

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The earliest listeners to Mark's script for this gospel would not have thought of it as a form of scripture. It would be better to imagine Mark's gospel as "a performance script that enabled early Christian storytellers to recite the stories about Jesus than as a sacred book." Mark has taken "separable episodic bits and (fitted) them into a compelling plot." Jesus does not begin to talk to his disciples about the fate that awaits him in Jerusalem until about halfway through the narrative, but the audience "sees hints of danger from the opening verses." In the first century, most people encountered a work such as Mark's by hearing it. Ancient audiences "would hear a book repeated many times." No two readings would have been the same, because the reader "imparted meaning while performing the text." Oral presentation in fact shaped the construction of the narrative. Mark's gospel is "much more than a loose collection of recollections and oral and written tradition." It is "a complex, deliberately crafted composition." And the term *gospel* had come into general use as part of a standard phrase: "*the beginning of the gospel (or important news)*." This is known from proclamations and inscriptions from the time of Augustus.

If you've ever paid much attention to the interior space in Episcopal churches, you will recall that the lectern is frequently shaped like an eagle. And this magnificent creature looks like it was always intended for such a prominent place in our church buildings. The reason for this is that the eagle's *outstretched wings* are the perfect cradle or platform for scripture when it is read as part of the liturgy. The origins of this imagery go back very far indeed; the eagle has been viewed throughout history for its *heraldic* function which explains its symbolic role in the dissemination of proclamations, sacred readings and any news of interest to a wide audience.

St. John the Evangelist, among the four authors of the gospel accounts, is often represented with an eagle symbolizing the theological heights to which he rises in his Gospel. His work is pre-eminently "the spiritual Gospel, the Gospel of Christ the Eternal Son and Incarnate Word: he soars to heaven above the clouds of human infirmity and reveals to us the mysteries of the God-head." That secular heraldic role in the first century was played by a designated official, a kind of town crier, who took up a prominent place in the public square and held forth on news of military victories and defeats, royal marriages and births, dates for registration for the census and for taxation, and other matters of significance to the general population.

I think of the eagle and its heraldic role when I read the prologue to Mark's gospel. All of the gospel accounts have prologues, and the most famous is that of John, but in every case those opening lines are telling us a great deal about the purpose of the book. In Mark, we are dealing with a pronouncement of epic importance, the very kind of thing that would have been announced in the public square. The

difference here is that it is not a designated official providing news and propaganda on behalf of the emperor or local officials. “The contemporaries of Jesus were accustomed to hearing their news in this way.” And Mark’s account begins with the writer taking the form of an official herald announcing “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Now, recall that the emperor was also considered the Son of God, so that this kind of pronouncement could be considered disloyal if not treasonous. Nevertheless, if you can imagine for a moment having the good news of the Son of God be about a peasant rabbi traveling on foot from village to village in the back country of Galilee rather than the offspring of a Roman emperor living in luxury in the capital, you will begin to see how startling this pronouncement must have been to the average first century audience.

And Mark’s narrative appears to have been crafted for the benefit of a particular community, possibly in Alexandria, Southern Syria or Northern Palestine. Another strong possibility is Rome on the basis of Mark’s Greek which is “peppered with Latinisms...associated with Roman colonial power.” This is buttressed by the fact that “when the Flavian persecutions (named for a dynasty ruling Rome between A.D. 69 and 96) made public preaching impossible, a text capable of being read in a household setting by someone with moderate literacy was a useful alternative to public declamation. But since the education necessary to write a book of the caliber of Mark’s gospel was available everywhere in the empire, it could have been written in virtually any locale where Rome’s power held sway. It bears the marks of a work composed for a baptismal context or another Christian rite of initiation within the community for whom Mark had composed his work.

In addition to the town herald, visiting high officials would send advance men who would prepare and proclaim the visitation. These advance men would arrive as emissaries. The official herald himself could assume this role, in which case he had three possible functions: “to proclaim news, to act as a mediator between the local populace and the visiting dignitary, and immediately precede” the official visitor. In just such a way, the first verse in Mark’s gospel proclaims the arrival of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. “In the title *Christ*, Mark saw Jesus as God’s chosen, the one who had a unique relationship with God, the one who would lead his people back to God.” The name *Jesus* is the Greek form of the Hebrew name *Joshua*. An idea had developed in pre-Christian speculation that “God’s expected Messiah would fulfill or at least reflect the role of Moses’ successor Joshua.”

Mark also identifies the prophet Isaiah as the advance man. The author actually referenced three Old Testament books for this purpose, not simply Isaiah: the books of Malachi, Isaiah, and Exodus. So, his account is suffused with scriptural references. (Note the similarity between the passage from Malachi -- “*Here is my herald whom I send on ahead of you*”---- and the one found in Exodus --- “*See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way.*”). By combining these three sources, he accomplished two things: “he invoked the spirit of the Hebrew scriptures. Moses, the prophet and the other Spirit-led

people of Israel prepared the way for the Messiah. In this sense, they all acted as advance people, as emissaries for God.”

And Mark also used John the Baptist as a herald or forerunner, “the voice crying in the wilderness.” So, “Mark used scripture (extensively) as a reference and a vehicle of proclamation.” Additionally, John the Baptist acted as an Elijah figure. Just as Elijah was the first of the prophets, John was the last.” He was the “prophet of *the most High*.” His ministry prepared the way for the Christ. John fashioned himself as and preached like Elijah, since there was a popular belief that Elijah would return to prepare for the Messiah.” Mark presents John as an Elijah and describes him as “a hairy man, girt with a leather belt around his waist. Hairiness was an ancient symbol of the sun’s rays (with Samson, Elijah, and Esau sharing the characteristic.).” “The challenge of John to his own generation (is no different than it would be for ours): we (like the people of Israel) are locked into the bondage of sin, death and judgment. If we want to share in this salvation (of the last days), we must repent, leave Egypt and pass through the waters into the wilderness to meet with our God.”

In Mark’s prologue we must deal not only with a beginning but also an ending. Both are “shrouded in mystery.” You may recall that Mark’s gospel ends in a peculiar way with no clear outcome like the one found in the other gospels. Rather, the angel tells the women “do not be alarmed (by the absence of the body of Jesus); you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here...But go tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” This is a singularly strange ending for a story which is characterized in the other gospels by the resurrection itself and by a number of memorable post-resurrection appearances. “There will be no tidy conclusion or tying up of loose ends for this story of God. There is a radical disorientation in (both) the beginning and the ending of this Gospel.” But note that “in the midst of devastation and despair, of hopelessness and certain destruction (in the wake of the crucifixion), the exiles (in the community for whom Mark was writing) hear the good news from the very first verse of Mark’s gospel: God is here, God is victorious, your God reigns.”

The very first line in Mark’s gospel does not contain a main verb; it is not a complete sentence. Rather, it is a *title* for the gospel. “Whatever story, miracle, parable, exorcism, teaching or narrative event of Jesus is in the gospel of Mark, *it is the beginning of the good news* of Jesus Christ. The beginning takes place in our hearing or reading (of the work.) The words of this gospel break into our lives with the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” “Right from the beginning, we, the readers (or listeners), know more than most of the characters in the narrative. We are already anticipating this writing to be ‘good news’ --- which is a comment about what the writing does to us, rather than just what it *says*.”

Right from the start, “Mark lets us in on the secret --- Jesus is God’s Son. If you sit and listen to the whole book from beginning to end it’s as though we as listeners are privy to a bit of a joke. Jesus is God’s Son,

but most of the characters in the story don't get it." But the listener or reader is let in on the secret from the outset. The narrative merely fills in the details. The hopeful outcome is foreshadowed in the opening proclamation, and It is very good news indeed. On this second Sunday in Advent, the arrival of the Messiah is announced by his forerunners, and this generates enormous expectation and hope, for us as well as for those closest to the coming event.

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer.

Amen.

Sources

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