
Preaching and the Caricature of Many Jewish People in the Gospel of Mark

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In the Gospel of Mark, tension between Jesus and many of the leaders of Judaism leaps off the page while initially the crowds are more positive toward Jesus. By the time the narrative reaches the trial of Jesus, the Jewish crowds are also antagonistic to Jesus. In my earlier days, I preached from Mark's narrative almost as if it is a straightforward account of what happened in the lifetime of Jesus. Even when I become more aware of the complicated development of Mark and the other gospels, I tended in preaching to speak as if Mark recounts simple biography. I could easily contrast narrow, rigid, superior, legalistic, works-righteous, power-hungry, and contentious Jews with open, accepting, gracious, and liberating Jesus, a contrast that extended to Judaism and the church. Indeed, I have heard preachers imply that Jesus came to save us from Judaism. In those days, I discussed Mark's pictures of the Jews as if they were straightforward accounts of what happened.

This contrast was a bonanza for preaching as I could easily make analogies between the Jews in the Gospel and contemporary individuals and groups, within the church and beyond. I could expose ways the congregation today is narrow, rigid, superior, legalist, and contentious. I might say, "You are the Pharisees of today!" I could exhort the congregation to follow Jesus by giving up its narrowness, rigidity, superiority, legalism, hypocrisy, and contentiousness and to become more open, accepting, gracious, and liberating. This approach had the effect—even if unintended—of reinforcing anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.

In the last generations, however, many scholars have convincingly argued that the Gospel of Mark often presents negative caricatures of many Jewish people. Mark does seek to represent actual historical figures as a biographer, but parodies Jewish figures for the purpose of discrediting the authority of many Jewish leaders in Mark's own day. Mark retrojects conflicts taking place in the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem into the story narrated in the Gospel.

In this article, I give an abbreviated survey of the main pictures of Jewish people in the Gospel of Mark, then recollect the context for which Mark wrote with an eye on why Mark portrays so many Jewish people in an unfortunate light. I note how this situation complicates the preacher's task and conclude by posing

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some possibilities for dealing with problematic pictures of Judaism in the sermon.

These themes are the subject of considerable scholarly discussion. Because of the brevity of this assignment, I venture my own perspectives without entering into extensive dialogue with other interpreters.

Mark's two main pictures of Jewish people

Mark pictures Jewish people in two main ways: positively and negatively. On the positive side, Mark tells the story of Jesus through a Jewish lens. Mark introduces the gospel with a quintessential end-time prophet, John the Baptist (Mark 1:2-8). Mark interprets Jesus and his mission in terms of Jewish end-time theology centered in the announcement that the movement towards the realm of God is beginning in the ministry of Jesus and will reach its final and complete manifestation at the return of Jesus (Mark 1:14-15; 13:24-27). The categories with which Mark names Jesus are Jewish, e.g., son of man, messiah, son of God. Mark pictures Jesus as authoritatively interpreting Torah in light of the present and coming transformation. Jesus engages in many key Jewish practices, such as attending synagogue. The path to following Jesus begins with repentance, a defining Jewish practice.

For much of the Gospel, the crowds largely respond positively

to Jesus, as do many Jewish people who are not identified with Jewish leadership. When Jesus engages in his first public act of ministry in the synagogue at Capernaum, the congregation was “astounded at his authority” (Mark 1:22). The “whole city” gathered at the door when Jesus was at Simon’s house (Mark 1:33). The disciples report to Jesus, “Everyone is searching for you” (Mark 1:37). This pattern largely continues until Mark 14 when a “crowd comes out with clubs and swords” to arrest Jesus (Mark 14:43).

Mark typically portrays Jewish leaders in a negative light. This negativity applies to nearly all Jewish leadership groups whom Mark names such as scribes, Pharisees, Herodians, elders, priests, and chief priests. The scribes are the first such figures to appear in the narrative and they are “questioning in their hearts” and accusing Jesus of blasphemy (Mark 2:8). The “scribes of the Pharisees” question Jesus’ eating with tax collectors and sinners (Mark 2:15) and the Pharisees accuse Jesus of violating sabbath practice (Mark 2:24). By Mark 3:6, the Pharisees conspire with the “Herodians” to destroy Jesus. Such leaders repeatedly initiate conflict with Jesus so that Jesus warns the disciples to beware of the “yeast of Pharisees and the yeast of Herod” (Mark 8:15).

After the chief priests and scribes decide to look for a way to kill Jesus (Mark 11:18), Jesus tells the parable of the wicked tenants against this religious leadership to say that God is taking the vineyard away from them and giving it to others. The parable thus explains the reason for the destruction of the temple (Mark 12:1-12; Mark 13:1-2). Mark depicts the chief priests, scribes, and elders as orchestrating the events that put Jesus on the cross. These leaders send the crowd with “swords and clubs” to arrest Jesus (Mark 14:43). Jewish leadership is responsible for the crowd choosing Barabbas over Jesus and crying “Crucify him!” (Mark 15:11).

The context for which Mark wrote: Crisis in Judaism and in Mark’s congregation

Most scholars in the historic churches think someone we call Mark gave the gospel its present form in the wake of the defeat of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 CE. Judaism was in crisis. The Roman Empire tightened its repressive grip on Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. Grief was in the air as many Jewish people had died during the siege. The Romans destroyed much of Judea’s infrastructure. The economy was staggering. Some Jewish institutions collapsed. Jewish groups associated with the temple, such as the priests, lost power.

The catastrophe included a crisis in religious authority. In the shadow of defeat and destruction, key questions haunted many people. How should Jewish people interpret the religious significance of the crisis? What would be the future of the Jewish community? What should people do? Different Jewish groups interpreted the meaning of the destruction of the temple in different ways. Different groups put forward competing visions of the future as well as different guidance on how to participate in the movement toward that future. These groups vied with one another.

At this time, Mark’s community was a sect in Judaism. One

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of Mark’s purposes in writing the Second Gospel is to offer the congregation an authoritative interpretation of the national disaster and to put forward a vision of the future of Judaism and how to respond appropriately. Mark writes as a faithful Jew who presented Jesus as an apocalyptic, end-time prophet who saw the destruction of the temple as the signal that God was in the process of ending the present broken age and replacing it with the new world, the realm of God (Mark 1:14-15; Mark 13:1-37). Mark, like other writers in the Jesus tradition, believes that God is now opening the way for Gentiles to be part of the movement toward the eschatological future.

Although Mark portrays many Jewish leaders in a negative light (and eventually portrays the crowds in the same way), Mark does not disdain *Judaism* as such. To be sure, Mark believes that aspects of Judaism are now relativized, e.g., the dietary practices (Mark 7:1-23). The religious life associated with the temple no longer exists. But Mark does not see Jesus establishing a new and different religion. Mark does not urge the congregation to give up its Jewish identity. In fact, Mark sees the story of Jesus as a continuation of the centuries-old Jewish story that will end only with the coming of the realm of God. Mark wants the congregation to see faithfulness to Jesus as a part of the movement of God’s purposes through Judaism into the future.

Why Mark caricatures so many Jewish leaders: To undermine other Jewish authorities

Mark’s caricature of so many Jewish leaders in the Second Gospel is related to the issue of authority. The voices claiming to be authoritative in the world of post-70 CE Judaism were quite diverse. People had to decide which voices are more and less authoritative, which voices they would follow, which ones to ignore, and which ones to criticize. As part of that culture, members of Mark’s congregation must decide which authorities they will follow. Mark wants the congregation to regard the story of Jesus as told in the Second Gospel as authoritative. Mark wants listeners to follow Jesus and the way toward cosmic transformation using the Second Gospel as a guide.

Mark uses two strategies to pursue this goal. One strategy is to portray Jesus and the way of discipleship in inviting terms. By

following Jesus by means of the Markan congregation, people will anticipate qualities of the realm of God in the present and will be part of the final and full manifestation after the apocalypse. Those who repent, believe in the good news, and are faithful will be bear fruit thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold (Mark 4:20). To be sure, in the mode of pastoral warning, Mark cautions the congregation that this pathway will involve conflict similar to the conflicts that Mark pictured taking place with Jesus. Indeed, those who would come after Jesus must “take up their cross,” a reference to the specific suffering that results when one witnesses to the realm of God and meets rejection and violence (Mark 8:34-38). More specifically, for Mark, the suffering of the community in the shadow of the fall of the temple is itself a sign that the apocalypse is coming soon (Mark 13:9-13). Listeners need to endure faithfully to the end to be saved (Mark 13:13).

This, incidentally, is a communication strategy that today’s preacher might emulate. While it is important for the congregation to recognize the brokenness of the world and to repent of its complicity in that brokenness, people are more likely to consider long-lasting change in attitudes and behavior if they are drawn forward by a positive vision.

In Mark’s world many people anticipated an apocalypse at which time all people would be judged—the faithful joining God in the final materialization of the realm, others being condemned. Some people today believe just this way. Others (myself included) think such a singular apocalyptic event is unlikely. Even if the congregation today does not believe that an apocalypse with such results is coming, it is still possible to affirm that God is continually present, inviting the community toward thoughts and actions that bring the qualities of the realm of God to life in the present. A preacher can appeal to the desire of the congregation to be part of a movement that is promising for the community and for all.

The second part of Mark’s strategy is to undermine the authority of other Jewish leaders by painting the Jewish leaders in the Gospel as narrow, rigid, superior, legalistic, works-righteous, power-hungry, and contentious. Mark depicts them acting to preserve their own power, going so far as to encourage Pilate to sentence Jesus to death and, thereby, to remove Jesus’ threat to their place in the social order.

As noted earlier, Mark does not seek to reconstruct a reliable biographical picture of historical Jewish leaders as they were in the time of Jesus. Instead, Mark seeks to use the picture of the Jewish leaders in the Gospel as a way of commenting on the Jewish leaders of Mark’s own day. By portraying Jewish leaders in such a negative light, Mark uses these caricatures to say to the congregation, “The other Jewish leaders in our time are like the ones pictured in the Gospel. You cannot trust them. You see what happened to those who followed them: Jerusalem was ransacked, the temple was destroyed, and many aspects of Jewish life collapsed into chaos. If you follow them, you can expect more of the same.”

In doing so, Mark employs a communication practice that was commonplace in the Hellenistic age: the rhetoric of vilification. Speakers and writers employ this approach in the face of

At the time of the Second Gospel, other Jewish groups interpreted the present and future in ways that some in Mark’s community found inviting. Mark employs the rhetoric of vilification to discredit the other authorities and to persuade listeners to stay in the Markan camp.

direct competition. The targets of the rhetoric of vilification are typically groups that are successful and toward whom members of the speaker’s community are attracted. Speakers who employ the rhetoric of vilification often think their groups are in danger of losing members to rival groups. Speakers and writers use the language of vilification when they recognize that other groups offer real competition. At the time of the Second Gospel, other Jewish groups interpreted the present and future in ways that some in Mark’s community found inviting. Mark employs the rhetoric of vilification to discredit the other authorities and to persuade listeners to stay in the Markan camp.

To add fuel to the vilification fire, Mark writes as if other Jewish groups will engage in formal legal proceedings against members of Mark’s community. The cross that Jesus says the church must take up includes conflict with the leaders of traditional Judaism, as well as conflict with Roman authorities. Mark 13:9 alludes to such a possibility. “They will hand you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them.” In a culture in which identity is communal, the Markan Jesus justifies the breakdown of the family when some members of the household reject others in the household who align themselves with the Jesus movement. Wider social relationships also disintegrate (Mark 13:12-13a).

Moreover, Mark also calls attention to the presence of rival interpretations of Jesus on the part of other groups of Jesus’ followers. “Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray” (Mark 13:6; cf. Mark 13:21-22). While the degree of vilification of other communities of Jesus’ followers is mild by comparison with the vilification of the Jewish leaders, discrediting is still discrediting. For Mark, the only trustworthy interpretation of the story of Jesus is the one Mark tells in the Second Gospel.

These factors suggest that Mark engages in bad history and bad theology by creating a false impression of Jewish leaders. Yes, Judaism was diverse, and some Jewish people looked with genuine disdain on other Jewish people. For example, the end-time community at Qumran regarded the temple leadership as hopelessly corrupt. Nevertheless, typical Jewish theology in the first century

reveals a view of a gracious, covenant-making, covenant-keeping God who seeks blessing for all and who gave Torah as the gift of instruction for the way to live in community towards blessing. The historical Pharisees were the equivalent of a reform movement who sought to increase the practice of covenant values in everyday life and whose emphasis on Torah as the center of religious practice gave them a particular platform from which they could eventually take a lead in regathering Judaism in the decades following the crisis of 70. Mark's caricature thus misrepresents some facts of history.

Scholars sometimes say that in its own context in antiquity, the rhetoric of vilification was simply a convention. The particulars with which the speakers besmirched their competitors were just popular, off-the-shelf characterizations. The historical Jewish leaders, then, were not likely as disreputable as Mark portrays them. However, this perspective does not excuse the fact that the rhetoric misrepresents those whom they vilify. In essence, with respect to history and theology, Mark bears false witness and violates the spirit of the ninth commandment (Exod 20:16; cf. Deut 5:20).

In a broad sense, Mark faces an issue that is one of the most important matters before the church in the early twenty-first century: authority. From congregation to congregation today, one can go through interpretations of God's purposes that are as different as blue and red in the color spectrum. How does the church distinguish which interpretations are more and less plausible? A preacher could help the congregation wrestle with the process of deciding interpretations are more authoritative than others, and why.

Attempting to expose Mark's caricature while using it

This way of thinking about the pictures of the Jewish people in the Gospel of Mark complicates the preacher's task. This complication is also true, in various degrees, with respect to the pictures of Jewish people in Matthew, Luke-Acts, and John. As noted at the outset, a typical hermeneutical move in preaching is to make analogies between elements in the text and elements of contemporary life. This kind of move is tempting in the case of the caricature of Jewish people precisely because the preacher is likely aware of people in the world today (including people in the congregation) who think and act in ways that are similar to the negative pictures of Jewish people in the Gospels.

Indeed, the preacher may be especially inclined in this direction because the world of the early twenty-first century shares several characteristics with Judaism after the destruction of Jerusalem. There is considerable chaos in the social world. The future is uncertain. Many different groups vie with one another for loyalty and power. People are asking, "Which authorities can I believe?" How easy it is for the preacher to try to undermine authorities the preacher opposes in the contemporary world by likening those authorities to antagonistic Jewish figures in the Gospels.

Preachers may attempt both to respect the desultory dimensions of the caricature of Jewish leadership and to draw analogies between Mark's portrait and today. The preacher with such a

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double mind-set might explain the historical and theological difficulties of the role of so many Jewish people in Mark's telling of the story, and then say something like, "Recognizing the flawed nature of Mark's caricature with respect to Jewish people in the ancient world, we can nevertheless use that caricature as a lens to identify people and groups today who are narrow, rigid, superior, legalistic, works-righteous, power-hungry, and contentious."

While this preacher may seek to avoid reinforcing anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, the fact that the preacher continues to use the language of the Jewish stereotypes from the Gospel unwittingly does this very thing. Even though this approach calls attention to problematic elements in the negative associations with Jewish people, as long as preachers continue to compare contemporary people with the Jewish people in negative stereotype, then sermons will feed anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic impulses. To be sure, the degree of deprecation would go down, yet such analogies unintentionally feed unfortunate associations with Jewish individuals, communities, institutions, and perhaps even with the first thirty-nine books of the Bible. Listeners may not consciously have anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic sentiments open on the desktops of their minds, but the taint of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism may be running in selves and community like background programs.

Four steps on a way forward

When confronted with a text in which Mark uses the rhetoric of vilification to caricature Jewish leaders, wider groups of Jewish people, or Jewish institutions for the purpose of undermining the authority of those groups, a preacher might turn to a fresh four-phase interpretive process designed to help the congregation recognize the historical and theological difficulties in Mark. In doing so, the preacher would not only criticize those difficulties and invite repentance, but also use them as jumping off points

for revitalizing relationships and witness between church and synagogue today.

In this sense, Mark's misrepresentation of many Jewish leaders and other people is not just a problem with which the preacher must deal. This picture also creates an opportunity for the preacher. The act of recognizing the problem in antiquity can become a launching pad for thinking about how we today might make theological mistakes similar to those Mark made. That is, the preacher might take Mark's pattern of caricaturing as a lens for helping the congregation identify how we, too, engage in dismissively representing individuals, communities, movements, and institutions that we find objectionable. Indeed, people across the theological spectrum of the contemporary church engage in the rhetoric of vilification to undercut the authority of others.

Moreover, the theological resources available to Mark for moving beyond this issue are also available to us, albeit perhaps adapted for theological orientations that differ from Mark's end-time world view. For example, as a process theologian I do not share Mark's apocalyptic perspective, but I can use that perspective as a spark for considering how I do envision God's presence and purposes.

To be sure, today's preacher needs to help the congregation wrestle with issues of authority related the different visions of God's purposes before the church and world. However, the preacher needs to do so in ways that are consistent with the ways and means of the realm of God. Vilification, even for a good end, is an unacceptable means of undermining one authority to establish another.

The notion of analogy does not disappear from hermeneutical process. But instead of finding analogy between ancient Pharisees and contemporary elders and deacons, we look for possible analogies between Mark's caricature of the Jews and similar ways that we caricature and dismiss people or institutions to undermine them.

Toward this end, I find the following four steps to be quite helpful when working with individual passages:

1. The preacher explains how Mark characterizes the Jewish people present in the text at the center of the sermon, and names why Mark took the route of caricature. The preacher names the injustice—bearing false witness against Jewish neighbors—in employing the rhetoric of vilification.
2. The preacher turns to the central theological message of the Gospel of Mark, the realm of God, as containing the resources necessary for correcting Mark's misrepresentation and for reinvigorating the positive mission of the Markan community. In Mark's context, many people believed the realm of God would be a new social world in which people lived together in mutual support according to God's values for community. The route into that community began with repentance—turning away from complicity with things that violate others, such as caricaturing Jewish leaders and people in other groups under the auspices of the rhetoric of vilification, and turning toward the values and practices of the realm. The Gospel of Mark offers the theological and moral antidote for the very problem that Mark exhibits.

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3. The preacher helps the congregation recognize how we are similar to Mark in misrepresenting people, groups, and institutions in our churches and in the wider world in which we live. In some congregations, these misrepresentations may involve Jewish people, but much of the time, the misrepresentations will include other Christian churches, as well as racial and ethnic communities and even political parties and politicians. Treating individuals and groups in caricature allows us to dismiss them without engaging them or their ideas in serious ways. It also gives the other groups occasion to dismiss us.
4. The preacher returns to the central message of the Gospel of Mark as a way forward. In my mind, the notion of the realm of God is still a vision of a world in which all people live together in mutual support. While I do not, like Mark, think this realm will come about through an historical apocalypse, I do believe that God is ever present offering individuals and communities opportunities to participate with God in moving toward greater depths of mutual solidarity and support.

These four steps can become a part of the preacher's process of preparing the sermon. While the preacher can organize the sermon in almost pattern, these four steps could also easily become a four-part structure for a sermon. The preacher could expand these four steps into the sections of the body of the sermon.

The church should always be concerned to reduce anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism and to encourage not only mutual respect but also mutual mission. This concern has particular urgency in the early twenty-first century when the mass shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh is only one of the most visible manifestations of the increasing level of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism not only in North America but in many other sectors of the world. Reflecting critically on the pictures of Jews, Judaism, the Jewish Scriptures, and Jewish institutions in the Gospels can contribute significantly to reshaping Christian perspectives with regard to how we perceive our parent religion and its people in ways that honor the intentions of the realm of God. I would like to think such reflection could increase the moral authority of the church in the early twenty-first century.