

Brief Notes on the Readings From Mark for Sundays and Other Holy Days

Advent 2 Cycle B, Mark 1:1-8

The biblical quotation in Mark 1:2-3 actually contains quotations both from Malachi 3:1 and from Isaiah 40:3. The ascription of both quotations to Isaiah alone remains a puzzle. Within a Jewish context the appearance of a prophet such as John was a sign of the end of time because Jews of Jesus' day believed that prophecy had ceased in Israel and would return only with the advent of King Messiah. John's Baptism was a ritual washing away of the defilements of the present evil age in preparation for the coming new age, a ritual closely akin to the ritual washings of the Qumran sect described in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

First Sunday After the Epiphany Cycle B Mark 1:7B11

The vision of the dove belongs only to Jesus in Mark's account, as does hearing of the voice from heaven. Perhaps under the influence of Greek philosophy, Judaism in the first century was reluctant to portray God as undertaking such a directly human activity as speaking, so the divine voice in heaven is called an "echo" (Hebrew: *bat qol*) instead.

First Sunday in Lent Cycle B Mark 1:9-13

Christians are so used to talking about the Holy Spirit, that they sometimes fail to understand the surprise the ancient reader would have felt to have the Spirit be the

divine agent in Jesus' baptismal vision and his subsequent testing in the wilderness. Jews believed that the Spirit had ceased from Israel and would only return with the Messiah. Mark's seemingly offhanded reference to the Spirit tells the reader of the author's belief that the Age of the Messiah has begun. Mark gives no content to Jesus' "testing" in the wilderness, only Matthew and Luke mention actual Satanic enticements. Perhaps for Mark mere survival in the Judean wilderness for forty days was "testing" enough.

Third Sunday After the Epiphany Cycle B Mark 1:14-20

Jesus was a wandering teacher of a kind that disappeared after the Jewish revolts of AD 66-72 and AD 132-135. Such a teacher would call students ("disciples") to accompany them on their travels and learn his *torah* ("teaching") before returning home. Students would pay the teacher a fee and would help defray the costs of the wandering school. When students had successfully learned the *torah* of their masters, they were themselves able to call their own students. Hence the promise to Simon and Andrew in 1:17 that they will "fish for people." Mark presents Jesus and his disciples as fitting this mold of the wandering teacher and his disciples but has Jesus' *torah* be the revolutionary disclosure of the coming of God's kingdom on earth.

Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany Cycle B Mark 1:21-28

The present synagogue in Capernaum is a reconstruction of a fourth-century synagogue but may very well rest on the

foundations of the synagogue where Jesus taught. Before the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 synagogues were principally Jewish community centers where people might gather for important public functions and to study and pray together. Unclean spirits were considered to be incomplete beings, souls without bodies, and first-century magical lore is replete with formulas for getting rid of them. All such formulas involve the invocation of a high god to drive the spirit away from an afflicted person. The author of this Gospel has Jesus dismiss the demons without such invocation, thus stressing Jesus' power as Son of God. Throughout Mark, the demons, who are aligned with Satan and the powers of the underworld, recognize Jesus and seek to drive him away. In this way the author portrays Jesus' ministry as a direct encounter with the forces of the underworld.

Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany Cycle B

Mark 1:29-39

This completes Mark's account of a day in the life of Jesus begun in Mark 1:21. The healing of Peter's mother-in-law and others from Capernaum who were sick shows Jesus' power over disease as a way of legitimating the message that he preaches.

Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany Cycle B

Mark 1:40-45

Mark insists that Jesus actively sought to hide his messiahship during his Galilean ministry. Scholars refer to this literary feature of the Gospel as the "Messianic Secret," and this passage is a paradigm for it. Although Jesus would not have the former leper tell his secret, nothing can constrain the man from proclaiming his cure

and thus bringing notoriety to Jesus. The Messianic Secret, therefore, is a badly kept secret that offends some and encourages others to seek out Jesus. The accurate description of the Messianic Secret in Mark by Wilhelm Wrede in 1901 is one of the most important events in the development of modern New Testament scholarship.

Seventh Sunday After the Epiphany Cycle B

Mark 2:1-12

This is a complicated *apophthegm*, i. e. a story that illustrates a difficult but important saying of Jesus. The difficult saying is contained in Jesus' words to the paralytic: "The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins (2:10)." Forgiveness of sins against God is a function of the Temple cultus, and the scribes in attendance understandably regard Jesus' words as blasphemy (verses 6-7). This is shocking utterance serves Mark's fundamental theme that Jesus becomes the locus of God's forgiving presence and in that sense takes on the saving functions of the Temple. This theme culminates in the rending of the Temple veil in Mark 15:38.

Eighth Sunday After the Epiphany Cycle B

Mark 2:18-22

Education from religious teachers in first-century Palestine always involved students learning to imitate their teacher's religious practice. Often one school would make it a point to practice in a certain distinctive way to emphasize its differences from other schools. This story at one level is merely an exchange the students of the Pharisees and the students of Jesus, but at another level it is an opportunity to emphasize the belief

that the Messiah was present, a situation that would preclude fasting.

Proper 4
Cycle B
Mark 2:23-28

This is a *controversy dialogue*, designed to show Jesus' authority to interpret the Law. Jesus does not claim blanket authority for him or for his students to violate the Law but makes his first argument (2:26-26) with reference to an event in the life of David, who was to become the first messianic king. Jesus' authority to do as he did is grounded in his role as Messiah. The NRSV translation of 2:27 obscures the play on the word "man" in the second argument (2:27-28). Following the teaching of the contemporary Pharisee Hillel, Jesus declares that the Sabbath regulations were made for the sake of "man." He then goes beyond Hillel to interpret "man" to refer to the "Son of Man" and so argues for his authority as the Son of Man to arbitrate the Sabbath regulations. So both as Messiah (Son of God) and as divine Son of Man, Jesus has final authority over the Sabbath, and, by extension, over the entire Law of God. According to 1 Samuel 21:1-6, the priest to whom David fled was Ahimelech, not Abiathar as in Mark 2:26.

Proper 5
Cycle B
Mark 3:20-35

"Beelzebul" is an Aramaic corruption of the Ugaritic *b'l zbl*, "Baal is Lord." By the time of Jesus Baal worship in Palestine was rare, and Jewish tradition had made the old Canaanite God Baal into the prince of the underworld or Satan. Jesus' argument is a classic rabbinic argument: "The mouth that forbids is the mouth that permits." A legal argument gains strength when the advocate

can admit his adversary's charges and still contend that his side is correct. Jesus points out that if he is casting out demons by the power of the prince of demons, then Satan's kingdom is divided and coming to an end. So even if he were possessed by Beelzebul, Jesus would *still* be the agent of salvation! In this context it is clear that the unforgivable blasphemy against the Spirit is the claim that Jesus is a demonic power.

Proper 6
Cycle B
Mark 4:26-34

Parables are extended similes which often contain an element of surprise. The two in this passage conclude a long discourse that included several parables as well as Jesus' declaration that "everything comes in parables" (4:11). Although the parables come from Israel's wisdom tradition, which seeks to understand the meaning of human life and the best ways to live that life, Jesus restricts his use of parables to providing his hearers with images of the kingdom. In Mark's Gospel, those hearers not only do not understand the parables but in their hardness of heart seek the life of the one who gave them.

Proper 7
Cycle B
Mark 4:35-41 [5:1-20]

A principal theme of Mark's Gospel is that of Jesus' authority (Greek: *exousia*): authority over the demons and disease, authority over the Law, authority even over death. In 4:35-41 the author explores Jesus' authority over the forces of nature. Jesus' nonchalant sleeping in the boat during the storm reminds us of Jonah's similar indifference to the storm on his way to Tarshish. In both cases, the power involved was not merely wind and rain but the very

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power of God. For very different reasons, neither Jonah nor Jesus have any reason to fear that power.

[Location of the miracle of the legion of demons in the “country of the Gerasenes” (Jerash in Jordan) is a problem because the city lies over thirty miles away from the Sea of Galilee. Many texts read “Gaderenes” (modern Umm Qais) which is much nearer. Rudolf Bultmann thought this story was a joke told among non-Christians about Jesus because he must trick them in going into the swine. Most other commentators have not followed him in this. Demons were neither the souls of the dead nor angels from the underworld. Jews thought of them as incomplete but natural creatures who inhabited unclean places like graveyards, ruined buildings, and deserts. Sending them into unclean animals like pigs is well within popular first-century ideas. The death of the pigs did not kill the demons, but one supposes that they returned to their unclean place of origin, the graveyard where the demoniac had loved for so long.]

Mark 5:1-20 is also the Gospel for Thanksgiving ABC.

Proper 8

Cycle B

Mark 5:22-24, 35b-43

When Jesus told the mourners in Jairus’ house that the little girl was not dead (verse 39), he was reflecting the ancient near eastern belief that it took three days for the soul to descend to the underworld and so a person could not be really considered dead until the third day after the cessation of life functions. Consequently, this is not a resurrection story but a healing story and represents the last of the three great miracles of healing in Mark 5. It represents a further demonstration of Jesus “power” or “authority” (*exousia*) over disease.

Proper 9

Cycle B

Mark 6:1-6

This is an *apophthegm*, *i. e.* a story that has been built up out of a saying to preserve and even interpret that saying. The saying in question is the difficult saying about prophets in verse 4. The tradition has put the setting in Jesus’ “hometown” without naming it because the word “hometown” (verse 1, Greek *patris*) without further identification because that is the word used in verse 4. Jesus’ mother and siblings are mentioned in verse 3 because of the reference to “kin” and “house” in verse 4. Reference to Jesus as “son of Mary” in verse 3 is an insult that suggests that Jesus was illegitimate and underscores the enmity of Jesus’ opponents in the synagogue. It was so remarkable that Mark claimed that Jesus *could* not do any great work in his hometown (verse 6) that Matthew changed the verse to say that Jesus *did* not do any great work (Matthew 13:58).

Proper 10

Cycle B

Mark 6:7-13

Although Luke 9:1 and Matthew 10:1 mention that Jesus gave his students the power to cast out demons *and* to cure diseases, Mark only mentions the exorcism of demons because in Mark all disease derives from the demons and because Mark uses the demons as representatives of the power of Satan and the underworld. He commissions his disciples to continue and expand his own mission against the satanic forces themselves. Reference to curing diseases by anointing with oil (Mark 6:13) derives from the widespread bathing

practices of the Mediterranean world in which oils were used to protect the skin from sunburn after the bath had washed away the body's own natural oils. The ancients believed this protective benefit of oil might extend to the curing of disease as well.

Proper 11
Cycle B
Mark 6:30-44

This is the first of two miraculous feedings in Mark. The second is the feeding of the four thousand in 8:1-10. Emphasis in this passage is upon Jesus' compassion for the crowd and for the lost (6:34), and this leads him both to teach and to feed the crowd. The blessing and breaking of the loaves picks up the language of 15:22 that describes Jesus' blessing and breaking of the bread at the Last Supper. Use of the term "apostle" for the disciples in 6:30 is matched in Mark only in 3:14. In ordinary Greek, an apostle is one who acts as the legal agent for another, a function taken over into Jewish law in the Talmud. In 3:14 and 6:30 Jesus' disciples are presented not only as his students but also as those charged to act as his agents in the world.

Proper 12
Cycle B
Mark 6:45-52

The expression "hardening of the heart" (Mark 6:52) in the Bible understands the "heart" as the organ of thinking and willing, much as we now understand the brain. For the heart to be "hardened" is for the mind to be unable to think properly. Unlike the story of the stilling of the storm in Mark 4:35-41, the disciples in this story are facing only an "adverse wind" and are in no particular danger during their difficult journey toward

Bethsaida on the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee (6:48). Their fear comes from within themselves as they mistake Jesus for a ghost (6:49). This error shows their "hardness of heart." In Mark's Gospel, however, "hardening of the heart" always leads to a further revelation of Jesus' power and love. In this case, he stills the wind and calms his students' troubled minds.

Proper 17
Cycle B
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

The Pharisees were the most popular Jewish sect in Palestine because they made the Law a matter of everyday practice. In addition to the written Law (Hebrew: *torah ketuvah*), the Pharisees believed Moses had received an oral Law (Hebrew: *torah shebe'al peh*) which addressed the matters of everyday life not discussed in the scripture such as ablutions before meals. They believed that it was their duty to reconstruct that oral Law and follow it with the same rigor as they did the written Law. Jesus' position here is that the oral Law of the Pharisees can actually involve them in trespass against the clear meaning of the written Law and insists that God is much more interested in inward purity than in external freedom from ritual defilement, a position which some Pharisees also argued against their hyper-observant colleagues.

Proper 18
Cycle B
Mark 7:31-37

By setting some of Jesus' ministry in the Lebanon (Tyre and Sidon), the author asserts Jesus' lordship over all the world, not just the Jewish world. Also, to tell us that the Sea of Galilee belongs in the region of the Decapolis (7:31) emphasizes the same

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point. The Decapolis (Greek: “ten cities”) consisted of the ten leading Roman-Hellenistic cities around the Sea of Galilee, most of which lay outside of traditionally Jewish territory. A curiosity of the healing of the deaf man with a speech impediment involves the use of the Aramaic word *effatha* which is masculine singular, addressed to “ears” which in Aramaic are feminine dual. Similarly, the Aramaic injunction to the little girl in 5:41 is masculine singular. I have suggested elsewhere that both Aramaic formulas may have been added by the author for effect.

Proper 19
Cycle B
Mark 8:27-38

Caesarea Philippi was a pagan city whose protecting deity was the Greek God Pan--hence the site’s modern name: Banyas. Because of its idolatry the Rabbis did not even consider the city to be part of the Land of Israel. To have Jesus confessed as Messiah in this place, as opposed, say, to Jerusalem, is to assert that his messiahship has meaning for pagans as well as Jews. The passage contains the first of three predictions of Jesus’ passion in Mark (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). Peter cannot understand how Jesus can be King Messiah on the one hand and yet expect to suffer and die in Jerusalem.

Proper 20
Cycle B
Mark 9:30-37

This is the second of three predictions of Jesus’ passion in Mark (8:31, 9:31, 10:33-34). The reference to “the house” (9:33) in Capernaum is a reference to Jesus’ specialized instruction to his inner core of students. (See also 7:17). Important

rabbinic scholars were sometimes said to have created a “house,” *i. e.* a school of interpretation that was carried on by the scholars’ students after his death. Completely confused by his prediction of death and resurrection, Jesus’ disciples had been arguing about their relative position in his “house” after his death. The “little child” of verse 36 recalls the association of such little children with the heavenly kingdom (*e. g.* Psalm 8:2). Jesus’ “house” is in fact nothing less than the kingdom of God.

Proper 21
Cycle B
Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

When Jesus’ students report finding others healing in Jesus’ name, the reader expects Jesus to condemn them as interlopers. Consistent, however, with his argument about a “house divided” in 3:19b-30, Jesus portrays the work of these non-disciples as building up the kingdom and warns his students against standing in the way of the work of God. Because of the imminence of the Kingdom of God, the disciples would be justified to take extreme measures to avoid being found opposing that kingdom, even measure ordinarily not allowed by the law such as self-mutilation. On the other hand, Jesus has already maintained that the real origin of sin is not in external members but in the human heart (7:14-23). The quotation from Isaiah 66:24: “where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched” occurs in 9:48 and in many manuscripts also after verses 43 and 45. The best texts, however, have it only at 9:48.

Proper 22
Cycle B
Mark 10:2-9

The dispute over divorce was one that

separated two Pharisaic schools, that of Hillel and that of Shammai. Shammai and his students held that divorce and remarriage were not allowable except in the case of unchastity. Hillel and his students held that divorce and remarriage were allowed for any reason whatsoever, even if a man found someone he liked better than his current wife. Although in Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:1-9 Jesus supports the position of Shammai, in this passage Mark has Jesus express disagreement with both schools, thereby establishing his authority over interpretation of the law.

Proper 23

Cycle B

Mark 10:17-27[28-31]

Jewish sects in the time of Jesus such as the Qumran Community, responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls, often referred to themselves as “the poor” as a way of claiming for themselves the special relationship between God and the poor spoken of in scripture. Christians continued this practice, and one Jewish-Christian sect even called itself “Ebionites” from the Hebrew word for “poor” (*evyon*). Mark used this convention to underscore the radical break from the world required to follow Jesus. The rich young man went away disappointed because he could not bear to give up his wealth (10:22), and Jesus comments upon this by speaking about the impossibility of the wealthy entering the new kingdom he is bringing (10:25).

Proper 24

Cycle B

Mark 10:35-45

If Jesus is, indeed, King Messiah, the Sons of Zebedee (Mark 1:19) reasoned that he would have to have a royal court with a vizier to sit on his right hand and a first

minister to sit on his left; and they saw no reason why they should not be those officials (Mark 10:35-37). What they have not understood is that Jesus will realize his particular role as King Messiah through suffering and death (10:38), not through military victory or political process. Indeed, Jesus, who will be King Messiah in God’s kingdom, could not grant them their request even if he wished to do so. He tells the would-be rulers that in God’s new kingdom high office will reflect service, not privilege (10:39-44). Indeed, his impending death will be the most important such service and will be a “ransom” (Greek: *lytron*, “purchase price” as for a slave) for “many,” a term that also occurs in the Dead Sea Scrolls to indicate the sectarian community. The servitude from which he will purchase the “many” is slavery to sin.

Proper 25

Cycle B

Mark 10:46-52

The Jericho of the New Testament lies near the northern shore of the Dead Sea about a mile south of the Jericho of the Hebrew Bible. Jews who did not wish to pass through Samaria traveled from the Galilee to Jerusalem through the Jordan Valley, turning west toward Jerusalem at Jericho. This is the route Mark has Jesus follow. As Jesus exits the city on his way to Jerusalem, Bartimaeus calls out to him using the royal title “Son of David” (Mark 10:47). This cry anticipates the royal entrance Jesus will shortly make into Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, and the crowds will cheer him into the city with messianic praises (11:9-10). As always in Mark, the healing occurs not because of some magic power Jesus has but because of the recipient’s faith in Jesus (10:52).

Proper 26

Cycle B

Mark 12:28-34

It was common for Pharisaic teachers to give their students summaries of the Jewish law, heuristic statements that would catch up the whole meaning of the law as the teacher understood it. Many such summaries are contained in the collection of sayings called the *Pirqa Avot* (“Chapters of the Fathers”) in the Talmud. Jesus’ summary is a citation of two verses of scripture (Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18) and is not particularly unusual. Within the context of the story what is so important about Jesus’ wise answer is that it works together with the other teachings of 11:27-13:37 to establish his teaching authority within the holiest city in the world.

Proper 27

Cycle B

Mark 12:38-44

Public scribes earned their living by creating important documents, including bills of sale, adoption papers, and marriage contracts. To create such documents scribes needed to know how to write and what to write, *i. e.* they needed to understand the law. Scribes, therefore, functioned much as lawyers do today, creating and even interpreting the contracts and other official documents necessary for the conduct of human affairs. Most often scribes in the time of Jesus aligned themselves with the political-religious party of the Pharisees. The Treasury of the Jerusalem Temple was somewhere in the Women’s Court, the court where both men and women might assemble. See also John 8:20. Women were not permitted into the next court, which was called the Court of Men.

Proper 28

Cycle B

Mark 13:14-23

Mark’s “Apocalypse” (Mark 13) derives from Jewish end-of-the-world (apocalyptic) writings, and is built upon the idea that the readers live at the end of the seventy weeks of years mentioned in Daniel 9:24. Like other Jewish apocalypses, our passage predicts that the final days of this age will be days of terror and confusion. God mercifully will not allow the “elect,” *i. e.* those who belong to the community of the end of time, to be destroyed in this final conflagration.

Advent 1

Cycle B,

Mark 13:[24-32] 33-37

Many first-century Jews believed that the coming of God’s kingdom would be preceded by natural disasters, and early Christians seem to have shared that view. Jesus here teaches his students that they should not be alarmed at such events and should greet them as harbingers of the kingdom. Mark 13 as a whole is often referred to as “Mark’s Apocalypse” because of its teaching about the end of the age and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Proper 29 = Liturgy of the Palms

Cycle B

Mark 11:1-11

Mark’s short account of the Triumphal Entry has been taken over and modified somewhat by both Matthew (21:1-11) and Luke (19:28-38). As Jesus approaches Jerusalem, the crowd recognizes him as King Messiah, the Son of David, and cries out to him in the traditional plea to the king: *hosanna* (“O [king], save!” Mark 11:9). The route from the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley, and into the holy city is the tradition route of the new king of Judah en route to his coronation.

Sunday of the Passion**Cycle B****Mark [14:32-72] 15:1-39 [40-47]**

Mark's account of Jesus' passion is the source for both Matthew's and Luke's. Nevertheless, certain unmistakable Markan themes occur. Jesus' death on the cross is the occasion for the splitting of the Temple veil which hides the presence of God enthroned upon the Ark of the Covenant. Thus the death of Jesus brings access to God in a new and unexpected way. This completes the theme introduced as early as Mark 2:10 that the Son of Man has the authority heretofore reserved for the Temple cultus to forgive sins. The citation of Psalm 22:1 in Aramaic at Mark 15:34 (rendered in Hebrew in Matthew 27:46 and absent altogether from Luke and John) is the third citation of Jesus' words in Aramaic in the Gospel. It is no accident that the first two occasions (Mark 5:41, 7:34) are within the context of healings. The death of Jesus for Mark is the great healing event in human history. When Jesus dies, the truth of his life and death can no longer be hidden; and even an unnamed Roman centurion can recognize that Jesus was Son of God (Mark 15:39).

Easter Day**Principal Service****Cycle B****Mark 16:1-8**

This is almost certainly the close of Mark's Gospel. Mark 16:9-20, the so-called "longer ending" was added in the second century AD as was the addition to verse 8 sometimes called the "shorter ending." Both were added because the enigmatic close of the Gospel, "for they were afraid" (Greek: *efobounto gar*) may have seemed too abrupt and too ambiguous for some of its readers. Nevertheless for Mark to end his Gospel on a note of uncertainty and anxiety is not at all uncharacteristic. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus' actions sow discomfort and misunderstanding even as they achieve the kingdom's goals. This last great sign of resurrection is received by Jesus' followers with even greater uncertainty than the rest of

Jesus' acts.

In Jerusalem of the first century the Jews buried their dead in large tombs cut into the area's natural limestone. Each tomb would have several cysts to receive the bodies of the dead. After death, the corpse would be wrapped in a large cloth and wetted down with spices to combat the stench of decomposition. The body would be deposited in a cyst, and the family would then close the tomb with a large door or blocking stone. A year later family members would open the tomb and disarticulate the skeleton, depositing the bones in a "bone box" or ossuary placed on the floor of the tomb. The cyst would then be ready for its next occupant.

Ascension Day**Cycle B****Mark 16:9-15, 19-20**

Modern scholars agree that the last words we have from the pen of the Second Evangelist are the cryptic *efobounto gar* ("for they were afraid"). Tradition, however, has supplied two different endings for the Gospel of Mark: the "shorter ending," consisting of a single verse that records the commissioning of the disciples, and a "longer ending," numbered as verses 9-20. This "longer ending" records appearances to Mary Magdalene and to two unnamed persons (9-13), an appearance to the eleven disciples to commission them (14-18), and an account of the Ascension and the disciples' proclamation of the good news (19-20).