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Maverick Mark

The Untamed First Gospel

Bonnie B. Thurston



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*For the Cistercian sisters at
Our Lady of the Angels Monastery, Crozet, Virginia.*

*Their discipleship is angelic,
and their hospitality embraces imps.*



“Seven times a day I praise you . . .”

(Psalm 119:164, NRSV)



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*Hate evil and love good,
and establish justice in the gate;
it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts,
will be gracious to the remnant.*

—Amos 5:15





Prologue



As I have aged, I have grown increasingly skeptical of taming things. A good deal of what I know with certainty about God (and it is miniscule), I learned from C.S. Lewis' the Narnia Chronicles in which the children are frequently reminded that Aslan (the lion who is the God figure in the saga) is good, but not a "tame lion."¹ Neither is the Gospel tame, although in my darker moods I think the church has spent the last two millennia trying to tame it. This is distinctly odd since the first gospel to be written is not only "untamed," but downright rebellious. To give but one incontrovertible example: what kind of "good news" ends with a fearful silence?² I find myself in complete agreement with Annie Dillard's deathless observation in *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*: "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? . . . It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."³ Indeed.

This little book is a modest attempt to "untie" Mark's gospel, to allow its original radicalism to shine forth again and to be proclaimed. That is what Mark's Jesus came to do, not to put down roots and build lovely church buildings (see the chilling Mark 13:1-2) that assist nicely washed and appointed people to maintain the status quo, but to "go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may

proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do" (1:38). Jesus' message about the Kingdom of God (*basilea tou theou*) and what it looks like (as opposed to earthly "kingdoms") and Mark's gospel, which records it in Jesus' words and deeds, are shockers. In its tendency to see Mark as the "cookie cutter" for Matthew and Luke, even good scholarship often moves toward "taming" Mark's reality.

I have never quite gotten over reading Morna Hooker's powerful book *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: New Testament Interpretations of the Death of Christ*. The book opens with a graphic evocation of the meaning of crucifixion in the first century. She goes on to explain that the cross was a symbol of weakness and signified total humiliation and degradation. As St. Paul so well understood, the first task of preachers to contemporary Jews and Gentiles was to deal with the problem of Jesus' death.⁴ Both Professors Hooker and Robert Gundry (whose commentary *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* was published the year before her book⁵) recognize that "Mark's gospel is a bold apology for the scandal of the cross."⁶ Thus from the outset of his gospel with its focus on John the Baptist whose radical preaching led him to martyrdom, Mark continually links the crucifixion of Jesus and what Bonhoeffer so memorably called "the cost of discipleship," thus underlining the truth of the old hymn "if you can't bear the cross, then you can't wear the crown." As Hooker explains, we who wish to share Christ's triumph must share his shame and death. "The belief that God is revealed in the shame and weakness of the cross is a profound insight into the nature of God."⁷ Ours is not a tame, predictable or even *reasonable* God, and I, for one, would not worship a God who operated by human reason.

To any way of thinking, a God who voluntarily "un-gods" himself (see Phil 2:6-11) is hardly a "business as usual" God. This understanding of divinity as essentially self-emptying is challenging enough. But as Hooker so succinctly puts it, "His [Jesus'] death is not a substitute, but an exemplar."⁸ In Mark's gospel Jesus' authentic disciples play a cosmic game of follow the leader. That an

incarnate God dies the most humiliating death possible is ludicrous. That this God invites his disciples to follow suit is incredible. And yet it is exactly what Mark the Evangelist suggests to his audience: take up your cross and follow. As Gundry explains, Mark makes the passion itself a success story.⁹ Mark's thought is as wild and untamed as his Greek, which, as any student of Greek can tell you, can be dreadful. A radical message is not about the niceties of grammar in your second language.

Somewhere along the way the wild, unlikelihood of the Christian message, which, let me make clear at the outset, I believe with all my heart, has been reigned in, made to fit more conventional categories of thought. That it is good and moral to be Christian we understand. That it is feral and almost uncontrollably countercultural is something that has been largely forgotten or suppressed. In *Mark for Everyone* N. T. Wright asks the crucial question: "Have we so domesticated and trivialized our Christian commitment, our devotion to Jesus himself, that we look on him simply as someone to provide us with comforting religious experiences?"¹⁰

In the church of my youth, we regularly sang at the Eucharist these words, the last verse of Isaac Watts' passion hymn "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross":

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small:
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

As an "older adult," I believe "all" means "all." I do not know specifically what "all" might mean to someone else. I have a pretty clear idea of what it might mean for me—precisely through my study of and prayer with the Gospel of Mark and the very human and incredibly Godly Jesus he portrays. Jesus is not your usual Greco-Roman *kurios*.

When I had finished the rough draft of this book and written about it to my friend M. Marion Rissetto, OCSO, she reminded

me of Robert Kysar's 1976 book *John, The Maverick Gospel*.¹¹ In his very fine work, "maverick" refers to John's literary and theological departures from the synoptic evangelists. Kysar's focus is the religious thought and theological themes of the fourth evangelist. Mine is in the challenges which the first evangelist poses to the typical Christian's and the institutional churches' cultural and economic assumptions, pietized spirituality, and understanding of peace and justice issues.

In what follows, I provide a brief overview of the Gospel of Mark (chap. 1). If you are familiar with Markan studies, you might want to skip this chapter. Then I suggest the gospel's radicality in three areas: discipleship (chap. 2), economics (chap. 3), and what we might call "lifestyle" (chap. 4). This by no means exhausts Mark's untamable message. I do hope it brings that message to bear on practical, personal aspects of every Christian's life and challenges what appear to be common assumptions of churches as public institutions. My work is not prescriptive. I'm not wise (or brash) enough to tell others what they ought to do in response to Mark's gospel and Jesus' invitation to them. (I'm often not wise enough in any given situation to know what *I* ought to do!) But I hope I'm persuasive enough to raise fundamental questions about several contemporary assumptions about Christianity with which, you will see, I disagree. Mark's gospel is never very far away from the cross. If you want happy-clappy Christianity, Mark is not your man. If your doubts can be serious and your darkness can be deep, if you suffer about the serious condition into which the human family has plunged, Mark's portrait of Jesus may well be just what you need to comfort your heart and energize your effort.

And speaking of effort and energy, I am once again profoundly grateful for the work of my colleagues at Liturgical Press who do so much to bring to print and the public my work. Thanks go to academic publisher Hans Christoffersen, and to his staff, particularly Lauren L. Murphy, Colleen Stiller, Michelle Verkuilen, and Barry Hudock. This volume owes a special debt to Professor Amy-Jill Levine of Vanderbilt University who read with great care what I

thought was the final draft of the work and made seven pages of thoughtful suggestions. My responses to most of them may not make this a better book, but it certainly makes it a more careful and accurate one. The Rev. Dr. Linda Maloney provided helpful reminders near the end of the process. To those who heard earlier lecture versions of some of this material, I also offer thanks for their attentiveness (or for not snoring if they weren't attentive) and helpful questions.

A number of years ago, the president of the school in which I taught, bemusedly attempting to explain (what we shall kindly term) my quirkiness, referred to me in public (in chapel, no less) as a "maverick." The term may derive from a nineteenth-century American pioneer, one Samuel A. Maverick, who did not brand his cattle. Thus a "maverick" is, technically, "an unbranded range animal," and by extension "an independent individual who does not go along with a group or party."¹² I am "guilty as charged." I think of St. Mark as a maverick in this sense as well, one who was not "toeing a party line" but presenting pretty much the unvarnished Jesus story as he received it, early church tradition holds from St. Peter. St. Paul explains that this "passing on" is how the process works. We "pass on" what we "receive," and thus Christianity is both mobile and rooted. (See, for example, 1 Cor 11:23 or 15:3.)

Perhaps, as is often the case with scholars, I found what I looked for. That might be a fulfillment of Jesus' promise in Matthew 7:7 that the searching find. Or it might be a failure of method or intellect or imagination on my part. In any case, there you have it. This is a book about a maverick evangelist by a maverick believer. Consider yourself warned.

Chapter 1

Mark, Gospel of Suffering and Servanthood

The evangelist Mark may be a maverick, but he was not a disembodied one. He lived in a particular period of history and wrote for a particular community. Both are crucial to the message and meaning of his gospel. As all theologians do, the writer of Mark had theological and pastoral agendas. His work is historical, but his intentions are not those of a modern biographer or historian. His aim was not to record in chronological order the events in Jesus' life, but to evoke and strengthen faith in Jesus the Christ. The evangelist we call Mark *retells* the Jesus story; his audience certainly knew it at least in outline. James Hoover explains that theologically and pastorally, Mark "sets out to retell the story of Jesus, showing that the kingdom in its glory comes at the end of the path of suffering and service. . . . Mark portrays Jesus principally as the servant-king whom we should follow (Mk 1:17). Thus, if we are to enjoy the glories of the kingdom, we too must follow the road of suffering and service."¹

While this may sound very stark to modern ears, Mark's was a crucial and comforting message for the gospel's original audience which faced persecution for allegiance to Jesus. For them, cross bearing was literal; nobody took up a cross except to go and die. Hideously. To understand Mark's gospel, we must understand the evangelist as a

preacher for a specific audience. His, and no other gospel, is “one size fits all.” Mark’s is a popular work, that is, for the *populi*, the common people, written to strengthen faith in Jesus. Its literary form has affinities with folktales, realistic narratives meant to be told or read aloud. If, as many scholars suggest, Mark wrote primarily for “lower classes” and the marginalized, it means his gospel was first read among “unofficial people” who might well have delighted that nothing good is said in it about “officials,” Roman, Jewish, or Apostolic.

Mark’s Jesus leads, “goes before”; disciples follow. *Akoloutho*, “to follow” or “to accompany,” is a technical term for discipleship in Mark’s gospel which seems more interested in disciples, the wider group of followers, including women, around Jesus (cf. 15:40-41) than apostles (the twelve men Jesus singled out from among them for a particular task). (See 6:6b-13 and 30ff.) The evangelist’s reasoning is that if Jesus were persecuted and ultimately crucified (and he was), and if we follow him (and Mark wants us to), how can we expect to escape similar treatment? But if God vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead (and God did), God will also vindicate us. Mark’s is a gospel for a suffering church. That is why it has such power and relevance for today, although perhaps more so precisely among the marginalized and suffering than among “mainline Christians” who are comfortable and “in control.”

That, coupled with the historical fact of the death of the eyewitnesses of Jesus’ ministry, is why Mark wrote a gospel. Who was Mark and when and where did he write? The most honest answer is that we don’t know for sure. The safest (and dullest) answer is that Mark wrote probably for largely but not exclusively Gentile readers (we presume this on the basis of his explaining Jewish customs; see for example, 7:3-4, 19) in the Roman Empire about the middle of the first century AD. In fact, careful reading of the text and scholarship can fill in some of the gaps.

We don’t know precisely who the individual person Mark was (or who any of the evangelists were with certainty). “Mark” was one of the most common names in the period. The evangelist probably wasn’t the John-Mark of the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 12:12, 25;

15:37, 39) who, in any case, is a man associated with Paul's work (1 Pet 5:13; Col 4:10). It has been suggested that Mark was the "streaker" in 14:51-52 who wrote himself into the story much as Renaissance painters inserted their faces into their paintings.² Even if this wonderful, and to my mind fanciful, suggestion is true, it tells us very little about our author. It's fairly clear from the gospel's rough Greek that the language wasn't its writer's mother tongue. And this matter of language raises interesting questions about Mark himself. Was he a companion of Peter, an Aramaic speaker, and himself also a Jew? Or was he a Latin-speaking Roman convert? We don't know.

Ancient church tradition (which, in the interest of full disclosure, I tend to treat more seriously than do some contemporary scholars) almost universally connects Mark to the Apostle Peter. Justin Martyr referred to "Peter's memoirs" in connection with Mark 3:16-17 (*Trypho* 106:3). Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* (III.30) quotes an early bishop, Papias (ca. 140 AD) who said Mark was Peter's "interpreter," writing what Peter remembered of Jesus' words and actions, but "not in order." This is important for it means that Mark's ordering of the Jesus material is a primary clue to his intended meaning in any given section of the text. Although many contemporary scholars are skeptical about Papias' report, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Jerome all associate Mark's gospel with Peter, a connection that remained constant well into the fifth century and which is now again accepted by several reputable scholars.³

In an e-mail discussion in January 2013 of matters related to this gospel's attitude toward Judaism and to Mark's identity, my colleague The Rev. Dr. Linda Maloney mused as follows: "If we suppose Mark to have been a Gentile proselyte (and not the John Mark of Acts), some ignorance/hostility [toward Judaism] could be explained. Or, contrariwise, if he's just an ardent Jesus Jew, he wouldn't have very cozy feelings about those making the rules for Judaism, either. If he is the John Mark of Acts he's somehow mixed up in the whole fight between Paul and Barnabas and the 'Judaizers' and so on." With the author's permission, I quote from our correspondence to highlight the connection between questions

about the evangelist's identity and the attitudes in his work toward the religious tradition of its protagonist, Jesus the Jewish *tekton* (carpenter) from Nazareth.

Scholarly consensus (that rare phenomenon) is that Mark, the first complete gospel to be written, was produced between 65 and 70 AD. The fact that Matthew (sometimes refreshingly referred to as the first commentary on Mark) and Luke use Mark to structure their gospels suggests it came from a city and a major Christian center. Toward the end of the reign of the Emperor Nero (54–68 AD), a thoroughly nasty piece of work, Christians in Rome were subjected to terrible persecutions. Nero (wrongly) blamed them for the fire in the city. With the outbreak of the Jewish War of 66–70 AD, apocalyptic expectations of both Jews and Christians surged (and are clearly evident in Mark 13). Turmoil roils just below the surface of the first gospel.

Both ancient testimony (notably Clement of Alexandria in the second century) and the text of Mark suggest, if not a Roman location for the gospel, at least a location highly influenced by Rome.⁴ That the evangelist explains Jewish customs (7:3-4; 12:8; 14:12) and translates the Aramaic words of Jesus that he retains (5:41; 7:34; 15:34 perhaps preserving Peter's aural memory?) suggests he is writing for non-Jews and non-Aramaic speakers. Mark contains Latin loan words though many of them are military terms and could come from anywhere in the Empire. Mark's focal interest in suffering certainly spoke to Roman Christians at the time. While many scholars note strong links to Palestinian Christianity, these would be natural if the first-person memory behind the gospel is Peter's.⁵

Before leaving the matter of the provenance and date of Mark, it is worth noting what C. H. Dodd once highlighted as the three permanent factors in the history of the time. First, there was Rome as the dominant and domineering political order. Second, there were the priests (or Sadducean class, to which I would add the scribes) and Pharisees who represented institutional religion. Finally, there were the Zealots who represented patriotism.⁶ Most of the conflict which we encounter in the gospel, and a good deal of its radicality,

is connected with one or the other of these three groups. “Politics” is operative on many levels in Mark’s gospel.

Why was Mark written? Certainly stories about Jesus circulated before Mark was written, and the contents of Mark suggest the evangelist had access to stories of Jesus’ mighty acts. If people heard only these accounts, they would run the risk of understanding Jesus as a magician, engaged in thaumaturgy like the many traveling miracle workers of the time. Similarly, accounts of Jesus’ teaching existed before Mark, in particular the hypothetical “sayings source” Q which Matthew and Luke apparently used. If Mark’s readers had only that material, they might categorize Jesus as a peripatetic Hellenistic philosopher. Mark wrote for a Christological reason: to help people understand Jesus, *not* who he was, because early Christians experienced him, not as a figure from the past, but as a living Lord. This may be Mark’s most radical claim. It is certainly one that continues to elicit controversy. Mark carefully arranged Jesus material already in circulation into a narrative that culminates at the cross. Fully a third of the gospel, chapters 11–16, is devoted to the last week of Jesus’ life.

Mark suggests that if we want to understand Jesus, we must understand his death on the cross. Mark’s focus is the passion of Jesus. This is hard for moderns who tame the cross in fine jewelry to understand. It was hard in the days immediately after Jesus’ ascension, as well. In its day, the cross was an atrocious scandal, as Paul makes very clear in 1 Corinthians 1:23: “we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” Only the most horrible criminals were crucified, a fate reserved for non-Roman citizens, slaves and especially insurrectionists. Crucified criminals were hung naked and left to rot on their crosses, a powerful deterrent to opposing Roman authority. Anyone presenting Jesus to the Hellenistic world had to explain why he was such a wicked criminal who died such an awful death. Mark writes to demonstrate that the Jesus of the mighty acts, the Jesus of the teachings, is the Jesus of the cross. In *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* Robert Gundry argues persuasively that Mark

wrote his gospel to explain the shameful way Jesus died.⁷ In short, Mark focuses on the suffering of Jesus as *integral* to his identity and mission.

This gives us another clue about why the first gospel was written. Mark wrote for a pastoral reason, to comfort suffering believers. Emphasis on Jesus' suffering points to the fact that Mark's first audience also suffered or anticipated suffering (to my mind further evidence for the gospel's Roman provenance). In the gospel John the Baptist preaches (1:2-8), is delivered up and is martyred (6:14-29). Jesus preaches (1:9-11 and throughout, although Mark records the fewest words of Jesus of the four evangelists), is delivered up (14:10-11) and is martyred (15:1-47). Is this the progression that Mark's community expects for itself? I am disposed to think so. Mark's story of Jesus not only seeks to explain the cross, but intentionally comforts those who follow the Crucified, shows them that their faith in Jesus, their suffering for his sake and the gospel's (8:35) is neither misplaced or without effect.⁸ In resurrection, God vindicated Jesus. Mark suggests, albeit subtly, that his followers will receive similar treatment.

Mark was not a modern biographer and did not write to solve historical problems. For him and his community Jesus was a living Lord (and, of course, to call Jesus Lord, *kurios*, was itself seditious), not a figure from history. Mark was apparently indifferent to chronology, and he seems unfamiliar with the geography of Roman Palestine as you will quickly see if you try to plot the travels of Jesus on a map.⁹ Although his interest isn't systematic Christology, Mark's concern is theological, to show (and I use the word "show" pointedly, since what Mark wants us to know of Jesus, he tells us by means of the narrative itself) who Jesus is, why he died as he did, and what that death means to his followers. As he addresses those issues, Mark is masterful.

It might be tempting to think that because Mark's gospel is an ancient document, it is "primitive" or not carefully constructed. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Very simply, chapters 1-8 address the question "who is Jesus?" and chapters 11-16, "why did

he come?” Mark’s structure, that Matthew and Luke basically retain, is geographic: Galilee (1:14–6:13), beyond Galilee (6:14–8:26), Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem (8:27–10:52), Jerusalem (11:1–16:8). Mark casts Jesus’ ministry as a journey to Jerusalem, not as one might expect, the symbol of true religion, but of opposition to Jesus, a point to which I will return momentarily. Jesus leads; disciples “follow.” Mark asserts discipleship is learned “on the way” as I hope to demonstrate in the following chapter.

Within the geographical pattern, Mark groups stories by time frame, for example, a day (1:16-39) or a week (chaps. 11–16), and by arranging blocks of similar types (genre) of story, for example, parables (4:1-33), miracles (1:40–2:12; 4:35–5:43; the latter unit demonstrates Jesus’ authority over *everything*), or controversy dialogues, stories in which someone tries to “trap” Jesus with a question (as in 1:18–3:6 or 11:27–12:40, a unit of material in which Jesus “bests” representatives of the major parties within Judaism and in Jerusalem). I understand the key to the meaning of any pericope in Mark to be its immediate context in the gospel, what comes before and after the distinct unit. For example, the interpretation of the “widow’s mite” (12:41-44) changes when read in light of Jesus’ criticism of scribes who “devour widows’ houses” (12:38-40).¹⁰ Mark also relies on intercalation, story-within-a-story construction. Perhaps the most dramatic example is the “fig tree narrative” in 11:12-25 in which the temple “cleansing” (11:15-19) is sandwiched between the cursing of the fig tree (11:12-14) and the “return to the tree” (12:20-25). Understanding intercalation helps us interpret the event as a sign act like that of the prophets or an enacted parable rather than an example of Jesus’ petulance (although Mark is more likely to describe the emotional state of Jesus than the other evangelists). Other examples of intercalation include 3:20-35 and 5:21-43.

Reference to Jerusalem and the Temple “cleansing” call for a brief excursus highlighting one way Mark is a maverick. In the Jewish popular imagination in Jesus’ day, Jerusalem was a “holy city,” a repository of a people’s memory, site of historical kingship and of

the Temple which represented “God in the midst.” It was a symbol of God’s presence with Israel, of her cultic life, and of forgiveness of sins effected in the Temple by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. The second Temple, Herod’s Temple, was not as large or splendid as Solomon’s, but had recently been “redecorated.” Herod’s work was begun in 20/19 BC and was complete with golden façade by the time of Jesus. It probably did look impressive to Jesus’ disciples sitting on the Mount of Olives looking across the valley at it (13:1-3). Jesus was not impressed, and in this he reflected contemporary “fringe” ambivalence about the Temple.

Although the popular view of Jerusalem and the Temple seemed positive (symbol of God’s election and Presence), there was a tradition of hostility toward both which is reflected in apocalyptic literature like Ezekiel 40–48, 1 Enoch 83–90, and Mark 13. There was disagreement in contemporary Judaism about Herod’s Temple structure (it wasn’t built to God’s specifications) and cultus (the High Priest was named by the Romans). What we know of the community at Qumran (with whom John the Baptist seems to have had ties) shows it to be critical of the Temple.

From the outset of Mark’s gospel, the Temple and its representatives are depicted as Jesus’ opponents. (See, for example, 2:1-3:6.) In the account of the “cleansing” of the Temple, only the Markan Jesus adds “for all nations” to the quotation from Isaiah 56:7 (11:17). This can be read as a case in point of the evangelist’s general dis-ease with “officialdom.” Several scholars, I among them, read 12:38-44 as Jesus’ attack on the Temple system which accepted “the whole living” of the most marginalized. Certainly Jesus’ condemnation of the Temple in 13:3 seems clear. (Or is it a prediction of what was coming with no judgment implied?) While he suggests that Mark’s portrayal of Temple representatives and Jerusalem authorities is not historical but polemical (the reader is to understand them as a composite character opposed to Jesus), J. D. Kingsbury notes that at 15:38, “Jesus supersedes Temple as place of salvation.”¹¹ John Paul Heil argues that the audience of Mark’s gospel is to understand itself as replacing the Temple by obedience to Jesus¹² much

as Sharyn Dowd's book *Prayer, Power, and the Problem of Suffering: Mark 11:22-25 in the Context of Markan Theology* had suggested that for Christians after the resurrection of Jesus and the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD the spiritual center of gravity shifted from the Temple as a place to prayer, itself as locus of divine encounter.¹³

Mark's Jesus hardly seems "in love and charity" with Jerusalem and the Temple. (Luke paints a rather different picture.) From its beginning his teaching "with authority" (1:22, 27) apparently alarmed the Temple officials (2:6, 3:22). Mark describes their increasing opposition to Jesus whose own stance is either from the beginning anti-Temple (though not anti-Jewish; Jesus is a good Jew who, in fact, argues with Pharisees *like* a Pharisee and loves a man who keeps the law; see 10:17-20), or it becomes so in response to opposition. Vis-à-vis the symbol of Jerusalem and the Temple, Jesus may be the "loyal opposition," like good and faithful church members who call for reforms in their church's structure. But being opposed to the Temple does move Mark's Jesus toward the "fringe." That Mark emphasizes this in his portrayal of Jesus intrigues me because either the Temple and Jerusalem are under siege at the gospel's writing (65–70 AD) or the Temple and Jerusalem are recently destroyed (70 AD) with the utter dislocation this caused both Jewish and Christian communities. Did Mark's original audience watch the triumphal procession in Rome as Titus had the Temple furnishings paraded through the streets as spoils of war (and this indignity later carved for posterity into the Arch of Titus)? And how would this horror and indignity have affected the Jewish attitude toward Jesus, or for that matter, Jewish Christians in Rome of whom Paul's letter to the Romans (and contemporary documents) suggests there were many?

Returning to Mark the literary stylist, the final Markan structural technique I choose to highlight is inclusion, repeating a similar story at the beginning and end of a unit of material to mark it off as a unit, to "frame" it. Mark 8:22–10:52 is the spatial center of the gospel and the heart of its message, and it will be treated in detail in the following chapter. The unit begins and ends with stories about the healing of blind men (8:22-26; 10:46-52). Between these

two accounts are three passion predictions of Jesus, each similarly organized and each more detailed than the last. In each prediction story the disciples misunderstand, and Jesus gives further teaching. Everything in the “framed” section is related either to the meaning of Jesus the Christ or to discipleship. The passion predictions point to Jesus’ suffering, reinforcing the connection between suffering and discipleship, a central theme in Mark’s gospel. The narrative is a journey; Jesus and the disciples are “on the way.” They haven’t arrived, suggesting that discipleship itself is a process not a “destination” and that a single event in which one “gets saved” was not what the evangelist Mark understood by “discipleship.”

Each teaching of Jesus in the journey section stresses discipleship as a matter of servanthood and/or suffering. The suffering of Jesus is linked to the disciples’ suffering in the context of service. We will treat this matter in detail shortly. For the moment, suffice it to say that the inclusion of 8:22–10:52 relates the approaching passion of Jesus in the narrative to two problems faced by the community for which Mark wrote the gospel: first, persecution and martyrdom; and, second, the desire for status and domination, a matter that will be examined in the final chapter of this book. To a community suffering persecution and martyrdom, Mark offers an odd consolation: the disciples in his community are to replicate the life of their Lord, and thereby to continue to be close to Him. To a community suffering under the domination of Rome (and prey to the very human urge to power), Mark’s Jesus says, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (10:42-45). In a society in which many people (some historians believe the majority) were slaves, this must have sounded as radical, and as mad, as it does to us.

At 10:46-52, the closing healing of the discipleship inclusion, an unexpected person, a “nobody on the road of life,” confesses Jesus with strongly Messianic titles: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on

me!” (10:47). The Markan theme of faith from unexpected people (for example, a Syrophenician woman in 7:24-30 or a centurion in 15:39) is highlighted. Somebody has “gotten it.” But to “get it,” to understand, is precisely to confess one’s blindness and say, “My teacher, let me see again” (10:51). Discipleship is the gradual unfolding of greater insight and following “on the way” (10:52). Jesus now goes up to Jerusalem and its inevitable violence.

Much of Mark focuses on what it means to be a disciple. Matthew and Luke appropriate this theme in their own ways and for their own communities. Ironically perhaps, our maverick Mark depicts unnamed characters, not the Jewish leaders or Jesus’ apostles, as exemplars of discipleship: a gentile woman demands inclusiveness (7:24-30); a poor widow gives her life (12:41-44); an anointing woman understands Jesus faces passion and burial (14:3-9). In Mark the “wrong people” (and often female “wrong people”) “get it.” Mark’s portrayal of Jesus’ associates, especially the Twelve, is far less positive. They misunderstand Jesus’ teachings and Messiahship (4:10; 8:14-21); they are sometimes rude to him (4:38; 5:31; 6:37; 8:4). They clearly don’t understand discipleship (8:32) and want to appropriate patterns of power and domination present in their culture but forbidden in the Kingdom of God Jesus preaches and inaugurates. They want to be “the greatest” (9:34), to have the best seats in heaven (10:35-37). Even the women disciples (15:40-41 indicate we must read them back onto the whole narrative), who come off better than the men in the body of the narrative (radical stuff in its day and today in some circles), finally fail to do what they are charged to do (16:1-8), and thus the gospel closes on a note of fear. No disciple is perfect; all are “in process.” Perversely perhaps, I take comfort from Mark’s picture of the disciples as not only “slow of heart,” but downright dumb. If there is hope for them, there is hope for me, and I think that is part of Mark’s pastoral point in his depiction of Jesus’ disciples.¹⁴

Of course within the context of Mark’s narrative world, the disciples *cannot* understand Jesus. At the outset of the gospel (1:1) and in what I take to be its prologue (1:1-15), the reader is told things

that participants in the action of the story don't know. For them, Jesus can be understood only at the cross. The gospel begins with the evangelist's confession "Son of God" (1:1), and closes with the centurion's confession at the foot of the cross, "Truly this man was God's Son!" (15:39). This is another important Markan inclusion, a "frame" closed by another "wrong person," the Gentile executioner. At the moment of Jesus' death, an "outsider" recognizes who Jesus is. As Paul Achtemeier (of blessed memory) so perceptively noted, the disciples couldn't recognize Jesus as King "Until he was enthroned—on a cross; he could not be confessed as king until he had been crowned—with death."¹⁵ This is the central and very ironic point of Mark's gospel, that, to paraphrase Philippians, at the name of one tortured to death on a Roman criminal's cross, one day, not only those who killed him, but all creation *will* bow its knee (Phil 2:6-11). Mark's pastoral point is that in their Lord Jesus all the suffering of disciples finds meaning. In Jesus on the cross Mark's gospel shows us the kind of God we have, and in the process, smashes every idol we have made of God. It may be stark, but it is realistic, and very, very good news.

In the perhaps quirky thinking of the evangelist Mark (although many scholars, I among them, link this theme to contemporary apocalyptic expectation), his audience were participants in a great drama which began with John the Baptist's preaching of repentance and ended with Jesus being raised from the dead. What Mark wants the reader to know about Jesus, he reveals through the narrative itself. Jesus is depicted as the wonder working Son of God, living among people with his human nature evident.¹⁶ In Mark we get an "unsanitized" Jesus, one more likely to reveal his emotions (and I dare to think in some instances, limitations) than in any other gospel. Mark is interested in details and minute particulars and (like anyone writing in a language not his own) prefers the present tense, direct expression which, along with his favorite word, "immediately," moves the story forward to the passion narrative which is his real interest. This realism is calculated to draw us in, to give a "you were there" quality, so that we, too, will follow, will come to learn Jesus "on the way."

Mark frequently calls Jesus “Teacher” (Rabbi), but Mark records few of his words. Except perhaps in chapters 4 and 13 (a Markan framing of Jesus’ public ministry), Mark’s Jesus doesn’t deliver discourses as he does in Matthew and John. Nor does he lay down rules for life in God’s Kingdom, although his life and death clearly exhibit two guiding principles: love and obedience. As Stephen Ahearne-Kroll so eloquently puts it, “Discipleship for Mark is not construed as assent to a series of faith propositions or the full acquisition and understanding of divine mysteries. It is predicated on becoming connected with Jesus by following him after his call and acting like him because he is the manifestation of the kingdom on earth. One learns the mystery of the kingdom through the action of following after the one who manifests it.”¹⁷

Mark wants his audience to understand that one is martyred from within as much as from without. This is a powerful message in our self-centered culture. Mark’s gospel dramatically illustrates what I take to be the very heart of Christianity on the personal level: that we “find ourselves” in relinquishment of self/ego, in giving self for the other; that life rises from death. Mark’s gospel reflects something Joseph Cardinal Bernardin (of blessed memory) said: “It’s in the act of abandonment that we experience redemption, that we find life, peace, and joy in the midst of physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering.”¹⁸ And as Mark makes clear, even the imperfect and uncomprehending are included in the bargain.

Mark’s gospel is about cross bearing as active choice, not passive acceptance. One decides actively to “take up the cross.” Cross bearing isn’t “putting up with” life’s annoyances. This means that suffering is necessarily part of the Christian story, that the relationship of our suffering to that of Jesus’ own is somehow mysteriously redemptive for us. And Mark’s gospel demonstrates the connections between the personal and the communal, perhaps most dramatically at the close of the gospel when a little community of faithful *and* frightened women are charged to proclaim an astonishing message to a community, “his disciples and Peter” (16:7). That Mark’s gospel

exists bears witness to that fact that in spite of terror, amazement and fear, they eventually did so.

Mark's gospel is about Jesus, the unconventional One. Christian tradition has rightly characterized Jesus as prophet, priest, and king. At various periods in ecclesiastical history, one or the other image has predominated. I began this chapter with a description of Jesus as "servant-king." But it now strikes me that in Mark's gospel, the figure of Jesus as prophet is paramount. I suggest this in part because of the evangelist's largely negative characterization of the Temple and its functionaries and his equally negative view of "king Caesar" and *his* flunkies. But it came sharply into focus for me in reading a reflection by Anthony J. Gittins, CSSp.

The sacred figure in biblical literature is not the prophet but the priest. Protected by status, decked in brocaded robes, and privileged to enter the sanctuary, the priest operates within the protective embrace of the sacred temple. By contrast, the prophet is a profane figure. Profane (*pro-fanum*) means "in front of [outside] the temple": that is, dressed in no special garb, quite unprotected, exposed to public scrutiny and ridicule, and subjected to verbal and physical abuse.¹⁹

Ecce homo! Ecce Deus! Behold the Markan Jesus.