
Reading the Gospel of Mark within Three Horizons

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Reading the Gospel of Mark in Year B occurs within three horizons. The first, for anyone who preaches or reads from the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), is the lectionary. The second is twofold: the narrative of the Gospel of Mark and the Greco-Roman world behind it. Preachers and readers may choose to focus on one, or both. The first and second horizons are not the same; and, by the nature of the RCL, they are in conflict, which requires skillful mediation by the preacher or reader. The third, due to the nature, setting, and purpose of preaching, is the preacher's and congregation's world. Preachers and readers will differ in their emphasis on the similarities or differences between the second and third horizons, and on the relative weight they give to each of the three horizons.

Reading the Gospel of Mark in the horizon of the Revised Common Lectionary

Preaching from the RCL can help preachers be aware that they share the Bible with the wider ecumenical community of Christian churches. It can also orient preaching to the movement of the liturgical seasons of the church. And it can help preachers avoid preaching from a narrow "canon within the canon," and from ignoring the Bible altogether. In short, preaching from the RCL reminds preachers that their calling is to proclaim the gospel handed on to them from the books of Moses to the Revelation of John.

Another reason for preaching from the RCL is that its narrative framework for each year is one of the four canonical Gospels. The RCL invites preachers to engage texts from other parts of the Bible in a conversation with texts of the Gospel of the year, and vice versa. As good as that invitation is, it is often a daunting challenge!

There are other problems with the RCL. Its parameters of texts frequently violate the integrity of pericopes. In spite of making the Gospel the RCL's narrative framework, the liturgical seasons, not the Gospel's narrative, guide the selection and sequence of Gospel texts. As a result, RCL makes it difficult for preachers to orient the Gospel text to its immediate narrative context and to the Gospel's whole narrative. Nowhere is that more evident than in Year B. The Gospel of Mark cannot satisfy the demands of the liturgical year: it lacks a birth narrative, its brief resurrection narrative can serve only one Sunday, and Mark's brevity requires the RCL to supplement it with texts from other Gospels. As an attempt to overcome RCL's shortcomings, the rest of this introduction offers

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several hermeneutical keys to the Gospel of Mark, which preachers might find helpful as they delve into individual Markan texts.

Reading the Gospel of Mark in the horizon of the narrative of the Gospel of Mark and of the world behind it

"The beginning of the good news of Jesus, Messiah, [son of God]."¹ These opening words of the Gospel of Mark might function as its title. They also could simply be the opening line,² introducing the words of the prophets Isaiah and Malachi (1:2–3), or the proclamation and baptism of John the Baptist (1:4–8) and Jesus' baptism (1:9–11), or all the above as "the beginning" of "the good news of Jesus, Messiah, [son of God]." And "the good news of Jesus"

1. All translations of biblical texts are the author's, unless marked otherwise. Most manuscripts include "son of God." Some scholars believe it is easy to explain their omission in some manuscripts as scribal errors. For these reasons, they have been part of Mark for centuries, and standard translations still include them. Nevertheless, the oldest and best manuscripts lack these words. In addition, scribal copyists of the majority family of manuscripts tend to expand christological phrases. As a compromise with tradition, square brackets enclose these words, even though scribes might have added them.

2. Compare of Matthew 1:1, "Βίβλος [*biblos*: account, record, or book] of the origin of Jesus, Messiah, son of David, son of Abraham," which refers either to Jesus' ancestral line and birth, or to the whole of this Gospel. On the other hand, Luke 1:1 ("Since many have undertaken to compose a narrative [διήγησις: *diēgēsis*] of the events that have been fulfilled among us") clearly describes the form and genre of Luke's Gospel: The author claims to have written, "carefully" and "in order," "everything from the beginning" (1:3).

could refer to “the good news” that Jesus proclaimed about the approaching “reign of God” (1:15), or “the good news” proclaimed about Jesus, that he is “Messiah, [son of God],” whose words and deeds are evidence of God’s reign,³ or both *Jesus*’ “good news” and “good news” *about Jesus*.⁴

Some interpreters have thought that these opening words identify the genre of Mark as a “Gospel,” from the Greek word εὐαγγέλιον (*euangelion*). Even if this term were to point to a genre, the question would still be, “What is a Gospel?” In the Greco-Roman world, εὐαγγέλιον was not a term for a literary genre; rather, it referred to an announcement of “good news,” for example, about the end of war, the beginning of national security, and economic prosperity—in short, *salvation* from war and poverty. In the mid-first-century CE Greco-Roman world, an audience would immediately understand the opening words of the Gospel of Mark as announcing that “Jesus, Messiah, [son of God]” was the bearer of “good news” about the coming of God’s salvation. And some might have understood that “good news” as an alternative to imperial Rome’s so-called “good news.”

The answer to the question about the genre of Mark (and the other Gospels) is simple: it is a narrative,⁵ a story! But what kind of story is it?⁶ Of the four canonical Gospels, Luke fits most of the traits of a βίος (*bios*: “life” or biography) of Jesus: it begins with his birth, family, and education before it turns to his career, death, and vindication. There is even a hint that the Lukan Jesus “develops” (Luke 2:52), although he seems to be fully developed when he first appears as a character in the story (Luke 2:41–52). However, Jesus’ inner thoughts receive less attention in Luke 22:39–46⁷ than in the other Gospels.⁸

Mark, which jumps right into Jesus’ career and death, has the fewest traits of that kind of Greco-Roman biography. Ancient biographies, however, are not all of the same type, and some of the types have features that are worth considering as we read Mark. For example, some, in the interest of praising and honoring a well-known person, emphasize the person’s positive traits and accomplishments, and omit faults and events that might not be complimentary. Whereas we can see how Mark praises Jesus, many—then and now—would consider the event at the center

3. See Mark 1:11, 24; 3:11; 5:7; 8:29; and 15:39.

4. The same ambiguous “of” (a genitive case in Greek) appears in Mark 1:14, “the good news of God,” which refers either to God’s “good news” (a subjective genitive) or to “good news” *about God* (an objective genitive). Both here and in 1:1, the “of” could convey both meanings (the objective and subjective genitive).

5. Luke 1:1 describes Luke as a διήγησις (*diēgēsis*), a term in the Greco-Roman world for a “narrative.”

6. For what follows, compare Adele Yarbro Collins’s thorough treatment of this question in her *Hermeneia* commentary on Mark (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 15–43.

7. The absence of Luke 22:43–44 in the oldest, best, and diverse manuscripts strongly indicates that they are due to later scribal emendation of the text. In some manuscripts, they appear after Matthew 26:39; and in some manuscripts scribes marked them as questionable.

8. Compare Mark 14:32–42; Matthew 26:36–46; and John 12:27–28.

Mark also fits biographies that present a person’s role in history. Paying little attention to a person’s private life and character, they seek to answer an important historical question. For example, the Gospel of Mark offers an answer to why the Romans executed Jesus,

of the story, his execution by crucifixion, a humiliating end to the life of a person who was a failure. Mark’s narrative, instead of turning away from it, depicts the disciples’ incomprehension of and opposition to Jesus’ teachings about the necessity of his death and the requirement that everyone who would follow him must “lose their life”!⁹

Other biographies offer scholarly summaries of a person’s teachings, to place them in the history of thought. Although the term “scholarly” and the Gospel of Mark might not seem to go together, Mark does locate Jesus’ teachings in the debates within mid-first-century CE Judaism. Even closer to the purpose of Mark’s summary of Jesus’ teachings are biographies that offer a teacher’s instructions on how to live a good and upright life, and what is required if one wished to be the teacher’s follower. Closely related are biographies that seek to present a person as an example to be imitated, by portraying the consistency of the person’s words (λόγοι: *logoi*) and deeds (πράξεις: *praxeis*), which shows the person’s character (ἦθος: *ēthos*): The Markan Jesus is true to his “calling” (1:9–15) to the end, even to point of his execution on a cross. He practiced what he preached, and walked the talk (8:34–37)!

Mark also fits biographies that present a person’s role in history. Paying little attention to a person’s private life and character, they seek to answer an important historical question. For example, the Gospel of Mark offers an answer to why the Romans executed Jesus, with the collaboration of Judean temple authorities, for what purpose, and with what effect in history. Mark’s answer: Jesus was a faithful witness to—and bringer of—God’s reign to the sick and poor in the face of imperial opposition, even to the point of death. In terms of its opening narrative, the Gospel of Mark answers the question of how “Jesus, Messiah, [son of God],” the “Lord” whom God’s ancient prophets Isaiah and Malachi promised, and whose “way” John the Baptist prepared, proclaims and is “the good news of God” (1:1–15).

9. Compare Luke 24:13–24, which says that Jesus’ crucifixion made the disciples sad (v. 17) and ended their hope that Jesus would liberate Israel (v. 21).

Reading the Gospel of Mark in the horizon of the preacher's and congregation's world in dialog with the horizon of the world behind the Gospel of Mark

Reading the Gospel of Mark in the service of preaching the gospel is a theological and a political act. It is a theological act insofar as reading any part of the Bible in the service of preaching the gospel presupposes or implies the Bible bears witness to many and diverse ways of understanding and encountering God in the world. It is also theological in the sense that it presupposes or implies a claim that being open to those many and diverse ways of understanding and encountering God in the world can contribute to the creative transformation of individuals' lives. Lives transformed through preaching informed by reading the Gospel of Mark might also contribute to the creative transformation of society, and potentially even of this planet. In that sense, reading the Gospel of Mark in the service of preaching the gospel can be a political, as well as a theological, act.

Reading the Gospel of Mark in the service of preaching the gospel is, or can be, a political act in another sense. It can be an act of resistance against certain trends in our culture. For instance, the opening words of this Gospel announce "the beginning of the good news of Jesus, Messiah, [son of God]." These words invite us to set *Jesus' good news* and *the good news about Jesus* over against imperial Rome's so-called "good news" and the claim that the Emperor was the "savior" of the world. In our time, Mark's opening words invite us to set *Jesus' good news* and *the good news about Jesus* over against the so-called "good news" proclaimed from the White House, the halls of Congress, governors' offices, and media pundits across the political spectrum. They also remind us that no political figure or one political party can be "the messiah." History has shown that, when people believe a political figure or one political party is "the messiah," catastrophe results.

We can, and should, hold every president accountable to "the good news of Jesus, Messiah, [son of God]," but the current presidency is the context in which we now read and preach from the Gospel of Mark.¹⁰ The current president has been proclaiming "good news" that he will "make America great again." It remains to be seen how this president will define his "good news," but the message in his first 100 days sounds more like imperial Rome's so-called "good news" of military security and prosperity for the already-wealthy. The church's challenge today is whether its proclamation of "the good news of Jesus, Messiah, [son of God]" will offer a creative alternative to so-called "good news" in current political discourse, one that proclaims good news to the sick, the poor, and the elderly here and around the world, and to the planet.¹¹

How preachers approach reading the Gospel of Mark in the

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horizon of the preacher's and congregation's world also depends on their understanding of the historical world of this Gospel, and how much weight they give to it. A dominant construction of Mark's historical context has focused on the so-called "early church's" refutation of "Judaism" and denunciation of Jews. According to one version of this view, Jesus was "against the Jews" and "against Judaism." An alternative view recognizes the difference between the portrayal of "Judaism" and Jews in the Gospels and their historical reality in the first centuries of the Common Era and of subsequent Jewish history. The portrayal of Jews and "Judaism" in the Gospels is a *polemical* construct! The focus is on the conflict *among Jews*, including the Markan community of Jesus-followers, in the period following the end of the Judean Revolt (66–70 CE). The focus in Markan studies began to shift in the 1980s to an emphasis on the social, political, and economic conditions at the center of the conflict between Jesus and his movement and Roman imperial forces and theologies.¹² The reader does not face a binary choice between a polemical conflict among Jews and a political conflict with Roman imperial forces and theologies. Both conflicts are relevant to reading Mark in the horizon of its historical world.

The conflict between Jesus and his followers with imperial Rome could inspire preachers to see implications of this Gospel (and the gospel) for political understanding and action. Discern what your calling is "for just such a time as this" (Esther 4:14 NRSV)!

10. See, e.g., O. Wesley Allen Jr., *Preaching in the Era of Trump* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2017).

11. See, e.g., Ronald J. Allen et al., (eds.), *Preaching God's Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year B* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011).

12. See, e.g., Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988).