Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements

Gospel of Mark

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Introduction

The Gospel of Mark is generally dated to about 70 CE and was written somewhere in the Roman Empire, although no information is given by the narrator about the book's origin. The opening lines state emphatically that the book contains the "good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1; New Revised Standard Version), stacking two inter-related titles onto the figure of Jesus. In the first, he is identified as "Christ," or the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for "anointed one" or "Messiah" (on messianism in the first century, see Collins 1995; Novenson 2012; 2017). In the second, he is "Son of God," a title accompanied by a cluster of images including ancient Israelite traditions of King David and Roman imperial ideology of a deified emperor. Both titles signal one chosen by God for a specific, salvific purpose for Israel, and both would also resonate with a pagan audience familiar with anointing of kings in the ancient Near East and an emperor referred to as "son of God" (Peppard 2011). In its Jewish Hellenistic context, the Gospel of Mark is an apocalyptic text, meaning that it exhibits many of the themes associated with apocalypticism as a social-political movement of Jewish resistance to Roman occupation, dating to about the second century bce to the second century ce (see also Millenarianism in Ancient Judaism; Early Jewish Sign Prophets). Mark is not an apocalypse, per se, which is a distinct literary genre of the period, but rather reinterprets themes prevalent in such texts, such as the revelation of divine wisdom, an agent of God vanquishing evil forces, and that God's rule is established on earth. (For apocalypses, see Collins 1998.) While space limitations prevent a comprehensive treatment of this subject, this article highlights key characteristics and moments in the Gospel that locate Mark within this broad category of apocalypticism. Specifically, this involves the following ideas: Jesus as both the mediator and content of divine revelation, proclaiming in parables that the kingdom of God promises the redemption of Israel; the portrayal of Jesus as a healer and exorcist battling cosmic forces of evil; and the construal of Jesus as "Son of Man," an agent of God who is a salvific figure of Israel.

Jesus as Both Revealer and Revealed

Jesus in Mark as both the subject and object of revelation is a distinctively apocalyptic feature of the Gospel. Indeed, the opening scene of the Gospel narrates Jesus's baptism by John, after which the heavens split open (*schizō*/σχίζω, 1:10). While the heavens tearing apart appears in such apocalypses as Ezekiel,

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the Apocalypse of Levi, the Testament of Levi, 2 Baruch, and Revelation, in Mark the Holy Spirit descends like a dove and a voice from the heavens proclaims to Jesus that he is God's son (Barnes 2017, 16). From this moment, Jesus is understood as especially favoured by God and, after being tested in the wilderness, Jesus begins his ministry. In the scenes of preaching and healing that follow, Jesus primarily functions as a revealer, a role that is related, in his parables, to the angelic mediators of apocalypses. Often the disciples are said not to understand his meaning, and Jesus at times interprets his parables allegorically for his disciples, as he does, for instance, for the parable of the sower in Mark 4. In this way the parables both conceal and reveal the message, and in doing so they pose the question of who receives a revelation and why. As Jesus says to the disciples in Mark 4:11, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables." Here, Mark highlights the apocalyptic endeavour of revelation as only disclosed to the wise, much like in the apocalypse 4 Ezra, which states at 14:45–47, "And when the forty days were ended, the Most High spoke to me, saying, 'Make public the twenty-four books that you wrote first, and let the worthy and the unworthy read them; but keep the seventy that were written last, in order to give them to the wise among your people. For in them is the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom, and the river of knowledge'" (Barnes 2017, 17–18). Despite Jesus's efforts to explain, Mark presents a generally negative portrayal of the disciples as incapable of understanding. In 4:13, Jesus says, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?" Most scholars identify this feature of Mark as a literary strategy to represent the disciples as standing in for the readers and to make the point that the message of Jesus is understood from the perspective of faith. As Grant Macaskill argues, while for most of the narrative the disciples are as bewildered as those on the outside, at the end of Mark, the angel at the empty tomb gives the instructions to the women to tell the disciples to go to Galilee, to see the risen Christ. By this time, they will understand the identity of Jesus as Messiah (Macaskill 2017, 66).

At the centre of Jesus's parables is the concept of the coming kingdom of God. At the outset of the narrative, Jesus introduces the proclamation in 1:15 that "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has drawn near; repent and believe in the good news." Notice in this first reference to the kingdom that Jesus describes its arrival as issuing from the fulfilment of time. By this he states that time has reached its "ripeness," so to speak, as the Greek word used here, *plērēs*/πλήρης, refers to "containing within itself all that it will hold…lacking nothing, complete" (Danker 2000, 827). The present moment is the one in which God's agent of redemption for Israel—Jesus—is acting, calling Israel to see the eschatological future that is breaking into the present (Bahr 2019, 53). This eschatological feature of the kingdom of God has its precedent in the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures and not in apocalypses as a literary genre (Rowland and Murray-Jones 2009, 15). However, as Macaskill argues, this eschatological feature of Jesus's proclamation is apocalyptic in the sense that older traditions are applied in new ways; in this case toward the identity of Jesus, who is thereby associated with the coming of God (Macaskill 2017, 56). This eschatological feature of the kingdom of God is also apparent in the parable of the seed growing secretly in Mark 4:26–29:

> *The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.*

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In this parable the seed grows and reaches fulfilment, or is “ripe,” the same word used in 1:15, *plērēs*/πλήρης, linking the fulfilment of time to God’s impending judgement. From Mark’s perspective of Jesus as Messiah, Jesus’s presence itself signals the coming kingdom, and the content of his proclamation discloses that revelation.

The transfiguration of Mark 9—where (in Mark’s version) Jesus’s clothes are said to have transformed into a dazzlingly white while on a high mountain—reflects the apocalyptic pattern of a human being transformed by a divine encounter. One instructive parallel is the repetition of words spoken by the voice from heaven, which in this instance are words directed not to Jesus, as in his baptism, but to the disciples. Mark 9:7 reads, “Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’” This directive from God points to a proper understanding of Jesus’s identity and the source of his authority. Another important allusion is to Elijah and Moses, both of whom encounter the glory of God on mountaintops, as Jesus does here. Some scholars refer to Jesus’s transfiguration as transforming him into an angelic being or that the depiction is a parallel to an eschatological transformation. However, looking to theophany scenes (occasions when the divine is manifested) in such apocalypses as Daniel 10 and in Revelation 13:13–16, both of which derive their imagery from the theophany of Ezekiel 1, some scholars interpret the transfiguration as a glorified state to be identified with God (e.g., Macaskill 2017, 68). Furthermore, Christopher Rowland claims that the transfiguration is drawing upon 1 Enoch 14:20–21, which also describes a theophany, because of the shared vocabulary with Mark 9 of “sun,” “face,” and “clothing” (Rowland 2009, 106). As these apocalypses describe God, not an angelic being, the parallels in Mark serve to identify Jesus in relation to God. Furthermore, the appearance of the cloud recalls Exodus 34:5, and the radiance of Moses in Exodus 34:29–30 echoes Jesus’s “dazzling white” appearance. Moreover, Adela Yarbro Collins has noted the connections between the transfiguration and Hellenistic theophanies, offering further evidence of Jesus as a divine figure in relation to God, not just a heavenly being (Macaskill 2017, 69; see also Yarbro Collins 2007, 418–19). In this way, and in the content of his proclamation outlined above, Mark revises the role of the angelic mediator of apocalypses to depict Jesus as the revealer and the revelation itself.

Jesus as Healer and Exorcist

From the inaugurating moment in Mark of Jesus’s baptism, Jesus is identified as distinct from John the Baptist in that the Holy Spirit empowers him to battle the cosmic enemies of God. Jesus’s ministry of exorcisms and healings, as Elizabeth Shively argues, “is akin to Jewish apocalyptic compositions that display heavenly battles enacted on earth, through which God’s appointed agents fight evil spirits and their leader on behalf of the righteous” (Shively 2012, 155; see also Robinson 1957). As a healer and an exorcist, Jesus battles the demonic activity afflicting people in the form of sin, disease, and death, from which they cannot free themselves. Mark 3:22–27 exemplifies this role:

> *And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’ And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, ‘How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man’s*

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> *house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.'*

While the scribes, who hold religious authority among Jews, question Jesus's powers as an exorcist and claim an evil force animates him, Jesus responds in a parable about binding the "strong man." Here, he affirms the power of evil forces and that he has come to engage in a battle in which they will be at least restrained. In a departure from apocalypses such as the book of Revelation or the War Scroll from Qumran that describe cosmic battles of good and evil, the agent of God in Mark is not an angel and does not completely remove the power of evil. Rather, this passage at the beginning of Mark indicates a struggle and a judgement upon that struggle that will continue throughout Mark's narrative, culminating in Jesus's death on a cross (see also Meyers 2008). As Shively demonstrates, one way that Mark reinterprets apocalyptic themes is that Jesus's power gradually diminishes as the narrative progresses, thus emphasising a contrast between Jesus's power as exemplified in his ministry and that which is at work when he is killed by his enemies. However, at his resurrection Jesus overcomes the demonic forces, thus projecting the power exemplified in his ministry into the future. This motif of a future glorification recalls Daniel 12:13, in which a martyr rises to receive the glory of the righteous (Shively 2012, 156–58).

Like exorcisms, Jesus's acts of healing in Mark are demonstrations of his power. When Jesus heals the haemorrhaging woman of Mark 5:25–34, for instance, the text states he was "immediately aware that power had gone forth from him" (Mark 5:30) These activities are described in Mark as *dunamis*/δύναμις, or "acts of power." Jesus is thus transmitting God's power to the people he heals and allowing them to overcome debilitating illnesses caused by "unclean spirits." The implication is that they cannot help themselves in this way. The healing of the Gerasene demoniac, also in Mark 5, is instructive. As Jesus is directing the unclean spirit to depart from the man, the spirit replies that his name is "Legion; for we are many" (v. 9). Richard Horsley relates this exchange to Roman imperial occupation of Palestine, which for three generations had traumatised and oppressed the rural agrarian communities depicted in the Gospels. Roman military conquest forced submission by destruction, enslavement, and crucifixion, and although pacified, Galileans and other Israelites recalled God's acts of deliverance to give shape to popular revolts and prophetic movements, such as that around Jesus. As an apocalyptic expression of resistance to Roman imperial domination, Jesus's healings of disease and suffering enabled people to restore their lives under God's kingdom (Horsley 2011, 122). As explained above with respect to exorcisms, these events are understood in Mark as battles between divine forces and demonic forces, where Jesus acts as God's agent to overcome the evil that controls people's lives; in material terms, this is understood as the battle between God's people and Roman imperial rule (see also Fredriksen 1999; Horsley 2007).

Jesus as Son of Man

In depicting Jesus in relation to the book of Daniel, scholars point to the apocalypse in Daniel 7, in which a figure called the Son of Man appears. This figure is described as coming with the clouds and being given dominion, glory, and kingship (vv. 13–14). In Mark 14:61–62, at his trial before the Sanhedrin, Jesus refers to this passage in response to a question about whether he is the Messiah. (For arguments about whether the historical Jesus referred to himself with this title, see Vielhauer 1957; Bultmann 1968; Perrin 1974; Yarbro Collins 1996.) Some scholars argue that the reference is more likely an allusion to another

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apocalypse, the Parables of Enoch, in which the Son of Man is a superhuman figure that establishes God's kingdom and lifts up the poor (46:1–6, 48:7) (Huebenthal 2020). It is impossible to discern which traditions Mark knows, but these references to Jesus as Son of Man appear throughout Mark, as in 8:31, 9:31, 10:33–34, and, in a departure from the Son of Man in other texts, Jesus consistently refers to his own future suffering and resurrection. While scholars dispute every issue at hand in this puzzling phrase of "Son of Man" and its connection to Jesus, most recognise that a convergence of traditions is at work, notably that there seems to be a tradition in which the Danielic Son of Man is identified with the suffering servant of Isaiah (for an overview of the problem, see Yarbro Collins 1996.) This helps explain how the Son of Man is one to suffer and die. Most helpful to this view is the method of social memory theory, in which scholars move beyond identifying sources to determine interpretive "keys" in a text that attest to how writers and their communities have established frameworks for meaning (Kirk 2005; Kelber 2013). In the case of Jesus as Son of Man, Sandra Huebenthal (2020) argues that the book of Isaiah is a critical key or frame to Mark, and she identifies direct and indirect quotations from Isaiah in Mark. Some of these concern an impending judgement (Isaiah 13:10; 24:19), warning of destruction (Isaiah 66:24), and an eschatological messenger who is despised and forsaken (Isaiah 52–53). Most notably, as Craig Evans has noted, three important themes from the second half of Isaiah appear in Jesus's teaching and ministry: the proclamation of good news, which is presented as the coming Kingdom of God; the demand for repentance in view of an impending judgement; and healing and restoration (Evans, 667). While Isaiah is not an apocalyptic text, its older themes of eschatological judgement and comfort are reinterpreted in Mark to address the situation of the Markan community, which has just suffered the loss of the Temple in Jerusalem under the Romans. This loss is interpreted in Mark as God's judgement upon Israel, as is apparent in Mark 13 and as predicted by Jesus when he identifies himself as the Son of Man who will come to judge the world (see Mark 13).

Conclusion

While not an apocalypse in a formal sense, the Gospel of Mark interprets apocalyptic themes into its narrative through its depiction of Jesus. Central to the identity of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark are the following: his proclamation of the arrival of the kingdom of God, in which he is both the medium and content of revelation; his ministry of exorcisms and healings; and the references to Jesus as a salvific figure of Israel. While scholarship on Jesus in recent decades has explored his identity as an apocalyptic prophet (Allison 1998; Ehrman 2001) and offered evidence of Mark as retaining historical features of Jesus, some scholars have maintained Jesus is best understood in a wisdom context as a Cynic philosopher or poet sage (Crossan 1973; Mack 1987; Borg 2015). At stake here are historical issues related to Jesus of Nazareth, none of which can be settled by the sources themselves. In turning attention to the Gospel of Mark and its literary and rhetorical strategies, as well as its varied interpretive "keys," scholars instead continue to explore its reworking of apocalyptic themes and ideas for their deep theological resonance.

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