



## The Gospel of Mark and Judaism

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### **The Gospel of Mark and Judaism**

**By Robert McFarlane**

#### **Introduction: Mark the Orphan.**

Mark's story of Jesus has attracted much less interest than the other gospel narratives in debates concerning the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. The main reason for this is that Matthew and John, in particular, have notable passages which have been considered to have a strong flavour of anti-Judaism.

In Matthew, attention is often focussed on peculiar injections into the narrative of Jesus' trial which highlight Jewish culpability for the

subsequent outcome. The major one of these is the crowd's cry, "Let his blood be on us and on our children" (Mt 27:25). This is placed in juxtaposition with the dream of Pilate's wife (Mt 27:19), which functions to remove guilt from the Roman authorities (compare Mark 15:1-20). Another notable feature in Matthew is the final beatitude (Mt 4:11,12) there is a critical difference between this and the parallel in Luke 6:23. Matthew reads "for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" whereas Luke reads "for that is how their fathers treated the prophets." In these two examples, the trial of Jesus and the final beatitude, one can discern a polemical tendency in Matthew which is absent in Mark.

Similarly, John has a markedly hostile tone in its use of a characteristic phrase 'the Jews'. Hostile instances of this expression include John 5:16,18; 6:52; 7:13; 8:44 (see v31),48,58,59; 10:31; 11:8; 18:36.

The last mentioned of which also seeks to focus culpability for Jesus' death on 'the Jews'. Again, such an expression is absent in Mark.

A first observation that we might venture then is that Mark, far from being of no interest to us, is highly interesting in the absence of these overtly anti-Judaic sentiments so often discussed in Matthew and John. In the discussion below we shall examine what Mark does have to say on Jews and the contemporary forms of Judaism at its time of authorship. However a brief comment on Luke-Acts is also in order before we begin.

Luke-Acts, although not as markedly negative in its portrayal of Judaism as Matthew and John, is still often considered to be of greater interest than Mark in discussing Jewish-Christian relations because of its focus on such issues as table fellowship (notably Acts 10,11), the actions of Acts' central character, Paul, and the link to his letters, especially Galatians and Romans. Of

particular interest in Acts are Peter's speech (Acts 2:14-41) and Paul's final speech (Acts 28:25-28). This last speech concludes with a particularly vexing saying: "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!" This has been interpreted in an anti-Semitic way, being inferred to constitute a rejection of Jewish people by God. However a number of people, such as Jervel, have argued this to constitute a goad, shaming Jewish hearers to accept what is now offered to all by their God. Either way, Luke-Acts is considered to be the central document for understanding how following Jesus came to move from being an activity within Judaism to becoming a separate religion. However, we will observe below that Mark has more interaction between Jesus and Gentiles than any other gospel, including Luke.

A final reason for examining the text of Mark in relation to Judaism is that of date of composition.

It is not the place to rehearse all the arguments, but the scholarly consensus remains that Mark is the earliest gospel, certainly compared to Matthew and Luke, and probably in relation to John as well. In particular, Mark appears to be written in close proximity to the events of the fall of Jerusalem at the end of the Jewish-Roman War of 66-70 CE. Prior to this catastrophic event Judaism exhibited an extremely rich interpretive range, both within and without formal Rabbinic circles. This means that Mark could be a helpful source in considering the relationship between Judaism and Christianity at an earlier point in the process of 'the parting of the ways' than that represented by the other gospels.

### **Mark's Picture of Jesus and Judaism**

A good starting point in discussing Mark and Judaism is to ask how the text portrays Jesus in relation to Judaism within the

narrative. Mark's narrative shows Jesus interacting with a number of different groups within Judaism of the time. These are described in ways which are not easy to categorise, in that some descriptions, such as Pharisees or Sadducees, represent different *halakhot*, whereas other descriptions represent roles and positions, such as elders, scribes and priests. Thus, Mark speaks of scribes who were Pharisees (eg 3:16). Still other appellations are more broadly 'political', such as Herodian. Further, the use of both synagogue and temple as dramatic settings provide a structural relationship to Judaism.

There is a huge amount of detail concerning the interactions we have just enumerated, both between Jesus and other groups, as well as between the other groups (eg Pharisees with Sadducees in 12:18, 28, and Pharisees with Herodians in 12:13-17). Although widespread, these interactions are concentrated in the

narrative within 2:1 - 3:6 and chapters 11 and 12. The most significant observation that can be made about these passages is that Mark presents Jesus as a rabbi among rabbis; the interactions between Jesus and the others concerns establishing his way as the legitimate reading of the Torah. In this sense it must be said that Mark can not be characterised by anti-Judaism. Rather, Mark appears to have the qualities of a sectarian group, seeking to establish a new interpretation of Torah.

Having said this, it must be admitted that these interactions are quite heated and that the portrayal of Jesus' opponents is almost entirely negative (note the exception in 12:28). Some examples of these negative incidents may be listed:

Herodians: 3:6; 8:15; 12:13ff (also by inference 6:14-29)  
Pharisees: 2:16; 2:24; 3:6; 7:1 ; 8:15  
Sadducees: 12 :1-8-27  
Scribes: 1:22; 2:6; 2:16; 3:22; 9:14;

12:28-34; 12:38-40  
Elders: 8:31  
Chief Priests: 10:32;  
11 :1 8; 11 :27;  
14:1,53-65;  
15:31,32a

However, unlike John's 'the Jews', Mark portrays 'the crowds' (perhaps referring to *am haretz*) in highly positive terms (eg 1:32-34; 3:7-11; 12:37). The one major exception is the call for Barabbas' release at 15:11-15. Even here it must be noted that the crowds' actions are attributed to agitation by the 'high priests'. Thus, Mark is favourable to the people at the expense of the leadership.

There are two instances in the text where Mark shows a positive link with other Jewish groups. The first may be too obvious to make the observation, but we need to recall that the teaching of the figure who has come to be known as John the Baptist also represents a *halakhic* way. In both 1:1-14 and 6:14-29 Jesus' and the Baptist's renewal movements are closely related. What is even more



significant for the purpose of our argument is to notice that at 2:18 the Baptist's movement is seen to be in accord with Pharisaic practice rather than Jesus' way. In this we see again that we are not looking at a hard and fast division between Christianity and Judaism, but a diverse debate concerning ways of interpretation. The surprises we have noted include the Baptist being bracketed with the Pharisees concerning fasting, and scribes and Pharisees being bracketed with Jesus over the issue of resurrection.

The second group that attracts our attention is that described in the enigmatic passage 9:38-41. It probably derives from the life of the early church rather than that of Jesus. Nevertheless it represents a greater tolerance of other ways of following than is the case in Matthew and John, from whom it is absent (it is narrated in abbreviated form in Luke 9:49-50). With the traditional near eastern expressions of 'speaking evil'

and 'cup of water', omitted in Luke, this does seem to represent a location in Israel. Thus, Mark may show an awareness of at least one other group within Judaism following Jesus.

Having recognized the diversity of groups represented within Mark's portrayal of Judaism we are now in a position to look briefly at the range of issues under debate between Jesus' and other forms of *halakhah*. These include fasting (2:18), patterns of Sabbath observance (2:23-27; 3:1-5), a complex passage regarding ritual washing and offerings (7:1-23), grounds for divorce (10:1-12), Roman taxes (12:13-17), resurrection (12:18-27), 'the greatest commandment' (12:28-31), the Messiah (12:37), robe length and synagogue seat (12:38-40), the relative value of offerings from rich and poor (12:41-44), and the Temple (11:15-18; 13:2). What needs to be noted is that, while Jesus' total pattern of teaching

may be distinctive, there is no single teaching or practice that is not found in any other form of contemporary Judaism.

What is also often over-looked, not only in Mark but all the gospels, is that Jesus is remarkably observant as a Jew. We see this in his baptism (1:9), his prayer life (1:35), his instruction for someone healed of leprosy to make the appropriate sacrifice (1:44), his explicit commitment to the commandments (7:10; 10:19; 12:29-31), and his observance of Passover (14:1,12ff). We may even note that his women disciples observe the Sabbath command at his burial (16:1).

Thus, both in Mark's conflict narratives and in his portrayal of Jesus' positive actions, we discern a figure more representative of, than disjunctive with, elements within the rich tapestry of contemporary Judaism.

Within Mark we can also discern two distinct elements which express the author's

understanding of Jesus' role. The first of these is the narrative perception of the character of Jesus. He is presented quite traditionally as a prophet, both giving wisdom and having a healing ministry (eg 6:1-6, cf 14:65 & 15:31). Similarly, Jesus' character is presented as that of a teacher (eg ch 4, cf also 14:49). Thus, Jesus is seen to operate conventionally within Judaism.

The second distinct element which indicates Mark's perception of Jesus' role is the set of titles used by and for Jesus. These are Jewish in nature, notably Christ or Messiah (eg 8:29; 13:22; 14:61ff and Son of David (eg 10:47,48). Although much less clear in its interpretation, the common expression used by the narrative Jesus in self-description, 'Son of Man', also has its origins in Biblical Judaism (eg 8:31; 9:31; 10:33; see Daniel 10:16). These stand in marked contrast with John's titles, such as true vine, the door, the light, etc. Although having Judaic parallels,

these can be understood in a more general Hellenistic environment. Thus the titles ascribed to Jesus within the Markan narrative, like the narrative functions performed by him, represent a usage of Jewish categories to interpret the significance of the character.

In conclusion to our discussion of Mark's portrayal of Jesus and Judaism, we have observed that Mark does not present Jesus in conflict with Judaism. Rather, the conflicts that exist are between Jesus and various other rival *halakhic* traditions. Mostly these groups are in conflict with Jesus. Sometimes they are in agreement with Jesus but in conflict with one another. In addition to the expected groups, we have also noted that the Baptist's movement represents another strand of renewal Judaism. We have even noted the allusion to at least one other group which follows Jesus, but not in direct communion with the Markan community; the description of this group has

strong elements of Levantine locality. Thus, we conclude that Mark's perception of Jesus is of a Jewish Rabbi as founder of their community. There is no sense that there is an intention to separate from Judaism. Rather, the conflicts we discern in the narrative are described in a manner consistent with being within Judaism. The Markan narration is an exercise in seeking interpretive supremacy, both of the life and death of Jesus and of the Torah.

### **Mark's Community and Judaism**

There are strong elements within the text of Mark which reveal the self-perception of the community. These relate to culture, geography and history. The most remarked of these is the extraordinarily long (for Mark!) speech in chapter 13 concerning the desecration of the Temple. As this is reproduced in Matthew and Luke there are other issues that seem to be more indicative of the distinctively

Markan view of the community in relation to Judaism. This view is revealed in the way the narrative is told. Even though the story is about Jesus forty years before, elements within the act of narrating reflect the authorial community's self-perception. The most significant of these are Mark's narration of Jesus' interaction with Gentiles, and the polarity in the text between Galilee and Jerusalem.

As intimated in the introduction, above, Mark has more interaction between Jesus and Gentiles than any other gospel. The instances in Mark are the healing of the demoniac in the Decapolis (modern day Jordan) in 5:1-20, the healing of the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter near Tyre (modern day Lebanon) in 7:24-30 and the healing of the mute in the Decapolis in 7:31-37. It is noteworthy that this last story is unparalleled in any other gospel. A further Markan positive interaction between Jesus and a Gentile is at the death of Jesus

(15:39) where the centurion is said to remark “Surely this was the/a son of God”. All of these narrative incidents indicate a strong acceptance of Gentiles into the Markan community.

Some commentators regard this acceptance of Gentiles as evidence of a Roman location for the text’s composition. It is not the place of this article to refute this, however it seems preferable to understand this ‘mission to the Gentiles’ in the context of Mark’s wider concerns with issues of purity and religious acceptance. This is especially true with the instances of healing in Mark 5 & 7.

The healing of the Demoniac precedes the healing of both a ritually unclean haemorrhagic Jewish woman and of the daughter of Jairus the synagogue leader’s daughter (5:21-43). Similarly the two healings in Mark 7 follow immediately after the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees concerning the



disciples' failure to correctly wash their hands prior to eating. The thrust of Jesus' response to the Pharisees is to shift the basis of purity from ritual observance to ethical conduct. Thus Mark's interest in Gentiles seems to be part of a *halakhah* designed to shift the boundaries of purity to include and exclude different persons than in other forms of Judaism of the time. Nevertheless, we do note that conversion to Judaism could and did occur especially within Hellenistic Diaspora Judaism. Thus, again Mark is not entirely unparalleled in the Judaism of the day.

A second distinctive feature of the Markan narrative is the Jerusalem-Galilee polarity. It is not an exaggeration to say that every reference to Jerusalem in Mark is negative while every reference to Galilee is positive. The most significant feature of this is that Mark portrays Jesus as not even being prepared to sleep in the city (11:1) whereas Galilee is presented as the promised land

where the community will be reconstituted after Jesus' rising from the dead (14:28; 16:6-7). Overall Mark portrays Jerusalem as the place of death, Galilee as the place of new life. While this is startling, we can observe that the community at Qumran, undoubtedly Jewish, also regarded the Jerusalem Temple hierarchy as corrupt.

Considering both these issues, the place of Gentiles in the text and the negative portrayal of Jerusalem, we can make one final observation. This is to say that these elements did not constitute a breach with Judaism in and of themselves. Indeed, the overall tone of Mark is, as we have observed, a movement within Judaism. Nevertheless, we can see within these two elements in particular seeds which inevitably led to unbearable tensions between the early communities of Jesus' followers and the Rabbinic reconstruction of Judaism after the destruction of the Temple and nation

in 70 CE.

## Conclusion

In this brief discussion we have looked at both how Jesus is portrayed in Mark in relation to forms of late Second Temple Judaism as well as distinctive features of the Markan narration which seem to be windows to the community behind the text. We saw Jesus as a rabbi among rabbis. We saw the community as a group of followers of Jesus, firmly within Judaism, seeking to establish the legitimacy of their *halakhah*, open to Gentiles and other ritually impure persons. It can be concluded that Mark is not coloured by anti-Judaism, but represented a way whose distinctiveness could find a place within the reconstruction of Israel following the Jewish War.

### **Some suggestions for further reading:**

There is little written about Mark and Judaism, for reasons discussed above. Some works that have informed this discussion include:

0. Charlesworth, J.H.  
*Jesus within Judaism: New Light from Exciting Archaeological Discoveries*  
(London: SPCK, 1989).
0. Daube, D. *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*  
(NY: Arno, 1973 originally published 1956).
0. Hilton, M. & Marshall, G. *The Gospels and Rabbinic Judaism: A Study Guide*  
(London: SCM, 1988).
0. Marcus, J. *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark*  
(Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993).
0. Russell, D. S. *From Early Judaism to Early Church*  
(London SCM, 1986).
0. Sandmel, S.

*Judaism and  
Christian  
Beginnings*  
(NY: OUP,  
1978).

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Source: Gesher.