

Mark 1:1-13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Mark chapter 1 verses 1 to 13 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight. John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.

And he preached, saying, After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.

[1 : 1 2] And a voice came from heaven, You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased. The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan.

And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him. Mark introduces his account with the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Jesus is the Messiah and the Davidic Son of God. And Mark uses gospel with reference to what he is writing. He is writing a gospel. What is the background of that term?

If we go back to the book of Isaiah, we can see that it refers to the good news of the establishment of the reign of the Lord. In Isaiah chapter 40 verse 9 we read, Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news.

Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news. Lift it up, fear not. Say to the cities of Judah, Behold your God. Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him.

[2 : 1 7] Behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms. He will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

And again in chapter 52 verse 7, How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, Your God reigns.

The voice of your watchmen, they lift up their voice. Together they sing for joy. For eye to eye they see the return of the Lord to Zion. In chapter 61 verse 1, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound. The gospel is the message that God is returning to his people.

He's going to deliver them from captivity, and he's going to restore his presence in their midst. He's going to bring back the captivity to Judah. Are we supposed to understand this as the gospel concerning Jesus Christ, or the gospel belonging to Jesus Christ?

[3 : 33] Well, likely it can be read as both, and it seems to me that Mark is probably playing with the ambiguity here. Mark's prologue sets the scene for the rest of the book, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet.

And the quotation that follows is actually an amalgamation of verses from Malachi 3 verse 1, Exodus 23 verse 20, and Isaiah 40 verse 3.

But the statement about Isaiah the prophet may refer to more than simply the verses that follow. It may refer to the prophecy of Isaiah more generally, and the way that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of what Isaiah has foretold, this coming new Exodus.

John the Baptist is the harbinger of the coming of the Lord to reign. And Mark de-emphasizes the temple part of the Malachi quotation, and includes elements of Exodus 23 verse 20, which speaks of the angel who will provide for, and lead them through the wilderness into the promised land.

So the verse from Malachi is chapter 3 verse 1, Behold I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple, and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.

[4 : 49] And then in Isaiah chapter 40 verse 3, A voice cries in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord, Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

And then in Exodus chapter 23 verse 20, Behold I send an angel before you to guard you on the way, and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.

That quote from Exodus chapter 23 verse 20, speaks of the angel that will provide for them, and lead them through the wilderness into the promised land. And the wilderness setting is very important for Mark in this opening section.

John the Baptist doesn't really feature much in Mark's gospel after this, save in a retrospective look at his death in chapter 6. But it's noteworthy that in all of the gospels, there is John near their beginning, and they all underline his significance in various ways.

John isn't merely a wise teacher or religious leader, or even simply a prophetic teacher of divine truth. John is a key actor in redemptive history. He has a particular role to play.

[5 : 52] He is the Elijah that was to come. And having witnessed the ministry of Christ from the baptism of John is a seeming qualification for apostleship in the book of Acts.

The amalgamation of these texts changes some of their reference. So for instance, who is the messenger sent before in Exodus chapter 23? The messenger, the angel of the covenant, is sent before Israel.

And Jesus is the one that the messenger is sent before here. And Jesus may be implicitly presented as Israel in this picture. He is the true fulfilment of Israel.

But in the next verse, when compared with the original verse being quoted, Isaiah chapter 40 verse 3, a different association may be made. The way of the Lord, in context, the Lord clearly means Yahweh.

And his, in this verse, substitutes for our God in the original verse. Jesus is being implicitly identified as the Lord himself.

[6 : 53] At such points, we may get a hint that Mark is working with a far higher Christology than many would attribute to him. John appeared baptising in the wilderness. No background for him is given.

In some ways, this might remind us of the sudden appearance of the prophet Elijah on the scene in 1 Kings chapter 17 verse 1. And he proclaims a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

This isn't just a private rededication of one's life to God. It's the preparation of a people for an eschatological crisis near on the horizon. God is about to come to judge.

There is something that's going to be the end of the age and they must be prepared. There is a catastrophic event on the horizon. A large body of the people going to the wilderness to be baptised would be a symbolic reconstitution of them as renewed Israelites.

A new people entering the land again. Re-entering a land. And returning from a sort of spiritual exile. As a baptism of repentance, it would have to be confirmed in actual change of life.

[7 : 57] It's not just the effect of the water. It's something that requires a different form of life. Merely going into the wilderness and getting washed wasn't enough. Huge crowds, however, come to the wilderness to John's baptism.

All of the country of Judea and all Jerusalem, as Mark describes. They come out to John the Baptist to be baptised by his baptism. It's a massive popular movement. And John the Baptist is recorded in the history of Josephus.

He's someone who's known to the historians of the day. He's not just a fringe religious figure. He was well known and he was respected by the people even long after he had died.

The people were confessing their sins. We don't know exactly what this looked like. Whether it was a public confession of a particular person's sins or a more general confession of the sins of the nation. I would imagine it would be the latter.

And seeing your sins as included within that. A more general confession. And then individuals including themselves within that confession. And then more particular individual sins.

[9 : 00] They were baptised by John. Usually ritual washings were performed upon oneself. However, the fact that John the Baptist performed the baptism and it was associated with him highlights his prophetic significance.

He is a leader of the people. And his baptism creates some association with him too. The clothing and the location of John the Baptist reminds us of Elijah. In 2 Kings chapter 1 verse 8, Elijah is described for us.

He is described as one who wore a garment of hair with a belt of leather about his waist. This is the way that John is described too. We're supposed to recognise that this is a man who's coming in the spirit and the power of Elijah.

He's dressing like Elijah. He's in the location of Elijah. He's doing the same sort of things as Elijah. All these resemblances were supposed to see that there's a similar thing going on.

The wilderness is a place of new beginnings. It was through the wilderness that God led the first exodus and now there are hints of a new exodus. Through the ministry of John the Baptist, God is mustering his people in the wilderness, prepared for a new entry into the land.

[10 : 11] The wilderness was a theologically significant location for something new starting. It is the unformed and the unfilled realm that precedes a new creation. It's a realm of separation from the sin and the impurity of settled society.

It's where the seeds of a new faithful order might germinate. And we can see this in groups like the Essenes that will go into the wilderness and start religious groups within that context.

It reminds the reader also of Moses and Elijah, both men of the wilderness that preceded a larger re-entry into the land, in the case of Joshua and then in the case of Elisha.

Like Moses and Elijah, he will be succeeded by another, someone whose ministry will greatly exceed his own. He is not worthy to even act as the servant of this coming one. The spirit is a focus in these opening verses of Mark's gospel.

Christ is the anointed one. He's the king who has the spirit of God upon him. And John the Baptist's baptism anticipates a greater baptism, a baptism with the Holy Spirit, which will be a greater reconstitution of the people of God that would occur at Pentecost.

[11 : 21] Jesus of Nazareth comes on the scene at this point, coming down from a northern province to the area where John is baptizing in Judea. John's is more of a Judean movement, but Jesus the Galilean comes to be associated with him.

Like John, he comes on the scene suddenly and without introduction. When he is baptized by John, there is a theophanic appearance of the spirit as a dove to Jesus.

He saw the heavens being torn open. It's an appearance to him, not necessarily witnessed by others who were present. The heavens being torn open might remind us of the vision of Ezekiel at the beginning of his book, for instance.

The heaven is torn open. It's not just opened. Perhaps we might think also of the temple curtain that would be torn open later in the book. Jesus is commissioned by the voice of the Father from heaven.

You are my beloved son. With you I am well pleased. In Isaiah chapter 42 verse 1 to 2, we have something that might serve as part of the background for this.

[12 : 25] Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him. He will bring forth justice to the nations.

He will not cry aloud, or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street. Psalm 2 would seem to be another part of the background. You are my son. Today I have begotten you.

And the description of the beloved son might also remind us of Genesis chapter 22 verse 2, and the description of Isaac and his relationship to Abraham.

In God's voice from heaven, Jesus is identified in the same way as he has been identified in the opening line of Mark's gospel. And the subtle possible allusions within this identification invite the reader to hear associations with the Davidic king, with the Isianic servant, the servant of the book of Isaiah, and also Isaac, who is nearly sacrificed by his father Abraham.

And all of these backgrounds will be important within the gospel of Mark. Mark will bring together threads from each one of those backgrounds to paint his portrait of Christ within his gospel.

[13 : 36] Each of the gospels frames the wilderness temptations of Jesus differently. In Matthew, Jesus is led up into the wilderness. In Luke, Jesus being filled with the spirit is led in the spirit into the wilderness.

However, in Mark, Jesus is driven out into the wilderness. And each of these statements invites the reader to notice different associations. In Matthew, Jesus being led up into the wilderness, it reminds you of the Exodus.

In Luke, Jesus being filled with the spirit and led in the spirit into the wilderness reminds you of something like the book of Ezekiel and the description of his prophetic journeys. However, for Mark, Jesus might be more like David, forcefully exiled from Saul's court, where he was living in places with wild creatures.

You can think about 1 Samuel chapter 24 verse 2, where he's living in the rocks of the wild goats. He's living outside safe realms of the land. He's living among the Gentiles. Mark, Jesus being tested in the wilderness.

He's living in the wilderness. He's living in the wilderness by facing all these obstacles and opponents. Mark understates the temptations, but highlights the realm that Jesus goes to.

[14 : 49] John's presence in the wilderness was emphasised in verses 3 and 4, and now Jesus' presence in the wilderness is emphasised there too. The fact that he was in the wilderness is twice stated, and the detail that he was with the wild animals further underlines the importance of the location.

He was being tempted by Satan. This focuses less upon the actual content of the temptations, and even upon Christ's victory in them. It focuses more upon the fact that the wilderness is a realm of testing and danger, where you are exposed to the buffeting temptations of Satan, where you are exposed to starvation and the elements and thirst, and where you are exposed to the danger of wild beasts.

It's an untamed realm belonging to Satan and the wild beasts, and Jesus begins his ministry by going into that enemy territory, much as in his death he will enter Sheol itself.

The spirit stands in contrast to Satan, and the angels stand in contrast to the wild beasts. This also gives us an insight into the greater conflict beneath the surface conflict.

This is a battle between great spiritual powers, and the wilderness is an initial place where we see what sort of mission Christ is engaged in. We might also be reminded of the experience of Israel in the wilderness, where they were exposed to its dangers, to temptations, and to wild animals.

[16 : 14] In Deuteronomy chapter 8 verse 15, it's described as follows, Who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions, and thirsty ground, where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock.

We might also be reminded of the experience of Elijah, in his 40 days and nights in the wilderness in 1 Kings chapter 19, where angels also ministered to him. Some other parts of Old Testament background that we might consider here.

Jesus might be compared to the scapegoat in Leviticus chapter 16 verses 20 to 22, And when he has made an end of atoning for the holy place, and the tent of meeting, and the altar, he shall present the live goat.

And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat, and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness.

The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness. The people of Israel have been confessing their sins at John's baptism.

[17 : 31] Jesus is then baptised at the climax of this, and immediately driven off into the wilderness. Being driven out is language used elsewhere for exorcism, but the important thing here, I think, is the fact that he's going into the wilderness.

It's the nature of the realm that's underlined in Mark's account. The scapegoat in Leviticus chapter 16 is described as being for Azazel, which is apocryphally associated with the demon of the wilderness.

Jesus plays the part of the scapegoat, symbolically bearing the sins of those baptised by John into the wilderness, the sins of Israel that have been confessed in the baptism of John, in that sort of ritual.

And then he bears them to the place where Satan, the great demon, is found. Another possible connection might be with the book of Daniel, chapter 4, verse 19-27, where Nebuchadnezzar is brought low as a result of his pride.

Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was dismayed for a while, and his thoughts alarmed him. The king answered and said, Belteshazzar, let not the dream or the interpretation alarm you.

[18 : 37] Belteshazzar answered and said, My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you, and its interpretation for your enemies. The tree you saw, which grew and became strong, so that its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth, whose leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in which was food for all, under which beasts of the field found shade, and in whose branches the birds of the heavens lived.

It is you, O king, who have grown and become strong. Your greatness has grown and reaches to heaven, and your dominion to the ends of the earth. And because the king saw a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying, Chop down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze, in the tender grass of the field, and let him be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts of the field, till seven periods of time pass over him.

This is the interpretation of a king. It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field.

You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will.

And as it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be confirmed for you from the time that you know that heaven rules. Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you.

[20 : 06] Break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity. In the other synoptics, John the Baptist talks about the axe laid to the root of the trees, drawing upon the symbolism of this particular chapter.

And in Mark's account, the Holy One comes down from heaven and drives out Jesus, so that he dwells among the beasts for a period of time. Maybe Jesus should be seen as bearing the fate of the proud rulers, who are about to be judged.

Jesus is bearing the sins of the people, like the scapegoat. He's also bearing the fate of the rulers, that are about to be humbled, like Nebuchadnezzar. A question to consider.

The spirit immediately drives Jesus out into the wilderness. Immediately is a term that Mark uses with a remarkable frequency, especially in this chapter. Why might this word have a particular attraction for Mark?

And how does it fit in with his more general characterization of Jesus within his gospel?