

---

# CONTENTS

---

Introduction . . . . .	.ix
The Good News Begins: Mark 1–4 . . . . .	1
Restoring Purity and Wholeness: Mark 5–7 . . . . .	27
Sacrifice, Ransom, Prophet, Messiah: Mark 8–10 . . . . .	53
Fig Trees and Tenants: Mark 11–12. . . . .	87
The Little Apocalypse: Mark 13 . . . . .	109
Judas Iscariot and the Naked Young Man: Mark 14–15 . . . . .	129
Conclusion . . . . .	149

---

# CHAPTER 1

---

## The Good News Begins

### Mark 1–4

#### John and His Baptism

Mark's Gospel was not simply read from a scroll, page by page; more likely, the reader would explain the text passage by passage. Otherwise, the opening is like whiplash. First, we have the *Beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Messiah* with *Son of God* perhaps added. And immediately we get a quote that is a mash-up of verses from the prophets, a quote that is less about Jesus than it is about John the Baptizer. Mysteries abound: Who is this John? Why is he dunking people in the Jordan River? Why, if he promotes repentance, is Jesus coming to him—did Jesus sin?

Mark 1:2-3 reads:

*Just as it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Look, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way. A voice crying in the desert, ["You (pl.)] prepare the way of the lord. Straight [you (pl.)] make his paths."*

Mark likes Isaiah (Isaiah is the only named prophet in the Gospel), but despite Mark's attribution, the citation combines Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3-4. Malachi 3:1 says, *See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me.* I imagine Mark putting pen to papyrus and, with a smile, thinking, "I wonder if readers will know that I am quoting not just Isaiah but also Malachi?" Mark may be imagining even more.

The opening, “Look”—or “Behold”; I opted for “look” since I’ve yet to hear someone say to me, “AJ, behold”—prompts us to picture the storyteller pointing, and then the heads in the audience turning. At whom do we look? The “messenger” from God. The term is *angelos*, so not only do we look, we also hear: we hear an echo of that opening term *eu-angeliou*. First there is a good message, and now there is a messenger to begin its proclamation.

Mark immediately raises questions about the popular search for heavenly messengers in contemporary contexts. I wonder: Why look for angels with harps and haloes when the messages we need to hear may be from the friend who calls to ask how we are doing? We look for a word from God and so for good news in ancient texts, but we may also hear it coming from shelters or nonprofits or encampments of asylum seekers at the border. There are angels, good-news givers, all around, if we have ears to hear.

Next, audiences who know the initial line is from Malachi will likely also know that Malachi ends by predicting the coming of the prophet Elijah to announce the messianic age. Elijah, introduced in 1 Kings, never dies; rather, he is in bodily form, in heaven (via that sweet chariot that swung low), which means he can return at any time. In the Jewish tradition, Elijah attends every Passover seder (we open the door for him); he is sort of like a Jewish version of Santa Claus coming down the chimney. Santa delivers presents and gets milk and cookies (the reindeer get carrots); Elijah signals the promise of redemption and gets sweet wine. For Mark, John the Baptizer takes the role of Elijah, here to announce the arrival of the Messiah. In 9:13, after the Metamorphosis where Elijah appears, Jesus tells his disciples that *Elijah has come*. The reference to this returning Elijah is to John the Baptizer.

Making Mark’s citation to Malachi even more meaningful: in the Septuagint, the basis of the church’s Old Testament, Malachi is the last book. The Jewish canon (the Masoretic text) as developed in the Middle Ages tucks the Prophets in the middle and ends with

2 Chronicles. By alluding to Malachi, Mark again shows the continuity from the Scriptures of the Hellenistic Jewish community to the Gospel of Jesus.

Finally, for Mark, the “your” as in “before your face” and to “prepare your way” is Jesus. John the Baptizer is, for Mark, the messenger who comes before Jesus, both physically, to baptize him, and socially, to prepare anyone who will listen for his messianic message.

Understanding ancient texts as referring to something in the present is a not a misreading. The authors of some of the Dead Sea Scrolls saw their community as predicted by the ancient prophets as well. The meaning of a text will always outstrip what its author intended. New generations will ask new questions; new intertexts will provide additional insight into the original text. We continually pose to great literature questions that the authors may not have considered; sometimes we find new answers.

***We continually pose to great literature questions  
that the authors may not have considered;  
sometimes we find new answers.***

Mark next sees something in Isaiah 40:2-3 that the author of those verses may not have seen. Mark finds new meaning, in effect, by redefining terms and changing the punctuation. Since technically punctuation hadn't yet been invented, such adaptation was easy to do.

Isaiah was writing to the covenant community in sixth-century BCE Babylon. The prophet's good news to them is that their exile is ending. King Cyrus of Persia (today's Iran) has conquered Babylon (today's Iraq) and is repatriating the Judeans taken into captivity. Politically, Cyrus needs allies on the Mediterranean; theologically, Cyrus is for Isaiah “God's anointed,” “God's messiah,” or “God's Christ” (Isaiah 45:1) who ends the exile. The community in Isaiah's time was out of place; for Mark's readers, whether in antiquity or

today, there still may be a sense of dislocation. Part of the good news of Mark's Gospel is finding "home," as we'll see as we continue.

Now we come to punctuation. Isaiah wrote, were we to punctuate, *A voice crying, 'In the desert, prepare the way of the Lord'* (40:3). The prophet exhorts: go to the desert and build a highway from Babylon to Jerusalem, because you are going home. Isaiah calls for road construction. Mark moves the imagined comma and the imagined quotation mark: *A voice crying in the desert* (1:3), and that voice is the voice of the Baptizer dipping people into the Jordan.

Along with repurposing Malachi and Isaiah, Mark encodes additional hints about Jesus's mission. For example, "way," as in "prepare the way" in Greek is *hodos*, the origin of the English term "odometer," a mileage indicator. According to Acts 9:2 (see also 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22), the early followers of Jesus were not called "Christians." They were known as the "followers of the way" (*hodos*). Isaiah spoke about building a way, a highway; Mark repurposes: the way being constructed is the way Jesus's disciples will follow.

This way is "of the Lord," and "Lord" in Greek is *kyrios*; the underlying Hebrew is *YHWH*. The mnemonic (to remember that the "Lord" translates *YHWH*) is that *YHWH* has four letters and is referred to as the "Tetragrammaton," a Greek word that, appropriately, means "four letters," so also "Lord" has four letters. But Mark imbues the term with additional meaning, for "Lord" (again, the problem with whether to capitalize) is the title Jesus's followers give him.

For Isaiah the "Lord" is *YHWH*; for Mark, this Lord is Jesus. Nowhere does the Gospel clearly designate Jesus as the divine "Lord"; thus, readers must determine for themselves, when someone identifies Jesus as *kyrios*, should we think "lord" with a lowercase "l" and the sense of "sir," or should we think "Lord" with an uppercase "L" and with the sense of "God incarnate."

Who is preparing this "way"? The imperative verbs are in the plural, as "Y'all" (I live in Nashville), or "you" (I do recognize that "you guys" is on Stanford's list of terms to avoid) do the preparation:

anyone who can hear Isaiah's voice or Mark's Gospel. It is the responsibility of "all y'all" to do the preparatory work.

Mark 1:4-8 describes this mysterious figure:

*John, the one baptizing, appeared in the desert, and he was proclaiming a baptism of repentance regarding the forgiving of sins. And were coming out to him all the Judean region and the Jerusalemites, all, and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. And John was clothed in camel hair, and a leather belt around his waist, and he was eating locusts and field honey. And he proclaimed, saying, "Is coming the one stronger than me, after me, of whom not am I worthy, bending, to loose the thong of his sandal. I baptized you by water, but he himself will baptize you in the Holy Spirit."*

Then as now, location matters. The Greek term for "desert" or "wilderness" recollects Israel's forty-year sojourn before entering the Promised Land. The setting suggests the beginning of a new way of life, which is what Jesus will shortly proclaim when he states *The Kingdom of God has come near* (Mark 1:15). The setting also suggests a retreat from comfort. Mark is not talking about glamping. Mark is suggesting a reset: leave behind what makes us comfortable; open ourselves to new possibilities including, as did ancient Israel in the wilderness, a renewed sense of dependence on God. What needs to be left behind? What needs to be lifted up?

What needs to be confessed? The expression *baptism of repentance regarding the forgiving of sins* (1:4) needs unpacking. The ritual, which likely meant full-body immersion, is related to the *miqveh*, the Jewish bath for ritual purity, but it has a different function. Jewish washing, including the handwashing in Mark 7:1-20, concerned ritual purity and not sin. One immersed after contacting a corpse (e.g., preparing and burying a body), menstruation or ejaculation, childbirth, etc. Nothing to do with sin here. Just as Mark repurposes the words of the prophets, John repurposes the ritual.

We might think of John as promoting an ancient altar call, an invitation for people to repent and then rededicate themselves toward doing what God wants. Such repentance is needed, since as John puts it, someone stronger than he is coming, and this coming one will baptize not with water but in the Holy Spirit. John thereby suggests that the present, right now, is the time to repent. Repenting means fixing broken relationships and so doing one's best to restore community. Public testimony, and John's baptism is a public act, means that others present are responsible for keeping the repentant one on the right path.

***Repenting means fixing broken relationships and so doing one's best to restore community.***

The first step in repentance is to confess one's sins. The next step is to make restitution where it is possible, and the related third is to turn from sin to righteousness. The Hebrew term for repentance, *teshuva*, literally means to "turn" as in turn away from the evil and toward the good. The Greek term in Mark 1:4, *metanoia*, also has the sense of changing one's thought patterns.

Many commentaries suggest that John is engaging in an anti-Temple protest by taking away the priests' monopoly on granting forgiveness. According to this reading, one need not go to the Temple or pay for a sacrifice; one only needed to go to John, whose penitence is cost-free. This view, while it has a cachet especially with people who are "spiritual but not religious" or who do not appreciate the communal aspects of religious affiliation, misunderstands Jewish practice and belief. God was, and is, always ready to forgive the repentant sinner. Sacrifice is not required to be in a right relation with God. Rather, John's baptism is a personal reset in light of eschatological urgency. So, too, a tent revival is not a replacement for regular church attendance; the two complement each other.

None of Jesus's followers, as far as we know, rejected Temple worship. Paul refers to it as one of the irrevocable gifts God gave

to the Jews (Romans 9:4 mentions “worship” or “service” [Greek: *latreia*], which meant the worship in the Jerusalem Temple), and Acts shows the followers, including Paul, not only worshipping in the Temple but also sacrificing there (see Acts 21:26). Since the Temple worked on a sliding scale, people who wished to make an offering, as do Mary and Joseph in Luke 2:24, were able to do so regardless of economic status. Comparable would be passing a collection plate on a Sunday morning in church: people give what they can, and if they cannot give anything, they are still welcome.

As for John, many people at the time regarded him as a prophet. While what we call “classical prophecy” and hence biblical prophetic texts end with Malachi, our first-century historian Josephus speaks of Essenes as having prophetic abilities. He mentions “sign prophets” such as Theudas and “the Egyptian,” a prophet named Jesus the son of Ananias, and another prophet named Menahem who both predicted the rule of Herod the Great and exhorted Herod to behave in a just manner. Josephus even attributes prophetic abilities to himself. John would have registered to some Jews as a prophet, as did Jesus.

When I first heard that John wore a “camel-hair coat,” I thought of high-end shopping. Today’s (expensive) camel-hair coats are made from the hair of the bactrian camel (two humps), with the industry centered in Mongolia and surrounding regions, but the dromedary (one hump) is native to the Middle East. John likely wore what Zechariah 13:4 calls a “hairy mantle” (which, contrary to my initial impression, has nothing to do with the shelf over the fireplace, and just as well), a garment marking an individual as a prophet.

As for his diet, locusts combined with wild honey suggests John is living off the land. On the other hand, the Greek term for “locust” sounds like the term for “honey cake.” Mark may be hinting at manna, the “bread from heaven” ancient Israel ate in the wilderness (Exodus 16:31; Numbers 11:8; popular etymology proposes that “manna” comes from the Hebrew *man hu*, meaning “What is that?”). Other explanations strike me as less likely, for example, that locusts



are related to the plagues in Egypt or that honey concerned promised land, flowing with “milk and honey” (e.g., Exodus 3:8). It is our task, or gift, as readers to determine what, and when, symbolism is in play or which readings we find palatable.

John’s message is, like his setting, one of anticipation. Some in John’s original audience, already disciples, would understand “baptism in the Holy Spirit” in terms of spiritual gifts, such as speaking in tongues (see Acts 2; 10; 19; 1 Corinthians 12–14) or healing. We might also think about the Holy Spirit as “possessing” people, but in a good way. If we are possessed by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit then works in and through us. Just as Satan can possess people, so can the Spirit.

## The Baptism of Jesus

Mark’s opening scene ends with Jesus’s baptism. In Matthew’s version, John insists that Jesus, being the greater of the two, baptize him, and Jesus responds that John should perform the ritual for the sake of “righteousness” (one of Matthew’s favorite terms). In Luke’s Gospel, John and Jesus are cousins, and even when they are *in utero*, John acknowledges Jesus’s superiority (1:41). In the Fourth Gospel, John never baptizes Jesus (there’s a baptism scene in John 1, but no baptism). Mark, who has had John announce his subordinate status vis-à-vis Jesus, offers the following unembellished account in 1:9-11:

*And it was in those days, came Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee, and he was baptized in the Jordan by John. And immediately, coming up out of the water, he saw splitting the heavens, and the Spirit as a dove coming down to him. And a voice came out of the heavens, ‘You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.’*

John is baptizing for the remission of sin, and John baptizes Jesus. The logical conclusion is that Jesus had sinned. The Epistle to the Hebrews (which, I find myself consistently noting, Jews generally don’t read since it is not the Jewish canon) states that Jesus *in every*

*respect has been tested (or tempted, or brought to trial) as we are, yet without sin* (Hebrews 4:15). We can, following this epistle as well as later church teaching, regard Jesus as sinless, or we can, in Mark's account, see him as knowing what it is like to sin, to repent, and to be forgiven.

There is a third option beyond the “he sinned” and “he did not sin” to explain Jesus's baptism. Jewish life then, and now, is communitarian. On the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), we pray: “forgive *us* . . .” The “*Our* Father” (note that “*our*”!) prayer includes the verse, “Forgive *us our*” debts, sins, trespasses—all are viable readings. Atoning in the plural, as being a member of a community means that one person's sin impacts the many. Even if we were not personally responsible for committing a particular sin, we still atone as a community. By accepting John's baptism, Jesus can be seen as accepting his role as a part of the human community. He also sets an example for his followers.

According to Mark, the heavens ripped or split apart (the Greek verb is *schidzo*, whence “schism”). The same term appears in Mark 15:38 to describe the tearing of the Temple veil. The symbolism of the veil does not, contrary to some claims, indicate that forgiveness is now available, outside the Temple, to Gentiles, people who were ritually impure (e.g., suffering from vaginal hemorrhages or leprosy), or the poor. The Temple could not and did not restrict either forgiveness or salvation. Nor was there a barrier between humanity and divinity that needed to be broken. The opening of the heavens at the beginning of Mark's Gospel and the voice that descends is known in Hebrew as a *Bat Qol*, the “daughter of the voice.” This voice speaks in rabbinic literature as well. The opening of the heavens here, repeated at the cross, tells us that Jesus was never alone, even though he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Mark 15:34, quoting Psalm 22:1). God has ripped the heavens, as Jews rip a garment when in mourning. God is present, even when we most acutely feel the absence.

The dove can recall the dove Noah sent to determine if it were safe to leave the ark (Genesis 8:8-12), or gentleness (Psalm 74:19), or a variety of other images that “dove” or, for that matter, “pigeon,” would evoke. It seems to me historically plausible that as Jesus rose from the water, he saw a dove and interpreted it as a divine message. This approach means being open to the natural world. It means heavenly signs can be as ordinary as a pigeon strutting on the sidewalk. It means that all signs require interpretation.

This baptism engages our senses: the touch of John’s hands, the wet of the water on the skin, the vision of the dove, the hearing of the voice. For Mark, the voice speaks directly to Jesus; it is personal, even intimate: *You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased* (1:11). The voice confirms Jesus’s mission. Mark here also unites Jesus with the audience of the Gospel: *we* like Jesus hear the voice from heaven. *We* know what the other people coming to John that day do not.

This voice from heaven can be taken as announcing an adoption; for Mark, Jesus’s role as God’s anointed comes not at conception or birth; it comes when Jesus submits to John’s baptism. The voice is also a mash-up of Psalm 2:7 LXX (a royal psalm depicting God telling the Davidic king, *My son you are; I today have begotten you*), Isaiah 42:1 (one of the so-called “servant songs,” which reads, *Here is my servant [or slave], I support him, my chosen [in whom] is pleased my soul; I give my spirit upon him; justice to the nations he will bring forth*) and perhaps Genesis 22:2 (God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, *the son whom you love*). Again, Mark repurposes the words of the ancient prophets. These early texts can be seen, retrospectively, as pointing to Jesus, but they will always have additional meanings, whether in their own historical contexts, or as read by (non-messianic) Jews, or as read by anyone who sees the texts as still having something to say. Anyone can be a beloved child, a suffering servant, a seeker of justice.