

The Gospel According to Mark

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth...¹*

The opening lines to Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken” are a fitting introduction to the gospel according to Mark. Like the poet, Mark’s gospel reveals the divergent paths from the outset. “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1.1). Will the reader accept Mark’s premise? The question remains an open one that must be answered again and again—moment by moment, choice by choice, day by day.

New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson notes that the gospel of Mark was largely neglected in church history, as “no commentary on Mark appeared until the 6th century and not another until the 9th.”² While there are certainly a variety of reasons, this was due, in part, to the perception that Mark was nothing more than a shortened version of the gospels of Matthew and Luke. A renewed interest in the last century has resulted from the recognition of Mark as the earliest gospel, from which the writers of Matthew and Luke derived a large amount of their material.³ Thankfully, this has allowed scholars to gain a better understanding of this earliest account of the good news of Jesus the Christ. The result has been a realization of theological depth previously unseen, a theology woven not only into the stories but into the entire structure of the Markan narrative. Though we cannot analyze this in depth here, we can note and reflect briefly upon the broad movements of the story. The writer begins with a basic premise, namely, that what is about to be told is the story of Jesus who is the Son of God (1.1). Thus, “the Gospel as a whole is intensely ironic. The readers always know more than the characters in the story.”⁴ Nevertheless, a choice is still to be made by all. Knowing the writer’s premise does not absolve the reader from making a determination as to its validity. Put another way, there remains a choice to follow Jesus, the Son of God, for both the readers and the characters in the story.

Mark’s Gospel begins with a flurry of activity, and slows only slightly as the story progresses. “The sheer pace of it all is unrelenting...Jesus rushes around just like a bounding lion. It all happens ‘and immediately,’ ‘at once,’ or ‘straight away’” [1.10, 12, 18, 20, 21, 23, 28-30, 42-42].⁵ Jesus moves from place to place, doing mighty works of power and teaching the

¹ Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*, <<http://www.bartleby.com/119/1.html>>.

² Luke T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 147.

³ Johnson, 147; Metzger, Bruce M. and Michael D. Coogan, eds. *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 492-3; see also Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, (New York: Doubleday, 1996), “The Synoptic Problem,” 111-122.

⁴ Johnson, *The Writings*, 155.

⁵ Richard A. Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 37. The symbol associated with Mark’s gospel is the lion, which denotes the wild and untamed nature of the gospel’s portrait of Jesus. Burridge points to C.S. Lewis’s lion ‘Aslan’ in the *Chronicles of Narnia*—the Christ-figure in the story—who is ‘not safe, but good,’ C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1978), 80.

people. Through the stories, Mark is revealing what it means that Jesus is the Son of God. This is how the narrative becomes part of Mark's theology. Johnson has suggested a dialectical structure to this gospel, which is traditionally formulated as *thesis—antithesis—synthesis*.⁶ This provides a helpful lens to view the entire gospel story theologically. In 1.1-8.26 we find a *thesis* constructed upon Mark's assertion that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah), the Son of God.⁷ In this section Jesus is portrayed as a worker of mighty acts of power—healing diseases, casting out demons, raising the dead. At 8.27-30 we find the hinge in the story, when Peter confesses that Jesus is 'the Christ.' In 8.31-15.38 the careful reader observes a dramatic shift (the *antithesis* in this schema) where Jesus is revealed as a suffering servant who must die and rise again. Mark reveals that Jesus is not simply the worker of mighty deeds. He is also, and more so, one who will suffer, die, and rise again for the redemption of the world. Therefore, the *synthesis* comes in 15.39 where, for the first time in the narrative, someone recognizes Jesus as 'the Christ.' Not simply the divine miracle worker, but the divine agent who suffers and dies for the sake of the world. And it is a Roman centurion, of all people, who is the first to see and proclaim Jesus as 'the Christ' in the fullest and truest sense of the word.

This leads to a brief discussion of a difficult theme in the Markan narrative, often called the "messianic secret."⁸ Throughout Mark's gospel we find something curious—after doing mighty deeds Jesus tells the people *not* to tell anyone. 'The blind receive sight, the lame walk, the dead are raised.' We would think the command would be "go and tell," "go and proclaim," "go and share the good news with all who will listen." Rather, we find Jesus "earnestly warn[ing] them not to tell who he was" (3.12). Yet, even more curious, this is not always the case. There are times when Jesus tells the healed and redeemed to "go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how he had mercy on you" (5.19). What is going on here? Why are some encouraged to share and others not? This is one instance where Mark's theology is discovered in his structure. Above we saw the dialectic of the gospel, which is part of the reason for the secrecy. The Messiah is not merely a worker of mighty deeds. To understand Jesus as this alone is to misunderstand him. The Messiah is also the suffering servant who dies for the sake of the world. Thus, there is a need for secrecy until the full revelation of Jesus as 'the Christ' can be revealed. Only then can the reader confess with the centurion that Jesus is the Son of God (15.39). Yet there is another reason for the secrecy. Those in *Jewish* territory who encounter Jesus bring all of their preconceptions as to who the Messiah would be and what he would do. A prevailing idea was that the Messiah would overthrow Rome and establish Israel as a nation once more—in sum, overcome by divine strength through mighty acts and wonders (cf. Mt 3.1-12; Lk 3.1-9). What they expected to see blinded them to the reality of 'the Christ.' Those in *Gentile* territory who encounter Jesus are not hindered by these preconceived ideas. As such, we see a clear dichotomy—a call to secrecy in *Jewish* lands, so as to avoid misunderstanding Jesus; a call to "go and tell" in *Gentile* lands unhindered by these limited conceptions of 'the Christ.' In the end, it is only Jesus, the worker of mighty deeds *and* the suffering servant, who can be worshiped and proclaimed as 'the Christ, the Son of God.'

⁶ Johnson, *The Writings*, 150.

⁷ David Garland has rightly pointed out that *Christ* (Messiah) "was a title of the one anointed by God to carry out specific tasks related to the liberation of Israel. The term probably evoked as a constellation of hopes for different Jews," Garland, David E. *The NIV Application Commentary: Mark*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 21.

⁸ Johnson, *The Writings*, 147-8. See Mark 1.25, 34, 44; 3.12; 5.43; 7.36; 8.30; 9.9.

“And [the young man] said to them, ‘Do not be amazed...He has risen; he is not here...But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you. They went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had gripped them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid’ (Mk 16.6-8).

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Mark’s gospel ends where it began, with two ways parting and a choice of which to take. It’s an ending that is more properly called a beginning.¹⁰ To accept Mark’s claim (1.1) and follow Jesus the Son of God, or to leave off in astounded silence at the audacity of the claim (16.8). The tomb is empty. He goes before us, always, to Galilee. “This incomplete ending...has Christ still waiting symbolically in Galilee for his followers to come and forces us to ask whether we will go to meet him there as well.”¹¹ The choice is, and always will be, ours. “The beginning gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God (1.1)...Come, follow me (1.17; 2.14; 8.34; 10.21; 10.52)...I go before you to Galilee where it all began (1.9; 16.8).” Will we leave off in silence or will we begin again at the beginning?

Outlines of and Commentaries on the Gospel

Luke Timothy Johnson¹²

- I. The Prologue (1.1-15)
- II. Conflict and Selection (1.16-3.34)
- III. Teaching in Parables (4.1-41)
- IV. To Caesarea Philippi (5.1-8.26)
- V. To Jerusalem (8.27-10.52)
- VI. Jesus in Jerusalem (11.1-13.37)
- VII. The Passion (14.1-15.47)
- VIII. The Empty Tomb (16.1-8)

Raymond Brown¹³

Part One: Ministry of Healing and Preaching in Galilee (1.1-8.26)

Part Two: Suffering Predicted; Death in Jerusalem; Resurrection (8.27-16.8, + 16.9-20)

⁹ Robert Frost, *The Road Less Traveled*, <<http://www.bartleby.com/119/1.html>>.

¹⁰ As Garland notes, “the whole gospel of Mark is about a beginning...Mark does not finish the story because the announcement of Jesus’ resurrection and his going before the disciples to Galilee is not the final stage...The story of the Gospel about Jesus continues,” *NIV App.*, 18.

¹¹ Garland, *NIV App.*, 623.

¹² Johnson, *The Writings*, 175. Johnson offers two outlines, preferring the latter.

¹³ Brown, *An Introduction*, 127.

For Further Study

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