

A MIRACLE UNOBSERVED: A DETAILED EXAMINATION AND LITERARY
ANALYSIS OF THE GOSPEL OF MARK WITH SPECIAL ATTENTION
TO JESUS' ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM

by

Rhonda Chambers

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for Departmental Honors in
the Department of Religion
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

May 6, 2019

A MIRACLE UNOBSERVED: A DETAILED EXAMINATION AND LITERARY
ANALYSIS OF THE GOSPEL OF MARK WITH SPECIAL ATTENTION
TO JESUS' ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM

Project Approved:

Supervising Professor: Patricia Duncan, Ph.D.

Department of Religion

David Grant, Ph.D.

Department of Religion

Keith Whitworth, Ph.D.

Department of Sociology

ABSTRACT

Regarding Mark as a whole and examining it with the use of narrative criticism (a combination of literary criticism and theological interpretation) allows us to gain a richer appreciation for the message the author conveys. As Richard A. Horsley attests, “If we always read it in fragments, we will never get a sense of the full story.” Experiencing the gospel in its entirety, the audience tenses with a sense of urgency as layers of meaning unfold across subplots filled with suspense, drama, miracles, politics, power, betrayal, and suffering – all set against the backdrop of the kingdom of God. Like most stories, Mark’s masterfully crafted narrative contains a variety of characters; however, they are not as fully developed as most characters found in modern literature. Instead, the author of Mark utilizes characters to convey meaning and further develop the plotline. This paper examines the literary characteristics, patterns, and meanings throughout the gospel of Mark and focuses on one character who has remained largely overlooked in scholarship, the colt from Mark’s account of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem.

I assert that the author of the Gospel of Mark utilizes the colt (πῶλον) in Mark 11:2 as a character within the narrative who, like the voice from heaven, the demons, and the winds and waves, also recognizes and submits to the authority of Jesus as the Son of God.

A Miracle Unobserved:
A Detailed Examination and Literary Analysis of the Gospel of Mark with Special
Attention to Jesus' Entry into Jerusalem

Introduction

The Bible and its treasure trove of wisdom continues to inspire readers across the centuries and around the world. Many of its familiar passages are so tightly woven into the cultural idioms people are often unaware of their biblical origins. Phrases such as “sign of the times,” “the apple of your eye,” “at the eleventh hour,” or “the writing on the wall” are deeply ingrained in our vernacular, further illustrating that “there is nothing new under the sun.”¹

The Bible persistently wielded great influence in literature and inspires writers throughout the ages. William Shakespeare, Dante Alighieri, T.S. Eliot, John Steinbeck, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Dickens, and John Milton are only a handful of famous authors who artfully interspersed biblical themes within their classic works. Even those who are not avid readers may have grown up hearing children’s versions of biblical stories like Noah’s Ark, David & Goliath, Jonah & the Whale, and the Christmas Story. With an ancient text so intricately grafted into Western culture, there is a risk of allowing biblical writings to grow too familiar, fade into the background, and lose their potency. The well-known narratives can appear to lie lifeless on the page, refusing to yield anything new. Desensitization can shift the capacity of these sacred texts from transformation to mere information – unless we consider them with fresh eyes. As Ulrich Luz wrote, “Only when we discover what is new, strange, and other in the very familiar biblical text, and only when we allow ourselves to receive new insight from members of

¹ Sign of the times – Matt 16:3, Apple of your eye – Psalm 17:8, At the eleventh hour – Matt 20:6, Writing on the wall – Daniel 5:1-28, Nothing new under the sun – Eccl 1:9.

other confessions and religions, in order to discover new – and even surprising – things in the Bible, will our reading of the Bible have a future.”² Within the last century, the gospel of Mark has been discovered anew by those who recognize that the author of Mark intended it to be read or heard not in fragmented pericopes, but as a narrative whole.³ After almost two thousand years, Mark continues to reveal more τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ Υἱοῦ Θεοῦ (of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God).

Understanding the historical context in which Mark was written helps current readers to appreciate not only life under Roman rule, but the power struggles, oppression, and stark divide that separated the tiny fraction of wealthy elite from the poor masses. The vast majority within the expansive Roman Empire were illiterate; authors wrote their tales intending them to be performed orally before a crowd of listeners.⁴ When the audience consumed the gospel of Mark as a whole, certain sections stood out or prompted the audience to wonder and ask questions.

Like the ancient audiences who originally heard Mark’s good news, we each bring our own experiences and understanding to the text. Recently, I helped a neighbor gentle her three-year-old horse, a challenge which provided a unique perspective that few people in our modern society experience. The venture afforded insights into the arduous task and allowed me to appreciate the efforts of both the equine and the rider. Despite the fact that the animal was hand reared from birth with an abundance of attention and affection, just getting the horse acquainted with the tack proved problematic. Based on the animal’s behaviors, we could tell the horse

² Ulrich Luz, "Paul as Mystic," in *The Holy Spirit and Christian Origins: Essay in Honor of James D. G. Dunn*, edited by Graham N. Stanton, Bruce W. Longenecker, Stephen C. Barton, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 143.

³ Richard A. Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), ix.

⁴ Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, xiii.

exerted great effort trying to understand what my neighbor and I were attempting to teach. My neighbor was very careful to let the colt see, sniff, and examine (mouth) the halter, blanket, and saddle. We were especially careful to slowly unfold the blanket so as not to spook the horse. After trotting around a bit, we loosely added the saddle – again, allowing the animal plenty of time to adjust to each new element. We could tell by the horse’s uncharacteristic licking of her lips and fidgety stance that she was anxious and confused, but trying to comply. We spent a lot of time together before my neighbor was comfortable to set even one foot in the stirrup and stand a little weight on it. This filly knew us so well she would race across the pasture whenever I whistled for her, anticipating affections and her customary treats of carrots and apples. She followed us around as if she was a thousand-pound Labrador. The young horse was always patient and well-behaved for groomings as well as the farrier. But even with a well-established relationship, we all found ourselves at a loss to communicate effectively across the human-horse barrier.

Although I have read Mark’s Gospel numerous times, I repeatedly glossed over the details Mark mentions when he explicitly describes the colt as one that “has never been ridden” (Mark 11:2). For many years, I have helped our church reenact the drama with a Palm Sunday parade of live animals. Some years, despite using an experienced donkey, we still encountered difficulties with an animal that balked and refused to enter the sanctuary. Experiencing those complexities firsthand piqued my curiosity and enabled me to view Mark’s familiar pericope through fresh eyes. As I again read Mark’s account of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem, immediately I recognized that the colt in the story was behaving in a way contrary to its nature. Sensing that the peculiarity pointed to something extraordinary, I began to search for deeper meaning.

Regarding Mark as a whole and examining it with the use of narrative criticism (a combination of literary criticism and theological interpretation) allows us to gain a richer appreciation for the message the author conveys. As Richard A. Horsley attests, “If we always read it in fragments, we will never get a sense of the full story.”⁵ Experiencing the gospel in its entirety, the audience tenses with a sense of urgency as layers of meaning unfold across subplots filled with suspense, drama, miracles, politics, power, betrayal, and suffering – all set against the backdrop of the kingdom of God. Like most stories, Mark’s masterfully crafted narrative contains a variety of characters; however, they are not as fully developed as most characters found in modern literature. Instead, the author of Mark utilizes characters to convey meaning and further develop the plotline.⁶ This paper examines the literary characteristics, patterns, and meanings throughout the gospel of Mark and focuses on one character who has remained largely overlooked in scholarship, the colt from Mark’s account of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem.

I assert that the author of the Gospel of Mark utilizes the colt (πῶλον) in Mark 11:2 as a character within the narrative who, like the voice from heaven, the demons, and the winds and waves, also recognizes and submits to the authority of Jesus as the Son of God.

History

Author

The narrative that we know as the Gospel of Mark is an anonymous work, as are the other canonical gospels. The gospels themselves do not divulge their authors; however, sometime during the second century, the early church came to associate these works with the names by

⁵ Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, x.

⁶ Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, 7.

which they are known today.⁷ Tradition holds the author to be the Mark (or John Mark) mentioned in the Book of Acts and 1 Peter (Acts 12:12; 1 Peter 5:13).⁸ In his account of church history, Eusebius cites Papias, an early second century Bishop of Hierapolis, who stated that Mark was a follower of Peter and accurately recorded all that he remembered from the things Peter told about Jesus. Although it may not have been in the correct order of events, Papias declared that “Mark did nothing wrong in thus writing down single points as he remembered them.”⁹ Papias goes on to say that Mark made no false statements and left nothing out of his accounts. Although the author may not have been an eyewitness to the life of Jesus, the accounts were based on traditions and reports passed down from those who were eyewitnesses.¹⁰

Modern scholars note that the gospels of Matthew and Luke contain a great deal of content that appears to be gleaned from the gospel of Mark. Richard Baukham remarks, “if Mark’s Gospel was closely associated with Peter, this would account for the high value that Matthew and Luke evidently placed on it.”¹¹ Graham Stanton offers his observations concerning the close relationship between Peter and Mark, noting that Irenaeus commented on the earliest gospel as well. Irenaeus described Mark as the disciple and interpreter of the apostle Peter who conveyed Peter’s preaching in written form.¹² Noting that Mark was a very common name in the ancient world, some scholars are not convinced that the Mark mentioned in the book of Acts and

⁷ C. David Grant, *Thinking Through Our Faith: Theology for Twenty-First-Century Christians* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 81.

⁸ Michael David Coogan, Marc Zvi Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and Pheme Perkins, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version: With the Apocrypha: An Ecumenical Study Bible*. Fully rev. 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1791, 1942, 2131.

⁹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*. Vol. 153. LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926), 297.

¹⁰ Grant, *Thinking Through Our Faith*, 83.

¹¹ Richard Baukham, *Jesus: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 15.

¹² Graham Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 54.

the Mark in 1 Peter are the same person.¹³ While the identity of the author remains a mystery, one verse hints at possible sources for his information. When the author mentions that Simon, the Cyrene, helps Jesus carry the cross, Simon's children are also named (Mark 15:21).

Alexander and Rufus appear nowhere else in the Bible, yet the author lists them by name. Mark Allan Powell suggests it is possible that the original, intended audience knew who Alexander and Rufus were, and the children may have been the eyewitnesses upon whose testimony the author based his account of the crucifixion of Jesus.¹⁴

Date

Most scholars assert that Mark is the earliest of the four canonical gospels and date Mark's account between 65 to 75 CE.¹⁵ Even so, Mark was written decades after Jesus walked the earth. Mark's warning about a potential desecration of the temple may be a clue which would date the gospel closer to the siege and fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, when Roman soldiers defiled and destroyed the temple. Writings from Irenaeus around 180 CE affirm this time frame, noting that Mark wrote down the teachings of Peter after Peter and Paul were martyred.¹⁶

Audience

While scholars continue to debate whether Mark wrote in Antioch, Palestine, or Rome, most agree that the audience was a mixture of Jews and Gentiles.¹⁷ Since the text was not

¹³ Morna D. Hooker, "The Gospel According to Mark," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 493. Mark Allan Powell, *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 45.

¹⁴ Powell, *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels*, 47.

¹⁵ Bauckham, *Jesus*, 10.

¹⁶ Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, 54.

¹⁷ Schnabel suggests that Mark's explanation of Jewish customs and translation of Aramaic terms were intended to benefit a gentile audience. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Mark: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*. vol 2. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 14. In the Hermeneia commentaries, Collins asserts that the gospel was written to a Hellenistic audience (1). Collins goes on to examine the opinions of various scholars and concludes

addressed, like the Pauline epistles, to a particular church or person, it is possible that the author intended the narrative to be shared widely, in hopes that literate Christians would orally present the good news to crowds of people. Due to Mark's emphasis on suffering, some believe Mark intended to encourage a community being persecuted for their beliefs.¹⁸ Tradition dating back as far as Irenaeus holds that the gospel was written in Rome.¹⁹ Mark's use of Latin terms, such as *quadrans* (κοδράντης) for a Roman copper coin, also support that claim (Mark 12:42).²⁰ Scholars also point out that Mark's "poor knowledge of Palestinian geography" and his explanations of Jewish terms and customs may also suggest that Mark was written for Gentiles living outside of Palestine.²¹ Michael Peppard also asserts that the gospel targeted a mixed audience with varied understandings of Jewish traditions and non-Jewish Hellenistic customs.²²

Style

At the time the gospel was written, the majority of the population was illiterate, so it is safe to assume that Mark intended his kerygma to be conveyed as a whole and proclaimed orally to a listening audience rather than read in individual pericopes.²³ R. T. France remarks that

"the evidence is not strong enough to point definitively to either Rome or Antioch, but it is compatible with both locations (and others). Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 101.

¹⁸ Hooker suggests the warnings found in Mark were intended for an audience that was either in imminent danger of persecution or had already been forced to endure such hardships. Hooker, "The Gospel According to Mark," 494. Lane opines that early Christians were being blamed for the fires in Rome and suffering persecution. Lane argues that Mark intentionally set the gospel of Christian faith in a context of affliction. William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 14-15. Strauss asserts that the gospel of Mark was intended to encourage a persecuted and suffering church. Mark L. Strauss, *Mark: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. vol. 2. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 19.

¹⁹ Hooker, "The Gospel According to Mark," 493.

²⁰ Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger, *The Greek New Testament*. 4th rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2001), 101.

²¹ Hooker, "The Gospel According to Mark," 493.

²² Michael Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in its Social and Political Context* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2011), 2.

²³ Hooker, "The Gospel According to Mark," 492. Coogan, Brettler, Newsom, and Perkins, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1791.

modern scholars increasingly realize the effectiveness of Mark's gospel as an oral presentation, noting the author's use of drama, surprising twists, rising tension, and repeated dual expressions, which make for a memorable tale.²⁴ Rather than comparing the text to a literary biography, viewing the gospel as the oral presentation it was intended to be reveals Mark's narrative as sophisticated and effective at communicating the good news. Mark L. Strauss views the gospel as "energetic, forceful, unexpected – even shocking," and admits he is "impressed by the author's literary design and theological skill."²⁵ Close examination reveals that the text incorporates a complex plotline interwoven with references to Jewish scriptures, as well as allusions to Greco-Roman literature. Many of the teachings of Jesus appear in the form of parables. Paradoxical teachings such as "whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all," prod the listening audience to pause and ponder what was said (Mark 10:43-44). The ancient culture valued storytelling, proverbs, riddles, and aphorisms which the author liberally provides.²⁶ Lavish symbolism permeates not only the parables of Mark, but also the actions of Christ.

Mark's account flows at a hurried pace, emphasizing the urgency of his message with the use of the Greek word *εὐθύς* ("immediately") at least forty-two times.²⁷ Readers may be tempted to rush past artfully crafted illustrations that highlight the juxtaposition of characters and traditional expectations; however, to do so is to risk missing the richer and deeper meanings skillfully woven into the text. Robert M. Fowler advises readers to move beyond surface appearances and understand that Mark's gospel "can work on different levels simultaneously:

²⁴ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 9-10.

²⁵ Strauss, *Mark*, 11.

²⁶ Bauckham, *Jesus*, 61.

²⁷ Clive Marsh and Steve Moyise, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 3rd ed. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 15.

that if we read on one level only, then we may end up as deaf and blind as certain characters in the story.”²⁸

Upon close examination, what we discover is that Mark is a “work of considerable literary skill and theological subtlety.”²⁹ As Morna D. Hooker observes, there were “no parallels to this precise literary form before early Christianity.” It is therefore not unreasonable to credit the author of the Gospel of Mark with the creation of the “gospel” genre.³⁰

Purpose

The author’s purpose can be discerned in the opening line of his gospel as one of proclaiming the “good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). As Powell argues the primary motivation and intended purpose for Mark’s gospel is to ‘provide historical grounding for an emerging theological system and the pastoral concerns it generates.’³¹ Powell also mentions other important factors, such as inclusiveness toward Gentiles, maintaining Hebrew scriptures as sacred to the Christian faith, encouraging those who suffer persecution, lifting up the suffering and unwavering obedience of Jesus as the ultimate example, warning of false prophets, and providing a consistent account for worshippers.³² David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie see Mark’s purpose as one of encouraging the believers who were oppressed, persecuted, and rejected as they worked to spread the good news.³³ According to Clive Marsh and Steve Moyise, “The burden of Mark’s Gospel, on this view, is to show that even Jesus, with

²⁸ Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1996), 225.

²⁹ Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, 55.

³⁰ Hooker, “The Gospel According to Mark,” 492.

³¹ Powell, *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels*, 49.

³² Powell, *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels*, 49-50.

³³ David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 2.

all his mighty power and superior wisdom, could only accomplish his work through suffering. The same will be true of his followers.”³⁴ Stanton asserts “Mark’s purposes are many. He sets out in dramatic form the story of Jesus so that it will be meaningful for faltering and hard-pressed Christians in his own day.”³⁵ From the beginning and consistently throughout his narrative, the author of Mark sets out to spread the good news of Jesus Christ to any and all who would hear, whether they are Jews or Gentiles. His narrative warns that the persecution that Christ suffered may befall those who follow, but Mark’s message also encourages followers by sharing tales of Jesus’ miracles and teachings. Mark uses a host of characters to illustrate the identity of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Midway through the gospel, Mark reports that Jesus asks the disciples who the people say he is. The disciples reply that some say Jesus is a prophet, some say he is John the Baptist, and others claim he is Elijah (Mark 8:27-28). Then Jesus asks his followers, “But who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:29). When read as a whole, this vital question becomes a fine thread that connects the various pericopes. Mark’s seemingly unresolved ending (Mark 16:8) leaves the audience wanting to know what happens next and encourages the audience to answer the question of Jesus’ identity for themselves.

History of Interpretation

Although frugal with his words, the author of Mark makes the most of each phrase and composes a sophisticated narrative to proclaim the “beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). The shortest of the New Testament Gospels, Mark was set aside by some of the early church fathers such as Augustine, who wielded great influence in the church.³⁶

³⁴ Marsh and Moyise, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 19-20.

³⁵ Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, 57.

³⁶ Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, 37.

Strauss notes that Mark is the “most dramatic and fast-paced of the four Gospels,”³⁷ yet early commentators afforded the text comparatively little attention and apparently deemed the books of Matthew and Luke to be of more importance since they offered more detail. Mark does not include a birth narrative, nor does it mention any of Christ’s resurrection appearances.

Considering the breadth of episodes described in Matthew’s account, early church fathers may have interpreted Mark’s “omissions” as a failure to report the full story and viewed Mark as an abbreviated account. Matthew and Luke share many similarities with the gospel of Mark. Most of Mark’s accounts are also recorded in the other Synoptic Gospels, so much so that of Mark’s 661 verses, 600 of them are paralleled in the Gospel of Matthew.³⁸ Yet Mark’s report of the healing of the demoniac and the herd of swine (Mark 5:1-20) covers much more detail than the account in Matthew (Matt 8:28-34). Other evidence found in comparing the Synoptic Gospels, such as use of unusual Greek phrases, suggests that there is a relationship between them.³⁹

It was not until the nineteenth century that scholars such as K. Lachmann (1835) and H.J. Holtzman (1863) researched the relationship between the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke and showed that the abbreviation theory is untenable.⁴⁰ Since then, other scholars have continued to investigate Mark’s neglected gospel, and most now conclude that the Gospel of Mark was the first of the canonical gospels. Modern scholarship suggests that the authors of the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke utilized the Gospel of Mark as a source.⁴¹ Some of the evidence academics offer to support this finding is Mark’s portrayal of the disciples as

³⁷ Strauss, *Mark*, 20.

³⁸ Marsh and Moyise, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 11.

³⁹ Marsh and Moyise, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 11.

⁴⁰ Marsh and Moyise, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 11.

⁴¹ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. 1st ed. vol. 27. (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 41-45. Marcus examines the top theories including the Two-Source Hypothesis, the Griesbach Hypotheses or Two-Gospel Theory, and the Proto-Gospel theory and concludes the “cumulative evidence for the Two-Source Hypothesis, therefore, seems very strong” (45).

dimwitted and unable to grasp the teachings of Jesus, traits the authors of Matthew and Luke would seem to soften or omit. Stanton asserts that “Since it is more probable that a later Christian writer would defend rather than criticize the disciples of Jesus, the more favourable [sic] portrait of the disciples in Matthew and Luke strongly supports Marcan priority.”⁴²

Literary Characteristics, Patterns, and Meanings in Mark

Modern audiences are so familiar with the stories of Jesus they often gloss over the nuances, irony, and unexpected twists that would excite audiences who heard Mark’s account for the first time. The Gospel of Mark announces a new beginning in human understanding, a paradigm shift in perceptions of religious observances and Messianic expectations. The author opens with “the beginning of the good news” and immediately discloses his purpose, telling the audience up front that Jesus is “the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). After quoting scriptures from the Septuagint that allude to a new exodus,⁴³ Mark evokes images reminiscent of Elijah to introduce John the Baptist (Mark 1:6).⁴⁴ Preaching repentance and baptizing with water, John proclaims that one even greater is coming, one who is so great that John is unworthy even to untie his sandals (Mark 1:7). While John baptizes with water, this coming great one will baptize with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:7-8). Immediately Mark introduces Jesus, the Galilean. The audience already knows that Jesus is the Son of God – the great one to whom John was referring – and yet, John, the unworthy one, baptizes the great one, Jesus. Just as Jesus is baptized in the Jordan

⁴² Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, 45.

⁴³ Exod. 23:20; Mal. 3:1. References of a messenger/angel and an exodus. Isa. 40:3. Audiences familiar with Hebrew Bible would know about the restoration of Zion.

⁴⁴ Audiences would be looking for Elijah to come before the Messiah. This becomes an ironic juxtaposition in that Elijah did not die, but was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot 2 Kings 2:11. John will be arrested in verse 14 and beheaded in 6:27.

river, the heavens split ($\sigma\chi\acute{\iota}\zeta\omega$),⁴⁵ the Spirit descends like a dove, and a voice from heaven proclaims, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” – further confirming what the audience was told in the opening line (Mark 1:10-11).

Mark reinforces the parallels to the major prophets Moses and Elijah (1 Kings 19:8; Exo 24:18)⁴⁶ when the author reveals that Jesus spends forty days in the wilderness being tempted by Satan. The audience is told that while Jesus was in the wilderness, he walked among the wild beasts and angels attended him.

Without warning, the audience learns that John (whom the author just likened to Elijah) has been arrested. Then, Jesus comes back from the wilderness proclaiming good news. Jesus calls people to repent and to believe the good news that the time has come and the kingdom of God has drawn near. In just fifteen short verses, Mark has associated Jesus with two of Israel’s greatest prophets, asserted that Jesus is the Son of God, and proclaimed the good news. Throughout the rest of his narrative, the author masterfully employs revelations, drama, and surprising twists to pique his audience’s attention. Mark successfully primes his audience to expect a fast-moving adventure that will require them to keep up and pay close attention to unexpected details.

As the narrative progresses, the audience will follow along as Jesus travels through Galilee exorcising demons and performing miracles. Along the way, Jesus calls his disciples (Mark 1:16-20), teaches with authority (Mark 1:22), heals the sick (Mark 1:34), and proclaims

⁴⁵ Deppe notes that the author of Mark uses $\sigma\chi\acute{\iota}\zeta\omega$ (torn), the same verb used at Christ’s baptism and crucifixion in 15:38 when the veil in the temple is torn in two. The term bookends both momentous events and frames Mark’s gospel. Dean B. Deppe, *The Theological Intentions of Mark’s Literary Devices: Markan Intercalations, Frames, Allusionary Repetitions, Narrative Surprises, and Three Types of Mirroring* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 1.

⁴⁶ Both Moses and Elijah spent forty days on a mountain with God. Jesus, the Son of God, spends forty days being tempted by the devil.

the good news that the kingdom of God is near (Mark 1:38). Conflicts arise as the religious elite, who should be happy that the Son of God is performing miracles (Mark 1:40-42; 2:1-12; 3:1-5), teaching, and proclaiming the kingdom of God (Mark 1:39; 2:13), instead, accuse Jesus of consorting with the devil (Mark 3:22). Undaunted, Jesus continues his ministry, declaring his purpose to proclaim the message throughout the land (Mark 1:38). Jesus' popularity grows. Mark illustrates Jesus' penchant for turning convention on its head by sharing details of him fraternizing with sinners and tax collectors, healing on the sabbath, and confounding the religious elite by reinterpreting the scriptures (Mark 2:14-15; 2:23-28; 3:1-6; 12:18-27). When the Pharisees scorn and scold, Jesus emphatically maintains that the sabbath is intended to benefit humanity, not hinder it. He asserts, "the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath" (Mark 2:27-28). With flagrant disregard for the Pharisees' adherence to their restrictive interpretation of the law, Jesus restores a man's withered hand on the sabbath. The plot thickens as the Pharisees conspire to destroy Jesus (Mark 3:1-6).

From there, Mark's gospel picks up speed and intensity as listeners hear Jesus redefine family (Mark 3:35), teach in parables (Mark 4:1-34), calm a storm (Mark 4:35-41), cast out a legion of demons (Mark 5:1-20),⁴⁷ raise a girl from the dead, and heal a woman who only touched the hem of his robe (Mark 5:21-43). Next Mark shocks his audience by disclosing that this 'hometown hero,' who continues to draw massive crowds, returns to his village only to be greeted with scorn and rejection. Jesus, the one who amazes others, is himself amazed by his hometown's unbelief (Mark 6:1-6a).

⁴⁷ This episode may be what amounts to the first report of deviled ham.

Mark details the commissioning of the disciples as they are authorized and sent by Jesus to cast out demons, heal the sick, and proclaim the good news (Mark 6:6b-13). While other characters in the story fumble about confused as to Jesus' identity, the audience delights in knowing who Jesus really is from the beginning (Mark 6:14-15). But before they can giggle, Mark immediately and bluntly reveals the devastating news of John's beheading (Mark 6:16). The author seems to have a penchant for startling listeners with unexpected information, then once the author captures their attention, he proceeds to fill in the details. Normally sparse with specifics, Mark reinforces his pattern of expanding on key events – a detail difficult to recognize unless the text is read as a whole. Rather than immediately rushing on, Mark lingers to disclose important elements which he skillfully veils in an amalgamation of literary devices including flashback, foreshadowing, and allusion. The account reveals Herod haunted by guilt for ordering the death of a man he knows to be righteous and holy (Mark 6:20).⁴⁸ Despite John's admonishment of the king for his scandalous marriage to his brother's wife, Herodias, the narrative concedes that Herod enjoyed listening to the prophet speak. Herod tried to protect John, but Herodias nursed a grudge and wanted to kill the prophet. Later, on a special occasion of the ruler's birthday, the king generously offers his daughter anything she wishes, as much as half of his kingdom. To the shock and dismay of the audience, Mark divulges that she rejects the kingdom and chooses evil – requesting John's head on a platter. After John is sacrificed because of Herodias' hatred, John's disciples come and lay his body in a tomb. In the hands of a master storyteller, these characters simultaneously play dual roles. John foreshadows the death and resurrection of Jesus. Herodias represents the offended Pharisees who manipulate Pilate, the

⁴⁸ France's commentary from the Greek text of Mark interprets the word order and inclusion of ἐγώ such that the emphasis is Herod's personal responsibility for the death of John. As such, France deduces that Herod perceives the reappearance of John as a personal threat, "coming back to haunt his guilty conscience." France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 254.

ruler; the daughter represents the crowd who, rather than choosing Jesus and his proclamation of the kingdom of God, refuses the kingdom and chooses death. Herod is thrust into the role of Pontius Pilate. Both rulers heard the truth, yet neither was moved to righteousness. Terence J. Keegan observes that “Herod is indeed an excellent illustration” of the seed among thorns from Christ’s parable (Mark 4:16).⁴⁹ Herod listens gladly, yet the daughter of Herodias and Herod’s guests effectively choke out the word he so gladly heard. After hearing of John’s murder, the prophet’s disciples lay John’s body in a tomb, but when Jesus is crucified, the disciples of Christ flee. It is Joseph of Arimathea who comes to perform this honor for the beloved teacher and lays the body of Jesus in a tomb.

Perhaps anticipating his audience’s reaction to all that has been revealed thus far, Mark tells of a compassion-filled Jesus who offers his disciples rest (Mark 6:31). Jesus feeds five thousand men with five loaves and two small fish, sends the disciples ahead in their boat, and goes up the mountain to pray (Mark 6:30-46). Before his listeners can catch their breath, Mark astonishes them by describing Jesus walking on the water (Mark 6:48-51).

Midway through Mark’s story, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:29). When Peter replies that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus begins to explain that their expectations of the Messiah differ from what Jesus intends to accomplish. Jesus plans to redefine assumptions concerning the prophesied Messiah. Tensions continue to build in the story as Jesus repeatedly attempts to convince his disciples that he must suffer and die (Mark 8:31; 9:31-32; 10:33). Jesus further explains that “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

⁴⁹ Terence J. Keegan, “The Parable of the Sower and Mark’s Jewish Leaders,” *CBQ* 56.3 (1994), 505.

On three separate occasions, Jesus specifically informs the twelve that the Son of Man will be betrayed, suffer, die, and on the third day rise again. Each time the disciples are unable to comprehend. Mark not only elucidates what it means to be the Messiah but also spells out the cost of discipleship. Jesus calls the crowd and his followers to him, then expounds on his paradoxical teaching. Jesus takes their original perspectives and upends them. Instead of following the Messiah into glorious battle to overthrow Rome, Jesus insists that the way to become one of his followers is to deny oneself, take up one's cross, and conform to the example of Jesus. Jesus drives his point home stating, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mark 8:35). Mark's gospel emphasizes this message to bolster those in his audience who suffer persecution for their beliefs. Adela Yarbro Collins suggests that Mark's allusion to picking up and carrying a cross may not necessarily mean the author or the early audience anticipated literal crucifixion, but instead that Mark's message "may be used metaphorically for any kind of death in a context of persecution."⁵⁰

Immediately after such a sobering revelation, Mark enthralls his readers with detailed descriptions of the Transfiguration (Mark 9:2-7). The author's depiction of Jesus ascending the mountain mirrors famous prophets such as Moses and their mountaintop encounters with God. Directly following the private, yet glorious high of the Transfiguration, Mark transitions to the very public, yet dismal low of the other disciples' failure and inability to heal an epileptic boy (Mark 9:14-29). Once again, Jesus comes to the rescue. The boy's father articulates feelings that often plague the faithful in the throes of a crisis when he pleads for Jesus to help if he is

⁵⁰ Collins, *Mark*, 99. Collins cites several scholars, including Brian Incigneri, William H.C. Frend, and Hendrika Roskam, who agree that Mark's gospel served to provide encouragement to Christians suffering persecution, 98-101.

able. Jesus assures the father that all things are possible for those who believe. Mark reports that immediately the father exclaimed, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

A talented storyteller, Mark intersperses subtle humor to lighten the mood. When Jesus heals a deaf mute, the first thing the man hears is Jesus ordering him not to tell anyone. Other playful accounts reinforce a point. When Mark tells of Bartimaeus crying out for mercy, Bartimaeus, though blind, “sees” Jesus and calls out to the “Son of David” (Mark 10:46-52). Despite witnessing Jesus calm the sea, walk on water, raise a young girl back to life, and restore sight to the blind, the disciples themselves remain blind to the truth.

As Mark’s gospel continues to unfold, the reader witnesses the Son of Man as he imparts wisdom, compassionately serves, and continually upends expectations. Mark’s entire narrative focuses on the Son of God with all his glory and power; yet Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man – a human being. Ironically, Mark identifies the demons, not the priests, as the ones who recognize the Son of God. Adding to the listeners’ shock, Jesus asserts that “to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away” (Mark 4:25). In other unexpected twists, a wealthy man who asks how to inherit eternal life is told to sell everything and follow Jesus (Mark 10:17-22). More paradoxical teachings such as “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” continue to vex his followers (Mark 10:31).

Despite Jesus’ repeated warnings that the Messiah will suffer torture, death, and on the third day rise again, his followers persistently fail to understand. The disciples (and undoubtedly most Israelites) anticipate a Messiah who will come as a great warrior, overthrow those who oppress God’s chosen people, and reign over a newly restored kingdom in Israel. Seeming to acquiesce to their expectations, Jesus and his followers approach Jerusalem. Jesus prepares to

fulfill the prophetic promises (1Kings 1:38; Zech. 9:9-10) and sends for a young colt, one that has never been ridden before. Richard Bauckham notes the text from Zechariah was not a popular Messianic prophecy at that time, as it depicts the “Messiah as the king who comes in peace and humility, not as a warrior.”⁵¹ The disciples bring the colt and Jesus simply sits on it and rides into the crowded streets lined with people cheering “Hosanna,” waving leafy branches, and spreading their cloaks on the road.

The escapades of Jesus have continually irritated the chief priest and scribes. They harangue Jesus, question his authority, and attempt to trap him in wrongdoing. Trying to trick Jesus, they ask leading questions, but Jesus retorts with more questions and indicting parables. Another scribe asks Jesus which is the greatest of the commandments. Jesus replies with the Shema – you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength (Deut. 6:4-5), and then adds, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:17-18; Mark 12:31). In the battle of wits, Jesus proves victorious. The disgraced priests, scribes, and elders determine to put an end to him.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus repeatedly warns his disciples that he will be killed; however, Jesus also assures them he will rise again after three days (Mark 8:31; 9:9; 9:31; 10:33; 14:28). Stanton asserts that Jesus prepares his disciples for his impending death and the severing of their relationship; however, “it will be restored.”⁵² In addition to warnings about Jesus’ impending death, Mark intersperses several warnings that those who follow Jesus will also suffer persecution. Early on in Mark’s narrative, Jesus sends out his disciples to expand his ministry. The author packs a great deal of meaning in a few short verses. This commissioning of the

⁵¹ Bauckham, *Jesus*, 88.

⁵² Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, 53.

twelve reinforces Jesus giving authority to the twelve and the symbolism of a renewed Israel (Mark 3:13-19). Additionally, the verses illustrate the ascetic lifestyle the followers of Christ can expect. Jesus instructs them to travel light, taking nothing with them except a staff. They are told to depend on the hospitality of others. This is no prosperity gospel; Mark portrays the lifestyle of followers of Christ as one that appears more like that of a vagabond. Jesus warns them that they will encounter those who will not welcome them and refuse to listen (Mark 6:7-13). A little later in the text, Jesus warns not only his disciples, but the entire crowd, that becoming a follower of Christ requires self-sacrifice. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). Jesus warns that they will be beaten, handed over to rulers, brought on trial, and hated all because they follow Jesus (Mark 13:9-13). In asking these faithful to give up so much, Jesus also offers a promise of rewards to come; however, these rewards have a more eternal focus (Mark 10:28-31).

James and John, seemingly ignoring Jesus’ words that the first will be last, ask their teacher for a favor. They ask for Jesus to grant them the honor of sitting on either side of their master. Jesus responds that the brothers do not know what they are asking. “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?” Not fully comprehending all that Christ’s question entails, the brothers reply that they are able (Mark 10:35-40). A few passages later, Mark describes the Passover meal and the powerful symbolism Jesus employs with the cup (Mark 14:23-24). After their supper, Jesus goes to the garden and prays fervently asking God to “remove this cup from me.” In the next breath, Jesus adds, “yet, not what I want, but what you want” (Mark 14:36). At the crucifixion, the audience learns even more when the author describes that it is two bandits who are crucified with Christ – one on his right and one on his left (Mark 15:25-27). The author of Mark repeatedly reminds the audience that discipleship exacts a high price.

Mark's narrative presses on as the disciples prepare for the Passover meal. As they share the Passover meal together, once again, the author reveals that one of the twelve will betray Jesus. Focusing on vital aspects of his story, Mark offers a more detailed description of the Last Supper. Cultural mores established meals as "the most intimate form of fellowship"⁵³ and this was a special feast made even more poignant by all that would transpire next. Jesus discloses that the Son of Man must suffer and die. After offering a blessing, Jesus shares the bread and cup and explains, "This is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many" (Mark 14:24). The group concludes their feast singing the traditional Passover hymns.⁵⁴ Surely some verses hold deeper meaning – especially as Jesus sings, "I will lift up the cup of salvation and call the name of the Lord," or "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones," or "I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord" (Ps 116:13; 117:15; 118:17).

Mark continues his narrative in heartbreaking detail. Jesus knows that his friends will desert him despite their insistence otherwise. He knows that Judas will betray him. And what's more, Jesus knows the excruciating agony that will come with the cross. Mark pulls his audience into Jesus' most intimate moments as he desperately prays in the garden of Gethsemane. Three times Jesus asks his closest friends – Peter, James, and John – to stay awake and pray with him. Three times they fail and succumb to sleep (Mark 14:32-41). Judas arrives and, with a kiss, betrays the Son of Man. Priests lead a mob brandishing swords and clubs to arrest Jesus. Terrified, the disciples flee. Jesus willingly submits. Mark's gospel nears its apex and neatly ties back to its opening as Jesus remarks, "Let the scriptures be fulfilled" (Exod. 23:20; Mal. 3:1;

⁵³ Richard A. Horsley, "Mark" in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version: With the Apocrypha: An Ecumenical Study Bible*. Fully rev. 4th ed., ed. by David Michael Coogan et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1819.

⁵⁴ Horsley, "Mark," 1819.

Isa. 40:3; Mark 1:15; 4:49). Mark stresses the fulfillment of both time and the scriptures in the long-awaited reestablishment of God's beneficent will for the people.⁵⁵

Abandoned by his disciples, falsely accused, and brought on trial before the council and chief priests, Jesus offers no defense. The high priests accuse and convict Jesus of blasphemy. Instead of following Levitical law and stoning him (Lev 24:16), at daybreak, the priests take Jesus to Pilate and continue to accuse Jesus of many things. Pilate repeatedly questions Jesus, who remains silent. Realizing that the priests' jealousy spurred the trumped-up charges against Jesus, Pilate offers to release "the King of the Jews" to the crowd as a festival gift (Mark 15:6-15). However, Mark's story is driving hard toward fulfillment; and the readers discover that the priests have persuaded the crowds to cry out for the release of Barabbas instead (Mark 6:24-25).⁵⁶ Pilate turns to question the crowd, "What do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" The crowds shout out, "Crucify him!" Perplexed, Pilate inquires, "Why? What evil has he done?" (Mark 15:12-15). Unable to placate the crowd, Pilate orders Jesus to be flogged and crucified.

Roman soldiers mock, spit upon, and brutally beat the Son of Man. Since Jesus was unable to carry his cross, the soldiers enlist the aid of a bystander. As Mark tells it, the man who picks up and carries Jesus' cross is Simon. Not Simon Peter, but a substitute, Simon the Cyrene (Mark 15:21).⁵⁷ Jesus is crucified between two criminals who also taunt and jeer. A crown of thorns digs into his brow and a sign that hangs above his head reads "The King of the Jews." At midday, darkness descends, and Jesus cries out the words of Psalm 22:1. As Jesus breathes his

⁵⁵ Horsley, "Mark," 1793.

⁵⁶ Just as Herodias persuaded her daughter to ask for the head of John the Baptist.

⁵⁷ Horsley, "Mark," 1822.

last, the curtain of the temple rips from top to bottom. With unmistakable irony, Mark discloses another unexpected twist: a centurion realizes, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Mark 15:39).

Joseph of Arimathea asks Pilate for permission to bury the body of Jesus. Joseph, Mary Magdalene, another Mary, and Salome see that the body is safely entombed. Three days after Jesus dies, the women return to the tomb with spices to anoint Jesus’ body. The stone no longer blocks the entrance to the tomb, and the women peer inside and find a young man who announces that Jesus is risen. He then instructs the women to go tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus will meet them in Galilee just as he said. Terrified, the women flee and say nothing (Mark 16:8.).

And with that, Mark abruptly ends his good news.⁵⁸

Although most Bibles include additional verses at the end of Mark (Mark 16:9-20), many of them also note that the oldest manuscripts end with Mary Magdalene, Mary, and Salome fleeing from the empty tomb in terror and amazement (Mark 16:8). Powell argues that the “surprising lack of resolution contributes to the effect the evangelist wanted the Gospel to have on his readers. They are left asking questions, wanting to know more.”⁵⁹ The seemingly unresolved ending leads the reader back to the question Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:29).

Themes

⁵⁸ Most scholars agree the original Gospel of Mark ends with 16:8. Many Bibles segregate the additional verses with either extra spacing, bracketing, or headings that label 16:9-20 as a longer ending. provide information in the annotations or footnote the fact that the oldest manuscripts end Mark at 16:8. NOAB, 1824.

⁵⁹ Powell, *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels*, 39.

Relative to the other canonical gospels, Mark emphasizes the miracles of Jesus more than the teachings. Mark does not include Jesus' teachings on the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord's Prayer, or the parables of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son. Several themes appear throughout the gospel. Some key themes highlight the authority of Jesus, Jesus as the self-proclaimed Son of Man, and Jesus as the Son of God.

Authority of Jesus

The concept of authority commands an important role in Mark's gospel and appears at least nine times. Mark describes Jesus' many miraculous healings, demonic exorcisms, and incredible teachings. Throughout his ministry, Jesus displays unparalleled authority, especially when Jesus tells the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:5). Bauckham notes, "this is not a prayer for God to forgive. It is an unequivocal declaration of God's forgiveness, as though Jesus claims the right to speak for God."⁶⁰ Because they believe that only God has the power and authority to forgive sins, the scribes and temple leaders are outraged and accuse Jesus of blasphemy. Jesus confidently commands the paralytic to stand and walk, explicitly stating, "so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (Mark 2:10). Mark discloses that the religious leaders perceive Jesus as a threat to their authority. Undeterred, Jesus continues to amaze the crowds with wise teachings and unprecedented power.

In another display of authority that conjures images of Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod. 34:2, 5-6, 27-28), Jesus ascends a mountain and appoints twelve of his followers to be with him as apostles. Scholars suggest that this indicates a new Sinai and a renewed Israel, mirroring the twelve princes over the twelve tribes of Israel.⁶¹ Jesus charges the newly chosen twelve to go

⁶⁰ Bauckham, *Jesus*, 85.

⁶¹ Horsley, "Mark," 1797.

forth and proclaim the good news. Mark further amazes his readers when he divulges that Jesus, whose authority the Pharisees already question, grants the disciples authority to exorcise demons (Mark 3:15: 6:7).

In Mark, the miracles of Jesus appear in the first half of the gospel. Hooker asserts that the arrangement is intentional “to persuade [the audience] that Jesus is superior to the prophets who have gone before him”⁶² The miracles illustrate various qualities concerning Jesus such as his authority, prophetic actions, and power to heal. Hooker argues that these miraculous events prove Jesus is a true prophet (in contrast to false prophets who are unable to heal or prophesy events that come to pass). The transfiguration reveals that Jesus is superior to Moses and Elijah.⁶³ Jesus is not only a miracle worker who heals and forgives sins with authority, but even nature submits to his authority. The self-proclaimed Son of Man can calm the storm, walk on water, and multiply food to feed thousands.

Jesus the Son of Man

Mark’s gospel also emphasizes the suffering of Jesus. Mark presents Jesus as the martyr-Messiah who obediently suffers – even unto the cross. According to Luke Timothy Johnson, radical obedience to God and radical service to humanity exemplify the pattern of Messiah.⁶⁴ Mark’s portrayal of Jesus “is dominated by the relatively long passion narrative.”⁶⁵ Some scholars argue that the suffering of Jesus is central to Mark’s narrative. As Martin Kähler

⁶² Morna Dorothy Hooker, *The Signs of a Prophet: The Prophetic Actions of Jesus* (Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International, 1997), 55.

⁶³ Hooker, *The Signs of a Prophet*, 55-56.

⁶⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 153.

⁶⁵ Powell, *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels*, 41.

famously quipped, Mark is, in some sense, a passion narrative with a long introduction.⁶⁶

Indeed, Mark emphasizes Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and his suffering and crucifixion. Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man fourteen times in the Gospel of Mark. Twice he is quoting from Daniel 7:13 where "Son of Man" can also refer to human being. Infused with miraculous power, and wielding unparalleled authority, Jesus is both divine and human.

Jesus the Son of God

By the time the gospels were written, early Christians were already proclaiming that Jesus was the Son of God.⁶⁷ Mark begins and ends his gospel announcing who Jesus is. In the opening line, Mark declares his purpose stating that this is "the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). Throughout Mark's narrative, many other characters also recognize the divinity of Jesus.

On three separate occasions, even demons recognize Jesus as the Son of God (Mark 1:24; 3:11; 5:7). According to Mark, these were not the only instances. The author summarizes Christ's activity stating that Jesus cured many illnesses and cast out many unclean spirits, but "he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him" (Mark 1:34).

Not only people and spirits recognize Jesus as the Son of God, for Mark records that the wind and the waves submit to the authority of Jesus perhaps because they also recognize the Creator's Son. In one example, while Jesus and his disciples were crossing the sea, a terrible storm arose. Fearing that the boat would sink and that they might all perish, the disciples wake Jesus. Jesus rebukes the storm and immediately the winds quiet and the sea stills (Mark 4:35-41;

⁶⁶ Martin Kähler, *The so-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 80, n. 11.

⁶⁷ Grant, *Thinking Through Our Faith*, 26.

Ps 89:9). Later, Jesus sends the disciples ahead to cross the sea while he goes off to pray. In the early morning, the disciples find themselves still struggling against the winds. They see Jesus walking on the water and cry out in fear. Jesus calms the twelve and the winds as he steps into the boat (Mark 6:45-52.). Although he does not describe the winds or water as sentient, Mark portrays creation as obeying Jesus, the Son of God. Ironically, Mark characterizes even Jesus' chosen disciples as dimwitted and unable to understand (Mark 4:13; 6:52; 7:18; 8:14-21, 32; 9:10, 32; 10:24; 14:68). Not only do the twelve fail to understand Jesus' teachings, they remain dumbfounded by his power to control the wind and water and fail to recognize the Son of God (Mark 4:37-41; 6:47-52). To his chagrin, Jesus, the great teacher, must repeatedly pull his twelve disciples aside and explain.

Mark repeatedly shares with his audience that Jesus is the Son of God. When Jesus calls Peter, James, and John to go with him atop a high mountain, they witness Christ's transfiguration (Mark 9:2-7). Alongside Jesus, Moses and Elijah appear and begin talking with Jesus. Mark reports that a cloud overshadows them and from within the cloud they hear a voice saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" The disciples hear the same voice that announced Jesus as the Son of God after Jesus was baptized.⁶⁸ Again, Mark alludes to the Septuagint by using common symbolic language.⁶⁹

When Jesus is arrested and brought before the high priests, they interrogate Jesus and ask, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus responds saying, "I am."

⁶⁸ NOAB, 1808.

⁶⁹ The cloud that appears during the transfiguration (Mark 9:7) parallels the cloud during the exodus from Egypt. In each instance, the cloud represents the presence of God. (Exo. 13:21; 16:10; 19:9; 33:9; 40:34-35).

Recognizing that Jesus has referred to himself in the same way that God disclosed himself to Moses, the high priests are enraged and accuse Jesus of blasphemy (Mark 14:61-64).

Afterwards, Jesus is beaten, ridiculed, nailed to a cross, and dies. At the very moment when Jesus breathes his last, the audience is told that a catastrophic event happened in the temple. The author reaches back to the beginning when he uses the word *σχίζω* to describe the heavens being split in two at the baptism of Jesus. Mark completes his *inclusio* when he uses the same word, *σχίζω*, to declare that the temple curtain separating the people from the presence of God is split in two. Even the guard who presides over the crucifixion of Jesus recognizes there is something unique about this man. As David Grant asserts, the centurion who witnessed Jesus die upon the cross sums up Mark's gospel by acknowledging, "truly this was the Son of God" (Mark 15:39 KJV).⁷⁰

Throughout the narrative, Mark repeatedly uses various characters to disclose that Jesus is the Son of God. The characters whom the audience might expect to identify the Messiah, such as the religious leaders or his own disciples, fail to recognize him. The ones who recognize Jesus as the Son of God are unlikely witnesses – the demons, the winds and waves, a centurion, and even a colt.

Unridden Colt

As illustrated in the sections above, the author of Mark crafted a brilliantly complex, albeit brief, narrative. Immediately, he grabs the audience's attention and quickly sprints toward the climax. Throughout the narrative, the author is frugal with his words, so in the few instances where the author is lavish with words, the details stand out and alert the audience to pay attention. These unusual occurrences indicate that the author is highlighting something special,

⁷⁰ Grant, *Thinking Through Our Faith*, 83.

something important, something worth taking time to discover. Dean B. Deppe argues that the author of Mark intentionally employs literary tools such as “intercalations, frames, allusionary repetitions, narrative surprises, and mirroring to offer a theological and symbolic interpretation of the events.”⁷¹ With these literary devices, Mark masterfully incorporates multivalent expansions and invites his listeners to pause and ponder.

One such moment concerns Jesus and a fig tree. Initially, the reader may wonder why Mark includes details about a hungry Messiah hoping to find a fig. According to the report, Jesus did not find any figs on the tree “for it was not the season for figs” (Mark 11:13). Jesus then curses the tree. Before the perplexed audience can recover, the narrative quickly moves on to describe Jesus in the temple overturning the tables of the money changers. Jesus chastises those in the temple and sternly reminds them that the temple of the Lord was intended to be a house of prayer, not a “den of robbers” (Mark 11:17). Mark completes his intercalation when the story turns back again to the fig tree, which Peter notices is now badly withered. While descriptions about a fig tree may appear to be a strange detour from the story, Mark uses the tale to frame both ends of the account of Jesus in the temple and highlight his point. The fig tree did not bear fruit and so it was destroyed. Likewise, the temple is not bearing good fruit and it too, will be destroyed. The author of Mark uses intercalations for a variety of purposes including connecting pericopes, emphasizing parallels, dramatizing ironies, and directing the audience to view the inner story through the lens of the outer story and vice versa.⁷²

Throughout Mark’s narrative, passages that offer more in-depth details or that describe characters behaving in non-traditional ways serve as signals to the audience, encouraging them to pay close attention. As Mark describes Jesus entering Jerusalem, three distinct characters behave in unusual manners: the city, Jesus, and the colt. Many Christians refer to the first eleven verses of chapter eleven as the “Triumphal Entry,” but scholars such as Paul Duff, Werner Kelber, and Jacob Myers argue that Mark’s depiction of the entry into Jerusalem is far from triumphal.⁷³ Collins suggests that Mark used his audience’s understanding of typical Greek and Roman entrance processions to stand in stark contrast to Christ’s entry.⁷⁴ Rather than the customary

⁷¹ Deppe, *Theological Intentions*, 11.

⁷² David E. Aune, *New Testament and Early Christian Literature and Rhetoric* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 231.

⁷³ Collins, *Mark*, 515.

⁷⁴ Collins, *Mark*, 515.

celebration and ceremony that would surround a conqueror's or dignitary's arrival, Mark describes Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as anti-climactic. According to the gospel, Jesus arrives at the temple, looks around at everything, and leaves (Mark 11:11). The city does not respond appropriately. None of the city leaders come out to greet the Messiah. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem appears in all four of the canonical gospels, and each one quotes Psalm 118:26, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" In the Psalm citation, each of the gospels has the masculine participle ἐρχόμενος, but Luke adds βασιλεύς to suggest that Jesus is a "king." In Luke's account, people hail Jesus as the coming king, yet the city's failure to recognize and receive him moves Jesus to tears (Luke 19:41). Collins asserts that the city's response "is nothing short of insulting," adding that even though "he is a king, he is not so received by the leaders of the city."⁷⁵ Collins offers her opinions on Mark's anticlimactic ending of the entry, as well, noting that those familiar with such celebratory welcomes would experience "the frustration of expectations." Those hearing Mark's gospel would expect to hear that the leaders came out to welcome the visiting dignitary and join him on his approach to the temple.⁷⁶ Strauss argues that the anticlimactic ending suggests the authenticity of the event, since "a story created by the church would likely end with an immediate temple clearing and a challenge by the religious leaders."⁷⁷

The city's cold reception of the Messiah is not the only evidence of unusual behavior in this pericope. To ensure his audience's attention, Mark describes Jesus as acting contrary to his customary manner, as well. Joel Marcus notes that Jesus' choice to ride into Jerusalem is a "noteworthy departure from his previous pattern, since he has walked all over Palestine to this point."⁷⁸ Mores of the time would have stressed the importance of walking into Jerusalem as part of the pilgrimage for the Passover festival. William L. Lane also notes that the final portion of a pilgrimage was customarily completed on foot.⁷⁹ Only those who were unable to walk would ride on an animal. Collins suggests that the special circumstances surrounding the event imply that "Jesus deliberately chose to *ride* into the city, rather than to walk."⁸⁰ Within the

⁷⁵ Collins, *Mark*, 516.

⁷⁶ Collins, *Mark*, 521.

⁷⁷ Strauss, *Mark*, 478.

⁷⁸ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. 1st ed. vol. 27a. (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 778.

⁷⁹ Lane, *Gospel According to Mark*, 393.

⁸⁰ Collins, *Mark*, 518.

canonical gospels, there are no other instances of Jesus riding on any animals. Not only is the behavior of the city unusual, Christ's behavior is also out of the ordinary. Mark has subtly dropped another hint to alert his audience that something significant is about to happen.

All four of the gospels record Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a colt, yet each account offers slightly different nuances. Commentaries have devoted much attention to the word translated as colt (πῶλον) and whether or not the author intended it to imply the foal of a horse or a donkey (ὄνος).⁸¹ It is important to note that the colt is not a newborn foal.⁸² Most likely the animal would be two to three years of age, fully capable of supporting the weight of a full-grown man,⁸³ but both Mark and Luke emphasize that the colt had never been ridden before (Mark 11:2; Luke 19:30).⁸⁴ Marcus suggests that by stressing that the colt is unridden, the author could be implying that the colt is reserved for royal use.⁸⁵ Likewise, Collins posits that any "animal that is to be used for a sacred purpose should not have been put to any profane use."⁸⁶ Strauss agrees and states that describing an animal as never having been ridden seems to highlight the purity of the animal.⁸⁷ Lane goes so far as to assert that "the precise instructions concerning the colt of an ass never before ridden possess a profound symbolic significance which could only be messianic."⁸⁸

Additionally, scholars focus on inferences that can be gleaned from the Hebrew scriptures. The authors of Matthew and John both paraphrase Zechariah 9:9, and Matthew takes

⁸¹ Collins, *Mark*, 516, n. 44, notes that Bauer asserts the term is used for a horse, but Kuhn disputes that claim. Duncan and Derrett argue that the animal in question had to be a donkey since at that time, horses were far too valuable to be left in the street. Strauss, *Mark*, 479, insists that despite the word's normal meaning of "horse," the "allusion to Zech. 9:9 and the parallels in Matthew and John (Matt 21:2, 5, 7; John 12:15) confirm that a young donkey is intended."

⁸² Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 772.

⁸³ Xenophon's directions for the training and maintaining of equines suggest that cultures of antiquity understood that training is most effective if started at a young age. Xenophon recommends that if a person did not breed their own animals, they should purchase an unbroken colt, since there is "more hope of improving a young horse." Xenophon, *Ancient Greek Horsemanship*, 98.

⁸⁴ An animal that has never been ridden before will not calmly accept a rider. Quite the contrary, such a strange attempt would create a great deal of negative associations and anxiety for the animal. Research proves that taming of animals is less stressful if the animal associates people with positive experiences. And while hand-rearing of an animal during its early youth "is effective in taming animals, (it) is labor intensive." Edward O. Price, *Animal Domestication and Behavior* (Wallingford: CABI Pub, 2002), 121. Even animals who are hand reared from birth can be dangerous to themselves and to their owners.

⁸⁵ Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 772.

⁸⁶ Collins, *Mark*, 518. Collins notes that "according to the Mishnah, no one else is allowed to ride upon the animal that the king rides." Additionally, Collins references Num. 19:2; Deut. 21:3; and 1 Sam. 6:7 in her remarks.

⁸⁷ Strauss, *Mark*, 479.

⁸⁸ Lane, *Gospel According to Mark*, 393.

an extra step to ensure that the reader picks up on the scriptural reference by declaring, “This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

‘Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey,’ (Matt 21:4-5; John 12:15).

Lane notes that the account contains all the elements of the Zechariah oracle, yet Mark’s narrative does not cite the prophecy and stops short of declaring the messianic significance of Christ’s entry.⁸⁹ While Matthew and John point to Jesus as the king, humble and riding on a donkey, Mark and Luke do not explicitly reference the scriptures from Zechariah, although the connection may still be implied.

Modern culture is less agrarian and not as familiar with livestock, and many contemporary readers may not perceive that mounting a colt that has never been ridden will most likely result in the animal bucking, balking, or bolting.⁹⁰ Mark and his audience likely would have known this,⁹¹ and so the scene further paints a picture of unexpected reversals in a way characteristic of Mark. Deppe notes that in the finale of Mark’s gospel, the characters the

⁸⁹ Lane, *Gospel According to Mark*, 393.

⁹⁰ Kimura and Tefera, “Taming Requirements in the Domestication Process of Donkeys,” *Pastoralism*, 3, 5, note that, as prey animals, equines instinctively shy away and resist anything new or different. Donkeys are very cautious animals and, if spooked, they can run at speeds exceeding 50 km per hour. If cornered, more than simply inflicting a painful bite, equines can defend themselves with powerful kicks or buck anything off their backs. According to Jack Murphy, “Innovative Use of an Automated Horse Walker When Breaking in Young Horses,” *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* 11.3 (2008), 228, “There is an inherent element of risk associated with ‘backing’ and riding the previously unbroken horse.” Andrew Ferguson Fraser, *The Behaviour and Welfare of the Horse*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Wallingford: CABI, 2010), 182, notes that weight on the back of an equine is instinctively perceived as a dangerous predator’s attack. Fraser, 4, also observes that first attempts to halter untrained adult horses result in vigorous and negative reactions as the horse resists the strange contraption and the control it attempts to exert.

⁹¹ In their writings, Aristotle, Plutarch, and Xenophon made mention of feeding, grooming, and exercising of horses. Through their documentation, we have a better picture of what horsemanship was like during the third century BCE. Xenophon provides instructions on proper techniques to bridle a horse, making sure to direct the groom to bridle the horse for preparation to work as well as the return to the manger. Xenophon asserts that this will better train the horse to “seize (the bit) of his own accord when it is held out to him.” Anderson, *Ancient Greek Horsemanship*, 93.

audience might expect to remain faithful are the very ones who abandon Jesus. When the Messiah is arrested, the disciples flee (ἔφυγον, Mark 14:50; ἔφυγεν, 14:52). Similarly, in the last sentence of Mark's original account, the women who come to the tomb and find the body of Jesus missing also flee in fear (ἔφυγον, Mark 16:8).⁹² And yet, the one character that the reader might expect to rear up and flee, the colt, remains steady and sure.

An audience familiar with equines would hear the story and quickly recognize the colt's behavior as highly uncharacteristic.⁹³ Modern day readers who are unfamiliar with untrained equines and yet very familiar with Mark's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem often overlook this miraculous event. Parading a donkey or horse through narrow streets with crowds of people cheering, waving branches, and throwing cloaks on the ground in front of them would spook even a well-trained animal.⁹⁴ I argue that, as with Balaam's donkey (Numbers 22:23-31), the young colt recognized the Son of Man and served as the noble steed of the King of kings.

Perceptions of the Intended Audience

Those familiar with Homer's *Odyssey* would have remembered the faithful dog, Argos. Given a divine disguise by the goddess Athena, Odysseus walks among his hometown unnoticed (Book 13, lines 397-403).⁹⁵ Even close friends, neighbors, and his own wife do not recognize

⁹² Deppe, *Theological Intentions*, 6.

⁹³ With large eyes positioned on either side of their head, equines are able to view almost a full 360-degree panorama. This ability to see such an expansive view and their acute sense of smell helps protect them from predators. If a horse detects anything remotely suspicious, its immediate reaction is to flee. Steven D. Price, *Essential Riding: A Realistic Approach to Horsemanship*. (New York: Lyons Press, 2000), 9, 11, warns that any horse, even the most well trained, "most placid, bombproof school horse, has the physical and emotional resources to become upset over a real or imagined danger."

⁹⁴ In Andrew Ferguson Fraser's six key points of training advice, the first two warn that "special care should be taken when handling a horse in a narrow and confined space," and "horses should be spoken to in a quiet and reassuring tone." Fraser, *The Behaviour and Welfare of the Horse*, 185. Note that these recommendations are the opposite of what the young unriden colt experienced in Jerusalem. Unfurling cloaks to spread them on the road and waving leafy branches while shouting "hosanna" would give any equine cause to take flight, especially one untrained for such situations. As Kimura and Tefera, 5, note, the process for training a domesticated donkey can take five days to two months.

⁹⁵ Homer, *Odyssey*, [Murray, LCL], vol. 2, pp. 429-438.

Odysseus. Only Argos, who lies neglected and dying on a dung heap, is able to see beyond the physical appearances and know his master (Book 17, lines 290-327).⁹⁶

Animals enjoyed a unique relationship with the gods of Greco-Roman religions. Animals possess abilities often far beyond human capacity. Some animals live under the ocean, some fly through the skies. In a culture that prized athletic prowess of speed and strength, certain animals greatly exceeded human capabilities. Those super-human abilities helped animals to be associated with the gods.⁹⁷ Often the gods disguised themselves in animal forms. Mythical tales permit more fanciful occurrences than real life and Ingvild Saelid Gilhus notes that religious tales permit more things as well.⁹⁸ The Greco-Roman culture heavily relied on animals in their day to day lives, their agricultural lifestyle may have influenced their perceived connection between animals and the gods.⁹⁹

In his book on animal metaphors in the book of Jeremiah, Benjamin Foreman notes that “animal images are extremely important because they elucidate human behaviour [sic] in ways in which plants or inanimate objects cannot.”¹⁰⁰ The ubiquitous presence of certain animals in antiquity would insure the hearer’s familiarity with the characteristics and behaviors of animals, which would in turn facilitate the comprehension of the metaphors.¹⁰¹ Skillfully crafted illustrations could effectively enable an ancient audience to connect a seemingly unrelated

⁹⁶ Homer, *Odyssey*, [Murray, LCL], vol. 2, pp. 175-179.

⁹⁷ Gilhus, *Animals, Gods and Humans*, 113.

⁹⁸ Gilhus, *Animals, Gods and Humans*, 105.

⁹⁹ Gilhus, *Animals, Gods and Humans*, 112.

¹⁰⁰ Benjamin Foreman, *Animal Metaphors and the People of Israel in the Book of Jeremiah*. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 3.

¹⁰¹ Equines existed in the Mesopotamian regions for thousands of years. Their images appear on reliefs, in statues, and painted on pottery of the various cultures within the area. Mesopotamian clay tablets from as far back as the third millennium BCE mention the “ass of the mountains,” which is believed to be a reference to a horse. J. K. Anderson and Xenophon, *Ancient Greek Horsemanship*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 2.

domain (agriculture) to their current situation.¹⁰² While modern audiences may discount an animal's ability to act contrary to its nature, ancient audiences would have been well aware of other stories involving animals who behaved in unexpected ways.

Foreman calculates that the Hebrew Bible alone mentions over 150 different animals.¹⁰³ Such varied and prolific appearances, scattered throughout the ancient biblical texts, suggest the effectiveness of animal imagery as a literary tool. In 1 Kings, a man of God disobeys the Lord's commandment and is killed by a lion (1 Kings 13:20-25). This much might be expected, but the audience would not expect to hear that after killing the man, the lion simply stood beside the man's body and beside his donkey. In a further puzzling detail, the story notes that passersby also witnessed the lion standing by the body of the prophet and reported the sight in the town where the prophet lived. This particular account represents the lion as an instrument of God's judgment rather than as a hungry wild beast.

Many early Christians would have heard other astonishing tales in Apocryphal Acts, as well. Janet Elizabeth Spittler details the fascination ancient Greeks had with animals, observing that Aristotle, Pliny the Elder, Aelian, and Oppian each authored lengthy works detailing descriptions of animals exhibiting humanlike behaviors of skill, cleverness, and "even awe and respect for the gods."¹⁰⁴ Beyond recording descriptions concerning the innate qualities of animals, authors of antiquity often cast animals in prominent roles within their prose. While the New Testament does not tell of talking donkeys or serpents, there are passages in New

¹⁰² Edward Silver, "Performing Domination/Theorizing Power: Israelite Prophecy as a Political Discourse Beyond the Conflict Model," *JANER* 14.2 (2014), 205.

¹⁰³ Foreman, *Animal Metaphors*, 239.

¹⁰⁴ Janet Elizabeth Spittler, "Wild Kingdom: Animals in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles." (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2007), 4.

Testament texts where animals symbolize or point to the divine.¹⁰⁵ Grant notes that as “Christianity spread into the geographical world of the Roman Empire and into the thought world of Hellenism, it took on characteristics of that cultural world.”¹⁰⁶ That culture included not only famous heroic stories from Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, but also Aesop’s fables, which were widely known throughout the Greco-Roman world. Believed to have been a former Greek slave, Aesop wrote his fables in the sixth century BCE. The tales featured anthropomorphized animals and offered moral lessons. Aesopian fables were incorporated within diverse genres of Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic Greek literature and were commonly used as part of the educational curriculum during the Hellenistic and early Roman periods.¹⁰⁷ According to Steve Reece, the “Aesopic tradition had crept deeply into the Jewish and Christian milieu as well.”¹⁰⁸ The writers of the gospels would have been well aware of the general popularity of Aesopian fables and could plausibly have incorporated similar allusions into their accounts.¹⁰⁹

Authors of ancient texts understood the power of allusions when linked with elements familiar to their audience. Humanity’s ability to conceptualize abstract ideas is structured by their experiences.¹¹⁰ Relatable stories are an effective vehicle for transporting cultural traditions, heritage, and wisdom to a wide audience. Stories entertain while they engage the audience’s imagination and captivate their focused attention. Unexpected twists add suspense and intrigue; humor often balances intense drama while making the overall narrative more memorable.

¹⁰⁵ Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, *Animals, Gods and Humans: Changing Attitudes to Animals in Greek, Roman and Early Christian Ideas* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 172.

¹⁰⁶ Grant, *Thinking Through Our Faith*, 26.

¹⁰⁷ Steve Reece, “‘Aesop’, ‘Q’ and ‘Luke’,” *NTS* 62.3 (2016), 367-368.

¹⁰⁸ Reece, “‘Aesop,’” 377.

¹⁰⁹ Reece, “‘Aesop,’” 375. Reece notes verbatim phrasing from an Aesop verse within the final chapter of Luke and goes on to illustrate how the vast popularity of such fables was not exclusively pagan.

¹¹⁰ Foreman, *Animal Metaphors*, 8.

Whether it was a donkey or a horse, the colt's anomalous behavior would have been conspicuous to early Christians, Jews, Gentiles, Greeks, and Romans. Already familiar with animals in stories and in their daily interactions with them, an ancient audience would have immediately understood that the colt was portrayed as behaving most uncharacteristically for an animal that had never been ridden before. Tales of animals in Hellenistic literature would have prepared the listener to be alert to symbolism attached to animals who act in extraordinary ways. The audience would expect a divine connection. From opening line to divine proclamations, recognition by demons, miraculous healings, authority to forgive sins, power over wind and waves – even the centurion who watched Jesus take his last breath – all throughout Mark's narrative, a wide variety of characters acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God. The colt is one of these several characters Mark used to declare that Jesus surely is the Son of God.

In the Acts of Thomas, a young donkey comes upon the apostle preaching alongside the road. The animal recognizes the apostle as “the twin of the Messiah and Apostle of the Most High” (Acts of Thomas 39),¹¹¹ and states that it is of the same stock that served Balaam and Jesus. Seeking a blessing, the colt offers its services to the apostle, who accepts and rides into the city on the animal's back (Acts of Thomas 40).¹¹² Klijn comments that the account was surely influenced by Mark, namely the parallel found in Mark 11:7.¹¹³ Spittler remarks the colt possesses a “notion of the spirit and desires the blessing that association with the spirit provides.”¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ A. F. J. Klijn, *Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 108.

¹¹² Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 109.

¹¹³ Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 109.

¹¹⁴ Spittler, “Wild Kingdom,” 313.

Those familiar with Jewish texts would have readily recognized allusions to Balaam's donkey (Numbers 22:22-33). Within the Torah, in the middle of the book of Numbers, lies a fanciful tale filled with symbolism and ironic reversals, the tale of Balaam the prophet. The donkey's tale (pun intended) is considered a later addition to the text and regarded as folklore.¹¹⁵ Although Balaam is not an Israelite, he speaks the words of God and is used to bless Israel. The Moabite King, Balak, sent for the seer, Balaam. King Balak wanted to hire the seer to curse the Israelites. Explicitly forbidden by God, Balaam still sets off on his donkey to meet with Balak (Numbers 22:1-21). Angered by Balaam's disobedience, God appoints an angel to strike Balaam down. Balaam's donkey sees the angel with a sword drawn and standing in the middle of the road. Three times the donkey turns away from the angelic warrior, and three times Balaam beats the donkey. In a humorous twist, Balaam, the seer, is unable to see the angel standing directly in front of him. At three points along the way, the donkey saves the life of Balaam, yet each time Balaam only beats the donkey more severely. Finally, God opens the mouth of the donkey, who asks why Balaam continues to beat him (Numbers 22:28). Kenneth Way argues that, in a second role reversal, the donkey becomes God's mouthpiece instead of Balaam.¹¹⁶ Astonishingly, Balaam is not surprised by his donkey's ability to speak.¹¹⁷ Often prophets use rhetorical questions to reinforce their point. In order to show the Israelites that he was speaking on behalf of God, the Old Testament prophet Amos asked a string of rhetorical questions and concluded with "surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets" (Amos 3:3-7). The prophet Micah queried, "what does the Lord require of you but to do justice,

¹¹⁵ Thomas B. Dozeman, "The Book of Numbers: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." *New Interpreter's Bible in Twelve Volumes, vol. II*, edited by Leander E. Keck, et al., (Abingdon Press, 1998), 183.

¹¹⁶ Kenneth Way, "Animals in the Prophetic World: Literary Reflections on Numbers 22 and 1 Kings 13," *JSOT*, 34.1 (2009), 48.

¹¹⁷ Dozeman, "The Book of Numbers," *New Interpreter's Bible in Twelve Volumes*, 183. Way, "Animals in the Prophetic World." *JSOT*, 50.

and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). Walter A. Brueggemann asserts that another prophet, Jeremiah, "utilizes rhetorical questions which seem to express traditional religious belief as the basis for his message."¹¹⁸ In Numbers, the narrative takes another ironic turn with the donkey asking rhetorical questions of Balaam.

Several scholars note that the donkey is female – a detail made clear in its original language, but undetectable in its English translation.¹¹⁹ Way quotes scholar N.S. Fox, who notes the importance of the donkey's female gender: "Her role as the insightful one of the pair is reminiscent of the biblical notion of Lady Wisdom (especially in Prov. 8-9). Perhaps, however, the story is merely suggesting that even a female donkey, the lowest of the low animals, is more perceptive than Balaam."¹²⁰ While female animals are valued for their ability to produce offspring, they are not esteemed for their wisdom. Since typically, the Bible casts females in subservient roles, the use of a female – albeit a donkey – as wiser than a male might be an unexpected element, and, as such, would draw further attention to the narrative's overall message.

Balaam is cast in the role of the donkey, which is famous for its stubbornness and stupidity.¹²¹ By way of the text's literary techniques and humor, the audience is able to discern God using Balaam's donkey as the prophet's teacher.¹²² The imagery and role reversals enable audiences to realize their own similarity to Balaam, and they remind the audience that humans are often unaware of the heavenly actions taking place all around them.¹²³ It is interesting to

¹¹⁸ Walter A. Brueggemann, "Jeremiah's Use of Rhetorical Questions," *JBL* 92.3 (The Society of Biblical Literature, 1973), 361.

¹¹⁹ Way, "Animals in the Prophetic World," 49.

¹²⁰ Way, "Animals in the Prophetic World," 52-53.

¹²¹ Way, "Animals in the Prophetic World," 49. Kenneth C. Way, *The Ceremonial and Symbolic Significance of Donkeys in the Biblical World*, (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2006), 121.

¹²² NOAB, 224.

¹²³ See also 2 Kings 6:15-17.

note that while the Lord had to open Balaam's eyes in order for Balaam to see the angel, apparently the donkey's eyes were naturally able to perceive the angelic warrior (Numbers 22:23, 31).

Discussion

Modern day first-world societies often remain insulated from issues that would have dominated the concerns of Mark's early audiences. Few Americans fall victim to persecution for their faith or fully understand the agrarian lifestyle. Americans typically enjoy climate-controlled environments, travel via motorized vehicles, and procure their bread from a store rather than grow their own grain, harvest, thresh, and mill the grain, and then bake individual loaves. Consequently, many of the illustrations used in the Bible pass over us unnoticed, because we can no longer relate.

Things that were ubiquitous in the first century have been eclipsed by modern advancements. Unfortunately, some of the meanings of common idioms and allusions in the Bible fall on ears deafened in modern culture. Since many people no longer experience the hardships of an agrarian lifestyle, illustrations that would have been grasped by the masses of ancient civilizations are often glossed over in the twenty-first century. Many of Christ's parables were about situations common to first-century society. Two thousand years later, society has changed – most people no longer handle livestock, ferment wine in animal skins, or tend a vineyard. The stories may be familiar, but the ability to relate on a personal level is fading – along with the richness of meaning.

Conclusion

The events recorded in the first ten verses of Mark's eleventh chapter were miraculous and intentional clues pointing to a divine connection. The examples given above show a pattern of characters within the gospel who reinforce Mark's claim that Jesus is the Son of God. The colt acts as another character in Mark's gospel who, like the heavenly voice, the demons, the storm, the water, and the centurion, recognizes the divine nature of Jesus and willingly submits to the authority of the Son of God.

By reading the Gospel of Mark as a whole instead of as fragmented pericopes, the reader recognizes the genre of Mark as a narrative, complete with plot, settings, and characters. Within the storyline, Mark introduces several characters who recognize Jesus as the Son of God and submit to Jesus' divine authority. Modern audiences will benefit from reading holistically in order to grasp Mark's good news as a whole, within the context of the Bible, and with an appreciation for the historical context in which it was originally written and heard.

The biblical texts were not written as verbatim transcripts or CNN news reports. Critical thinking continues to elucidate more as we study the Bible through various approaches. When we take into consideration the genre of each book within the Bible and the cultural context of the time, and when we appreciate the passion of witnesses long gone before us, we can read these texts with a fresh perspective. What treasures we discover when we linger a little longer with the scriptures and contemplate their wisdom! As Palm Sunday draws nearer and the familiar stories are read, take a moment to pause and imagine what it might be like to take a colt that no one had ever been on before and to ride it through the packed streets of Jerusalem while crowds shouted, "Hosanna!"

Bibliography

- Aland, Barbara, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger. *The Greek New Testament*. 4th rev. ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2001.
- Anderson, J. K. and Xenophon. *Ancient Greek Horsemanship*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961.
- Aune, David E. *New Testament and Early Christian Literature and Rhetoric*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.
- Bauckham, Richard. *Jesus: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Brueggemann, Walter A. "Jeremiah's Use of Rhetorical Questions." *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 92, no. 3. The Society of Biblical Literature, 1973. pp. 358-374.
- Collins, Adela Yarbro. *Mark: A Commentary*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007.
- Coogan, Michael David, Marc Zvi Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and PHEME Perkins, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version: With the Apocrypha: An Ecumenical Study Bible*. Fully rev. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Deppe, Dean B. *The Theological Intentions of Mark's Literary Devices: Markan Intercalations, Frames, Allusionary Repetitions, Narrative Surprises, and Three Types of Mirroring*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2015.
- Dozeman, Thomas B. "The Book of Numbers: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." *New Interpreter's Bible in Twelve Volumes, vol. II*, edited by Leander E. Keck, et al., Abingdon Press, 1998, pp. 1-268.

- Foreman, Benjamin. *Animal Metaphors and the People of Israel in the Book of Jeremiah*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011.
- Fowler, Robert M. *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark*. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1996.
- France, R. T. *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002.
- Fraser, Andrew Ferguson. *The Behaviour and Welfare of the Horse*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, Wallingford: CABI, 2010.
- Gilhus, Ingvild Saelid. *Animals, Gods and Humans: Changing Attitudes to Animals in Greek, Roman and Early Christian Ideas*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Grant, C. David. *Thinking Through Our Faith: Theology for Twenty-First-Century Christians*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998.
- Homer. *The Odyssey* vol. 2, Loeb Classical Library. Translated by A.T. Murray. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1919.
- Hooker, Morna D. "The Gospel According to Mark," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 492-496.
- Hooker, Morna Dorothy. *The Signs of a Prophet: The Prophetic Actions of Jesus*. 1st U.S. ed. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997.
- Horsley, Richard A. *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.

- Horsley, Richard A. "Mark" in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version: With the Apocrypha: An Ecumenical Study Bible*. Fully rev. 4th ed., ed. by David Michael Coogan et al. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996.
- Kähler, Martin. *The so-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964.
- Keegan, Terence J. "The Parable of the Sower and Mark's Jewish Leaders," in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* vol. 56, no. 3. 1994, pp. 501-518.
- Kimura, Rikako and Samuel Tefera. "Taming Requirements in the Domestication Process of Donkeys: The Methods and Concepts of the Training among the Afar Pastoralists in Ethiopia," in *Pastoralism* vol. 8, no. 1. 2018, pp. 1-8.
- Klijn, A. F. J. and ProQuest Academic Complete. *Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*. Leiden: Brill, 2003.
- Lake, Kirsopp, Loeb Classical Library, and Eusebius. *Eusebius: Ecclesiastical History* vol. 153. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926.
- Lane, William L. *The Gospel According to Mark: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974.
- Luz, Ulrich. "Paul as Mystic," in *The Holy Spirit and Christian Origins: Essay in Honor of James D. G. Dunn*, edited by Graham N. Stanton, Bruce W. Longenecker, Stephen C. Barton. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004, pp. 131-143.

Marcus, Joel. *Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. 1st ed. vol. 27. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

Marcus, Joel. *Mark 8-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. 1st ed. vol. 27a. New York: Doubleday, 2009.

Marsh, Clive and Steve Moyise. *Jesus and the Gospels*. 3rd ed. London; New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015.

Murphy, Jack. "Innovative Use of an Automated Horse Walker When Breaking in Young Horses," in *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* vol. 11, no. 3, 2008, pp. 228-231.

Peppard, Michael. *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in its Social and Political Context*. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2011. DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199753703.001.0001

Powell, Mark Allan. *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998.

Price, Edward O. and ProQuest Science & Technology. *Animal Domestication and Behavior*. Wallingford: CABI Pub, 2002.

Price, Steven D. *Essential Riding: A Realistic Approach to Horsemanship*. New York: Lyons Press, 2000.

Reece, Steve. "'Aesop', 'Q' and 'Luke'," in *New Testament Studies*. vol. 62, no. 3. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 357-377.

Rhoads, David, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie. *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*. 3rd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.

Schnabel, Eckhard J. *Mark: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*. vol 2. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017.

Silver, Edward. "Performing Domination/Theorizing Power: Israelite Prophecy as a Political Discourse Beyond the Conflict Model." *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2014, pp. 186-216.

Spittler, Janet Elizabeth. "Wild Kingdom: Animals in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles." ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2007.

Stanton, Graham. *The Gospels and Jesus*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Strauss, Mark L. *Mark: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. vol. 2. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014.

Way, Kenneth. "Animals in the Prophetic World: Literary Reflections on Numbers 22 and 1 Kings 13," in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2009, pp. 47-62.

Way, Kenneth C. *The Ceremonial and Symbolic Significance of Donkeys in the Biblical World*, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2006.