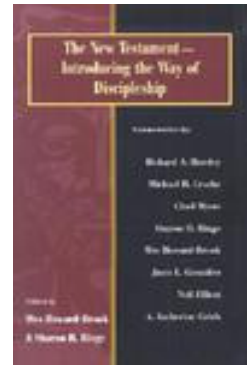


MARK: INVITATION TO DISCIPLESHIP

By Ched Myers

Published in *The New Testament: Introducing the Way of Discipleship*, ed. by Sharon Ringe and Wes Howard Brook. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002.



In our time we have not finished doing away with *idols* and we have barely begun to listen to *symbols*.

--Paul Ricoeur

The great Hebrew prophet Isaiah envisioned a day in which Israel's God would "destroy on this mountain the net that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations" (Is 25:7). According to the evangelist Mark, that day dawned in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Mark believed that the story of Jesus was so extraordinary that he needed to invent a new literary genre. He called this "gospel" (Mk 1:1,15), a term he wrested from Roman imperial propaganda (news of a Roman military victory in the provinces or of the ascent of a new Caesar was carried abroad as "euangelion"). But Mark is a decidedly anti-imperial story of liberation.

This gospel was written almost two millennia ago to help imperial subjects learn the hard truth about their world and themselves. Mark does not pretend to represent the word of God dispassionately or impartially, as if it was universally innocuous in its appeal to rich and poor alike. This story is by, about, and for those committed to God's work of justice, compassion, and liberation in the world. To the religious, Mark offers no "signs from heaven" (8:11f.). To scholars or politicians who refuse to commit themselves, he offers no answer (11:30-33). But to those willing to risk the wrath of empire, Mark offers the way of discipleship (8:34ff).

An action-based hero-narrative, Mark is unlike Roman biographies in that its main characters are not drawn from the elite classes, but from plain folk. Jesus is portrayed as a healer and exorcist, but in contrast to popular tales of magicians common to that period, Mark downplays the miraculous, emphasizing instead the empowerment of Jesus' subjects ("Your faith has healed you," 5:34; 10:52). Repudiating the authority of both the Judean ruling class and the Roman imperium, Mark's Jesus envisions social reconstruction from the bottom up. His practice of radical inclusiveness among women, outcasts, the poor and the unclean questions all forms of political and personal domination. This Jesus calls for a revolution of means as well as ends, enjoining his followers to embrace nonviolence and to risk its consequences. And at the center of the story stands the contradiction of the cross -- life given, not taken -- representing the only power that can remove the "veil" over the nations.

I. Context and Interpretation of the Gospel

There is probably no part of the Bible that has been more the subject of both popular commentary and scholarly investigation than the Gospel of Mark. It has a long and fascinating history of interpretation (see Kealy, 1982). As the earliest story of Jesus, it has preoccupied critical scholarly efforts to reconstruct the life of the historical Jesus (or, more modestly, the history of the earliest Christian communities). Each new epoch of modern biblical criticism has used Mark as a crucible in which new reading strategies are tested, established, and overthrown. The historical-critical methods of form and redaction analysis that prevailed throughout most of the twentieth century cut their teeth on Mark (Perrin, 1976). In turn, on the basis of work in Mark these methods were dethroned in favor of literary and other, post-modern approaches (Anderson and Moore, 1992). Mark "remains tantalizingly at the center of critical pursuits" (Bilezikian, 1977:11).

Meanwhile, outside the academy Mark has, as the shortest and "plainest" of our four gospels, traditionally been used in the church for evangelism and Christian formation. It has also animated many alternative Christian communities in the Anglo-American world over the last 30 years. This "radical discipleship" movement arose among those in First World churches (Catholic and Protestant) who were thirsting for the "whole gospel for the whole person for the whole world." Exposure to the uncompromising call to commitment in Mark was for many, including myself, the invitation to a "second conversion," and fired our battle against acculturated Christianity.

As the great Markan scholar Eduard Schweizer (1960) put it, for Mark "discipleship is the only form in which faith in Jesus can exist." This compelled our movement to also look to the various subversive discipleship traditions that have persisted throughout church history, from the fifth century monastic communities to the twentieth century Confessing Church. But we have always returned to Mark, under the tutelage of activist sages such as John Vincent in England, Athol Gill in Australia, and William Stringfellow in the U.S. (see Gill, 1989). It is the contention of this movement (and of this chapter) that Mark remains a manifesto for Christians today who would be "*radical*." That is, Mark helps us both return to the *roots* of our faith tradition as well as to probe the *roots* of the dysfunction, violence and injustice that haunt our world (see Myers, 1994).

The reading strategy I use and recommend draws upon three major new approaches that have emerged in gospel scholarship since the 1970s: the sociological, the literary and the "ideological" (see Myers, 1988, 3ff). It treats the text as a narrative, analyzing form and content. It also assumes that the narrative reflects an ideological point of view, which in turn is a response to real social, economic and political circumstances. Thus the *narrative* strategy found in the text reflects, directly or indirectly, a *socio-political* positioning and practice within a given historical context. It is also incumbent upon interpreters to state their own preconceptions and concerns openly. As readers, we must clarify our own social circumstances and perspectives, in order to see how Mark's strategies might correlate with or illuminate our context (e.g.

the African American reading of Mark by Blount, 1998, or the Japanese feminist approach of Kinukawa, 1994). And if we read Mark *as scripture*, we must also allow Mark to "read" us.

There are various opinions about when, where and why Mark was written, and as is the case with all books of the Bible, we can never be sure. Church tradition, and up until recently most scholars as well, hold that the gospel was written in Rome by a Jewish-Christian author for a predominantly Gentile audience. I agree however with the growing number of scholars who place the production of Mark in or near northern Palestine (see Kee, 1977:176ff).

Whether or not one dates the text before or after 70 C.E.--the year the Romans destroyed the Jerusalem temple, thus ending a four year popular Judean revolt--influences how one interprets Mark's polemic against that temple system. Some assert that Mark wrote after the war, trying to justify theologically the Christian community's rift with Judaism, and perhaps even the Roman victory (see e.g. Brandon, 1967). I disagree; Mark's vigorous criticism of the temple state is primarily *political and economic*, not theological, and would have been superfluous once the temple no longer stood. Thus I propose a date sometime during the Judean revolt (66-70 C.E.). The urgency reflected particularly in the "apocalyptic" sermon of Mk 13 is more understandable if the gospel was produced during the conflicted and dangerous days of the military struggle between the Judean nationalists and the Roman counter-insurgency campaign (see Myers, 1988:413ff).

Mark's Greek is relatively poor, suggesting that it may have been his second language (as it was for most literate Palestinians). The text is peppered with Latin and Semitic idioms. The Latinisms (e.g. in 5:9, 12:16 or 15:15) have been interpreted as evidence of the text's Roman origins. But in every case they are socioeconomic and administrative terms, and thus could simply reflect Roman linguistic penetration in the colonized culture of Palestine. Mark occasionally explains a Jewish practice (e.g. 7:3,11), indicating this text was also for Gentile Christians. But there is far more about Judean culture that he simply assumes, for example the revering of the "mountain" of the temple (11:23); the abhorrence of pigs (5:11f) and antipathy toward foreigners (7:24-30); or the privileges of the scribal elite (12:38ff). Mark's narrative may also reflect a rural bias, since cities are always places of conflict for Jesus (see 1:45), whereas the sea (3:6; 4:1), the wilderness (1:35; 6:31) and the field (4:26-32) are places of reflection and renewal.

Mark was the first to shape a *textual* narrative from the various oral traditions about Jesus that circulated among the early Christians. This had a double significance. First, unlike other early collections of sayings such as the Gospel of Thomas, Mark composed an action story that wove together varied episodes into a sustained plot with developed characters. Indeed, Jesus' sayings play a smaller role in Mark than in any of the subsequent gospels; action is primary. This reflects his view of discipleship as costly social *practice* (in contrast to, for example, the bias toward detached religious contemplation that is found in some early gnostic writings).

Mark also employs symbolic motifs from the contemporary tradition of popular Jewish resistance literature known as apocalyptic (other biblical examples would be Daniel and Revelation). Yet the gospel is neither a heavenly vision nor a fantastic hero tale, but a decisively *realistic* narrative of struggle anchored in the concrete terrain of Roman Palestine. His portrait of everyday people and recognizable places, of the unequal distribution of social power and privilege and of political conflicts and their consequences, would have been all too familiar to his first audiences.

Second, in writing about Jesus Mark was in a sense constraining the oral tradition. Perhaps he was concerned with the way in which the sayings could be manipulated to legitimate practices that were contrary to those of Jesus. This may be reflected for example in Jesus' debate in 7:1-13 with the Pharisees, in which he pits the authority of the written Torah against their oral tradition). Indeed, throughout the story Mark's Jesus repeatedly appeals to the Hebrew scriptures to justify his practices or to attack those of his opponents. He employs scripture offensively (11:17) and defensively (2:24ff), and argues interpretation with scribes (12:24ff), Pharisees (10:2ff) and Sadducees alike (12:10). This suggests that Mark was passionately engaged in the struggle over how, and by whom, the sacred tradition was best read.

Mark's strategy also employed scripture for his own narrative purposes. His direct citations (which come from a Greek version known as the Septuagint) are sometimes conflated (as in 1:2-3 and 10:19), other times re-imagined (2:25; 11:1ff). His allusions are often brief but unmistakable: to the Exodus escape from Pharaoh's army in an exorcism (5:13); to Moses at Sinai in the Transfiguration (9:2ff); or to the Deuteronomic Jubilee in the notoriously misused phrase "the poor will always be among you" (14:7 = Dt 15:4,11). More often he simply adapts older stories to new circumstances:

- portraying John the Baptist as an Elijah figure (1:6 = II Kg 1:8);
- invoking sabbath mandates to justify Jesus' direct action in a grainfield (2:24ff = Ex 23:10f);
- recontextualizing prophetic seed/tree parables (Ez 31, Dan 4) in Jesus' agrarian metaphors (4:30-32);
- recounting the disciples' crossing of the sea in terms of the Jonah story (4:38 = Jon 1:5f);
- renarrating Elisha's bread "miracle" in Jesus' wilderness feedings (6:35-44 = II Kgs 4:42-44);
- invoking Daniel's heavenly courtroom scene to ground Jesus' vocation as the "Human One" (8:38f = Dan 7:9-14);
- reiterating Isaiah's parable of the vineyard in order to criticize absentee landlords (12:1-10 = Is 5:1-10)

Thus the Markan text reshaped tradition while at the same time endeavoring to "normalize" it. This strategy simultaneously brought the historical Jesus of Nazareth

alive in the present *and* distanced him. On one hand, Jesus was not to be embalmed for the sake of reverence, but followed, which means continually recontextualizing his teachings and practices. On the other hand, this Jesus is not subject to however one might experience him: He is the Jesus of *this* story, and *these* demands. The gospel is both "open" and "closed," affirming the dialectic between canon and context that characterizes every community committed to a living tradition.

Mark drew upon many of the rhetorical traditions of his time, including various parts of the Hebrew Bible, apocalyptic literature, rabbinic stories, Wisdom sayings, and even Greco-Roman tragedy (see further Roth, 1988; Tolbert, 1989). But his "gospel" represented a new genre in the literature of antiquity.

To what extent is Mark a *reliable* source for the "historical Jesus"? This is a very modern question, and while it has preoccupied several generations of scholars, it would not have interested a first century audience. They, like all traditional peoples, did not make an absolute distinction between "facts," "myths" and symbols. I do not think Mark's gospel is fiction, as does the more skeptical tradition of modern historical scholarship (e.g. Mack, 1991). Neither however do I think it is best handled merely as a window to "what actually happened" (as does, for example, the Jesus seminar; see Funk, 1998). I do not believe there is history without interpretation. I do believe Mark was a faithful interpreter (and certainly more reliable than any contemporary theologian!) of the earliest traditions, who "shows" and "tells" us about the life and meaning of Jesus of Nazareth.

II. Structure of the Gospel

We can and should approach the gospel with the native skills we routinely use to interpret stories: looking for plots, characters and settings. The relationship between narrative *form* (composition and structure) and *content* is also crucial to interpretation. The components of literary structure are:

- **sentences** (the basic building blocks of discourse);
- **episodes** (a series of related sentences around a common event or theme);
- **minor sequences** (episodes that are linked around a theme or plot development);
- **major sequences** (a "sequence of sequences" articulating a continuing plot line of the story);
- and **overall architectural pattern** (this can sometimes define a *genre*).

Each component has its own (or sometimes more than one) internal structure and these can be analyzed for clues as to Mark's purpose in writing.

There have been numerous proposals for how one might outline the composition of Mark (summarized in Kee, 1977:60ff). No one of these is conclusive, because ancient storytelling, like a complex tapestry, has multiple dimensions. Mark, though at first glance a deceptively simple, quickly moving story, is no exception. Its texture is rich and layered. For example, a single Markan **episode** (the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida, 8:22-26) can be viewed as having at least three different compositional functions:

1. It can be seen as part of a **minor sequence** of healing episodes that articulate the theme of spiritual "deafness"(7:31-37 and 9:14-29) and "blindness"(8:22-26 and 10:46-52);
2. It can also be seen as the front end of a doublet (along with Mk 10:46-52) that "frames" a **major sequence** of Mark, namely the teaching cycle from 8:27 through 10:45 that I call the "discipleship catechism";
3. This episode (along with the one that follows it, 8:27-30) is a narrative bridge between the two halves of the story (**overall architecture**).

These three compositional "designs" cut across each other, but they are not mutually exclusive.

Having affirmed that there are a variety of ways to "read" the composition of Mark let me offer one model. The first half of the gospel (1:1-8:21) takes place largely in and around Galilee, with Capernaum and the Sea of Galilee representing the gravitational center of the narrative world. It introduces the characters and plots, and focuses upon the healing work of Jesus and the call to discipleship. Its **minor** and **major sequences** may be outlined as follows:

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| 1:1-20 | Prologue/call to discipleship |
| 1:21-3:35 | First campaign of challenge: around Capernaum |
| 4:1-34 | First sermon: parables |
| 4:35-8:10 | First campaign of affirmation: around the Sea of Galilee |
| 8:11-21 | Symbolic epilogue to first half |

The second half of the story (8:31-16:8) deals with Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and its consequences, and focuses on Jesus' teaching and the cost of discipleship:

- | | |
|------------|---|
| 8:22-9:13 | Second prologue/call to discipleship (the "confessional crisis) |
| 9:14-10:52 | Second campaign of affirmation: from Bethany to Jerusalem |
| 11:1-12:44 | Second campaign of challenge: around the Jerusalem temple |
| 13:1-37 | Second sermon: apocalypse and parables |
| 14:1-15:39 | Arrest and execution of Jesus (Passion narrative) |
| 15:40-16:8 | Symbolic epilogue to second half |

At the end of Mark's story our attention is directed suddenly *back* to Galilee and the prospect of following Jesus anew (16:7). This gives the narrative as a whole a sort of circular character, reopening the discipleship adventure that had tragically closed with the scattering of the community (14:50f) and Jesus' execution by the authorities (15:16-47). This architecture compels the reader to keep rereading the story so as to "understand" ever more deeply its meaning (Mk 8:21).

There is a rough symmetry between the constituent sequences in each of these halves, or "books," of Mark.

Narrative Sequence	Book I	Book II
A) Prologue/call to discipleship	1:1-20	8:22-9:13
B) Campaign of challenge	1:21-3:35	11:1-12:44
C) Extended sermon	4:1-34	13:1-37
D) Campaign of affirmation	4:35-8:10	9:14-10:52
E) "Passion" tradition	6:14-29	14:1-15:39
F) Symbolic epilogue	8:11-21	15:40-16:8

While these elements do not necessarily appear in corresponding order in each half, the parallels are unmistakable. We will get a feel for the narrative strategy of Mark by looking at them more closely.

A) Each prologue introduces the essential symbols, characters, and plot complications of the respective "books." Each takes place in the context of "the Way" (1:2f; 8:27), and discusses the relationship between Jesus and John-as-Elijah (1:6; 8:28). In both prologues, Jesus is confirmed as the anointed one by the divine voice (1:11; 9:7) in conjunction with symbolism drawn from the Exodus tradition (wilderness, 1:2,13; mountain, 9:2). Each articulates a call to discipleship (1:16-20; 8:34-36) specifically in regard to Peter, James, and John (1:16,19; 9:2). In Book I Jesus calls disciples to follow him in overturning the structures of the present social order. But because these disciples' understanding is suspect, Jesus must in the prologue of Book II extend a "second" call to follow, in which he introduces the central symbol for the rest of the narrative: the cross.

B) What I call the "campaigns of challenge" each consist of a series of conflict stories. The first sequence dramatizes Jesus' criticisms of the authorities in the provinces of Galilee (1:21ff). The second, set in Judea and Jerusalem, narrates Jesus' confrontation with the political stewards of the public order at the seat of its power: the temple (11:1ff). Both campaigns involve actions aimed at delegitimizing the current social arrangement. In the first half of Mark these are predominantly healings and exorcisms, while in the second half they are mostly verbal jousting and symbolic direct action. Each campaign centers around dramatic acts of "civil disobedience" (2:23-27; 11:12-25), which provoke the authorities to conspire to arrest Jesus (3:6; 12:12). Each culminates with an object lesson concerning the system's exploitation of

the poor (3:1-5; 12:38-44) and closes with Jesus' ideological polarization from the scribal establishment (3:22ff; 12:35-44).

C) Each of the above campaigns is followed by a narrative moment of reflection, in which Jesus offers an extended **sermon**. The first begins as an address to the crowd (4:1), but ends in a private explanation to the disciples (4:10-34). Conversely, the second sermon begins as a strictly private revelation (13:3-5) but concludes with a warning addressed to "all" (13:37). Both sermons rely heavily upon apocalyptic symbols, and include parables about seasons and trees (4:26ff; 13:28ff) and the command to "Watch!" (4:12,24; 13:5,9,23,33). The aim of both teachings is to exhort patience and discernment concerning the coming of God's kingdom in history.

D) Complementing the two campaign sequences of challenge are major sequences that function primarily to *legitimate* the alternative social practice of the discipleship community. I refer to these sections as **campaigns of affirmation**. In both cases Mark relies heavily upon the narrative device of repetition and the plot of a journey. The first sequence features a broad double cycle of socially significant actions:

- two sets of double healings (5:21-43 and 7:24-37) represent a practice of overcoming class and ethnic exclusion;
- two wilderness feedings (6:33-44; 8:1-10), represent a practice of economic sharing with the poor;
- two boat journeys across the Sea of Galilee (4:35-41; 6:45-52) represent a practice of overcoming social segregation between Jew and Gentile

The second affirmative sequence, which I prefer to call the "discipleship catechism," employs a triple cycle of teaching. It is framed by two healing stories of blind men as noted above, unfolds along a journey south to Jerusalem. Each cycle consists of a "portent" in which Jesus' anticipates his death at the hands of the Jerusalem authorities, which is followed by the disciples' "blindness," and ensuing instructions that center around a paradox:

Site	portents	"blindness"	teaching	paradox
Caesarea- Philippi	8:31	8:32f	8:34-37	save life/ lose life
Galilee to Judea	9:31	9:33f	9:35-10:31	first/last
on way to Jerusalem	10:32-34	10:35-39	10:40-45	greatest/ least

This teaching cycle addresses issues of status and power that are social (9:38-10:16), economic (10:17-31), and political in nature (10:35-45).

D) There is nothing in the first half of Mark comparable to the extended **Passion narrative** of Jesus' last days as a fugitive, his arrest, political trial and execution (14:1ff). However, a semblance of symmetry is nevertheless maintained by the account in Book I of the last days of John the Baptist (6:14-29). Both prophets are arrested for their political criticisms of the ruling elite (John of Herod, Jesus of the priestly aristocracy). Both are railroaded as victims of court intrigues in accounts that smack of parody (6:21-28; 14:53-15:15). Both narratives conclude with the prophet's execution and burial in a tomb (6:29, 15:46).

E) The gospel's general structural symmetry is completed in the respective "**symbolic epilogues.**" Here Mark attempts to interpret the meaning of the events he has recounted. In the third and final boat journey that closes Book I, Jesus poses questions to his disciples that force them to review his previous symbolic actions. Mark is implicitly challenging the reader to review the story in order to see what we have missed: "Do you not yet understand?" (8:21) Similarly, the empty tomb scene at the end of the story directs the disciples (and the readers) to return to Galilee (16:7), where the adventure began. As in 8:21, this ambiguous ending undermines our attempts to draw triumphal conclusions, inviting us instead to resolve the narrative crisis through only our own discipleship. That is, whether the Risen Jesus who continues the journey is actually "seen" or not depends upon whether or not *we ourselves* follow him.

The symmetrical structure of Mark, using the rhetorical strategy of repetition, functions to emphasize several "theses," including the following:

- divine intervention occurs at the margins of society, not at its center;
- the Way of Jesus is in conflict with the ordering of power in Roman Palestine;
- as a healer/exorcist, Jesus always attends both to the pain of individual bodies *and* to the roots of repression/ oppression in the body politic;
- the Kingdom of God demands radical change, radical commitment, and yet also radical patience;
- human beings (including disciples) are profoundly "blinded" to the Kingdom because of our patterns of denial.

At the structural center of this bipartite model, functioning somewhat like a fulcrum, is the "confessional crisis" (8:27-9:1). Thus at the heart of Mark's gospel is the assertion that the messianic vocation--and our discipleship as well--is defined by redemptive suffering, not triumph.

This or any other structural model of Mark can only offer a sort of "roadmap" to aid the reader in navigating the fascinating terrain of the gospel. But the map is not the territory. Nothing can substitute for careful reading of the story itself.

III. Storylines of Mark

Rhoads and Michie's *Mark as Story* (1982) is a useful introduction to how to analyze a gospel narrative. They summarize the general tenor of Mark's storytelling style as follows:

The narrative moves along quickly, and is a lively representation of action, with little summary. The narrator "shows" the action directly, seldom talking about it indirectly. Episodes are usually brief, the scene changes often, and minor characters appear and then quickly disappear. ... The reader is drawn quickly into the story by means of this fast-paced, dramatic movement. The brevity of style and rapidity of motion give the narrative a tone of urgency... Whereas early in the narrative the action shifts rapidly from one location to another, the end of the journey slows to a day-by-day description of what happens in a single location, Jerusalem, and then an hour-by-hour depiction of the crucifixion. (1982:45)

The first person on stage is John the Baptist (1:2-6), an Elijah-figure who portends divine judgment (Mal 4:5) yet who also embodies Isaiah's promise that the Exodus "Way" will be reopened (Ex 23:20; Is 40:3). After introducing Jesus, John disappears, resurfacing only in the flashback of 6:14-29 and in subsequent allusions (8:28; 9:11-13; 11:27-33). Jesus' baptism is the first of three "apocalyptic moments," in which a heavenly voice intervenes in the narrative (1:11; see 9:7; 15:34.) After a brief wilderness sojourn that might be likened to a sort of "vision quest" (Myers et al, 1996:7), Jesus announces his mission in Galilee. His simple message summarily dismisses the two classic excuses religious people use to avoid change or responsibility, namely that the domain of divine justice is beyond this world and in the hereafter. "The time is *now*," proclaims Jesus, "and the place is *here*"(1:15).

Jesus' first initiative is to begin creating a community around him. Three key disciple characters (who will represent the inner circle of the community) are briefly introduced in the first call to discipleship (1:16ff). Mark next shifts to the first public scene in a Capernaum synagogue (1:21ff), where the scribes, who will emerge as Jesus' arch-opponents, surface indirectly. A confrontation with a demon begins Jesus' inaugural ministry cycle around the Sea of Galilee, a campaign of exorcism and healing (1:32f; 2:1ff).

Jesus establishes a social practice of inclusivity which defies established group boundaries (eating with sinners, 2:15f), purity restrictions (contact with lepers, 1:41ff), and economic norms (expropriating food for the hungry, 2:23ff). This in turn provokes conflict with the local civic leadership: first the scribal (1:22; 2:6) and priestly (1:43) sectors, then the Pharisees (a series of three episodes beginning in 2:15ff). In the course of the story virtually every identifiable ruling faction in Judean society will oppose Jesus. The first campaign has a double culmination. A public challenge in a synagogue ends with the formation of a political coalition (the Pharisees and Herodians represent the Galilean political elite) that begins plotting Jesus' murder (3.1-6). Soon

after, a shouting match with government investigators ends in ideological polarization (3:22ff). Between these episodes Jesus consolidates his new community (3:13ff) even as he breaks with his own kin (3:31ff).

After each confrontation with the authorities Jesus withdraws (1:35; 3:7; 4:1). In a kind of narrative pause (4:2ff), Jesus offers an extended reflection concerning the paradoxes of the kingdom's infiltration into history. He next embarks on the first of several stormy boat crossings of the Sea of Galilee (4:35ff), which will traverse between "Jewish" and "Gentile" territory (see Kelber, 1979:30ff). Upon his arrival on the "other side" of the sea, Jesus initiates his ministry among Gentiles with another dramatic exorcism (5:1ff).

Jesus next returns to Jewish territory for two interrelated healing episodes (5:21ff; we will look closely at this episode in the final section below). Traveling to his hometown he experiences more rejection (6:1ff), and then dispatches his disciples on their first solo mission (6:7ff). Inserted between their departure and return (6:30f.) is the flashback account of John's arrest and execution by Herod (6:14ff). The remainder of the first half is a continuation of symbolic actions, including more boat journeys (6:46ff; 8:14ff) and healings (7:24ff), two wilderness feedings (6:34ff; 8:1ff), and a dispute with the Pharisees over social boundaries and table fellowship (7:1ff).

Throughout this middle section, the criss-crossing of the Sea and the recurring debate concerning "the loaves" (6:51f; 8:14-21) aim to dramatize the struggle to overcome the enmity between Jew and Gentile—an ancient rift in the Mediterranean world. The healings and brief teaching section (7:14ff) signify Jesus' repudiation of caste and class barriers. Book I closes with Jesus' attempt to tutor the disciples (and the readers) concerning the real meaning of his symbolic action (8:14-21).

In the second half of Mark the narrative sites of boat and sea are abruptly abandoned, and a new journey is begun. After the transitional Bethsaida healing (8:22-26), the first scene opens in Caesarea Philippi. This is the northernmost reach of the narrative, which then turns south with Jesus' slow march to Judea. From here on the story is dominated by the anticipatory force of the showdown in Jerusalem, articulated in the first of three "portents" (8:31f; see 9:31f; 10:32-34). In the second prologue, three major plot developments are suddenly brought into focus. First, the growing conflict between Jesus and his own followers erupts into full-scale confrontation (8:29ff). This tension will continue to escalate until its tragic conclusion in 14:50. Second, the mystery surrounding the identity of Jesus deepens when he rejects Peter's "orthodox" confession of the Christ (8:29). As readers we are now off balance, for we had been led from the beginning of the story to believe Jesus was in fact Messiah (1:1). Finally, the real consequences of Jesus' conflict with the authorities is revealed. He exhorts that his followers be prepared to reckon with execution by the Romans for insurrectionary activity (8:34ff). This second call to discipleship is confirmed by the divine voice in the second apocalyptic moment of the Transfiguration (9:2-8).

The next section consists of a triple cycle I call the "discipleship catechism on nonviolence" (see Beck, 1996). Each time Jesus anticipates his execution at the hands of the Jerusalem powers, the disciples are unable (unwilling?) to grasp or embrace this destiny (see 10:32). Each time Jesus responds by teaching them about power and service. This section addresses the internal organization of the community, including marriage and family (10:1-16), group boundaries (9:38-50), leadership (10:35-45), and possessions (10:17-31). By the time it draws to a close with a second blind man story (10:46-52), the traveling band has arrived at the outskirts of Jerusalem.

The second "campaign of challenge" is a series of running debates as Jesus moves in and out of Jerusalem. It commences with a theatrical procession (11:1 ff), a symbolic gesture (11:12-14,20-25), and a dramatic direct action in the temple (11:15-20). With this nonviolent assault Jesus declares his opposition to the temple state and the way it was legitimated through appeals to the old Davidic monarchy (12:35-37). One by one he engages in rhetorical battle with the various ruling factions, whose every objection is met by Jesus' counter-arguments. First the representatives of the temple power structure (chief priests, scribes, and elders) try to intimidate Jesus (11:27ff). Next come the Pharisees and Herodians (12:13ff). After locking horns with the archconservative Sadducees (12:18ff), Jesus turns for a final offensive upon the ideology of the scribal class (12:28-40).

In each of these debates Jesus appears to prevail, finally silencing his antagonists (12:34). Throughout most of this section the disciples are waiting offstage, reappearing only at the bitter culmination of the section (12:43). In the story of the "widow's mite" Jesus sharply repudiates the temple economy's exploitation of the poor. He then dramatically exits the temple for the final time, and alluding to his very first parable (3:25) predicts that it is a "house that cannot stand" (13:1-2). Taking a seat on the Mount of Olives, a traditional site for judgment (see Zech 14:4), he offers his second extended discourse on apocalyptic patience (13:3ff). Jesus exhorts his followers to reject the claims of nationalist patriots in their commitment to a restored temple-state (13:5-23). Instead, they should hold out for a more genuinely revolutionary transformation of the world, in which the Domination system itself unravels (13:24-37).

As Jesus withdraws to suburban Bethany, the plot to arrest him is in full swing (14:3). At this point, the narrative takes on the sinister hues of covert machinations. The authorities infiltrate Jesus' community, one of the disciples collaborating with the undercover operation (14:10f). Meanwhile, the hard-pressed community has gone underground (14:12-16). Mark offers a tragic/pathetic portrait of the community celebrating the Passover feast in hiding, riddled by doubt and suspicion (14:17-21). In stark counterpoint, Jesus emphasizes his solidarity with them (14:22-25), insisting that although their defection may be inevitable, the discipleship story will not end (14:28). True to his prediction, the disciples buckle under pressure and flee when Jesus is seized by state security forces (14:32-52). At this point the discipleship story collapses, and the trial narrative begins.

The double trial and torture of Jesus is narrated in parallel fashion (14:53-15:15). This functions to equate the Judean ruling class and the Roman imperialists in their common rejection of Jesus, who submits to the railroading in defiant silence. While the disciples hover in the shadows (14:66-72; 15:40f) new characters come onto the stage: the high priest, the Roman procurator Pilate, a fellow prisoner Barabbas. The narrative builds a crescendo of irony, culminating in the crowd's insistence that the dissident terrorist Barabbas be spared in order that the nonviolent dissident Jesus be executed (15:6-15). Amid the derision of his triumphant opponents, Jesus is summarily crucified, and the story appears to reach its tragic end (15:21-32).

Jesus' death, the story's third apocalyptic moment, brings to a climax Mark's symbolic representation of the "Human One" (15:33-38). Not only did Jesus three times anticipate the execution of this messianic persona (8:31; 9:31; 10:33f); he also thrice portended the "appearance" of the Human One as a sign of the "end of the world" (8:38f; 13:26f; 14:62). Here at the cross, as his opponents look on, Jesus expires and the sun goes dark. This is Mark's apocalyptic finale, but only for those with "eyes to see," for the dishonoring of Jesus continues in the postmortem responses of both a Judean and a Roman representative (15:39-46).

In the second epilogue it is three female followers, who have endured the ordeal of Jesus' crucifixion without abandoning him, who are revealed as true disciples (15:40f, 47ff). Attempting to give Jesus the dignity of proper burial, they encounter a mysterious "young man" presiding over an empty tomb (16:5ff). In Mark's third call to discipleship these women are invited to follow Jesus to Galilee, with the promise that the gospel narrative will resume there. The story ends with their (and our) understandable reaction of both "trauma and ecstasy" (16:8) at the realization that the discipleship adventure, like the tomb itself (16:4), has been unexpectedly reopened.

It has been argued that the basic "syntax" of a plot consists of five essential elements: (1) mandating; (2) acceptance or rejection of mandate; (3) confrontation; (4) success or failure; (5) consequence (Via, 1985:40ff). It is not hard to see each of these elements in the story line as I have outlined it. Jesus is mandated at baptism, accepts the mandate to proclaim and embody the kingdom, and continually skirmishes with opponents of this mission. Whether the cross represents success or failure depends of course upon one's point of view. From Mark's point of view it demonstrates that his portrait of Jesus as Messiah is indeed reliable—but only in terms of how Mark has redefined messianic characteristics!

In addition to this main plot, we can abstract three distinct subplots, each with a different subject. The first subplot involves Jesus' attempts to create and consolidate a discipleship community. Here the subjects are regular working folk he summons to follow. Though mandated to carry on Jesus' work (1:17; 3:14; 6:7), the Way is first unintelligible to these disciples (6:53; 8:17ff) and eventually resisted once its consequences are made clear (8:32; 9:38; 10:35-39; 14:27-42). This tragedy is, however, reversed by the persistence of a few women and the promise that because Jesus lives, the story *and its mandates* will go on (14:27f; 16:6f).

The second subplot is Jesus' liberative ministry of healing, exorcism, and proclamation. The subjects are the poor and oppressed, who typically in Mark are part of the "crowd." The mandate arises in the opening synagogue exorcism, in which the crowd first recognizes that Jesus' authority exceeds that of their scribal overlords (1:22). Jesus' clear priority for the poor is demonstrated in the healing of two females, as we shall see below (5:21-43). His social location is characterized by intimate communion with the outcast (1:40-45; 14:3), the disabled (2:1-12), the despised (2:13-17) and the marginalized (6:33-44; 8:1-10). By the time Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, it seems that the crowd has accepted his mandate for a new social order, hailing him as popular king (11:1-10). In the end, however, the crowd (like the disciples) abandons Jesus. Manipulated by the authorities into supporting his execution, the poor thus tragically remain under their control (15:11-15).

Mark's third subplot is Jesus' confrontation with the dominant social order. The subjects are the various groups of the political elite: scribes, Pharisees, Herodians, and ruling Jerusalem clergy. Jesus delivers his mandate to them several times in the first campaign of direct action. He critiques the public purity and debt system (2:10,28) and issues a Deuteronomic challenge to choose an ethos of justice and compassion over one of domination (3:4; see Dt 30:15-20). This mandate is rejected by the authorities then (3:6) and throughout the story (6:26; 7:1f; 8:11; 11:27-33; 12:13; 14:1f). Jesus again confronts each of the elite groups during the second campaign narrative, disrupting temple commerce and appearing successfully to silence his opponents (12:34). But eventually the forces of Judean and Roman state power join to vanquish him. The surprising consequence is that they behold the advent of the Human One on the cross, to their shame (15:29-32; see 14:62). Their ultimate demise is symbolized by the cosmic darkness and rending of the temple curtain (15:38; see 13:24-27).

These three narrative strands function to articulate the key aspects in Jesus' messianic mission: confronting the dominant public order, nurturing an alternative social order, and embodying solidarity with the poor. All three subplots contribute to and converge in the climactic Passion narrative. In the next to last scene of the story we see the defecting disciples, the disillusioned crowd, and the hostile authorities, all juxtaposed to Jesus, who alone goes the way of the cross.

IV. The Gospel in an Episode: A Reading of Mark 5:21-43.

As a popular educator I frequently do Bible study and social analysis with denominational leadership, churches and faith-based activist groups using the Gospel of Mark. Sometimes I have only a brief time with a group--even as short as one sermon or an hour workshop--to communicate the essential themes of Mark's story of Jesus. On such occasions I have found the best "summary" episode in Mark to be the healing of two females in 5:21-43. I therefore conclude this brief introduction to Mark with a closer look at that tale, which represents a kind of "microcosm" of the gospel as a whole.

This episode is a classic example of a "Markan sandwich," in which he wraps one story around another in order to compel the reader to interrelate the two. We pick up the narrative on the heels of Jesus' dramatic exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac on the "other side" of the Sea (5:1-20), after which Jesus returns to "Jewish" territory (5:21).

The setting of the first half of this story is the "crowd" (5:21,24,27,31). Jesus is approached by a synagogue ruler who appeals for a healing intervention on behalf of his daughter, who he believes to be "at the point of death" (5:23). Jesus departs with him (5:24), and since Jesus has already healed many different people to this point in the story (1:30-34; 40-42; 2:10-12; 3:5,10), we fully expect this mission will be accomplished. On the way, however, Jesus is hemmed in by the crowds (5:24). The narrative focus zooms in upon a woman whose condition Mark describes in detail with a series of descriptive clauses:

- she had been with a flow of blood for twelve years;
- she had suffered much under the care of many doctors;
- she had spent all her resources yet
- she had not benefited, but grown worse instead. (5:25f)

The purity code stipulated that menstruating women should be quarantined (see Lev 15:19ff), though in this period these strictures probably were not applied to the poor. Still, it would have been highly inappropriate for a hemorrhaging woman to publicly grab a "holy man"! But Mark focuses instead on the way she had been bankrupted by profiteering physicians who exploited her without addressing her condition.

The woman's approach to Jesus is in stark contrast to that of Jairus. The latter was frontal and assertive: he acknowledged Jesus' honor (lowering himself before him) in order to request a favor. She, on the other hand, reaches out anonymously from behind in the crowd, seeking to touch Jesus covertly and somehow effect a magical cure. Jairus addresses Jesus directly, as would befit male equals (5:23), while the woman talks only to herself (5:28). Jairus is the "head" of both his household (speaking on behalf of his daughter) and his social group (the synagogue). The woman is nameless, homeless and alone: poor, sick, and ritually impure. In other words, Mark is portraying two characters that represent the opposite ends of the social spectrum.

At the moment of contact between Jesus and the woman (5:29), however, the power dynamics of the story begin to be reversed. Her body is healed—whereas from the perspective of the purity code *Jesus* should have been contaminated. Indeed Mark tells us that power had been transferred (5:30). Does this comment signal a magical transaction, or is it a symbol of "empowerment," and a clue to the social reversals to come?

When Jesus stops to inquire what has happened, the whole narrative, which was in motion toward Jairus' house, grinds to a halt. A struggle now ensues:

Jesus: "Who touched my clothes?"

Disciples: "You see the crowd yet ask, 'Who touched me?'"

Jesus looked around to see who had done it. (5:31f)

To the disciples this interruption is an inconvenience attributable to the anonymous crowd, with whom they are unconcerned. Jesus, however, insists upon encountering the human face of the poor.

Emerging from the margins of the story to center stage, it is the woman's turn to fall in front of Jesus, suggesting that she is now an equal to Jairus. Finding her voice, "she told him the *whole* truth" - - including no doubt her opinion of the Purity system and the medical establishment (5:33)! One might legitimately wonder how long her story took, further delaying Jesus from his original mission. After listening patiently, Jesus acknowledges her rightful status as "daughter" in the family of Israel, and acclaims the faith evidenced by her initiative(5:34). His commendation grants her a status *exceeding* that of Jesus' own disciples, who have been shown to be "without faith" (4:40)!

But what of the original "daughter"? Jairus is informed by some servants that she has died (5:35). The phrase "while Jesus was still speaking" functions to overlap the utterances, as if gain and loss are voiced simultaneously:

Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace.

Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher further?

By attending to this importunate woman Jesus appears to have defaulted on his original task. Will the story end in tragedy? Undeterred, Jesus ignores this "interpretation" of events and exhorts Jairus to believe. The shock cannot be missed: He is instructing a leader of the synagogue to learn about faith from this outcast woman (5:36)!

The scene now shifts to Jairus' household. There mourning turns to derision at Jesus' insistence that the girl only "sleeps" (5:39). Jesus is not being coy; "being asleep" will emerge later in the story as a symbol of lack of faith (13:36; 14:32ff). He throws the onlookers out and takes the girl's hand (5:41), thus for a second time in this episode defiling himself by touching a body that is ritually unclean in the extreme (a bleeding woman, a corpse). After he raises the girl back to life the witnesses are "beside themselves with great astonishment" (5:43), a reaction that will occur only one other time in Mark: at *Jesus'* resurrection (16:6).

This episode portrays Jesus in the tradition of the prophet Elisha, who raised the dead son of a woman of Shunem (II Kg 4:8-37). This may help explain why Mark's story ends with Jesus' instruction to give the girl "something to eat" (5:43). For just as the story of Elisha's restoration of the young boy is followed by one in which he

presides over a "feeding miracle" during a famine (II Kg 4:38-44), Jesus will shortly do the same with a hungry crowd in the wilderness (Mk 6:35ff).

In the art of narrative, every detail is there for a reason, and Mark's "aside" that the girl was twelve years old is a good case in point (5:42). She has lived a life of privilege for 12 years, and is just on the edge of puberty (i.e. ready to start menstruating). In contrast, the bleeding woman had suffered deprivation for 12 years, and is permanently infertile. In the same way in which the number of 50 stars and 13 stripes on the U.S. flag symbolizes the number of states and original English colonies, the number 12 here symbolizes the tribes of Israel (see 3:13). This "coincidence" represents the key to the social meaning of this doublet. Within the "family" of Israel, these "daughters" represent the privileged and the impoverished, respectively. Because of such inequity between these two "socialized bodies," the body politic as a whole (represented by Jairus as head of household/synagogue) is "on the verge of death."

As Jairus learns, the healing journey with Jesus must take a necessary detour that stops to listen to the pain of the crowd. Only when the outcast woman is restored to true "daughterhood" can the daughter of the synagogue be restored to true life. *That* is the faith the privileged must learn from the poor. This story thus *shows* a characteristic of the sovereignty of God that Jesus will later also *tell*: The "last will be first" and the "least will be greatest" (10:31,43).

This story of "good news to the poor" embodies in a nutshell Mark's manifesto of radical discipleship. Writing in the midst of the pressure and suffering generated by the Roman-Judean war of 66-70 C.E., Mark beckoned readers to "have ears to hear" (4:9) and "eyes to see" (10:51f). This gospel still invites its audience to "wake up" (13:37) and "turn around" (1:15); to speak truth to mountains of domination (11:23) and cast out demons (3:14f); to row against the storms of ethnic division (6:48) and give the hungry something to eat (6:37); and to take up our cross and follow Jesus (8:34). It is a story whose symbols, if heeded, can yet animate us to do away with the dehumanizing idols of today.

V. References

Anderson, Janice Capel and Stephen Moore.

1992 Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies.
Minneapolis:Fortress.

Beck, Robert.

1996 Nonviolent Story: Narrative Conglict Resolution in the Gospel of Mark.
Maryknoll:Orbis.

Bilezikian, Gilbert.

1977 The Liberated Gospel: A Comparison of the Gospel of Mark and Greek Tragedy. Grand Rapids:Baker.

Blount, Bryan.

- 1998 Go Preach! Mark's Kingdom Message and the Black Church Today. Maryknoll:Orbis.
- Brandon, S.G.F.
1968 Jesus and the Zealots. New York:Scribners.
- Funk, Robert and the Jesus Seminar.
1998 The Acts of Jesus: What did Jesus Really Do? San Francisco:Harper and Row.
- Gill, Athol.
1989 Life on the Road: The Gospel Basis for a Messianic Lifestyle. Homebush West, Australia:Lancer.
- Kealy, Sean.
1982 Mark's Gospel: A History of Its Interpretation. New York:Paulist.
- Kee, Howard C.
1977 Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark's Gospel. Philadelphia:Fortress.
- Kelber, Werner.
1979 Mark's Story of Jesus. Philadelphia:Fortress.
- Kinukawa, Hisako.
1994 Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective. Maryknoll:Orbis.
- Mack, Burton.
1991 A Myth of Innocence : Mark and Christian Origins. Philadelphia:Fortress Press.
- Myers, Ched.
1988 Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus. Maryknoll:Orbis.
1994 Who Will Roll Away the Stone? Queries for First World Christians. Maryknoll:Orbis.
- Myers, Ched and Marie Dennis, Joseph Nangle, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda and Stuart Taylor.
1996 "Say to This Mountain" Mark's Story of Discipleship. Maryknoll:Orbis.
- Perrin, Norman.
1976 "The Interpretation of the Gospel of Mark." Interpretation, 30, pp. 115ff.
- Rhoads, David and Donald Michie.
1982 Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel. Philadelphia:Fortress.
- Roth, Wolfgang.
1988 Hebrew Gospel: Cracking the Code of Mark. Oak Park:Meyer-Stone.
- Schweizer, Eduard.

1960 Lordship and Discipleship: Studies in Biblical Theology No. 28.
London:SCM.

Tolbert, Mary Ann.

1989 Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective.
Minneapolis:Fortress.

Via, Dan.

1985 The Ethics of Mark's Gospel—In the Middle of Time.
Philadelphia:Fortress.