

JESUS, THE SUFFERING SON OF GOD: THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK

CHAPTER

5

WHAT TO EXPECT

If the early Christian Gospels were ancient religious biographies of Jesus, how should that affect their interpretation? Should we take them to be historically accurate accounts? Pure fictions? Something in between?

We begin exploring such questions by taking the Gospel of Mark as our first example. Mark is the shortest and probably the earliest surviving account of Jesus' life. In this chapter we will be especially concerned with the author's overarching message, seeing how, in a series of scenes, he establishes Jesus' character as the messiah sent from God in fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures, the Son of God chosen by God to fulfill his mission on earth.

What will strike us as especially odd is that people in this Gospel have such a hard time grasping Jesus' unique identity. In fact, at the end, one is left with the question: do Jesus' own disciples ever get it?

We begin our study of the Gospels with Mark, the shortest of the four in the New Testament. We do not know who the author was, only that he was a Greek-speaking Christian, presumably living outside of Palestine, who had heard a number of stories about Jesus. Mark (as I will continue to call him since we do not know his real name) penned an extended account of Jesus' life beginning with his appearance as an adult to be baptized by John and ending with the report of his resurrection. In addition to stories that he had heard, Mark may also have used some written sources for portions of his narrative. If so, these sources no longer survive. Of the full-length Gospels that do survive, Mark appears to have been the first written. As we will see, this Gospel was itself used by the authors of Matthew and

Luke for many of their stories about Jesus (see Chapter 6).

An introductory textbook such as this cannot provide an exhaustive analysis of Mark (or the other Gospels). My purpose here is simply to provide some guidance for your own interpretation of the book, by supplying you with important keys for unlocking its meaning. My working assumption, throughout our discussions, is that you have already familiarized yourself with the contents of the book by reading it carefully all the way through a couple of times.

There are a number of ways we could approach this investigation. Indeed, we will be taking different approaches to each of the Gospels that we examine. We will study Mark, however, in light of the issues discussed in the previous chapter. Let's

assume that we are informed readers of this text, conversant with the genre and knowledgeable about the world within which it was written. Knowing that Mark is a kind of Greco-Roman biography about Jesus, we can ask, who was Jesus, according to this literary portrayal, and what did he do? And how is this message conveyed through the shape of the narrative?

THE BEGINNING OF THE GOSPEL: JESUS THE MESSIAH, THE SON OF GOD WHO FULFILLS SCRIPTURE

One of the first things that strikes the informed reader of Mark's Gospel is how thoroughly its

traditions are rooted in a Jewish worldview. The book begins, as do many other ancient biographies, by naming its subject: "The Beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (1:1). Readers living in the Greco-Roman world would not recognize "Christ" as a name; for most of them it was not even a meaningful title. The word comes from the verb "anoint" and typically referred to someone who had just had a rubdown (with oil). "Christ" was a title in Jewish circles, however, as the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word "messiah." Mark, then, is a book about Jesus the messiah.

Jews in the first century could have meant a range of things by the title messiah, as scholars have come to realize (see box 5.1). Many of these meanings, however, can be subsumed under two major rubrics (which are not necessarily



SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 5.1 The Jewish Messiah

The term "messiah" comes from a Hebrew word that means "anointed one," the exact equivalent of the Greek term *christos* (thus "messiah" and "Christ" mean the same thing). In the Hebrew Bible the term is applied to the Jewish King, who was anointed with oil at his inauguration ceremony as a symbolic expression of God's favor; he thus was called "the Lord's anointed" (see 1 Sam 10:1; Ps 2:2).

The term came to refer to a future deliverer of Israel only after the Babylonians overthrew the nation of Judea in 587 B.C.E. and removed the Jewish king from the throne. From that time on, there was no anointed one (messiah) to rule for several centuries (until the Hasmonean rulers, starting in the mid-second century B.C.E.). But some Jews recalled a tradition in which God had told David, his favorite king, that he would always have a descendant on the throne (2 Sam 7:14–16). This is probably the origin of the idea that there would be a future messiah to fulfill God's promises, a future king like David who would rule the people of God once again as a sovereign nation in the Promised Land.

By the time of the New Testament, different Jews had different understandings of what this future ruler would be like. Some expected a warrior-king like David, others a more supernatural cosmic judge of the earth, and still others (such as the community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls) a priestly ruler who would provide the authoritative interpretations of God's law for his people (see Chapter 15). All of these figures are designated "messiah" in the ancient Jewish sources.

In no source prior to the writing of the New Testament, however, is there any reference to a future messiah who is to suffer and die for the sins of the people. This notion appears to be a Christian creation, as we will see more fully in Chapter 17. It may represent a combination of the belief in a future messianic deliverer with the notion that the one who is truly righteous suffers, a notion expressed in such biblical passages as Psalms 22 and 69 and Isaiah 53. Surprisingly for many Christian readers, the term "messiah" never occurs in these passages.

mutually exclusive). For some Jews, the messiah was the future king of Israel, who would deliver God's people from their oppressors and establish a sovereign state in Israel through God's power. For others, he was a cosmic deliverer from heaven, who would engage in supernatural warfare with the enemies of the Jews and bring a divine victory over their oppressors. Both notions had been around for some time by the first century; both, obviously, were designations of grandeur and power.

Mark begins his Gospel by calling Jesus the messiah. But as we will see—and as everyone who read the book probably already knew—Jesus did not conform to either of the general conceptions of this title. He neither overthrew the Romans in battle nor arrived on the clouds of heaven in judgment. Instead, he was unceremoniously executed for treason against the state. What in the world could it mean to call *him* the messiah? This is one of the puzzles that Mark's Gospel will attempt to solve.

The Jewishness of the Gospel becomes yet more evident in the verses that follow. First there is a tantalizing statement that the story, or at least the first part of it, is a fulfillment of an ancient prophecy recorded in the Jewish Scriptures (it is quoted, of course, in the Greek translation, the Septuagint; 1:2–3; see box 2.6). Then there is the appearance of a prophet, John the Baptist, proclaiming a Jewish rite of baptism for the forgiveness of sins. John's dress and diet (1:6) are reminiscent of another Jewish prophet, Elijah, also described in the Jewish Scriptures (cf. 2 Kings 1:8). This John not only practices baptism, he also preaches of one who is to come who is mightier than he. Mightier than a prophet of God? Who could be mightier than a prophet?

Jesus himself then appears, coming from the northern part of the land, from the region of Galilee and the village of Nazareth. He is baptized by John, and upon emerging from the waters, he sees the heavens split open and the Spirit of God descend upon him like a dove. He then hears a voice call out from heaven: "You are my beloved Son, in you I am well pleased" (1:11). The proclamation appears to have serious implications: Jesus is immediately thrust out into the wilderness to confront the forces of evil (he is "tempted by Satan," 1:13). He returns, victorious through the

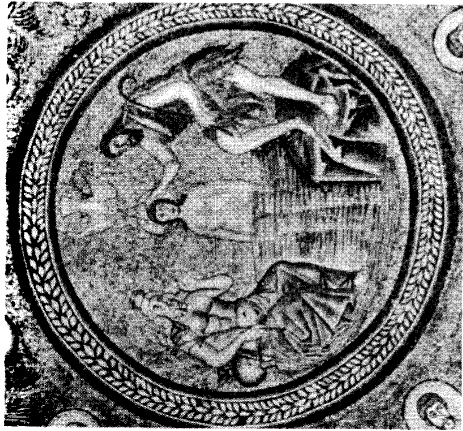


FIGURE 5.1 Portrayal of Jesus' Baptism by John and the Descent of the Dove, from a Vault Mosaic in Ravenna, Italy.

power of God ("the angels" have "ministered to him" 1:13), and begins to make his proclamation that God's kingdom is soon to appear (1:14–15).

Here, then, is a Gospel that begins by describing the forerunner of Jesus, the Son of God, and the miraculous proclamation of his own Sonship. Up to this point a Gentile reader may have recognized the Jewish character of the account but the designation "Son of God" would no doubt have struck a familiar chord. When Jesus was proclaimed the Son of God (by God himself no less), most readers in the Greco-Roman world would probably have taken this to mean that he was like other sons of God—divinely inspired teachers or rulers whose miraculous deeds benefited the human race. But given the Jewishness of the rest of the beginning, perhaps we should inquire what a Jewish reader would make of the title Son of God.

Even within Jewish circles there were thought to be special persons endowed with divine power to do miracles and to deliver inspired teachings (see Chapter 2). Two of them we know by name Hanina ben Dosa and Honi the "circle-drawer" (see box 2.8). These men, living roughly at the time of Jesus, were understood to have a particularly intimate relationship with God, and as a result were thought to have

been endowed with special powers. Accounts of their fantastic deeds and marvelous teachings are recorded in later Jewish sources. What made these persons special was their unique relationship with the one God of Israel. The notion that mere mortals could have such a relationship was itself quite ancient, as shown by the Jewish Scriptures themselves, where an individual was sometimes called "the son of God." The king of Israel, for example, was thought to mediate between God and humans and so stand in a special relationship with God as a child does to a parent. Even kings with dubious public records were sometimes called "the son of God" (e.g., 2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7–9). And others receive the title as well: occasionally the entire nation of Israel, through whom God worked his will on earth (Hos 11:1), and sometimes God's heavenly servants, beings that we might call angels (Job 1:6; 2:1). In all of these instances in Jewish circles, "the son of God" referred to someone who had a particularly intimate relationship with God, who was chosen by God to perform a task, and who thereby mediated God's will to people on earth. Sometimes these sons of God were associated with the miraculous.

What, then, does Mark mean by beginning his account with the declaration, by God himself, that Jesus (this one who was to be executed as a criminal) is his son? We can begin our quest for an answer by examining key incidents in the Gospel's opening chapter, recalling that ancient biographies tended to set the character of their subjects in the early scenes.

JESUS THE AUTHORITATIVE SON OF GOD

The reader is immediately struck by the way in which Jesus is portrayed as supremely authoritative. At the outset of his ministry, he sees fishermen plying their trade. He calls to them and without further ado they leave their boats and family and hapless co-workers to follow him (1:16–20). Jesus is an authoritative leader; when he speaks, people obey.

Jesus enters the synagogue to teach and astonishes those who hear. Mark tells us why: "He taught them as one who had authority, and not as

the scribes" (1:22). Jesus is an authoritative teacher; when he gives instruction, people hang onto his every word.

He immediately encounters a man possessed by an unclean spirit, who recognizes him as "the Holy One of God" (1:24). Jesus rebukes the spirit and by his word alone drives it out from the man. Those who witness the deed declare its significance: "With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (1:27). Not only does he drive out evil spirits who embody opposition to God, he also heals the sick, both relatives of his followers (1:29–31) and unknown townsfolk (1:32–34). Soon he is seen healing all who come, both the ill and the possessed. Jesus is an authoritative healer; when he commands the forces of evil, they listen and obey.

This portrayal of Jesus as an authoritative Son of God sets the stage for the rest of the Gospel. Throughout his public ministry, Jesus goes about doing good, healing the sick, casting out demons, even raising the dead (5:1–43). His fame spreads far and wide as rumors of his fantastic abilities reach the villages and towns of Galilee (1:28; 1:32–34; and 1:45). Moreover, he attracts the crowds by his inspired and challenging teaching, especially when he tells parables, brief stories of everyday, mundane affairs that he endows with deep spiritual significance. Interestingly, most of those who hear his words do not understand what they mean (4:10–13).

Given the incredible following that Jesus amasses, the amazing teachings that he delivers, and the miraculous deeds that he performs, one would think that he would become immediately and widely acknowledged for who he is, a man specially endowed by God, the Son of God who provides divine assistance for those in need. Ironically, as the careful reader of the Gospel begins to realize, nothing of the sort is destined to happen. Jesus, this authoritative Son of God, is almost universally misunderstood by those with whom he comes in closest contact. Even worse, despite his clear concern to help others and to deliver the good news of God, he becomes hated and opposed by the religious leaders of his people. Both of these characteristics are major aspects of Mark's portrayal of Jesus. He is the opposed and misunderstood Son of God.

JESUS THE OPPOSED SON OF GOD

A good deal of Mark's Gospel shows that despite Jesus' fantastic deeds the leaders of his people oppose him from the outset; and their antagonism escalates until the very end, where it results in the catastrophe of his execution. Despite this hostility between Jesus and the leaders of Israel, Mark does not portray Jesus as standing in opposition to the religion of Judaism (at least as Mark sees it). Recall that Jesus is said to be the Son of the Jewish God, the Jewish messiah, come in fulfillment of

the Jewish Scriptures and preceded by a Jewish prophet. He teaches in the Jewish synagogue and works among the Jewish people. Later we will find him teaching in the Temple, discussing fine points of the Jewish Law with Jewish scholars, and observing the Jewish Passover. Indeed, even though Jesus' understanding of the Law will come to be challenged, Mark maintains that he was himself faithful to the Law. Consider the account of the leper in one of the opening stories (1:40–44). After Jesus heals the man, he instructs him to show himself to a Jewish priest and to make an offering on behalf of his cleansing “as Moses



SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 5.2 Jewish Scribes, Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees, and Chief Priests

Mark's Gospel names a number of groups of religious authorities among the Jews. I will discuss these various groups more fully when we consider the historical Jesus in Chapter 15. For the present, it will be enough simply to sketch what each of these groups stood for.

- **Jewish scribes** in the first century represented the literate elite, those who could read and study the sacred traditions of Israel and, presumably, teach them to others. Recall that most Jews, as well as most other people in the ancient world, were not highly educated by our standards; those who were educated enjoyed a special place of prominence.
- **Pharisees**, as we have seen in Chapter 2, were Jews who were strongly committed to maintaining the purity laws set forth in the Torah and who developed their own set of more carefully nuanced laws to help them do so. They appear as the chief culprits in the Jewish opposition to Jesus during much of his ministry in Mark's Gospel (see box 5.3).
- **The Herodians** were a group of Jews that Mark mentions but does not identify (3:6; 12:13; see also Matt 22:16). They are described in no other ancient source. Mark may understand them to be collaborators, that is, supporters of the Herods, the rulers intermittently appointed over Jews in Palestine by the Romans.
- **Sadducees**, as observed earlier, were Jews of the upper classes who were closely connected with and strong advocates for the Temple cult in Jerusalem. They were largely in charge of the Jewish Sanhedrin, the council of Jews that advised the high priest concerning policy and that served as a kind of liaison with the Roman authorities.
- **Chief priests** were the upper classes of the Jewish priesthood who operated the Temple and oversaw its sacrifices. They would have been closely connected with the Sadducees (presumably a number of Sadducees were among them) and would have been the real power players in Jesus' day, the ones with the ear of the Roman governor in Jerusalem and the ones responsible for regulating the lives of the Jewish people in Judea. Their leader, the high priest, was the ultimate authority over civil and religious affairs when there was no king in Judea.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 5.3 Jesus' Opponents in Mark

Our knowledge about first-century Jewish groups should make us curious about certain aspects of Mark's Gospel. We know from other sources that the Pharisees were not numerous in the days of Jesus; there certainly were not enough to stand at every wheat field to spy out itinerant preachers on the Sabbath (see Chapter 15). Not, evidently, were they influential in the politics of Palestine at the time, or even concerned that everyone else (i.e., non-Pharisaic Jews) conform to their own rules and regulations for purity. And yet they appear as Jesus' chief adversaries in Mark's narrative, constantly hounding him and attacking him for failing to conform to their views. Can this be historically accurate?

Scholars have long known that some decades after Jesus' death, nearer the end of the first century, the Pharisees did become more prominent in Palestinian life. After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. they were given authority by the Romans to run the civil affairs of Palestinian Jews. Moreover, we know that Pharisees interacted frequently with Christian churches after the death of Jesus. Indeed, the one Jewish persecutor of the church about whom we are best informed was Paul, a self-proclaimed Pharisee.

Is it possible that the opposition leveled against the church by Pharisees after Jesus' death affected the ways that Christians told stories about his life? That is to say, because of their own clashes with the Pharisees, could Christians have narrated stories in which Jesus himself disputed with them (usually putting them to shame), even though such disputes would have happened only rarely during his own lifetime?

commanded" (1:44). Jesus is scarcely bent on subverting the Jewish religion.

Why, then, do the Jewish leaders—the scribes and Pharisees in Galilee and the chief priests in Jerusalem—oppose him (see box 5.2)? Do they not recognize who he is? In fact, they do not recognize him, as we will see momentarily. Even more seriously, they are gravely offended by the things that he says and does. This is evident in the accounts recorded in 2:1–3:6, a group of conflict stories that show a crescendo in the tension between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, the scribes and Pharisees. At first these leaders merely question his actions (2:7); they then take offense at some of his associations (2:16) and his activities (2:18), then protest the actions of his followers (2:24), and finally take serious exception to his own actions and decide to find a way to put him to death (3:6).

In particular, these authorities take umbrage at Jesus' refusal to follow their own practices of purity. He eats with the unrighteous and with sinners, those thought to be unclean and to pollute the pure. For Jesus, these are the ones who need his help (2:15–17). Nor does he follow the Pharisees' prescriptions for keeping the seventh day holy (2:23–3:6); he puts human needs above the require-

ment to rest on the Sabbath. In Jesus' view, the Sabbath was made for the sake of humans and not humans for the Sabbath; it is therefore legitimate to prepare food or heal a person in need on this day (2:27; 3:4). From the Pharisees' perspective (as portrayed by Mark), these are not honest disagreements over matters of policy. They are dangerous perversions of their religion, and Jesus needs to be silenced. The Pharisees immediately take counsel with their sworn enemies the Herodians (see box 5.2) and decide to have him killed (3:6).

After these opening stories of conflict, Jewish authorities are constantly on the attack. In virtually every instance they are the ones who initiate the dispute, even though Mark consistently portrays Jesus as getting the better of them in dialogue (see esp. 11:27–12:40). In the end, however, the chief priests triumph, convincing the Roman governor that Jesus has to die. Why, ultimately, do they do so? The short answer is that they find Jesus threatening because of his popularity and find his words against their Temple cult offensive, as shown in his violent and disruptive actions in the Temple itself (11:18). But in the larger picture painted by Mark's Gospel, the Jewish authorities do not seek Jesus' death merely because they are jealous or because they dislike

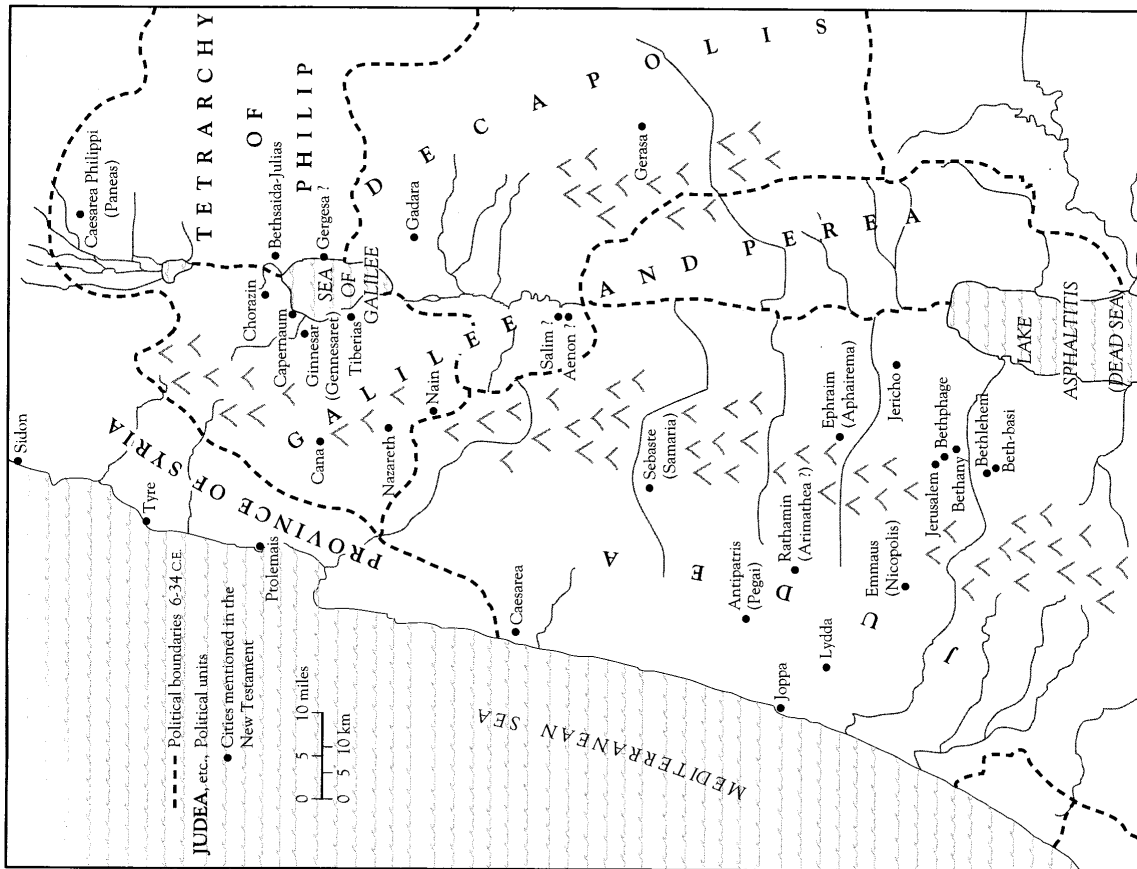


FIGURE 5.2 Palestine in New Testament Times.

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with him over legal, theological, or cultic matters. They oppose him because he is God's unique representative on earth—God's authoritative Son—and they, the leaders of Israel, cannot understand who he is or what he says. In this, however, they are not alone, for virtually no one else in Mark's narrative can understand who he is either.

JESUS THE MISUNDERSTOOD SON OF GOD

One way to establish misunderstanding as a Markan theme is to read carefully through the first half of the Gospel and ask, who realizes that Jesus is the Son of God? The answer may come as a bit of a surprise. Clearly God knows that Jesus is his Son, because he himself declares it at the baptism (1:11). And since this declaration comes directly to Jesus ("You are my beloved Son"), the reader can assume that he knows it as well. In addition, the evil demons recognize Jesus as the Son of God; on several instances they scream it out when they encounter him (3:11, cf. 1:24). Who else knows? Only two other persons: the author of the Gospel, who recounts these various tales, and you, the one who reads them.

Through the first half of this Gospel, no one else recognizes Jesus' identity, including even those who are closest to him. Early on, when he comes to his home town, his family tries to snatch him from the public eye because they think that he has gone crazy (3:21). Jesus' own townspeople neither understand nor trust him. When he teaches in their synagogue, they take offense at his words and wonder how he has the ability to do such miraculous deeds, since he is a mere carpenter whose (unremarkable) family they know (6:1–6). The Jewish scholars think they know the source of his power. Refusing to acknowledge the divine authority behind Jesus' words and deeds—how could one so profane come from God (2:7)—they claim that he is possessed by Beelzebul, the prince of the demons, and so does miracles through the power of the Devil (3:22).

Perhaps most striking of all, Jesus' own disciples fail to understand who he is, even though he has specially chosen them to follow him (3:13–19) and given them private instruction (e.g., 4:10–20). When they watch him calm a violent storm at sea with a word, their question is genuine: "Who then

is this, that even wind and sea obey him?" (4:41). When they later behold Jesus walking upon the water, they continue to be mystified: "For they did not understand . . . but their hearts were hardened" (6:51–52). When, later still, Jesus warns them "to beware of the leaven of the scribes and Pharisees" (8:15), they mistake his meaning, thinking he is angry because they have forgotten to bring bread, even though they had seen him miraculously feed thousands of hungry people on two different occasions. Now Jesus expresses his own exasperation: "Do you not yet understand?" (8:21). No, they do not. But they will begin to have an inkling, right here at the midpoint of the Gospel.

JESUS THE ACKNOWLEDGED SON OF GOD

One of the keys to understanding Mark's portrayal of Jesus lies in the sequence of stories that begins immediately after Jesus' exasperated question of 8:21. The sequence begins with perhaps the most significant healing story of the Gospel, an account that Mark appears to have invested with special symbolic meaning. This is a story of a blind man who gradually regains his sight (8:22–26).

It is striking that the healing takes place in stages. Indeed, it is the only miracle in the Gospel that Jesus does not perform immediately and effortlessly. When he is asked to heal the blind man, he takes him by the hand, leads him out of the village, spits on his eyes, and asks if he can see. The man replies that he can, but only vaguely: people appear like walking trees. Jesus then lays his hands upon his eyes and looks intently at him, and the man begins to see clearly.

A perceptive reader will recognize the symbolism of the account in light of its immediate context. In the very next story, the disciples themselves, who until now have been blind to Jesus' identity (cf. 8:21), gradually begin to see who he is, in stages. It starts with a question from Jesus: "Who do people say that I am?" (8:27). The disciples reply that some think he is John the Baptist, others Elijah, and yet others a prophet raised from the dead. He then turns the question on them: "But who do you say that I am?" (8:29). Peter, as spokesperson for the group, replies, "You are the Christ."

This is a climactic moment in the narrative. Up to this point, Jesus has been misunderstood by everyone, by family, neighbors, religious leaders, and followers, and now, halfway through the account, someone finally realizes who he is, at least in part. (The reader knows that Peter's confession is correct to some extent, since for Mark Jesus is the messiah; recall how he identifies him in the very first verse of the narrative as "Jesus the Christ.") Rather than rejecting or repudiating Peter's confession, Jesus orders the disciples not to spread the word: "And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him" (8:30; see box 5.4).

Still, Peter's identification of Jesus as the messiah is correct only in part. That is to say, Peter has begun to see who Jesus is, but still perceives him only dimly. The reader knows this because of what happens next. Jesus begins to teach that he "must suffer many things, and be rejected by the

elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise from the dead" (8:31). Jesus is the messiah, but he is the messiah who has to suffer and die. And this makes no sense to Peter. He takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him.

But why would Peter reject Jesus' message of his approaching "Passion" (a term that comes from the Greek word for "suffering")? Evidently he understands the role of the messiah quite differently from the way Jesus (and Mark) does. The author never delineates Peter's view for us, but perhaps it is not so difficult to figure out. If Peter uses the term "messiah" in the way most other first-century Jews did, then he understands Jesus to be the future deliverer of Israel, a man of grandeur and power who will usher in God's kingdom in a mighty way (whether as a warrior-king or as a cosmic judge of the earth; see box 5.1). But for Mark, this is only a

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 5.4 *The Messianic Secret in Mark*

After Peter's confession, Jesus instructs his disciples not to tell anyone who he is. Interestingly, Jesus attempts to keep his identity a secret on a number of other occasions in Mark's Gospel as well. When he casts out demons, he refuses to let them speak "because they knew him" (1:34; cf. 3:12). When he heals a leper, he commands him to "say nothing to anyone" (1:43). When he raises a young girl from the dead, he strictly orders "that no one should know this" (5:43). Indeed, before his discussion with the disciples at the end of chapter 8, he never speaks openly to anyone about his identity. And there, when someone finally recognizes that he is the messiah, he commands silence.

How does one explain this ironic feature of Mark's Gospel, that Jesus is the Son of God, the messiah, but that he does not want anyone to know? This puzzle has been called the "messianic secret" since the earlier part of the twentieth century, when a German scholar named William Wrede propounded a now famous solution—that the historical Jesus himself never urged secrecy at all because he did not actually see himself as the messiah. After his death, however, Jesus' followers began to proclaim that he *had been* the messiah. How could it be that Jesus was thought to be the messiah when he had made no such claim about himself? Wrede's explanation was that the early Christian community invented the idea that Jesus tried to keep his identity under wraps. They then fabricated the stories of Jesus' commands to silence to show that a messianic Jesus did not proclaim himself to be the messiah.

Different scholars evaluate the merits of this solution differently, and we will have occasion to return to it when we take up questions pertaining to the historical Jesus in Chapter 16. In the present chapter we are interested in how the messianic secret functions literarily in the context of Mark's story of Jesus. Here Jesus is clearly the messiah (cf. 1:1); but just as clearly he is not the great king or cosmic warrior that many Jews may have anticipated. Why then the commands to silence? One explanation is that Jesus in Mark's Gospel does not want people to have the wrong idea about him; for example, by thinking that he is the kind of messiah they have anticipated. For Mark, the title "messiah" does not signify earthly grandeur and power but just the opposite. As messiah, Jesus was the Son of God who had to suffer and die.

partial truth, a dim perception of who Jesus is. For him, Jesus is the messiah who must suffer and die to bring about salvation for the world.

Peter's failure to perceive this truth forces Jesus to turn the rebuke back on him: "Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (8:33). The idea that the messiah had to suffer may have appeared totally anomalous to most Jews of the first century, including Jesus' own disciples; but in Mark's view, to understand Jesus in any other way is to succumb to the temptations of the devil. Thus Peter has begun to see, but not yet clearly; he is like a blind man who has partially recovered his sight. Perhaps this is better than being totally blind, but in another sense it is worse, because partial perception can lead to misperception: people seem to be trees and Jesus appears to be the messiah of popular expectation. For Mark, however, Jesus is the suffering Son of God.

JESUS THE SUFFERING SON OF GOD

Throughout the early portions of Mark's Gospel the reader is given several indications that Jesus "will have to die (e.g., 2:20; 3:6). After Peter's confession, however, Jesus begins to be quite explicit about it. Even though he is the Christ, the Son of God—or rather because he is—he must suffer death. Three times Jesus predicts his own impending passion in Jerusalem: he is to be rejected by the Jewish leaders, killed, and then raised from the dead. Strikingly, after each of these "Passion predictions" Mark has placed stories to show that the disciples never do understand what Jesus is talking about.

We have already seen the first prediction in 8:31. When Jesus declares that he must be rejected and killed, Peter, who has just declared Jesus to be the messiah, not understanding fully what this means, takes him aside to rebuke him (8:32). Jesus turns the rebuke back on him and begins to teach that suffering is to be not only his lot but that of his followers as well: "Whoever would come after me must take up the cross and follow me." Being

a disciple means affliction and pain, not power and prestige; it means giving up one's life in order to gain the world. Those who reject these words will have no part of Christ at the end of the age (8:34–38).

The next prediction occurs a chapter later, after Jesus' hidden glory is revealed on the Mount of Transfiguration to three of the disciples, who even then fail to understand what they have seen (9:2–13; especially vv. 6, 10). In nearly the same terms as before, Jesus predicts his coming death, and Mark states that the disciples do not know what he means (9:30–31). Immediately afterward, they begin to argue over who is the greatest among them (9:33–34). Jesus again tells them that being his disciple means a life of lowly servitude rather than grand eminence.

The final prediction occurs in the chapter that follows (10:33–34). In this instance, the details are somewhat more graphic, but the response of the disciples is remarkably similar. James and John, two of his closest followers, request positions of prominence when Jesus enters into his glorious kingdom. Jesus has to tell them, yet again, that following him means certain death, and that if they want to be great they must become the slaves of all. This, in fact, is what he has done himself: "For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (10:45).

From this point on, the narrative marches inexorably toward Jesus' death, as Mark recounts the familiar stories of the "Passion narrative." Jesus triumphantly enters Jerusalem to shouts of acclamation from the crowds, who appear to accept the disciples' notion of what it means for Jesus to be the messiah (11:1–10). He enters the Temple and drives out those who are in business there, incurring yet further opposition from the Jewish leadership (11:15–19). He teaches in the Temple, and engages in disputes with his opponents among the leaders, who try to trap him and stir up the crowds against him (11:28–12:40). He launches into a lengthy description of the imminent destruction of the Temple, when the end of time comes and the cosmic judge, the Son of Man, appears to bring judgment to the earth and salvation to the followers of Jesus (13:1–36). He assures his hearers that

this apocalyptic drama will unfold soon, within their own generation (13:30).

Finally we reach the account of the Passion itself. Jesus is anointed with oil by an unknown woman, evidently the only person in the entire narrative who knows what is about to happen to him (14:1–9; she may, however, simply be performing a kind deed that Jesus himself explains as a preparation for his burial). He celebrates his Last Supper with his disciples (14:12–26) and then goes out with them to (the Garden of) Gethsemane to pray that he not be required to suffer his imminent ordeal (14:26–42). God, however, is silent. Jesus is arrested (14:43–52) and put on trial before the Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin, where he is confronted with witnesses who accuse him of opposing the Temple (14:53–65). The false witnesses on the inside are matched by the false disciples on the outside: while Jesus is being tried, Peter, as predicted, denies him three times (14:66–72).

Jesus is finally questioned directly by the high priest concerning his identity: “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” The reader, of course, already knows the answer: Jesus is the messiah, the Son of God, but not in any way that these Jewish authorities would recognize. Jesus now confesses to his identity and again predicts that the Son of Man, the cosmic judge from heaven, will soon arrive on the clouds of heaven (14:61–62; see box 5.5). The Sanhedrin charges him with blasphemy and finds him worthy of death (see box 5.6). The next morning they deliver him over to Pilate, who tries him on the charge of claiming to be King of the Jews (15:1–15). When Jesus refuses to answer his accusers, Pilate condemns him to execution for treason against Rome. Pilate gives the Jewish crowds the option of releasing Jesus or a Jewish insurgent, Barabbas (15:6–15). They prefer Barabbas. Jesus is flogged, mocked, and beaten. They take him off and crucify him at 9:00 a.m. (15:25).



SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 5.5 *Son of God and Son of Man*

The way that most people understand the terms “Son of God” and “Son of Man” today is probably at odds with how they would have been understood by many Jews in the first century. In our way of thinking, a “son of God” would be a god (or God) and a “son of man” would be a man. Thus, “Son of God” refers to Jesus’ divinity and “Son of Man” to his humanity. But this is just the opposite of what the terms meant for many first-century Jews, for whom “son of God” commonly referred to a human (e.g., King Solomon; cf. 2 Sam 7:14) and “son of man” to someone divine (cf. Dan 7:13–14).

In the New Testament Gospels, Jesus uses the term “son of man” in three different ways. On some occasions he uses it simply as a circumlocution for himself; that is, rather than referring directly to himself, Jesus sometimes speaks obliquely of “the son of man” (e.g., Matt 8:20). In a related way, he sometimes uses it to speak of his impending suffering (Mark 8:31). Finally, he occasionally uses the term with reference to a cosmic figure who is coming to bring the judgment of God at the end of time (Mark 8:38), a judgment that Mark’s Gospel expects to be imminent (9:1; 13:30). For Mark himself, of course, the passages that speak of the coming Son of Man refer to Jesus, the one who is returning soon as the judge of the earth. As we will see later, scholars debate which, if any, of these three uses of the term can be ascribed to the historical Jesus.

JESUS THE CRUCIFIED SON OF GOD

It is clear from Mark’s Gospel that Jesus’ disciples never do come to understand who he is. As we have seen, he is betrayed to the Jewish authorities by one of them, Judas Iscariot. On the night of his arrest, he is denied three times by another, his closest disciple, Peter. All the others scatter, unwilling to stand up for him in the hour of his distress. Perhaps Mark wants his readers to understand that the disciples were shocked when their hopes concerning Jesus as messiah were thoroughly dashed: Jesus did not bring victory over the Romans or restore the kingdom to Israel. For Mark, of course, these hopes were misplaced. Jesus was the Son of God, but he was the Son of God who had to suffer. Until the very end, when Jesus was actually crucified, there is nobody in the Gospel who fully understands this.

Mark’s narrative may even intimate that at the end Jesus himself was in doubt. In Gethsemane he prays three times not to have to undergo his fate, suggesting perhaps that he thinks there could be another way. When he finally succumbs to his destiny, he appears yet more uncertain, and with good reason. Deserted by his own followers, condemned by his own leaders, rejected by his own people, he is publically humiliated, beaten, spat upon, flogged. He is nailed to the cross, and even there he is mocked by passersby, Jewish leaders, and the two criminals who are crucified along with him. He suffers throughout this entire ordeal in silence, until the very end, when he cries out the words of Scripture: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (15:34; cf. Ps 22:2). He then utters a loud cry and dies.

Is this a genuine question of the dying Jesus? Does he truly feel forsaken in the end even by God? Does he not fully understand the reason for his death? These are questions on which readers of the account may disagree. On one point, however, there can be no disagreement. Even though no one else in the Gospel appears to know the significance of Jesus’ death, the reader knows. Mark reveals it by narrating two events that transpire immediately after Jesus breathes his last: the curtain in the Temple is torn in half from top to bot-

tom (15:38), and the Roman centurion confesses Jesus to be the Son of God (15:39).

Without posing the historical question of what really happened to the curtain in the Temple (there is no reference in any non-Christian source to its being torn or damaged in any way), one might ask how the reader is supposed to understand Mark’s claim that it was ripped asunder. Most ancient Jews ascribed a particular holiness to the Temple as the one place in which sacrifices could be offered up to God. This was a sacred place to be revered and respected. The most sacred area within the holy Temple was the Holy of Holies, the square room in whose darkness God’s very presence was thought to dwell. This room was so holy that no one could enter, except on one day of the year, the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), when the Jewish high priest could go behind the thick curtain into the presence of God to perform a sacrifice to atone for the sins of the people.

Mark indicates that when Jesus died, the curtain separating this holiest of places from the outside world was torn in half. The event appears to signify, for Mark, that God is no longer removed from his people; his holiness is now available to all. No longer do his people need to rely on the Jewish high priest and his sacrifice for their sins on the Day of Atonement. The ultimate sacrifice has been made, voiding the necessity of all others. Jesus, the Son of God, has “given his life as a ransom for many” (10:45). People now have direct access to God, who comes to them in the death of Jesus.

The second event cited by Mark is equally significant. No one throughout the Gospel has fully understood that Jesus is the Son of God who has to suffer. Until now. Strikingly, it is not one of Jesus’ family or followers who understands. It is the Roman centurion who has presided over his crucifixion. This pagan soldier, seeing Jesus die, proclaims, “Surely this man was God’s Son” (15:39). This brings the recognition of Jesus’ true identity full circle. It was proclaimed at his baptism at the beginning of the Gospel (from heaven); it is now proclaimed at his crucifixion at the end (on earth). Moreover, it is significant who makes the proclamation: a pagan soldier, one who had not been Jesus’ follower. This in itself may ini-

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 5.6 The Charge of Blasphemy according to Mark

Jesus' trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin in Mark is as poignant as it is difficult to understand. The high priest asks Jesus, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus replies, "I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven" (14:61–62). The high priest immediately cries out "Blasphemy," and the entire Sanhedrin concurs. But what was the blasphemy?

It was not blasphemous to claim to be the messiah. Other persons before Jesus had done so and others would later. Nearly a century after Jesus' death, one of the leading rabbis of the day (Rabbi Akiba) proclaimed a Jewish general (Simon bar Kosiba) to be the long awaited messiah, and no charges of blasphemy were brought against him. If the messiah was the future deliverer of Israel, then a person claiming to be the messiah was simply claiming to be the next king.

Nor was it blasphemous to call oneself the Son of God. Recall, other people were also called this, both in the Jewish Scriptures and during Jesus' own day. Nor, finally, was it blasphemous to predict that the Son of Man was soon to arrive on the clouds of heaven. This, in fact, was prophesied in the book of Daniel, and there were a number of Jewish preachers who proclaimed that his much awaited appearance would soon come.

So what was Jesus' blasphemy? From a historical point of view, Jesus does not appear to have committed one in Mark's narrative. But it is possible that Mark thought that Jesus' committed one, at least in the eyes of the Jewish high priest. Remember that Mark understood Jesus to be the Son of Man (see box 5.5). Perhaps Mark projected his own Christian understanding of Jesus back onto the high priest, so that in the narrative, when Jesus spoke about the Son of Man being seated on the throne next to God, the high priest "realized" (as the author of Mark himself believed) that Jesus was referring to himself. If so, then the high priest (in Mark's narrative, not in real life) would have understood that Jesus was claiming to be divine in some sense. This claim would be a blasphemy. Perhaps this is why the high priest in Mark finds Jesus' words blasphemous, even though technically speaking, no blasphemy had occurred.

mate what will happen to the proclamation of Jesus through the years until the time when Mark pens his account. The proclamation will not find fertile soil among Jews, either those who had known Jesus or those who had not. It will be embraced principally by those outside of Judaism, by Gentiles as represented by this Roman centurion. Jesus is the Son of God, rejected by his own people but acknowledged by the Gentiles, and it is this confession of the suffering and death of the Son of God, Mark reveals, that has brought salvation to the world. This, however, is not the end of the story.

JESUS THE VINDICATED SON OF GOD

One of the most fascinating aspects of Mark's Gospel is the way in which he chose to conclude it. Jesus is buried by a respected leader among the Jews,

Joseph of Arimathea (indicating, perhaps, that not all Jews, or even all prominent Jews, were bound to reject him; 15:42–47, cf. 12:28–34). Two women see where he is placed. The next day is the Sabbath. Early in the morning on the day after Sabbath, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome come to provide a more decent burial for the body, but they discover that the stone before the tomb has been rolled away. Going inside, they find a young man in a white robe who tells them that Jesus has risen. He instructs them to tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee and that they are to go there to see him (16:1–7). Then comes the breathtaking conclusion. The women flee the tomb and tell nobody anything, "for they were afraid" (16:8). That's where the book ends.

Christian readers from time immemorial have been shocked and dismayed by this conclusion.



FIGURE 5.3 One of the earliest surviving portrayals of Jesus' crucifixion, from a miniature ivory panel of the fourth century.

How could it end without the disciples hearing that Jesus has been raised? How could they remain in their ignorance? Surely the women must have told someone. In the early church, some copyists of this Gospel were so put off by the ending that they added one of their own, appending twelve additional verses that describe some of Jesus' appearances to his disciples. Modern scholars are unified, however, in recognizing this ending as secondary (see Chapter 29). Some have proposed, in its stead, that we assume that the final page of the Gospel somehow got lost.

These various explanations for Mark's ending, however, may be unnecessary. Mark devoted considerable effort to demonstrating that the disci-

ples never could understand what Jesus meant when he talked about dying and rising again. They never do understand, to the very end. Mark's readers, however, understand. In fact, they understand a lot of things—about who Jesus really is, about how he was thoroughly misunderstood, about how his message was to go to the Gentiles, and about what it means for those who believe in him to be his disciples.

CONCLUSION: MARK AND HIS READERS

Can we decide who the original readers of this Gospel probably were? It is impossible, of course,

to learn very much about them. Our only evidence comes from the Gospel itself, and conclusions drawn on these slim grounds will necessarily be tentative. But there are a few intimations both about the first readers and about Mark's overarching concerns for them, and I will conclude this discussion by considering them.

The first readers of this Gospel appear to have been the Christians of Mark's community, most of whom would have been illiterate, and thus "read" the Gospel by hearing it read (see box 3.1). They evidently resided outside of Palestine and had Greek as their primary language. There are clues in the Gospel that most of them had converted to Christianity from pagan religions, not from Judaism, the most striking of which comes in 7:3-4, where Mark has to explain the Pharisaic custom of washing hands before eating for ceremonial cleansing. Presumably, if his audience were Jewish, they would already know this custom, and Mark would not have to explain it. What is even more intriguing is the fact that Mark appears to misunderstand the practice: he claims that it was followed by "all the Jews." We know from ancient Jewish writings that this is simply not true. For this reason, many scholars have concluded that Mark himself was not Jewish.

Many of Mark's traditions, however, are concerned with showing the Jewishness of Jesus and appear to presuppose strictly Jewish beliefs and practices. How can we explain this? Many of the oral traditions found in this Gospel must go back to the earliest Jewish followers of Jesus, who embodied their own beliefs and concerns in them. As the stories were passed along, their Jewish character was preserved. Mark and many people in his congregation (some of them Jewish?) converted to faith in Jesus, which necessarily involved converting to Jesus' religion, Judaism. They too came to worship the Jewish God and saw in Jesus the Jewish messiah, whose death brought about salvation not only for Jews but for the whole world.

It may be that this community continued to experience open conflict with a local Jewish synagogue that actively rejected these Christian claims about Jesus. And it may be that this conflict at times turned ugly. This would explain why Mark

emphasizes that Jewish leaders, especially Pharisees, failed to understand Jesus and that following him involves a high cost. For Mark, following Jesus is not a ticket to glory, it is the path to suffering; being a disciple does not bring exaltation but humiliation and pain.

Mark stresses, however, that the suffering would not last forever. In fact, it would not last long. Just as Jesus was vindicated, so too will be his faithful followers. And the end was near (9:1). This may have been suggested to Mark by current events: many scholars believe that the Gospel was written during the early stages of the Jewish War against Rome (66-70 C.E.), at the conclusion of which the Temple itself was destroyed. Does this war mark the beginning of the end, predicted by Jesus as certain to occur during the lifetime of some of his disciples (see 8:38-9:1 and all of chap. 13)? Indeed, for the Markan community, the Son of Man was at the gate, ready to make his appearance. Those who were ashamed of Jesus' words would be put to shame when the Son of Man arrived; those who accepted his words and became his followers would then enter into glory. Just as Mark's Jesus may not have fully understood the meaning of his own crucifixion, so too the Christian community currently experiencing suffering may not fathom its full meaning. But ultimately their pain will lead to redemption. This is just one of the paradoxical claims of Mark's Gospel.

Mark's story of Jesus is replete with such paradoxes: the glorious messiah is one who suffers an ignominious death; exaltation comes in pain, salvation through crucifixion; to gain one's life one must lose it; the greatest are the most humble; the most powerful are the slaves; prosperity is not a blessing but a hindrance; leaving one's home or field or family brings a hundredfold homes and fields and families; the first will be last and the last first. These lessons provide hope for a community that is in the throes of suffering, experiencing the social disruptions of persecution. They make particular sense for a community that knows that its messiah, the Son of God, was rejected and mocked and killed, only to be vindicated by God, who raised him from the dead.

AT A GLANCE

Box 5.7 The Gospel of Mark

1. Mark was written in Greek, around 65-70 C.E.
2. Its anonymous author was a Greek-speaking Christian, probably living outside of Palestine, who had heard numerous stories about Jesus before writing his account for his Christian community.
3. The Gospel begins with Jesus as an adult, and at the outset it reveals his character as the Son of God who leads, teaches, heals, and casts out demons with authority, but who is nonetheless opposed by Jewish religious leaders.
4. The Gospel stresses that Jesus' character and destiny were misunderstood by virtually everyone with whom he came in contact.
5. For Mark, Jesus was not to come in power to overthrow the forces of evil aligned against God and his people. He came to suffer and die at the hands of these forces.
6. But Mark indicates that God had the last say. After Jesus' suffering and death in Jerusalem, God raised him from the dead, and an angelic messenger announced that he would meet his followers in Galilee.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Hooker, Morna. *The Message of Mark*. London: Epworth, 1983. A very nice overview of the most significant features of Mark's Gospel; ideal for beginning students.

Kingsbury, Jack D. *The Christology of Mark's Gospel*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983. A useful discussion of Mark's view of Jesus from a literary-critical perspective that looks for clues to the meaning of the text in the flow of the narrative.

Matera, Frank J. *What Are They Saying about Mark?* New York: Paulist, 1987. An excellent overview of modern scholarship on Mark, for beginning students.

Nickle, Keith. *The Synoptic Gospels: Conflict and Consensus*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1980. One of the best introductory discussions of the background and message of the three Synoptic Gospels.

Sanders, E. P., and Margaret Davies. *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989. A detailed and thorough discussion of the Synoptic problem and of the major scholarly approaches to each of the three Synoptic Gospels; for advanced students.

Tolbert, Mary Ann. *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989. An insightful and provocative study of Mark's literary technique and method, which tries to understand the entire narrative of Mark's Gospel in light of the literary conventions of its first-century milieu; best suited for advanced students.

Wrede, William. *The Messianic Secret*. Trans. J. C. G. Greig. Cambridge: Clarke, 1971. The classic study of Mark's literary technique and theological agenda, for advanced students.