me!" (compare—and contrast—the English, "I'll be damned if I'll . . . !"). Mark's account refers to a practice whereby, once such an oath has been uttered, even if it was uttered in a fit of passion, the one who swore it must adhere to it. This is the position that Jesus attacks (7:10-13).

Later rabbinic opinion took the same view of the question as is here attributed to Jesus, and for the same reason: "In a matter between a man and his father and mother, the way may be opened to him [to be released from his vow by reason of the honor due to his father and mother]" (m. Nedarim, 9.1). It is evident from the Mishnah, however, that the matter had been debated. It is possible that the harsher, more literalist view of qorban prevailed in the dominant Shammaite Pharisaism of Jesus' period, whereas he himself is shown arguing in agreement with the milder Hillelite view that eventually prevailed.

The sayings on defilement (7:14-23) do not attack the halakhic laws as such; they are simply an assertion of priorities. The further "explanation" in 7:19b ("thus he declared all foods clean") is clearly an interpretation, or midrash, by either Mark or the Gentile church for Gentile Christians (cf. Acts 10:13-16).

A Ministry to Gentiles 7:24-8:10

Once again we have the striking Greek ekeithen, "from there," suggesting a new section. Now we move to Gentile territory, "the region of Tyre" (7:24). From a number of traditions we know that Jesus did not have much to do directly with Gentiles and did not consider it part of his mission to do so (see Matt. 10:5-7). Yet in a gospel for a church containing Gentiles, which the Roman church clearly was, there would be interest in showing some relationships. (For the location of Mark's Gospel at Rome, see below, Note F.) Mark has done his best. Here are three stories: the Syrophoenician woman (7:24-30), the man with the impediment (7:31-37), and the feeding of the four thousand (8:1-10a). Each bears on the subject of Jesus' relationship with Gentiles.

The Syrophoenician woman is a foreigner and Mark goes out of his way to make it clear. He does not try to hide the fact that Jesus does not appear to be enthusiastic about helping her. (Nevertheless, the Greek diminutive kunariois, “little dogs” or “puppy dogs” is not as harsh as the NRSV “dogs.”) Perhaps, as Vincent Taylor suggested, we glimpse “a tension in the mind of Jesus concerning the scope of his ministry. In a sense, Jesus is speaking to himself as well as to the woman” (1957, 350). If so, then her reply shows that she is quick to perceive this. It is a remarkable reply. This is the only time in the gospel tradition that Jesus loses an argument, and it is to a woman and a foreigner!

There follow the stories of the man with the impediment and the feeding of the four thousand. Again our attention is carefully drawn to the setting in Gentile territory for the first story (7:31), and we are presumably intended to see the second in approximately the same setting.

Interpretation of the Two Previous Sections 8:11-21

We had earlier the sequence of feeding, crossing the water, and misunderstanding about the feeding (6:30-52). We now have the same sequence in 8:11-21, with the insertion of a brief pronouncement-story about the request for a sign (8:11-12). Since the same sequence occurs in John (6:1-59), one is inclined to wonder if historical reminiscence lies behind it. In any case it is important that, as it stands, the pronouncement-story about the request for a sign strikes us with great irony. It also re-engages Jesus in conversation with his own people. (We note that geographically Mark has moved us to Dalmanutha [8:10b], which is in Galilee, that is, in Jewish territory.) The conversation on the lake (8:14-21) has baffled many commentators. The very strangeness of the narrative makes one wonder whether there is reminiscence, even if only half understood. As the story stands, our attention is drawn to the differences of “twelve” and “seven” between the two feedings. If we bear in mind that in Jewish tradition twelve is the usual number that refers to Israel, whereas seven is the more “universal” number—there are, for example, seventy nations in the world—we have further reason for supposing that our distinction of “Jewish” and “Gentile” sequences is correct. It is clear that the evangelist is concerned about the disciples’ failure to understand. In fact, this failure is greeted, like the failure to understand parables, with an allusion to the hardening of hearts in Isaiah 6. Is Mark here reflecting concern about relationships between Christians of Jewish origin and Gentile converts? (As we have noticed, Paul’s letter to Rome would certainly suggest that such difficulties

were an issue in the Roman church.) The way in which the discussion in the boat resonates with discussions over table fellowship in the early church can hardly be accidental. “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body,” Paul said (1 Cor. 10:17). This, of course, was precisely what some among the Jewish believers found hard to take (cf. Gal. 2:12-14). “We do not have loaves,” the disciples complain (8:16). The NRSV has them say “we have no bread”—which is a possible, if somewhat strained, alternative translation of this particular Greek phrase, but in view of what has just been said (7:14b) makes them, and Mark, talk nonsense. That is, the disciples are saying, we do not have the materials for separate tables and separate fellowships. The force of Jesus’ reply is clear.

Part III—Mark 8:22-10:52
Jesus Teaches the Way of the Cross:
On the Road to Jerusalem

Bethsaida and Caesarea Philippi:
the First Prophecy of the Passion 8:22-9:29

We are back in Gentile territory: Bethsaida. The miracle story of the cure of the blind man (8:22-26) is like a rehearsal for what follows: the man sees something, but he does not, at first, see clearly. We move farther north to Caesarea Philippi, the most northerly point of Jesus' whole ministry and the farthest from Jerusalem. Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah is immediately linked to the usual demand for secrecy—the messianic secret again! But now, for the first time, it is joined also to an explanation: "the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed" (8:31a). Only after and through that will he be vindicated (8:31b). The juxtaposition of this assertion with the messianic claim is staggering in its effect. This, at last, is the reason for those repeated injunctions to silence that have puzzled us. Jesus must suffer, and after suffering rise again. In other words, even if we do in some sense "know" who Jesus is (as the demons do, or perhaps those who have experienced his healing power), still we cannot truly "know" him, and certainly we cannot speak of him, unless we speak also of his cross and resurrection. So it is even with Peter. "You are the Messiah" (8:29). Peter has seen something of the truth. When Jesus says "openly" that his way in a sinful world will be a way of suffering, Peter responds by beginning "to rebuke him" (8:32). Peter has seen something, but (like the blind man in the previous story) he does not yet see clearly. In return, Peter receives the most stunning rebuke given by Jesus to anyone in the whole gospel tradition. Not the Pharisees, not the Sadducees, not Caiaphas, not Pilate—no one save the first of the disciples is ever called "Satan!" (8:33)

To refuse to accept Jesus as crucified is to set oneself on the side of that very Satan whom Jesus has already defeated. The importance of this claim is highlighted by Jesus' use again of the term "Son of Man" in connection with it. We last heard this title at 2:10 and 2:28 in connection with Jesus' authority to forgive sins and his Davidic authority over the Sabbath. Now it occurs again in connection with his suffering, in an announcement to those who at least claim to accept his authority.

The scene at Caesarea Philippi is a turning point in Mark. From now on Jesus speaks repeatedly of his Passion; and whereas, until now, Mark has given us a steady sense of the polarization between Jesus and much of society, from this point he gives us that same sense of the polarization between Jesus and those who follow him.

Jesus then summons "the crowd with his disciples" (8:34). Jesus declares that commitment to him means commitment to him before all else and commitment to the cross. There is no alternative. "For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" (8:36) This is not a quest of suffering for its own sake, nor a passive acceptance of suffering, but a willingness to suffer with Christ for the sake of the gospel. "Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (8:38). The allusion to Daniel 7:13-14 is obvious. This passage (whatever it may have meant originally to the author of Daniel) had come in Jewish interpretation in the time of Jesus to be understood of the Messiah. More precisely, it spoke of God's vindicating the Messiah (and in him, of course, God's people) and destroying the forces that had opposed him and them. This is what is being said here: no more and no less. There are, moreover, Jesus says, some of those standing there in the band of the disciples who will see God's sovereignty manifest "with power" (9:1). What Peter hopes for will come to pass. Jesus will be vindicated. The way of vindication will be the way of the cross. It should not be necessary to say, but probably still is, that the "earth-shattering" language of texts such as Daniel 7:13-14 and other passages that allude to them was not understood by Jesus' or Mark's contemporaries to speak literally of the collapse of the physical universe as we know it, the end of history, or any such anachronistic ideas. The "apocalyptic" and "cosmic" imagery of these passages is simply the tool by which writers of the period expressed the theological and spiritual significance of the events they described. Such "earth-shattering" language is used by Mark to speak of Jesus' baptism (1:10); later it is used by Luke (citing the prophet Joel) to speak of the coming of the Holy Spirit to the church (Acts 2:17-21). Neither writer, obviously, is under any illusion that the world in general was aware that anything significant had happened, let alone that it had ceased to proceed as usual. "Six days

later" Mark begins the next part of his narrative (a temporal link that is rare in his writing and indeed unique outside the Passion story), and so ties what is to come rather closely to what has gone before—"six days later" Jesus takes aside Peter, James, and John, and is seen with Moses and Elijah, who are both, according to Hebrew tradition, harbingers of the last times. The heavenly voice once more speaks of Jesus as the "beloved Son," God's Isaac. We are reminded of Jesus' baptism (1:11). "Listen to him!" the voice says now (even when, as was the case with Peter, he is telling us something we do not really wish to hear [9:7]).

In the conversation that takes place as the disciples and Jesus return from the Mount of Transfiguration we hear again of the messianic secret. We hear also, by implication, of the coming Passion, although it is the Resurrection that is spoken of explicitly. By the talk of John the Baptizer as Elijah we are reminded of who and what Jesus is (9:9-13).

Mark follows this with the powerful miracle story of the epileptic lad (9:14-29). Those who preach on this passage often use it to remind us of the need to return to the frustrations and pains of everyday life after our "mountain top" experiences.

This is a reasonable point to make. But for Mark the importance of the story where it stands may well have been that it showed its readers what it meant to have faith in Jesus the Messiah. The father understands nothing, he is sure of nothing. In response to the challenge, "all things can be done for the one who believes!"—he can only cry out in the agony of his frustration, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (9:23-24) This is in sharp contrast to Peter's confident willingness to take control of the Messiah's destiny (8:32). It also contrasts with the confident assurance sometimes presented to us as if it were the essence of faith. The father's words sound more like a desperate clinging to hope by one who is in part doubting, in part believing, in part only wanting to believe. It also sounds angry. Perhaps this man, like the Syrophoenician woman, wins his argument with Jesus. At any rate his words and his faith are accepted. The child is healed.

The Second Prophecy of the Passion 9:30-50

"They went on from there (ekeithen)." The disciples turn south, to Galilee. It is the first stage of the final journey to Jerusalem, though Mark does not yet draw our attention to that. Jesus again speaks of his Passion (9:31): "But they did not understand what he was saying, and they were afraid to ask him," Mark says (9:32). Three stories follow. The first is the discussion at Capernaum (9:33-37). In view of what has gone before, it is painful to read. "Who among us is the greatest?" (9:35) Jesus replies with two sayings that illustrate his understanding of greatness: to be "servant of all" and to receive even the least in his name (9:35, 37).

The second story is the pronouncement about the strange exorcist (9:38-41). Here the problem is still a "faith" in Jesus that seems not to grasp who or what he truly is. The disciples want exclusive rights to their Messiah, but Jesus will not be the possession or monopoly of anyone or any group: "Whoever is not against us is for us" (9:40).

In the third story Mark gives us a small group of sayings that he, or more probably his source, link together, partly by parallelism of form (9:42-48) and partly by the catchwords "fire" and "salt" (9:49-50). They are appropriate here because they emphasize the ultimate seriousness of what Jesus has been saying in the two previous stories about the disciples' relationship to the world, to each other, and to him. The theme of the sayings is that of reward and punishment. Perhaps Mark places them here because they set a seal to the question of appropriate response to Jesus that has dominated the previous sections. It is a terrible thing to place "a stumbling block" in the way of the "little ones." Anything that causes us to do that must be abandoned. But what causes us to do it? The final word gives the clue. "Have salt in yourselves" (9:50b) refers to "sharing salt," that is, eating together, and thus to the fellowship that should mark the followers of Jesus (Mark 9:33-37 and cf. John 17:22-23).

The Continuing Journey to Jerusalem 10:1-31

"He left that place" (ekeithen: 10:1). We are still moving south—to Judea, perhaps to the trans-Jordan (the textual evidence is confused), certainly toward Jerusalem. In this section there is not even a prophecy of the Passion. Its debates are about attitudes to persons and to things. They are like an interlude, affording us relief amid the mounting pressure. There are five units to be distinguished: 10:1-12 (on

divorce); 10:13-16 (on children); 10:17-22 (the rich man and eternal life); 10:23-27 (a conversation about riches); 10:28-31 (rewards for discipleship).

In the pronouncement-story about divorce the question at issue is not whether the Torah permits divorce, which Jesus accepts. The question is about ourselves and our attitudes. The "bill of divorcement" (NRSV "certificate of dismissal"; Hebrew: get), as Jesus points out, is simply a protection for the woman against the callousness of men: "because of your hardness of heart he [Moses] wrote this commandment for you" (10:5). But, Jesus asks, with what attitude does a man consider "putting away" his wife at all? Does such a man reflect that the marriage commitment is part of God's order of creation, in which the man, too, is required to leave his parents and become a new person (10:7-8)? No one, at personal whim, should divide what God has joined (10:9). (Some in the house of Hillel later argued that a man could, in theory, divorce his wife "even if she spoiled his soup." Rabbi Akiba later said, "even if he found another prettier than she" [Sifre Deuteronomy, 269]. This is not to say that the rabbis approved of such behavior. They simply noted the legal possibility.)

In the next conversation, Jesus states that such "putting away" by the man is in fact adultery (10:11). An additional verse states that for a woman to do the "divorcing" is also adultery (10:12). Since, according to later rabbinic orthodoxy, "by the strict letter of the law divorcement is an arbitrary right to be exercised by the husband [alone]" (Werblowsky and Wigoder 1967, 118), commentators have tended to assume that this statement must be a Markan editorial comment, extending the principle to the situation allowed under other forms of law. There may also be here an implied criticism of the Herodian household, in which Salome, according to Josephus, divorced her husband (Ant. 15.259-260). While the passage probably is an editorial comment, we should recall that the status of women with regard to divorce may have been more complicated in Judaism before 70 CE than in later years, and that women other than Salome may have been emboldened to initiate divorce proceedings.

In any case there is nothing in the passage that refers to the situation when a marriage has irretrievably broken down. The root of the matter is one's attitude to others. The specific issue in Jesus' pronouncement is the arbitrary and selfish exercise of power by one person over another. As far as the possibility of divorce is concerned, there is no reason to suspect that Mark intends to state anything other than the understanding of marriage and divorce current in Judaism: "The altar sheds tears for him who divorces his first wife." Indeed, the causeless divorce of a first wife, even if valid, is deemed to be an act contrary to the will of the Almighty. Yet where continued life together is absolutely impossible, it is recognized that no impediment should hinder the release by divorce (Werblowsky and Wigoder 1967, 119). The one evident difference between Mark and this talmudic view is that Mark, whatever his source, sees rights and responsibilities in marriage and divorce extended equally to women. The notion of the so-called "indissolubility" of marriage is not intended by Mark. It is an idea quite alien to Judaism in general and to the NT in particular.

The second story, another pronouncement story, deals with children (10:13-16). Our attitude to God's kingdom must be like that of a child. It is not that we are invited to

be childish, but that in certain respects we are invited to be childlike. The kingdom is a gift into which, if we have a child's willingness to receive, we can enter now. The third story, the rich man and eternal life, involves a young man who seeks life and keeps the commandments, but wants more. Very well then! "Go, sell all you have, and follow me!" But it is too much. Here the problem is our attitude to things. If our possessions bar us from our destiny, we do not own them: they own us. We have fallen, as Rudolf Bultmann put it, "into an illegitimate concern with the world." This is a depressing story, for we all know, or suspect, that we have possessions (goods, skills, or reputation) that possess us. No wonder the following unit shows Peter asking, "Then who can be saved?" "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible" (10:26-27). In accordance with the fundamental tradition of Judaism, Jesus reminds us that, fortunately for us, our standing before God does not depend on our ability to act rightly, but on God's love.

A "theology of grace" has its own problems. One result of teaching such a theology might be exactly what W. H. Auden's King Herod said it would be: "Every crook will argue: 'I like committing crimes. God likes forgiving them. Really the world is admirably arranged'" (For The Time Being, 1946). This being so, why bother to disturb the arrangement? This is the question now raised by Peter: "We have left everything" (10:28-31). Why have we bothered? It is a reasonable question. Jesus' answer is simple: the attempt at obedience does have its reward (10:29-30). If we are destined to be children of eternal life, it is never too soon to start trying to live in accord with our destiny. Nevertheless, the faithful Christian's life is inevitably (as Jesus' was) a protest against the present age and an expression of hope for that to come.

The Third Prophecy of the Passion 10:32-52

The interlude is over. The disciples and Jesus are on the road again. Now Mark says it clearly: they are "going up to Jerusalem" (10:32). The picture of Jesus striding ahead, as if he cannot wait to get there, is powerful, as is the disciples' fear. The third prophecy of the Passion (10:33) follows and then we have another agonizingly inept response by the disciples. Jesus again defines leadership as it is understood in God's kingdom. The words should be ingrained in the heart of everyone who seeks a position of responsibility in any part of the church: "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (10:43-44). It is important that Mark records the words as addressed not to those on the fringes of the Christian community, but to those chosen as its leaders and symbols. The invitation is for the strong to identify with the weak, for this is what Jesus does: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (10:45).

We have here a statement of great importance concerning the evangelist's understanding of the meaning of our Lord's death. We seem to have an echo of Isaiah 53:10-12. Jesus' death, like that of the suffering servant in Isaiah, is a voluntary giving up of himself for the sake of others. The Greek noun translated by "ransom" (lutron) generally means "redemption" or "price of release."

The next episode brings us to Jericho (10:46-52), where Jesus gives Bartimaeus his sight. Who was Bartimaeus? The use of the name and the explanatory gloss "the son of Timaeus" that, in the Greek, precedes it (not at all Mark's usual style), suggest that Bartimaeus was known to the church for which Mark wrote. Perhaps he was a member of the Roman congregation?

The third part of Mark's Gospel ends where it began, Jesus giving sight to the blind and Jesus speaking of his death. It does not, of course, end exactly where it began. At least two developments should be noted.

First, at Caesarea Philippi we were told that the Son of Man would suffer, and also that he ''must (dei) suffer" (8:31). In what sense "must"? Were the words a veiled reference to God's purpose? If so, why should

the Messiah's suffering be God's purpose? With Jesus' last words to the Twelve before they enter Jericho, Mark suggests an answer to that question. The Son of Man's death is not only his appointed service, it is also "a ransom for many" (10:45). This phrasing looks forward, anticipating something that we hear again in the Passion (cf. 14:22-24).

Second, at Jericho blind Bartimaeus twice addresses Jesus with the explicitly messianic title "Son of David." This time the title is not rejected or questioned, nor (in contrast to Caesarea Philippi) is there an injunction to silence. On the contrary, it is as the declared agent of David's kingdom that Jesus will enter Jerusalem (11:9-10). References to Jesus' death and to his giving sight to the blind do not merely bracket the third part of Mark's narrative; they are also hinges, linking it to what is to come.

Part IV—Mark 11:1-15:41
The Passion of Jesus: In and Around Jerusalem

The fourth part of Mark, the story of Jesus in Jerusalem, falls into three obvious sections: ministry in Jerusalem (11:1-12:37), the farewell discourse (12:38-13:37), and the Passion (14:1-15:47).

Ministry in Jerusalem 11:1-12:37

Jesus rides into Jerusalem as the agent of God's kingdom (11:1-11). On the next day he "cleanses" the Temple (15-19). Whatever the cleansing may originally have meant (and scholarly opinion differs), there is little doubt about what it means for Mark, since he has bracketed it with the episode of the barren fig tree (11:12-14, 20-25). Anything that pretends to be bearing fruit and does not is to be destroyed. The "cleansing" (an interruption of the system necessary for sacrifice and hence, perhaps, a symbol of the ceasing of sacrifice itself) warns of imminent destruction.

In the narrative that follows, the disciples are encouraged to be themselves "a house of prayer" (cf. 11:17). "Have faith in God," says Jesus (11:22). Things impossible are possible for God, and so are possible for those who trust God (11:23). "Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it shall be yours" (11:24). Nevertheless, the life of the community is to be rooted in the compassion it hopes to receive (11:25).

The next two episodes remind us of earlier witnesses. Early in the Gospel we heard testimony to Jesus from the Scriptures, John the Baptizer, and the heavenly voice (1:2-11). We were reminded of those witnesses at the Transfiguration (9:2-13). Now, days before the Passion, we are reminded of them again.

First, there is the witness of John. The authorities challenge Jesus. "By what authority are you doing these things?" He answers with a counter question: in effect, "By what authority did John baptize?" It is not politically expedient for them to answer, for they fear the people (11:32). But we who are listening know the answer, and we are reminded that John testified to Jesus (cf. 1:7-8).

Second, we are reminded of the heavenly voice: "Then he began to speak to them in parables" (12:1). As we listen to the story of the wicked husbandmen (12:1-12), we know that the vineyard is Israel and the owner is God (cf. Isa. 5:1-7; Ps. 80:8-19). The owner sends servants to the vineyard and they are abused. Finally he sends his "beloved son" (12:6). The words resonate with us at once. We were at the baptism and the Transfiguration. We know who the "beloved son" is (cf. 1:11; 9:7).

Third, we are reminded of the Scriptures: "Have you not read this scripture: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'. . . ?" (12:10). These episodes not only point back to the earlier witnesses to Jesus. They also point forward. The wicked husbandmen took the beloved son, "killed him, and

threw him out of the vineyard" (12:8). The stone was "rejected" (12:10). We remember Jesus' own prophecies of his destiny (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). We know what will happen.

Following the parable, we hear again of the authorities' hostility toward Jesus. They want to "arrest" him, but they fear the crowds (12:12). The crowds have been a source of pressure on Jesus in the past (1:37; 4:1). Now they seem to be his protection. For the moment Jesus' enemies withdraw (12:12c), but they do not cease their hostility. On the contrary: "they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians, to trap him in what he said" (12:13). It is precisely the curious and unlikely combination we last heard at 3:6. We do not need to be told their purpose. It is to "destroy him." In pointing us back, Mark again points us forward. He also provides an ideal hook with which he can lead us directly to the next part of his narrative: the four questions that will be put, in turn, by Pharisees, Sadducees, the "good scribe," and Jesus himself (12:13-37).

Beginning with the subtle attempt of the Pharisees and Herodians to ensnare Jesus, we move through the cruder hostility of the Sadducees, to the friendship of the scribe (12:32), to the final teaching in which "none dared to ask him any question" although "the large crowd was listening to him with delight" (12:37). The section is certainly overshadowed by the opposition of the religious establishment to Jesus with which the section begins. In its linear development, the author places emphasis on that opposition and also on Jesus' triumph over it. The four questions do sustain our awareness of the religious establishment's hostility toward Jesus, and they diminish the establishment in our eyes. Thus the Pharisees in league with the Herodians appear as cunning schemers out to "trap" Jesus (12:13; the verb is used of a hunter seeking

prey). The Sadducees appear merely as heretics who try to mock him and the Resurrection (12:18-27). Even the conversation with the "good scribe" does not change this impression, since it is now the scribe himself who diminishes the importance of the establishment, asserting that to love God and one's neighbor is "much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices" (12:28-34). The four questions are the last part of the narrative of Jesus' public ministry in Jerusalem. It began with Jesus' entry as Son of David, herald of David's kingdom (10:47, 48; 11:10). It ends with the affirmation that even that title is not enough (12:35-37).

A short section criticizes the scribes (12:38-40). This serves as a hinge between public ministry in Jerusalem and the conversation with the disciples that is to follow. Jesus' criticism of establishment religiosity reaffirms the main themes of the former section, and the words about those who "devour widows' houses" prepare us for the scene with which Jesus' discourse begins.

As Jesus watches the rich casting their gifts into the treasury, a widow puts in two small coins. He calls the disciples to hear his comment on this (12:41-43). The story of the widow's mite is a good deal less straightforward than is usually admitted. The widow has cast in "more" than all of them. What does that mean? Evidently she has committed more: the rest "have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on" (12:44). The story exemplifies (and approves) total devotion and generosity—and so it is generally understood. We may not overlook the setting of this story. We have just heard Jesus denounce the religiosity that devours "widows' houses," and now we watch a widow giving up "all she had to live on" for the sake of the Temple. We are about to learn that of the "wonderful stones and wonderful buildings" to which she is contributing "not one stone will be left here upon another" (13:1-2). Her devotion is wholehearted, but apparently it is to a futile cause (10:42-45). The scene is full of ambiguity. We may still admire the woman's generosity, but our admiration will be tempered by our questions about the doomed system that exploits her.

The Farewell Discourse 12:38-13:37

Jesus' words about the future of the Temple lead to the disciples' next question: "When will this be?" This question leads to the extended section often called the "Little Apocalypse" or the "Apocalyptic Discourse."

In Mark's narrative structure it is important for us to note that this is Jesus' farewell. More than once in biblical, Near Eastern, and Greco-Roman literature we see sages pausing on the threshold of death to give final exhortations and advice to their followers (e.g., Plato's account of the death of Socrates [Phaedo], and farewell speeches in the biblical literature such as those of Jacob and Joshua [Gen. 47:29-49:33, Josh. 23:1-24:30]). Jesus' farewell discourse in Mark serves such a purpose. It gives the disciples (and Mark's hearers) information to understand the coming persecution of the church (13:5-9, 11-13), the preaching of the gospel "to all nations" (13:10), the destruction of Jerusalem (13:14-20), and the rise of false claimants to messiahship (13:21-22); it tells them that "after that suffering," they may look for the victorious presence of the Son of Man:

> But in those days . . .
> the sun will be darkened,
> and the moon will not give its light,
> and the stars will be falling from heaven,
> and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds . . . . (13:24-27)

Thus the discourse looks beyond Mark's plotted narrative into the history of the church and the experience of Mark's hearers.

Once again it must be stressed that the "earth-shattering" image here is imagery, and the evident allusion to Daniel 7:13-14 is, as always, messianic. Neither Mark nor his hearers would have thought that Jesus was talking about the end of the world. The point is simply that the city that has opposed God's Messiah and rejects his followers will be destroyed. The prophet, the Son of Man, God's Messiah, who warned the city and was rejected, will be vindicated. By vindicating him God also vindicates God's elect, gathering them from the whole world. The imagery is earth-shattering because the events described are reckoned to be of "earth-shattering" significance. The passage remains an answer to the question Jesus had been asked (13:4)—which it would certainly not be if the Daniel 7 imagery were taken literally.

We, who identify with the Lord's followers, are the ones finally exhorted to watch the signs (13:28-30). We are not to be disturbed, because Jesus' words cannot fail, although the date of what is to happen is unknown to all except God (13:31-32). Above all, we are to be alert (13:33-34). "Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake" (13:35-37).

The Passion 14:1-15:39

Setting the Stage 14:1-11

The Passion narrative opens with the story of a woman who anoints Jesus (14:3-9). This episode is bracketed (and so its warmth and compassion are emphasized) by the plots of those who will destroy him (14:1-2, 10-11). One thing makes the authorities hesitate: the presence of the crowds (14:2; cf. 12:12). In the episode itself there is irony: notably in the presence of critics of the scene—presumably disciples—who think they understand what is going on, and do not. The observation that the woman has prepared Jesus' body for burial continues to reinforce our awareness of his coming death, and the promise of "a gospel" that will be preached "to all nations" echoes a theme that was first heard in the farewell discourse (13:10). Early in the narrative we were told of a woman who was ministering to Jesus with his followers (1:31); now he is again cared for

by a woman, although this time “some of those present” (presumably his followers) scold her (14:4).

The farewell discourse, which is preceded by a story of a woman’s offering, is also followed by one. In both cases the offering is extravagant. In both, the object of generosity is under threat, and the generous gesture is apparently futile. Both are

followed by prophecy. Yet the similarities only serve to highlight the differences. In the anointing there is no suggestion that the woman has left herself destitute, and Jesus’ praise is not conditioned or ambiguous (14:3). The prophecy, following the gift of the widow’s mite, speaks of doom; that following the anointing promises a lasting memorial: “wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her” (14:9). With such notes of hope and danger we are prepared for the cross.

The Passion Narrative 14:12-15:39

Audiences and the creators of oral literature tend to be conservative; that is to say, no narrative designed to be heard may depart very far from an accepted tradition (as anyone who tells stories to children will be aware). Within the early church that process was associated with what we have come to call the apostolic tradition, “a line of descent that exercised a control over basic facts, despite rearrangements and simplifications” (Brown 1994, 2.1346). Opinions differ, but so far as the overall structure of the Passion narrative was concerned, Mark was faced with a basic pattern that permitted little change: a pattern represented for us not only by Mark but also by the Gospel According to John. The outline may be something like this:

Last Supper —> Gethsemane —> Arrest —> Trial before Sanhedrin —> Trial before Pilate —> Scourging —> Crucifixion

Such an outline would have constituted a basis too familiar to be avoided or rearranged, even if the narrator wished to do so.

Mark’s Passion story, like the rest of his work, shows signs of his own structuring, both in its internal arrangements and in its relationship to other parts of the narrative. We note first the overall chronology. “You do not know,” Jesus had said at the end of the farewell discourse, “when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly” (13:35). Roman usage (originally military) divided the night into four three-hour watches, normally designated first watch, second watch, and so on. Mark showed Jesus using the popular equivalents. Still, the elaborate statement of fourfold possibility seemed strange in the context of the farewell discourse. What was the reason for it? In fact, we now discover, it seems to anticipate Mark’s structuring of the first part of the Passion. Thus:

“when it was evening” (14:17) Jesus came with the Twelve for the Last Supper; at (presumably) about midnight, Jesus “came and found [the disciples] sleeping” (14:40), and “immediately . . . Judas, one of the twelve, arrived . . . and with him there was a crowd” (14:43), and the disciples fled (14:50); when Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin was coming to its conclusion, and as Peter below in the courtyard denied him the third time, “the cock crowed for the second time” (14:66-72); “and as soon as it was morning the chief priests, with the elders and scribes, and the whole council held a consultation; and they bound Jesus and led him away to Pilate” (15:1).

(R. H. Lightfoot, Gospel Message, 53)

This precise match can hardly be accidental. Moreover, the division of the narrative into three-hour periods continues as Mark tells the rest of the story. “It was nine o’clock in the morning when they crucified him” (15:25); “when it was noon, dark- ness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon” (15:33); and “at three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice . . . ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’. . . gave a loud cry and breathed his last” (15:34-37). As R. H. Lightfoot observed, such precision is the more striking in a writer for whom temporal precision is not usually a concern (Gospel Message, 53). Originally it might have been a way of remembering the story. As matters stand, its effect is to give this part of Mark’s narrative a suggestion of clipped, almost military precision. It is noticeable that as the soldiers take over in the final stages of the action, so Mark’s temporal language conforms to a semi-military usage, giving the Crucifixion something of the feel of a report from the front. It is very easy for a listener to follow.

So much for overall chronology. What of details? At the Last Supper, Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and gives, echoing what he has done before (14:22-25). Yet it is not quite as before, because now he interprets what he does. The disciples earlier complained when they had “only one loaf” (8:14). Now Jesus tells them what the fellowship of those who share the one loaf means: union with him—“This is my body” (14:22). On the road, before they came to Jericho, he spoke of being appointed to serve by giving his life “a ransom for many” (10:45). Now those words, too, are echoed and amplified. The shared cup is his “blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (14:24). Mark is not a theologian of the atonement, but he leaves us in no doubt that what is to happen on the cross will not be merely a result of human malice, nor even of Jesus’ willingness to endure human malice, but “for many”—hence, if we are willing to hear it, “for us.”

The Last Supper narrative echoes and amplifies themes that have preceded it. It also looks forward. Jesus’ prophetic words anticipate his own final isolation, the disciples’ failure, Peter’s denial, and the cross (14:27, 29-31). They also anticipate victory: Jesus will next drink wine “new in the kingdom of God” (14:25). “I will go before you to Galilee” (14:28). That Jesus speaks of all these matters in the course of the supper strengthens our impression that the entire ensuing narrative is bound together and that in all that happens, despite being victim, Jesus is in another and deeper sense actually in control.

The episodes emphasizing the disciples’ weakness and incomprehension (14:32-42, 51-52) bracket the account of Jesus’ arrest (14:43-50). Similarly the episode of Peter’s denial, with its own explicit reminder of Jesus’ prophecy at the Last Supper now fulfilled (14:53-54, 66-72), brackets the account of his trial before the Sanhedrin (14:55-65). These elements have led some critics to speak of Mark’s hostility toward the disciples and Peter. In fact, there is no hostility in the narrative toward the disciples, and the effect of hearing the story leads most of us to identify with their failure rather than scorn them.

In the section before the arrest we hear not only of the disciples’ weakness, but also of Jesus’ prayer. After the cleansing of the Temple he tells the disciples, “Whatever

you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (11:24). It would be idle to pretend that such an exhortation did not involve problems of theodicy, of which the ancients were as well aware as we. The Latin poet Lucretius spoke scornfully of those who

> . . . revert again to ancient faiths,
> And for themselves take cruel masters who
> (For so the wretches reckon) can do all;
> They know not what can be and what cannot . . . .
> (*De Rerum Natura 5:86-87*)

In the passage Mark confronts such a view directly. Jesus' prayer begins by asserting a principle he has earlier presented as the only basis whereby we may hope for salvation at all, namely, that all things are possible for God (cf. 10:26-27; this is precisely the principle denied by Lucretius). So Jesus prays, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible." He continues, "Remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want" (14:36). Trusting that God is his faithful Abba, and that what God desires will be done, Jesus embraces that will, even if it involves his own death. As we listen to Jesus' prayer, we know that he is right to believe that God is his faithful Abba, for we have heard the heavenly voice (cf. 1:1-3, 11; 9:7). Knowing that, we are naturally encouraged to pray ourselves as Jesus prays, "expecting power and accepting suffering," as Sharyn Echols Dowd expresses it (Prayer, 33).

During Jesus' trial some speak of a threat to destroy the Temple. "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands . . .'" (14:58). Mark tells us that they gave "false testimony" (14:57). Jesus did not say that he would destroy the Temple, but he did say that it was doomed to destruction (13:2). The words of Jesus' enemies indirectly remind us of that prophecy and of the doom in store for the system that the Temple represents. The accusers are already judged. The scene is replete with irony.

The high priest questions Jesus. In so doing he not only raises the same question Jesus raised at Caesarea Philippi, but Mark also reminds us of God's own declaration at the baptism and the Transfiguration. "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" (14:61) Now, for the only time in the narrative, and at the moment when we cannot doubt what this will mean for him, Jesus' answer is plain: "I am." Moreover, in words that echo both Caesarea Philippi and the farewell discourse, he adds, "'You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,' and 'coming with the clouds of heaven'" (14:62). In his first public responses to his critics, he claimed for himself the authority of the Son of Man in forgiveness and lordship over the Sabbath (2:10, 28). In his last public words he claims that he will be vindicated as God's Messiah. Such a claim might seem like madness. Yet when we return to the courtyard and hear the fulfillment of his prophecy regarding Peter's denial (14:66-72), this merely confirms our impression that Jesus is the one who is in charge here, despite all appearances to the contrary. Those who presume to judge him understand nothing. The irony deepens.

"As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate" (15:1). An important thread binds Jesus' trial before Pilate to the rest of Mark's narrative. It is the presence of the crowds. Twice we have been told that their support alone has restrained the authorities from acting against Jesus. Now they have their chance. "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" (15:9) But crowds can be manipulated, and the authorities have already taught them to prefer Barabbas (15:11). What then of Jesus? "Crucify him!" they cry (15:13). With the restraining factor removed, Jesus' fate is certain (15:15).

A second thread binds together the narratives of Jesus' trial before Pilate, his being mocked, and his crucifixion. It is kingship. Jesus is referred to as king six times in thirty-one verses, and he is called so by virtually everyone involved: by Pilate three times (on the third occasion Pilate admits that he is quoting the crowd: 15:2, 9, 12-13), by the Roman soldiers (15:18), by the official titulum over his cross (15:26), and by the chief priests and scribes, who also speak of him as "the Christ" (15:32). Of course the titles are given in mockery. But what for characters in the story is mockery, is for Mark's audience the truth. Jesus is the Christ, the King of Israel. Hence irony surrounds the entire proceeding. All these people (like the bystanders who criticized the woman who anointed Jesus [14:4]) think they understand what is going on, but they do not.

The final act of Jesus' ministry is his death. It is told with simple dignity. Jesus' last cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!" (15:34; translating 15:34, which is in the original Aramaic, as if we could not forget even the sound of its syllables) seals the loneliness that has been growing around him from the beginning. In the very moment of death there is something else. Once only God could declare the divine

sonship. All others who did so, since they did not acknowledge the scandal of the cross, were told to be silent. Now a Gentile soldier perceives the divine sonship in the scandal of the cross. His is the only such declaration in Mark's entire story, apart from God's own witness, which is not silenced.

It is all watched by the faithful women. The Passion story began with a woman's service to Jesus, and it ends with a group of women who watch. Mark lists the chief among them by name, adding that there were "many" others, and that they had been present, ministering (again the verb is diakonein: cf. 1:31) to Jesus throughout his entire ministry (15:40-41). They alone are still at their posts, and their presence saves the disciples' honor. It also points forward. The drama is not yet over.

Part V—Mark 15:42-16:8
Epilogue: Witness to the Crucified and Risen One At the Tomb

The women come to the tomb to see that Jesus' body receives honorable interment (16:1-3). They alone, like good soldiers, are holding their position in the hour when all seems lost. Therefore it is fitting that the news of victory is given to them first. They are first to see the kingdom of God come "with power" as Jesus promised (9:1).

They alone receive the theophany, that is, the divine revelation, at the tomb: despite all the restraint of his language, that is clearly how Mark intends us to understand what happens there. The designation of the heavenly messenger as a man clothed in white, his position ("the right side" denoting authority), the awe of those who see him, his reassurance, the declaration of God's gracious and redemptive act, the promised sign, and the continuing awe of the recipients, are all regularly paralleled in stories of angelic revelations in the OT and related literature.

Mark's Gospel, which began in the wilderness with a divinely commissioned messenger of the Coming One, concludes at the tomb with a divine messenger of the Crucified and Risen One. To the women is entrusted the message of the Resurrection, which they must bring to the disciples (16:6-7). For the moment, they can only flee in silence, saying nothing to anyone, overwhelmed with religious awe. They have been shown the mystery (16:8).

Note G
The Authorship, Date, and Origin of Mark

According to the church fathers Papias and Irenaeus, the Gospel According to Mark was written by John Mark, who appears in the Book of Acts as the companion of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 12:25; 15:36-40). Papias (writing in about 130) describes Mark as "the interpreter of Peter," who "wrote down accurately all that he remembered of the things done and said by Christ, but not however in order" (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, 3.39.17). We cannot assume from Papias' words that Mark's narrative was just a record of what Peter taught, nor do they say that; but there are passages in the Gospel According to Mark that could be based on Peter's memories.

In trying to decide exactly when a book of the NT was written, we first look for references to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, since this was a major event that changed the lives and expectations of Jews and Christians everywhere. Mark seems well aware of the fall of Jerusalem, but he does not seem to have any detailed knowledge about it. (Contrast Luke, who seems to give such accurate detail that most scholars feel convinced he wrote after the event had happened.) Perhaps he wrote at some time during the Jewish rebellion, when the fall of the city seemed inevitable, or just after it.

The Gospel also seems to reflect other events. Irenaeus (about 185 CE) said that Mark wrote his Gospel after

the deaths of Peter and Paul in the Neronian persecution. Mark's brevity and simplicity, together with his obvious awareness of the need for faithfulness amid persecution, would fit with a memory of this—particularly if the Gospel were written, as tradition holds, for the Christian community at Rome. Mark's clear, if indirect, touching on the issue of Christian fellowship, and particularly of unity between Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus (see above on Mark 8:14-21) would also agree with this memory. Paul, writing a decade or a little more before, seems to have known of this as an issue in the Roman church (see Rom. 14:1-15:13). Clement of Rome's later references to the deaths of Peter and Paul in Rome through "zeal and envy" may well refer to the same issue (1 Clem. 5.2).

Commentators who argue for an early date for the material preserved in Mark have frequently pointed to "**Semitisms***" in its style, that is, linguistic characteristics that appear to be the result of influence from Hebrew or Aramaic. These, they claim, are evidence of Mark's closeness to the original Palestinian tradition. Among Semitisms that have been commonly identified are:

1) "**Asyndeton**," that is, Mark's habit, unusual in classical Greek, of omitting the Greek part of speech known as a "particle" from the beginning of his sentences. (There is no way that this can be shown in English translation.)

2) Mark's frequent use of the so-called "historic present" in narrative. The RSV and NRSV often hide this by translating the Greek present with an English past, e.g., 1:12 ("drove" where the Greek has "drives," but cf. KJV); 1:21 (RSV "went into," NRSV "entered," where the Greek would more accurately be rendered "goes into" or "enters"); 2:10 ("said" where the Greek has "says," but cf. KJV).

3) "**Parataxis**," that is, Mark's habit of writing series of sentences joined by the Greek word kai ("and").

Recent research reveals, however, that the first and second of these characteristics were perfectly acceptable in various kinds of koinē Greek at this period, including many where there is not the slightest possibility of Semitic influence. The third may be more a sign of Mark's closeness to oral sources than it is a Semitism.

This does not mean that there is no evidence of Semitic influence on Mark's style. There is. But it does mean that each case must be treated on its merits, and the generalizations of some older commentators should be read with caution.