

of the elite. *Aggadab* was the junk jewelry of the pedlar, fine of its kind but not the same as the gems of leisured scholarship. He poses the riddles which delight children and the illiterate: tough, polemical little utterances which subvert the mind's accustomed order. He challenges the authorities and suffers from their malevolence and disregard, as the children and wayfarers of folktale suffer from wicked step-parents or witches and are put to the test by kings. And like them, he emerges from the ordeal triumphant. The official histories and the myths have their say. Jesus is no king, but he is David's son and lord. He is not God, but he is his son. Such powerful touches from other kinds of story have to be played out, however, within the folktale which they momentarily enhance. In view of Mark's apocalyptically dualistic frame of mind and his attachment to such apocalyptic myths as Doomsday and resurrection, it is particularly striking that myth does not get more of a showing than it does. Even in chapter 13, where it is a powerful force, it is firmly tied into the human incidents of the narrative. Mark's loyalty to popular narrative and the common human scene is all the more impressive in a writer so positive about the supernatural and the secret. His angels and devils do not interact in their own sphere. They serve people or batten on them. Women, children, fishermen, lepers, publicans, sinners, the sick, the unclean, and the mad: these matter to Mark as much as the powers that be—secular, religious, or (Jesus and God excepted) supernatural. His Jesus is a fitting hero for Christianity in its first and unofficial phase, housebased and taken by wayfaring missionaries to those whom the established faiths and cults did not satisfy; those who were glad to hear of the subversion and transgression of a religion which had never appealed to them.

From the reader's point of view, what matters most about folktale is the close attention it demands. A few of the Grimms' folktales would give good practice for reading Mark's. There is no unnecessary digression in such stories. They are lean, close and complex in articulation, with a precision which we tend to associate with science rather than with art. They are almost formulaic. Everything in them matters and has functional relationship to every other thing. So every, even momentary, negligence in reading them is disabling. They should be read no faster than the pace of speech, and not once only. For they belong to the people clustered round the storyteller who brings out of his narrative treasure things new and old, rather than to the rapid browser in the armchair.

### The Text

Mark's is generally believed to be the first written gospel. Granted the truth of that belief, something momentous happened when Mark wrote his first word: *arabé*, "beginning." A welter of oral and fluid tradition about Jesus got fixed into text. Stories which had been the property of

## Mark

*John Drury*

WHAT sort of literature is the Gospel according to Mark? It is sacred Scripture: a categorization long since and officially given to it by its inclusion in the Christian biblical canon. This venerable presupposition for reading it is certainly apt to a book which instructs its readers in the structure of the world's spiritual reality. It is about the holy. All the times, places, and people in it, together with their connecting movements, are concerned with the sacred as a way of life. It has the practicality and the mystery of religious writing.

But religious writing is an enormous category and in the Bible alone spans a wide spectrum of different forms: laws, letters, lyrics, proverbs, oracles, and various kinds of narrative. Every important literary or oral category had a religious use for the writers of the library of books which became the Bible. No book was under any obligation to keep to one category. In Mark Jesus legislates, speaks oracularly and proverbially, appeals to myth and compassionate common sense. But everything is carried and given significance by the story it is in. Mark is obviously and emphatically a narrative.

The narrative classification narrows the field slightly but not enough. Biblical narratives include court histories of kings, priests' myths about the origins and ends of things, and legends of heroes such as Jacob or Elisha, which had a more popular appeal. Mark best fits this last class. His tale is folktale. Before its official canonization as holy Scripture, it first lived among unofficial people and delighted them by having virtually nothing good to say about officialdom—high priest, procurator, or even apostle.

According to Walter Benjamin, folktale is the ordinary person's way of shaking off the nightmare which myth puts on his chest.<sup>1</sup> Mark's Jesus is typically a folktale hero, a wanderer going through ordeals which commandeer, disrupt, and reorder the established myths. He is unaccommodated and unofficial. He performs the miracles beloved of popular piety because they change lonely misery to social happiness at a touch; and of course these miracles are suspect to philosophy precisely because of their instant wish fulfillment. In teaching he uses the parables which rabbinism classed as *aggadah*, in distinction from *halakah*, the instruction

Christian preachers, teachers, and prophets were appropriated by a Christian writer. This written gospel is next-door neighbor to thirty or forty years of oral gospeling.

But in literature as in life, old habits die hard and new beginnings are not entirely new. Major features of oral gospeling impinge on Mark's text. It was meant to be read aloud to a circle of listeners: an external setting which matches the frequent scenes in the book, where Jesus questions and instructs his followers by word of mouth. This is a written text about a man who, according to its credible testimony, wrote nothing but spoke with an authority unofficial but divine: "They were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one that had authority, and not as the scribes" (1:22).

Mark's book occupies a threshold between the evanescent spoken word and the more permanent and fixed written word. Yet very soon after Mark had written, two other Christian writers, Matthew and Luke, broke up the fixity of his text—amplified it and reduced it—with the same magisterial freedom with which Mark himself had treated his oral sources, in order to incorporate more material from oral or written sources.

Yet again text may not be utterly fixed, particularly in a culture used to oral narrative or in as creatively unstable an environment as primitive Christianity; but it is more stable than speech, a more solid referent for meditation than the liquidity of hearsay. Matthew's and Luke's Gospels were made possible by Mark's. They could operate with his document. Mark himself seems to have been conscious of the advantages of literary over oral gospeling; for why else did he go to the trouble of writing at all? We may even detect in his writing a certain animus against the very people who had fostered the preceding oral tradition about Jesus: his family and his disciples. According to him, they understood little or nothing of what Jesus told them or of what his actions implied. Indeed, he presents them as so obtuse and wrongheaded that it is extremely difficult, within Mark's own terms, to account for his having any coherent or dependable tradition to use at all. Certainly in this matter his successors, Matthew and Luke, seem to have noticed a difficulty amounting to inconsistency. They modified Mark's blockheads into more historically probable transmitters of tradition. In Matthew they have "little faith" but do *understand* Jesus. Luke is always conscious that he is dealing with the future leaders of the Church, men who may have erred but who always got things right in the end.

The stupidity of Mark's disciples seemed as historically questionable to Matthew and Luke as it does to us. But within his book it has its highly effective uses. It is both flattering and instructive to his readers. We understand Jesus better than the people in the text usually do. Their incomprehension assists our comprehension. It signals the dead-end paths—namely, any routes other than the road to the Cross, which the

disciples, naturally, do not want to know about (for example, Peter at 8:31–33). For Mark is after an extraordinary kind of comprehension. He locates it at death, the world's edge, so that the centurion at the Cross is given the correct insight: "Truly this man was the Son of God" (15:39). In the course of the narrative Jesus is rightly identified by demons and enemies, momentarily by Peter—who immediately errs by trying to swerve Jesus from the way to the Cross. Genuine understanding, Mark is telling us, is supernatural. So within the continuities of this world, and within the continuities of a narrative set in this world, it is discontinuous and sudden. People listen to Jesus' teaching and see his actions—and fail to get it. Yet the truth about Jesus is peremptorily barked out by an unclean spirit (1:24), suspected by a hostile high priest at the end of his tether (14:61), and definitively pronounced by the centurion at the Cross, who endorses what God has said at the outset (1:1): this is the holy one, the Christ, God's Son. Identifications of Jesus within the narrative are incidental (in a strong sense) and unmotivated. They simply occur. Their source or ground, and therefore any continuity they could have, is elsewhere. Some sense of it is given by Jesus' being designated Son of God by God at the very beginning of the book and by the centurion at its very end: that is, at the thresholds of narrative entry and exit. There is ground at the start and finish. Jesus is called "Son of God" in its first verse, the caption which labels the entire book and gives us the identifying key. Having put it so firmly in our hand at the outset, having virtually made us into Christian initiates there and then and given us the ground of understanding, Mark can safely and properly make his story as perplexed and jerky as narrative can stand. So long as we hold on to what we were told in the first verse, the story holds—and all the more dramatically for its discontinuities and obscurities. Similarly, the lurid symbols of Rimbaud's provocatively titled *Illuminations* are an intelligible sequence to the writer/reader, who boasts "I alone have the key of this wild parade!" Between the secure understanding given us in its first verse and the radical insecurity and incomprehension of the subsequent tale, Mark's book gets its energy.

Mark 1:1 gives divine knowledge to his readers. It is all-important. Mark lived among people who believed the timetable of another world to be pressing upon mundane time. Each touch of its pressure was a promise of its eventual triumph over ordinary time and the defeat of death, mundane time's most dreadful marker, by resurrection. God was the master storyteller, the ultimate referent of every moment, the significance of which could be got from taking bearings back upon the sacred past recorded in the Old Testament Scriptures, and forward upon Doomsday and God's kingdom to come. This cluster of beliefs—history articulated into divinely ordained epochs which were discernible by scriptural *exegesis* and drove toward the divine ending—belonged to the apocalyptic

**Judaism exemplified by the Book of Daniel. It is a major part of the matrix of Christianity. Paul's thought is drenched in it, and its influence on Mark is strong and sustained.**

The importance of such a clear and rigid picture of the reality which shapes history is all the more urgent if we consider the physical appearance of Mark's text. It did not look the same as it does in a modern printed Bible. We do not possess Mark's autograph, but we can rightly suppose that he used the conventions of his time which survive in papyri. He wrote without punctuation, without paragraphing, even without spaces between words. His text consisted simply of letters, usually the same number to every line. It lacked the nonverbal aids to narrative structure which give us nowadays so much help in understanding the shape and rhythm of what is before us. So the only indication to his contemporary readers of the shape of what they were reading was in the words themselves. If somebody spoke, Mark had to write "And Jesus said unto them . . .," because he had no quotation marks at his disposal. The word "and" served him as a colon or stop. Topographical movement such as going into a house or over water, leaving a place or arriving at one, divides his narrative text much as paragraphing divides ours. This is a reason for the austere conventional character of Mark's scenery, for which Duccio would be a more apt equivalent in Christian painting than Holman Hunt. When Mark says "house" we do better to imagine a simple perspectiveless box around the characters concerned than a realistic dwelling. When he says "sea," heraldic wavy lines are more appropriate than Monet or travel posters. But the conventional is not at all the same as the perfunctory or the negligent. It bears structure and meaning simultaneously. A text without our repertoire of punctuation had to be all the more firmly and cleverly shaped by the words alone. The subtle divisions and connections made by our typographic conventions—divisions and connections without which there could be no narrative and which the speaker could make by pause or gesture—these had to be accomplished by Mark with words. In a nutshell, they had to be internalized within the flow of words, from which alone signals of the flow's articulation could be beamed to the reader.

Mark used narrative techniques common to all practitioners of the craft, but the layout of his text and the strength of his apocalyptic beliefs combine to make his use of them unusually (to us) diagrammatic. And his iconic austerity can sustain rich complexity of reference. The seeds of the end of a tale are planted in its beginning, the seeds of intervening events shed by other intervening events. For example, the healing miracles in the book are a cumulative series. By the end they have included men, women, and children; diseases of hands, feet, ears, eyes, and mouths (cardinal parts of the body in Jewish tradition; see Ps. 115:6-7); even death. Mark sets up a tale, then teasingly interrupts it with another tale

before resuming it. Some examples of this are the death of John the Baptist, between the going and returning of the twelve apostles (chap. 6); the healing of the bleeding woman, between Jesus' setting out to heal a girl and his doing it (chap. 5)—an interruption which tightens the tale it is in because the girl dies in the meanwhile and has to be resurrected; the overthrow of the Temple traders, between the cursing of a fig tree and the finding it dead (chap. 11); and Peter's denial, between the two trials of Jesus (chaps. 14 and 15). This is a fundamental and indispensable narrative ploy, a way of engaging the reader and knotting the story into multiple strength, without which the tale might revert to mere chronicle. It is not usually as often or as boldly used as here.

Sometimes Mark's devices are more technically sophisticated. His account of the death of John hints at the death of Jesus. It is also narrated with almost Proustian temporal complexity. The train of events must have been: reason for John's arrest, John imprisoned, John killed, John possibly resurrected. But Mark goes backward. He starts with Herod guessing that Jesus is John resurrected from the dead at 6:14, mentions John's death at 6:16, his imprisonment at 6:17, and the reason for it at 6:18: the order of recall is the reverse of the historical order. Only at 6:21 do actual time and narrated time move forward together. But when they eventually synchronize they do so with all the more energy for having been sprung by this coiled beginning. The resulting complex and horribly fascinating little tale appealed to Flaubert, Wilde, and Richard Strauss for further development. Beginning by dragging backward: this powerful opening gambit is obvious here. It is concealed, at least to modern readers, in the Gospel's prologue, which, as a key to the whole subsequent story, is worth close attention.

### Structures and Codes

The first fifteen verses of the book have unity. Jesus' gospel is announced in 1:1 just before the story begins, and in 1:14-15 Jesus comes into Galilee preaching it. Between those two pointed occurrences of the word "gospel" lie the events which form the starting motor of the whole gospel narrative. In other metaphors, Mark 1:1-15 is the overture which keys our mind into an atmosphere, the tabulation of the codes and ciphers used in the rest of the book. How does it move?

Verse 1 belongs in the present of Mark's Christian readers. "The gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," is their book about their master. From that near present they are suddenly taken far back in time. Verses 2 and 3, quoting Exodus, Isaiah, and Malachi, fasten Jesus' story to the sacred past as strongly as verse 1 has fastened it to the sacred present. These three verses mark out a temporal span much greater than the narrated life of Jesus. Much of the energy in the telling of Jesus' life and

death derives from that longer story on either side of it—and much of the significance, too. The Jesus announced as Son of God by the voice of Christian evangelism in verse 1 appears in verse 9 and is designated "beloved Son" by the divine voice quoting ancient Scripture in verse 11. The messenger announced by ancient Scriptures in verses 2 and 3 as a "voice . . . crying in the wilderness" to herald the Lord gets embodied in verse 4 as John preaching repentance and proto-Christian baptism in the wilderness. The pattern is a chiasm. The first to be announced, Jesus the Son of God, is the last to arrive. The second announced, John the herald, appears penultimately; the structure is ABBA. Its subliminal effect is to rouse us to the possibility that something momentous is happening in 1:1-15—something to do with John that brings Jesus into the lead. What happens is threefold: baptism of all Jewry, Jesus' baptism, Jesus' temptation. The central event, Jesus' baptism, is likely to be central in more than a formal way. And its powerful significance will become clear from the events on either side of it.

Before Jesus was baptized, everybody was baptized: "all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem" were baptized in the Jordan (1:5). City and land stood empty, the Jordan thronged. It is a startling picture, and all the more so if, like Mark and his first readers, we know the old story behind it. There, after the Exodus from Egypt, the nation entered the land by crossing the threshold of Jordan. After many years, David took Jerusalem and made it the capital. Here in Mark, the movement is reversed, the film rolled backward, and the nation is back at its beginning again, at its baptismal birthplace. It confronts a man whose appearance and diet signify the wild world before culture, an animal-like man. So rapid and momentous a backtracking could be taken as a climax, but it is immediately marked as a buildup by John's prophesying a greater man and a higher baptism.

No sooner said than done, as ever in the serendipity of legend, Jesus came from the edge of Judea, Galilee, and was baptized in the Jordan. So far this river has been the threshold of new beginnings, the thin line between contrasting states. But there is a thinner, the mathematical line, without thickness, where water touches land. As Jesus comes "up" over that, the spirit comes down ("descending") on him through the sky, the ceiling which separates divine and human worlds, splitting it in the process. The divine voice is heard below, authenticating Jesus. Mark uses his "coming up" and "descending" deliberately. Strong vertical movements strike through the horizontal narrative and open it to its meaning, its ground or height. The national baptism has been capped. Yet neither is this more powerful scene the end. The story is only beginning!

Its next phase is driven (Mark's own word in 1:12) by the greatest known force, the spirit which impels Jesus into the wilderness. In the old story which codes Mark's, the nation was forty years in the Wilderness,

tested by God and testing him, before coming to the Jordan. It seems as though Jesus steps up out of the river onto that wild far side, and so is taken further back into the original story than everyone else in Mark's story, who comes only as far as the river. This is confirmed by Mark's mention of temptation and forty days. Jesus is tested in the wilderness beyond Jordan like old Israel, tested by Satan like Job, tested among wild beasts and ministering angels like Daniel.

From this ordeal of the primitive, Jesus emerges with his gospel, Mark having cleared the way for him by a proleptic note about John's imprisonment (1:14). The prologue ends with the actual announcement of the "gospel" of the first verse, and the story is set on its way (which, interestingly, runs first along the sea's edge; 1:16).

This prologue introduces us to, among other things, the rapidity and condensation of Mark's style, and to his hectoring narrative intensity, which is unrelieved except by the emphatic downbeat and the flagging of Jesus' power at 6:5, after the resurrection of the little girl and his return to his own country. "Straightway" is Mark's favorite adverb; "run," "arise," "shout," and "amaze" are among his favorite verbs. His shuffle moves fast through present moments, back and forth between precedents and effects. Events follow upon one another apparently helter-skelter. But they are linked by deliberately concealed significances.

We have already cracked one of these, the Exodus-in-reverse in the prologue, entailing the religious shift from the old religion to the new. Another in the same passage is the synchrony of Jesus' story beginning at the same point with the Christian reader's story *qua* Christian: with baptism for both. So how did Mark and his first readers understand baptism? The answer will make legible more of the book by uncovering a code which they knew. It is fundamental and simple. Baptism was a ritual of dying to live anew. Paul, writing before Mark, appeals to this as common knowledge in Romans 6:3: "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death?" Mark shows that he shares that knowledge when, at 10:38, baptism is paired with the cup of death which Jesus will accept in Gethsemane (14:36). The baptism at the beginning of the verse and the cup at the end (which is also the eucharistic cup of 14:23) are linked. So baptism at the outset of Jesus' story is a secret and symbolic guarantee of how it will end. This matters because the Gospel is more about that end than about anything else. The prologue holds the book's genetic programme, a pattern of ordeal and crossing-over, of power unleashed after withdrawal and eclipse. Its climax and fulfillment are death and resurrection. On the same theme, many commentators have recognized a midstory seclusion in the events of 8:27-9:13, where, in the remote settings of the way to Caesarea Philippi and a "high mountain" (9:2), Jesus' secret identity is displayed and bound into his coming suffering.

At both the beginning and the end of the book, days are marked out, together with times of day, with a precision lacking elsewhere. And in both the familiar pattern is discernible. The early passage 1:21-38 covers some twenty-four hours from morning to morning. (On the sabbath morning, Jesus cures a man in a synagogue and a woman in a house. "At even, when the sun did set," he heals "all that were diseased" among the crowd at the door (1:32). "And in the morning, rising up a great while before day" (1:35), he withdraws to the wilderness to pray, where Simon finds him and returns him to public life. It is, very precisely, a full day. Action is followed by withdrawal leading to further action. Jesus departs from the world and returns to it via its margin: the wilderness as a place of prayer, of contact with God. For the Christian, Easter is the classic example of this pattern. And it is in Mark's mind. Jesus "rising up a great while before day" (1:35) on this first day prophesies (more precisely in Greek than in the KJV) his early-morning resurrection at the end. The last chapters cover a series of days and of times within them, beginning at 14:1. There is unprecedented precision about the time of Jesus' death. He is crucified at the third hour, dies at the sixth, and is buried at evening. There follows a sabbath when nothing happens at all before the tomb is found empty in the early morning of the first day of the week. In the tomb a young man points to reunion in Galilee, where Jesus began.

The great hinge of the Easter week-end and week-beginning imposes its pattern on more than the first day of Jesus' work. The Resurrection occurs "after three days" (8:31). At 8:2 Jesus notices that the Gentile crowd which he is about to feed has been with him for three days. The number of days gives a resurrection gleam to the meal. A double measure of the same significance is given to the Transfiguration at 9:2 by its occurrence "after six days." The fig tree at 11:13 dies overnight in prophetic contrast to Jesus' overnight revival: the end of the old religion synchronized with the beginning of the new.

For Mark, as for Paul, Jesus' death and resurrection was the decisive point at which divine meaning had invaded human history and turned its course. But for neither of them was it the end. The new (Christian) course of history drove toward the coming of the divine kingdom which Jesus had inaugurated. The end of Mark's story is outside his text; hence one of its most extraordinary features, the abruptness of the ending, which is neither happy nor resolved. Women flee from the tomb shaking with terror; "neither said they any thing to any man; for they were afraid" (16:8). Such endings are very rare in ancient literature. However, Mark has already done something of this sort. Jesus' apocalyptic sermon in chapter 13, his longest continuous speech, ends as suddenly: "and what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch." These incomplete endings,<sup>2</sup> impressively fortissimo, are poised toward an ending—the ending—which is beyond the text. Chapter 13 prophesies the stages leading to it. In the first phase, the sufferings Jesus is about to face are promised to his disciples in

their turn: betrayal, arrest, trial, torture, and death (13:9-13). The second phase is the horror of the war of 66-70 C.E.: desolation of the Temple, refugees, false messianic pretenders. In the third phase the cosmos collapses and the Son of Man comes to gather the elect. Mark wrote in the second phase, with the Roman conquest of Judea confirming his Christian apocalyptic convictions or prejudices: the destruction of the old is part of the validation of the new.

### People

After all that, we may as well go back to the prologue again to open another topic, Mark's understanding of human nature. He believed the boundaries of individuality to be highly permeable. Baptism joined Christ and disciples in a single destiny. For Paul baptism was "into Christ" (Gal. 3:27), as Israel before had been "baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Cor. 10:2). So real was this communion that Christians in Corinth were accustomed to getting themselves baptized on behalf of their dead (1 Cor. 15:29—a precedent for today's Mormons); and on the threshold of his death Jesus gave his body and blood to be consumed by his disciples. Participatory sacraments, baptism and eucharist, frame the story. Compared with such vivid interpersonal communion, the Pharisaic baptism of pots and pans (7:4) was trivial and dead.

With Mark, it is never entirely certain who people are. In the prologue he presents John the Baptist, Jesus, and Satan as named characters. But John the Baptist is also Elijah, wearing his costume and leather belt (2 Kings 1:8). This identification is repeated as a common view at 6:15, immediately after Herod's opinion that Jesus is John resurrected—another doubling of roles. Elijah, having ascended to heaven and not died, was believed to be still in the wings of history. He might come to take Jesus down from the Cross (15:36). So Elijah, John, and Jesus merge into one another, and the grand riddle of Jesus' identity is soluble by way of a correct understanding of John's (11:28-33), to which the key is Elijah. Satan is a particularly interesting instance of the same fluidity. He is also called "Beelzebub," and according to the Jerusalem scribes, Jesus "hath Beelzebub, and by the prince of the devils casteth he out devils" (3:22). However unforgivable, even this identification is feasible. At 8:33 Jesus uses it on Peter when Peter has remonstrated with him: "Get thee behind me, Satan." Jesus might be Satan. Peter is, at least for a moment. People are lived by others, most spectacularly the demoniac of 5:1-20 who calls himself "Legion: for we are many" (v. 9).

Mark often signals personal changes by changes of clothes, which were conductors of the power in a person ("If I may but touch his clothes, I shall be whole"; 5:28). At the Transfiguration Jesus' garments radiate heavenly light. After his condemnation the soldiers mockingly clothe him in imperial purple, then strip him of it and put him back in his own

clothes. The young man who fled naked from the garden at 14:51, leaving his garment (Greek *sinon*) behind, could be the young man at the end in the tomb wearing a white garment (Greek *stolé*). A *sinon* (the young man's?) has been used in the meanwhile to wrap Jesus' corpse (15:46). There is an echo here of the former demonic sitting, as does the young man in the tomb, clothed and in his right mind after his exorcism and the drowning in water of his infesting demons (5:15). There is still a clearer echo of the theology of baptism, which turned upon Jesus' death and resurrection. There was a *sinon* which the young man left behind in the garden. A *sinon* was the clothing of the dead Christ. The *stolé* which the young man wears in the tomb after Christ's resurrection is the hieratic garment worn by redeemed believers in Revelation 6:11 and 7:9, 13. Christians moved from one to another, from being clothed in death to being clothed in redemption, through the baptismal rite. They had the code of this part of Mark's story.

Mark's people can surprise in other ways. We expect the disciples to be, if not heroic, at least fairly exemplary. They obey Jesus' brisk commands and follow him everywhere. Yet, as we have seen, they show little understanding of the events they are dragged through. They even exemplify the hardness of heart which characterized outsiders to the Gospel and against which Jesus hurls his words (see the volley of six angry questions at 8:17-18) and actions. Their obduracy is a frustration which heightens tension in the narrative like a repeated discord in music. They all abandon him at the end. James and John betray an obsession with status which is clean contrary to the Gospel. Peter is worse. Jesus' "friends" try to stop him, believing him mad (3:21). He disowns his mother and family. Yet his mother is there at his end, though "looking on afar off" (15:40), and at his empty tomb. The chief priests are wicked, the Pharisees and scribes hostile and wrong, the Sadducees just wrong. Yet at 12:28-34, after a denunciation of traditionalists, Jesus congratulates a scribe on being "not far from the kingdom of God." The crowd which follows Jesus about is seen in various moods: pressing on him so violently as to threaten to crush him (3:9), arousing his compassion (6:34), acclaiming him as he enters Jerusalem (11:9), then preferring Barabbas and howling for his death (15:11). Jesus seems most at home with outcasts: publicans, sinners, and lepers. Transgression of the boundaries of the taboo, like the crossings of the boundaries of personality, gives the story much of its force.

#### Transgression

A world is ordered and structured by its boundaries. It is changed when those boundaries are crossed. They are social fictions, myths which await their demythologizers. A narrative can draw even tidier boundaries than

exist in the world, but only to violate them the more dramatically. The Christians were heirs of the magisterial transgressions of their founder, the outcast Messiah. From the standpoint of traditional Judaism these were blasphemies. Blasphemy, the crime for which Jesus is condemned (14:64), is an eruption of religious energy from the depths below orthodox structure, which it threatens by its primal force. It was for the Christians to show that what was, from the traditionalist point of view, a destructive evil, was truly a divinely authenticated salvation of the lost. Mark's story begins and ends with the sort of major transgressions which were needed to justify Christianity: that is, transgressions approved or done by God. The sky was split at Jesus' baptism, the Temple veil at his death. With the tearing of that veil, which marked off the Temple's inner sanctum and which only the high priest penetrated once a year with sacrificial blood, a huge profanation occurred. Simultaneously (15:36-39) a new holiness appeared with the Gentile centurion speaking Jesus' divine identity, previously spoken by the divine voice. The Temple and Golgotha were far apart. Only text makes these things simultaneous—to the mind's eye. The greatest shock of violation comes at the end. It is the empty tomb, a gaping hole in the supremely important boundary between dead and living. Through it divine power, of a most suspect and untoward sort, is loosed into the world. Hence the terrified flight of the mourners.

Fear, astonishment, and amazement are frequent reactions to Jesus' words and deeds throughout Mark's restless narrative. They surround his first miracle, the exorcism of a demoniac in the synagogue at Capernaum at 1:21-27. The excitement comes from forces breaking bounds. Jesus' teaching in the synagogue is authoritative and unofficial—and therefore astonishing. No sooner is that said than we are presented with an alarming breach of religious propriety as a *fait accompli*: "And there was in their synagogue a man with [Mark says 'in'] an unclean spirit" (v. 23). In the clean building there is an unclean presence, and out of it bursts, in utter contradiction of expectations, the sacred truth: "I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God" (v. 24). This double shattering of conventional order is followed by a climactic tearing as the unclean spirit tears the man and bursts out of him, screaming. The rapid series of burstings has the effect of one of Dostoyevsky's "skandal" scenes: embarrassment pitched up to terror.

And so it goes on. At 2:1-12 a roof is "broken up" to get a paralytic into Jesus' presence. Jesus forgives the sufferer, and the scribes are scandalized by the blasphemy of his doing what only God should do. But the man is healed and goes out, and again the bystanders are "all amazed." At 2:15-17 there is further scandal at Jesus' eating with "many publicans and sinners." At 2:18-22 Jesus gives a parabolic justification of tearing and bursting: new cloth tears old cloth, new wine bursts old leather bottles, and the norms of everyday existence are overwhelmed by the carnival of

the wedding day. Jesus goes on to disregard the sabbath regulations so integral to traditional order. He does not care that his disciples fall foul of them, for "the sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath," and he, the "Son of man," is "Lord also of the sabbath" (2:27-28). He heals a man with a withered hand in a synagogue (adding to the scandal) on the sabbath, and the Pharisees decide to revenge his destruction of their orthodoxy by destroying him (3:6). The great breakings which are at the climax of Mark's Gospel are in sight: Jesus' death and his resurrection from death. In the intervening narrative the holy moves decisively from its accustomed places to new ones, from synagogue to house and, above all, from tradition to Jesus.

### The Riddle of Bread

No guide to Mark's Gospel should take leave of his readers without some attempt to help them with one of its most baffling passages, 8:14-21. It is very difficult, but in a way entirely characteristic of this book of secrets, codes, and revelations. There is no mistaking the urgency with which Mark forces it on the reader. And the light of its meaning reflects far into the surrounding narrative. It reads:

Now the disciples had forgotten to take bread, neither had they in the ship with them but [AT] one loaf. And he charged them, saying, Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and of the leaven of Herod. And they reasoned among themselves, saying, It is because we have no bread. And when Jesus knew it, he saith unto them, Why reason ye, because ye have no bread? perceive ye not yet, neither understand? have ye your heart yet hardened? Having eyes, see ye not? and having ears, hear ye not? and do ye not remember? When I brake the five loaves among five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up? They say unto him, Twelve. And when the seven among four thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up? And they said, Seven. And he said unto them, How is it that ye do not understand?

The scene is simple but symbolic: Jesus and his (presumably twelve) disciples in a ship at sea with one loaf of bread. It is a classic little icon of the primitive Christian Church. In Jesus' weird harangue which follows, he emphasizes numbers in the course of recalling two incidents already narrated, the miraculous feeding of crowds (6:35-44, 8:1-10).

6:35-44 5 loaves among 5,000 left 12 baskets of bits.  
8:1-10 7 loaves among 4,000 left 7 baskets of bits.

To understand the significance of these numbers we must take a series of steps backward.

The first step is to the sabbath-day controversy about Jesus' disciples plucking ears of grain—the material from which bread will be made, Jesus

defends their action by asking: "Have ye never read what David did, when he had need, and was an hungred, he, and they that were with him? How he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and did eat the shewbread, which is not lawful to eat but for the priests, and gave also to those that were with him?" (2:25-26). This David story has, for Mark, a double appeal. First, it is a legitimate transgression of cultic taboo; second, it is about David, and Jesus is both David's son and David's lord (12:35-37).

The regulations for the shewbread are set out in Leviticus 24. It is to consist of twelve loaves. The David story to which Jesus refers in Mt 1 Samuel 21. It says that David took five of these loaves. Seven would have been left. So these steps backward yield three of the numbers which occur in Mark's enigmatic text: five, twelve, and seven. Adding this Davidic material to the earlier list yields:

1 Samuel 21 12 loaves; 5 taken; 7 were left,  
Mark 6:35-44 5 loaves among 5,000 left 12 baskets of bits,  
Mark 8:1-10 7 loaves among 4,000 left 7 baskets of bits.

Now we can see that the first of Mark's miraculous meals taken two numbers from the story of David and the shewbread (which Mark has made part of his own story). They are twelve and five. There were twelve shewbread loaves and David took five. But with Jesus the numbers go another, and more wonderful, way. He too takes five loaves: he is David's son. Like father, like son. But he leaves—and this can only be supernatural miracle—twelve baskets of fragments. He is not only, even not really, David's son. He is the Christ who is David's lord (12:35-37). So what Jesus does numerically resembles what David did, but also numerically transcends it. This is polemical arithmetic in a story about the relation of the new Kingdom of Christ to the old Kingdom of David, the continuity and the discontinuity between them. It fits the topographical setting, which is a desert somewhere in Jesus' own and Jewish country.

The second miraculous meal, at 8:1-10, is set abroad and is part of an excursion into Gentile territory. In the region of Tyre and Sidon Jesus heals the daughter of a Greek woman (7:24-30). He is reluctant to do this at first and parries, with imagery directly related to our problem here: "It is not meet to take the children's [the Jews'] bread, and to cast it unto the dogs" (v. 27). But she takes up the figure wittily and rejoins: "Yes, Lord: yet the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs" (v. 28). This looks very much like a story which we ought to take into account. Between it and the second miraculous meal, Jesus opens the ears and loosens the tongue of a deaf and dumb man. The channels of understanding are cleared and liberated. Now to the meal itself.

In the previous Jewish meal the number seven from the Davidic story was not used. David left seven of the twelve shewbread loaves and they

were, as it were, left sitting there. But now they are used: seven loaves which leave seven baskets of fragments. This is a little less miraculous than with the Jewish meal, but only quantitatively. Qualitatively the symmetry of seven and seven, the sacred number of fulfillment, is more resolved. The David story was somewhat fulfilled in the Jewish meal; it is more completely fulfilled in this. (This notion of the somewhat-complete or somewhat-fulfilled is logically faulty but indispensable to storytelling.) The miraculous feeding of Gentiles is a consummation even greater than the miraculous feeding of Jews. This crescendo is in line with the Gentile centurion at the Cross (15:39) who transcends and resolves all previous human attempts to identify Jesus. And it reflects the great question which faced the Church after Jesus, of whether or not to admit Gentiles to its sacred meals, and the positive answer to it.<sup>3</sup> This, however, is a resolution not yet achieved, and Mark knows it, for all the influence it exerts on his mind. So five thousand Jews are fed, in contrast to four thousand Gentiles. The Gentiles are less in the kingdom until Christ's death has opened it to them. This is a theology Mark has learned from Paul, and his shortfall of a thousand in this story which comes before Christ's death reflects it. There is, after all, one loaf still to be given, and it will matter more than any of the others. At his last meal of all Jesus will take the loaf and say: "Take, eat: this is my body" (14:22). All the other loaves lead to that. The "one loaf" in the ship at 8:14, apparently un eaten, prefigures it.

With the miraculous meals so replete with major significance, the controlled fury of Jesus' interrogation of his disciples in the ship is understandable and apt: "How is it that ye do not understand?" (8:21). He is desperate. They have missed so much. The argument in the cornfield and the Davidic precedent, the lively exchange with the Greek woman and the miraculous meals before and after it—all have been lost on them. More than that, they have lost track of the holy and divine, which, in this long train of coded events associated with bread, has shifted from its accustomed setting into a new place: from old tradition into Christ's life and body and the new community which will be nourished by it.

This solution to the riddle of bread is not exhaustive or exclusively correct. The riddle is too deeply tangled into the fabric of the book for that to be likely. But at least this attempt to unravel it has been done within the book and by means of the hints and symbols it provides, not least those mind-bending numbers. It has shown that to understand a little bit of Mark we need to have attended very carefully to the incidents before it and to be sensitive to what is to come. It is a book which demands no knowledge except of the Bible, but makes very strict and precise demands on our attention. Then it can surprise us by its austere art and the radical force of its message. The darkest secrets of divinity and humanity lurk in its complex and taut story, waiting for agile and dedicated readers to glimpse them as they follow its way along the edges of the world.

## NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations* (London, 1973), p. 102.
2. The last of them, 16:8, is the more incomplete in the Greek, where Mark writes "for" (Greek *gar*) after "they were afraid." So "for" is the last word Mark writes, leaving his whole text trailing, incomplete, into whatever is to come.
3. The most authentic trace of this crisis is at Gal. 2:11-21. Acts 10 gives a deceptively smooth and glamorized version.

## SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

1. W. H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (Philadelphia, 1983).
2. Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979).
3. R. H. Lightfoot, *The Gospel Message of St. Mark* (Oxford, 1950).
4. D. E. Nineham, *The Gospel of St. Mark* (Harmondsworth, 1963).

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