

#743 A reading of St. Mark, Crossings-style (Part 2)

Colleagues,

Last week ([ThTheol #742](#)) we brought you the first part of a paper on the Gospel of St. Mark by my fellow Thursday Theology editor, Jerry Burce. As you'll recall from last week, Jerry presented this paper as an extended pre-conference study session before the opening of the Fourth International Crossings Conference in Belleville, Illinois, this past January.

In the first part of his talk, Jerry walked us through what he called the "overture" of the Gospel, up to Mark 3:6. In this second part, and continuing with his symphonic metaphor, he walks us through the various "movements" and "interludes" in rest of the book. Along the way, he continues to point out recurring themes and to illuminate Mark's distinctive vocabulary, which (Jerry points out) is often obscured by standard translations. (Please refer back to the vocabulary list at the end of [ThTheol #742](#) for an overview.)

As you read, please keep in mind that today's installment is leading up to the final two parts of Jerry's paper, in which he first delves more deeply into several important episodes in Mark's Gospel and then runs the entire Gospel through the Crossings six-step matrix, finally tackling the question of how so gloomy and joyless a text can understood as good news for us today. We look forward to bringing you those final two parts in the next two weeks.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Orthographic note: when rendering Greek words with English letters, one wants somehow to distinguish between long “e” eta and short “e” epsilon, and between long “o” omega and short “o” omicron. To that end I’ve rendered as follows—

e = epsilonee = etao = omicronw = omega

[Part 2: picking up after paragraph 45]

46. At this point let’s pause to map out the rest of the Gospel with an eye for major section breaks and the rationale for identifying them as such.
47. First, since I’ve spoken of the opening section as an overture, I may as well carry on with the symphonic idea. Imagine four major movements with two interludes, the second an interlude as John Cage might imagine, the orchestra going silent and leaving everybody to sit there chewing on things until the conductor waves his baton to signal that it’s time to go home.
48. Geography and location are of the essence in making sense of Mark, so we’ll speak of the movements in those terms. Movement One: **Around the Sea**. Movement Two: **On the Road**. Movement Three: **At the Temple**. First Interlude: **Mt. of Olives**. Movement Four: **To Golgotha and Beyond**. Second Interlude: **Belleville, IL**, or Wherever.
49. **Movement One** starts at 3:7. It ends at 8:26. J. withdraws to the sea, his disciples in tow, a crowd gathers (3:8). Of huge significance is the composition of this particular crowd, comprising people from Gentile parts as well as Jewish. Here the ministry of J. is going completely public, which, in the larger context of the Biblical narrative as a whole, takes the Promise completely public for the first time. See the comments on Luke’s parallel in my 2010 Conference paper, [“The Mission of Christ the](#)

[Insurgent](#),” p. 10. Luke, by the way, attaches this Bible-as-a-whole hinge moment to the ministry of John the Baptist. Here it serves to launch Mark’s contribution to the major ecclesiastical issue for the New Testament church, i.e., for whom is Jesus, and on what terms, one of the top two or three issues in Mark’s Gospel as a whole.

50. Concerning the sea, look at the vocab sheet and note how references to it are clustered in this section, a tale of frantic movement back and forth and all around northern Galilee with the sea always at the center of things. 3:7-12 has an introductory, mini-overture quality to it, as in, “Here’s a typical day in life of Jesus,” J. with his disciples at the seashore, the crowds pressing in, the boat ready just in case, the sick touching to get healed, demons babbling his identity and being told to shut up. And so it will continue.

51. Major themes in this movement: First, the identity of Jesus with an emphasis on a) J. as the Messiah, the one promised and the one who keeps the promises; b) J. as a sort of new and peripatetic Zion to whom the nations come streaming to find healing and rest; c) J. as the Lord of Creation and the Ultimate Mr. Clean. Second theme: the calling of the Church as exemplified in the persons of the disciples, disciples defined as those who don’t merely listen, they hear, who don’t just see, they perceive (cf. 4:11-12); and in hearing and perceiving are equipped to carry J. mission forward. Third theme: the infernal difficulty of getting disciples to get it. Most of the time they flat out don’t, a problem that all of us today are painfully familiar with. The movement ends with the second of two miracles unique to Mark, both intensely didactic as all the miracles are—signs, as John the Evangelist will come to call them, pointers to things about J. that we get to hang our hearts and hopes on. Here

the thing pointed to is a promise of immense importance to the Church today. We'll explore it in detail later.

52. **Movement Two.** This begins at 8:27. The key marker of the movement is "on the road/way." Hodos in Gk. Again see the vocabulary sheet with an eye to how the word is distributed, seven occurrences in the section as a whole, four of them in chapter 10, which is best viewed as a major subsection. The road in this movement is the route J. takes to Jerusalem. It starts with a final Galilean tour, though without mention of the sea, and in 10:1 turns south toward Judea. The movement kicks off with the great "Who do people say that I am" question, followed by the first of the passion predictions, 8:31. The others are at 9:31 and 10:32-33. What unfolds is a two-edged sharpening of the identity question that loomed large in the first movement, gets sharpened, first by focusing on who J. is vis-à-vis Elijah and Moses, and second by introducing the disciples to the bizarre idea of the Christ who must die, with the implications of that for their present behavior on the one hand and their apostolic destiny on the other. Where is J. going, and what's entailed in tagging along? Those are the driving questions. There's an increased emphasis in this movement on teaching and instruction. As before, the disciples flat out don't get it. Nor do others. The mood is grim. The disciples are obtuse, the crowds needy, the Pharisees hostile, and Jesus cranky. Relief comes finally at end, in the person of Bartimaeus, the only one in entire Gospel who both sees and follows en tee hodw, on the way (10:52). Bartimaeus is for Mark as Thomas is for John, the one who finally gets it. Mark's choice, I think is the more scandalous, the beggar as exemplar for all of us today.

53. **Movement Three,** At the Temple. It begins at 11:1 with the entry into Jerusalem. This brings us to the heart of

Mark's soteriology, the clash between sin-management systems, both of them God's, but each producing a very different outcome. We'll look at that in some detail when we get to the widow's mite in the next [section]. All the action takes place in Holy Week, of course, first the Palm Sunday entry, then Monday's cleansing of temple—God coming suddenly with whip in hand per that hidden testimony of Malachi mentioned earlier—then a subsequent series of disputations (six of them) with opponents in their several varieties, including one—this is unique to Mk.—who winds up being praised (12:34). Along the way the fig tree gets cursed, the scribes are excoriated, and the widow's offering is observed. The mood is electric. Paul Jaster likens it to the King's return to Gondor in *The Lord of the Rings* ([ThTheol 711](#), second paragraph from the bottom). Jesus is commanding and the crowds enthusiastic, while the extant authorities alternate between hostility, fear, and amazement, the reactions that J. invariably stirs up. The central issue is authority, tied, of course, into the ongoing question about who J. is. For his part, J. stops being cagey. Almost. The section ends—as far as I know I'm utterly alone in asserting this—not at the end of chapter 12, but at 13:2.

54. **Interlude.** The Markan apocalypse. It starts at 13:3. One reason for saying that—the other I'll get to later—is the parallel in this verse to 3:7's kickoff to Movement 1, i.e. a mention of J. withdrawing with his disciples, and a note about specific place he's withdrawing to, in this case the Mt. of Olives. And now an oddity, unique to Mark: J. takes four disciples with him, not 12, not 3, but 4, Andrew having crashed the usual Peter, James, and John party (13:3). This is the longest unbroken stretch of discourse in all of Mark. I won't pretend to make sense of it beyond the following superficial observations:

- a. Today's exegetes associate it with Trajan's destruction of Jerusalem, A.D. 70. It makes tons of sense that Mark's first hearers did that too.
- b. That said, it could be just as easily associated with the downfall of any ingrained sin-management system, whether political, economic, cultic—the medieval papacy, the French aristocracy, American slavery, the Berlin wall; or on the micro-level, with whatever institutions you and I have invested in our whole lives long—church buildings, universities, neighborhoods, arrangements of any and every kind that are designed in large part to keep sinners in line. All these things will be laid low. That's the core message.
- c. Meanwhile whatever's being taken down and whenever it happens, expect wrath and woe, false Messiahs, turmoil within the church, attacks on the faithful. Re. false Messiahs, the Gk. reads "many will come in my name saying ego eimi (I am)," i.e. assuming not only Messianic but divine pretensions.
- d. Beyond that, expect the Lord's appearance to save. Hang in there. Be tough. Be smart, head for the hills if you have to, but whatever you do, don't give up.
- e. The last word here is "watch" (13:37; NRSV: "keep awake"). That's Markan code for "trust." Watching is the very thing the disciples fail to do during the proto-apocalypse about to unfold (14:37).

55. **Movement Four:** To Golgotha and Beyond, a.k.a. the Passion. To which I append the Easter narrative because in Mk.'s construction the two belong together as a continuation of a central theme that will occupy our attention in the next [section]. The movement begins, then, in 14:1. It ends at 16:8, not sooner, for reasons to be explored. I underscore

my earlier comment about the darkness of narrative. The gloom is unrelenting, all the way to the end. Again the central question, Where is the good news? The story, of course, is very familiar, but even so, here are a few assorted details to notice in Mk's telling, the significance of which will come apparent in the next [section] –

- a. In the garden Jesus becomes “distressed (14:33).” That’s a lousy NRSV translation (other translations are lousy too). The Gk. is ekthambeisthai, amazed, astonished—at least that’s how it’s translated wherever else the word pops up. In other words, everybody else’s standard reaction to God’s big doings in and through Jesus now becomes J. own reaction to what the Father is up to. He doesn’t like it, not one little bit. If you will “remove this cup” (14:36) and the “if you will” is the same “if you will” that the leper posits, chapter 1. Back then J. answered “I will.” Now the Father answers “I won’t.”
- b. Again some poor translation: we’ve been taught to say that Judas betrays Jesus, as in 14:11, 17, 42, whereas the chief priests hand him over to Pilate, 15:1, who in turn hands him over to soldiers, 15:15. The Gk. uses the same verb in all three places, paradidomi. I.e. if Judas is traitor, so are the others. In their actions they all commit the same offense, i.e. they betray God. And very much to a specific Markan point, the essential crime against J. gets committed by a) disciples, b) Jews, and c) Gentiles, all of them suffering from the same malady of terminal deafness and blindness.
- c. Speaking of which, pay attention to the places where the verbs “hear” and “see” pop up in this section.

E.g. “You have heard his blasphemy, what say you” (14:64), and “Let him down from cross that we may see and believe” (15:32), and when the centurion “saw” that he breathed his last in this way, he said... (15:39). Here we’re at the same core Markan theme.

- d. Small details. Notice that in Mk., exclusively Mk., the cock crows twice. Notice too the spitting, by Jewish council, 14:65, by Gentile soldiers, 15:19. Matt. picks this up, but not Lk. I think it carries more weight in Mk. than it will in Mt., calling to mind here the double-pass spit miracle of 8:22-26, about which I’ll say more shortly. Note for now that there J. touches twice to get the man seeing. Here the cock crows twice to open Peter’s eyes to his disgrace.
- e. By the way, notice the other strange detail, unique to Mk., of the young man in the garden running naked into the night (14:51-52). I plan to make some hay with that. Whether it’s worthy hay or not, you’ll have to say.
- f. Finally, notice that in Mk. the charges against J. focus on him as an insurrectionist, a revolutionary. “You think I’m a robber, a bandit?” asks J. when he’s arrested (14:48), but again, this is a wretched translation. The word is leestee, i.e. freedom fighter or terrorist depending on one’s point of view, the very thing Barabbas is. The accusation at his Jewish trial is that he threatened the temple (14:58) and that’s repeated in the mockery at the cross, 15:29; the issue at Roman trial is that whether he pretends to be king (15:2, 9; see too the mockery of the soldiers, 15:18, 26). That these are the charges will be obvious to all of us here. It

isn't and won't be to folks who hear this story in churches on Palm Sunday (and pity the lack of time that day for preachers to dig into it). Ask people in the pews, why did J. die? Their answer: to take away our sins. They'd be shocked to learn, I'll bet, that in Mk. sin per se is hardly ever mentioned. The Baptist brings it up, ch. 1, as does J. at the healing of the paralytic, ch. 2, but that's it. The word "sin," hamartia, appears nowhere else in the entire Gospel. Instead J. attends to sinners plagued by the consequences of sin—madness, as in infestation by unclean spirits; also sickness, hunger, and death, to say nothing of the deadly oppressiveness of the very systems that God himself has put in place to manage sinners, be it the temple or Rome. Sinners run these, of course. Sinners are also excessively attached to them. What we're about to explore is how J. focuses above all on the blindness, deafness, and hardness of heart that underwrites such attachments. Blindness (and deafness) is what sin is fundamentally about. When woman saw that tree was good for food, etc., she ate, and when the man ate too they saw that they were naked (Gen. 3), and up went the barriers of fear and hostility that J. will tackle in this very dark tale, this Gospel, so to speak, as St. Mark tells it. "So to speak," because it ends in a bust. "They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid" (16:8).

56. Comes **the close, the silent interlude**, Mk. 16:9 to 16:16, and on the far side of that gap is a bunch of people spending a Monday morning in Belleville, IL, with their noses buried in 1:1 to 16:8, as if there's something useful to be found there after all. As if the J.

of Mark's telling is worth reading and thinking about in A.D. 2012. Herein lies a mystery that (also) begs for much attention. Which it will get, before we're done.

57. So much for [section] 1, Mark in overview

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