



THE BEREHA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

Jesus’s Priority: Mark Gets to the Point

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Compared to Matthew, Luke, and John, the gospel of Mark was given little attention until the nineteenth century. But in the two centuries since, and especially since the 1950s, it has been prominently featured in multiple scholarly studies (Carson and Moo 2005, 190–191), and at the popular level is often singled out as the most appealing of the canonical gospels. The reason for that popularity is illustrated by the following anecdote in Thomas Olbricht’s brief study of Mark:

A man of twenty-eight sat in my office on Wednesday. . . . He had never read the Bible. On Tuesday night he started reading the Gospel of Mark. He got so involved he read it through non-stop. As he sat in my office he could hardly restrain his excitement. He had found the Gospel dramatic and compelling in a manner he had not anticipated (Olbricht 1979, 5).

Various details about Mark are highlighted to explain its appeal, including its action-oriented narrative and emphasis on Jesus’s suffering (37.7 percent of the words in the book are devoted to the events of Jesus’s final ministry in Jerusalem, his passion, and the empty-tomb narratives; Mark 11.1–16.20) (cf. Carson and Moo 2005, 171–172). It “presents the most human and down-to-earth portrait of Jesus” (Strauss 2007, 194).

Mark is significantly shorter than the other gospels. As translated in the ESV, Mark has 14,351 words, 4,541 fewer than John (18,892 total), 8,297 fewer than Matthew (22,648), and 10,265 fewer than Luke (24,616) (totals from Accordance Bible software). We soon see the reason for the differences in passages like Mark 1.9–15 where Mark takes just seven verses to describe Jesus’s baptism, temptation, and first gospel proclamation, compared to Matthew’s 22 verses (Matt 3.13–4.17) and Luke’s 33 (Luke 3.21–4.15). (Remember too that Mark does not include any of the content in Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2.) The longer accounts in Matthew and Luke are invaluable for understanding Jesus and his work, but, as 1.9–15 illustrates, Mark’s terse record focuses our attention on what Jesus considered most important in a way we may not fully appreciate when we read the others.

Mark 1.9–11 establishes that, for Jesus, pleasing God mattered more than anything else. Verses 2–8 review John’s ministry wherein he announced that God was beginning to do what he had promised and that people needed to make their lives right in anticipation of the coming of the one who would be mightier than John. As in all the gospels, Jesus’s arrival is depicted as the next phase of God’s great plan to effect humanity’s reconciliation and bless all nations. When John endorsed him (v. 7), Jesus “accepted John’s message and obeyed his call to be baptized” (Hurtado 1989, 19).

Two ideas in verses 10–11 underscore Jesus’s devoted attitude and obedience to God. First, Mark says that when he came up out of the water, he “immediately” saw the heavens open and the Spirit descending on him. Mark uses *immediately* (εὐθύς, *euthys*) 42 times to “add a sense of speed and urgency” to his account, or to introduce a new incident or surprising turn of events (Bayer 2008, 1893; cf. Matthew’s six, Luke’s three, and John’s three uses of the word). The translation of verse 10 in the NIV captures the sense of the word in this text: “just as Jesus was coming up out of the water.” God then directly expresses his approval: “And a

voice came from heaven: ‘You are my one dear Son; in you I take great delight’ (v. 11 NET). The point is plain: Jesus did what pleased God. That was his priority, the core value of the life he modeled and called his followers to emulate.

Mark 1.12–13 shows that living by that priority is necessary for faithfulness to God’s way. The challenge facing many of us is not determining whether pleasing God should be life’s priority, or even if we really want it to be. We struggle to be consistently loyal, especially when tested and tempted. Mark reminds us that Jesus faced the same challenge. It is interesting that the role of the Spirit in Jesus’s temptations is stated more forcefully in Mark than in Matthew 4.1 or Luke 4.1, both of which say that Jesus was “led” (a form of ἄγω, *agō*, in both texts) by the Spirit “into” (Matthew) or “in” (Luke) the wilderness. Mark says that the Spirit “immediately drove [ἐκβάλλω, *ekballō*] him out into the wilderness” (v. 12). As Hurtado writes, “The testing there was God-ordained, part of the necessary preparation for God’s chosen Son” (Hurtado 1989, 20; *πειράζω*, *peirazō*, 1.13, can mean either “test” or “tempt,” DA).

Verse 13’s echo of the Old Testament indicates that Jesus’s experience was part of the “fulfillment” motif in the gospels (v. 14); “forty days” recalls Israel’s time of wilderness testing (Deut 29.5) and Moses’s time on Sinai receiving the Law (Exod 24.18). Jesus’s wilderness testing was “a time of new revelation and salvation equivalent to the revelation given to Moses and Israel in the classical, Exodus time” (Hurtado 1989, 20). While understanding this Old Testament background gives us a better sense of God’s plan, we also draw strength for facing our own trials from the knowledge that Jesus met the temptations that were unique to him by refusing to deviate from God’s plan for the way of messiahship (cf. Matt 4.3–4, 6–7, 9–10).

Mark 1.14–15 announces the primary emphasis for Jesus’s service. He knew he was the embodiment of God’s work “at the appropriate time” (Gal 4.4 NET) and accepted the Father’s direction for establishing his reign. Notice that “the gospel of God” is connected to the coming of the “kingdom [rule] of God” (vv. 14–15). That is, the “good news” is that God is at last “visiting” Israel to do what he had long promised (for “visit,” cf. Luke 1.68, 78; 7.16; 19.44). The reign (*βασίλεια*, *basileia*) of God was the theme Jesus announced at the beginning of his ministry, emphasized throughout its duration (Mark 1.15; 4.11, 26, 30; 9.1, 47; 10.14–15, 23–25; 12.34; 14.25), and reiterated just prior to his ascension (Acts 1.3). It was also a significant theme in the apostolic preaching (cf. Acts 8.12 [where it is used with “good news”]; 19.8; 20.25; 28.23, 31). Jesus never deviated from that priority, proclaiming God’s reign, showing it (in the healings, etc.), and submitting to its standards (cf. Mark 14.32–36). That was God’s purpose and way.

And so it remains.

Works Cited

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