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# Isaiah in Mark

## Lesson 1

### “Introduction”

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**Objective:** To understand how Isaiah is used by Mark to proclaim the good news to his original audience and to understand how this should be understood by us today. How should the gospel message impact our lives. The historical and cultural barriers often cause us to miss, or even misinterpret the message of Mark. This then inhibits transformation into the image of Christ.

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**Materials:** Books, Journal articles, Targums, the Syriac Peshitta and interviews.

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**Procedures:** To outline the issues that confront us as we seek to comprehend more fully the powerful ways that the Old Testament, and in particular Isaiah challenged and transformed the world-view and the lives of first century believers. In doing this, it is hoped that we can then transform that understanding into a contextual milieu that will allow our lives to be impacted by the Gospel in the powerful, transformative way that it impacted that first audience.

In his opening statement, in Gospel of Mark, the author outlines from the very beginning his conviction that what he is writing is an account of the “The beginning (Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου) of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah.” He then goes onto buttress this claim with a text that is a conflated citation combining elements from Exodus, Malachi and Isaiah (Mark 1:1-3). We will deal in more detail with this quotation in a later lesson. Here it is perhaps sufficient to say that what Mark follows a rabbinic practice that most of his audience will have been familiar with, or they would have likely known who to ask. A few verses following this, there comes a voice from heaven, at Jesus’ baptism, making a proclamation from Psalm 2, Isaiah 42 and perhaps from Genesis 22 (Mark 1:11).<sup>1</sup> These quotations can create an atmosphere of confusion for the modern readers; one can be left in a place of failing to understand what apparently was not thought to be confusing for the original audience. Again he conflates Scriptures in a way that confuses us, but again, this will not have been confusing to Mark’s audience.

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<sup>1</sup> Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord* (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 1.

It is my supposition, as well as that of a number of others, that Mark anticipated that his audience would understand his message, and that they would understand it in a way that was based in large part, on their perspective of the prophecies of Isaiah, or the reorientation of these prophecies as conveyed in the Gospel account. This is a perspective that can be largely lost to modern readers and one that is particularly obscure to those within Churches of Christ, as they have for so long not adequately valued the Old Testament, much less the words of the prophets. In correcting this, one will find a greatly enriched understanding of the message of Mark, and also a greater understanding of how the Old Testament should both inform us, and act as a transformative force in our lives today. We often talk about being like the 1st century church, if we are to even begin to accomplish that goal, then we must have a level of understanding of the world-view of those who will have made up the early church. That first-century church will have had no other Scriptures beyond those of the Old Testament. Only late in the first-century, or into the second-century, will they have begun to have written copies of New

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Testament books. Not until the 4th century would that list of books be finally authoritatively finalized.

There are a number of issues that need to be addressed as we begin this study. Some of these come from exit interviews that Michael Martin, who has taught Mark for many years at LCU, has noticed. These issues are of great importance for us as we seek to understand the message of Mark to his readers. One of those issues is that a great many people today have a very Greek, Platonic view of what happens to a person after death and this effects dramatically their view of the kingdom of God and the Gospel message in particular. Here is the issue: many people in the church, and in the world at large, believe that the goal of the Gospel message is to get us to heaven. Technically, this is a pagan perspective, not a biblical one. The message of the Gospel is not that we are being called to go to God in heaven, but that God's goal is to come to us. Jesus is called *Emmanuel* ("God with us") and not *Elemmanu* ("us with God" - I made this word up, it does not occur in the Bible as far as I am aware). The point is very different between these two concepts; one makes sense of the resurrection, which is the central tenet of the

Christian faith (1 Corinthians 15:3), the other is considered heresy.<sup>2</sup>

We will address this more fully as we go through this study, but certainly this is one of the major issues that Paul addressed in 1 Corinthians and was a major problem there. He particularly deals with this in 1 Corinthians 15. The resurrection of the dead stands at the heart of the Gospel; it is what makes this message the good news.

Another issue, is the equation of the kingdom of God in some way with a particular nation, or form of government, such as democracy. The kingdom of God, that is described in the Bible, is not, nor will not, be a democracy, it is a theocracy (ruled by God) as Paul makes clear particularly in 1 Corinthians 15.<sup>3</sup> The kingdom of God does not equal the United States, the United States and its people may choose to align themselves with God, but they are not the

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<sup>2</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 80 - "For if you have fallen in with some who are called Christians, but who do not admit this [truth], and venture to blaspheme the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; **who say there is no resurrection of the dead, and that their souls, when they die, are taken to heaven; do not imagine that they are Christians, ....**" Justin Martyr lived from A.D. 100-165.

<sup>3</sup> "24 Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 27 For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "All things are put in subjection," it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. 28 When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all." NRSV

nation of God described, or envisioned by Mark, in his Gospel, or in the Bible. Mark envisions something far more dramatic where God himself rules while he is in the midst of his people, on earth. It is the kingdom of God.<sup>4</sup> This is a major point, and if we fail to understand this then we fail to understand the message of Mark and the vision that was preached to those early Christians who understood his message. They spoke his language, shared his cultural perspective, and held to the hope envisioned by their understanding of the prophecies of Isaiah, and others, that composed the Old Testament. They were willing to live by that message and even die for that message.

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<sup>4</sup> Revelation 21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell with them as their God;  
they will be his peoples,  
and God himself will be with them;

<sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away.”

Rev. 21:5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” <sup>6</sup> Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. <sup>7</sup> Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

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It is critical to remember and comprehend that these early Christians did not have the New Testament; they had the Old Testament, these were the Scriptures of the early church and it was never envisioned that the Old Testament Scriptures would be made obsolete by the writings of the New Testament. It was expected that these writings would continue to speak to the church and its people with the authoritative voice of God, even after the New Testament writings became available. Noting this means that as we come to the writings of Mark we need to recognize that he expected his audience to be deeply immersed in the words of the Old Testament, and certainly at the time he was writing, the prophecies of Isaiah, brought hope to a people that were ever more desperately seeking to be free from the domination of the Romans and their pagan ways.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are generally held to subscribe to what is at times termed a “promise-fulfillment” schema. This means that these Gospels regard the events they relate to, regarding Jesus Christ, to be the fulfillment of corresponding earlier events, or of prophetic predictions witnessed to in the pages of the

Old Testament.<sup>5</sup> Though some might dispute this, especially in the case of Mark there is indeed a growing consensus among a good number of scholars that Mark is heavily reliant upon Isaiah in particular for his explanations of Jesus as being the Messiah. Morna Hooker states that more citations in Mark's Gospel are drawn from Isaiah than from any other book of the Old Testament.<sup>6</sup> If we fail to understand where Mark gets the hope and aspirations that he expresses as being fulfilled in Jesus then it is far more likely that we are going to create an artificial construct based on our own hopes, aspirations and beliefs. Our tendency will be to be guided by what meets our needs as an audience rather than to hear the message of the Gospel that Mark intended. To some degree this is perhaps unavoidable, but it becomes far more likely when we remove the connections that anchor us in the hopes and expectations of the Jews based in their prophetic Scriptures.

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<sup>5</sup> Hugh Anderson, "The Old Testament in Mark's Gospel," in James M. Efird, ed., *The Use of the Old Testament in the New and Other Essays* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1972), pp. 280 - 306.

<sup>6</sup> Morna D. Hooker, "Isaiah in Mark's Gospel," in Steve Moyise, and Maarten J.J. Menken eds., *Isaiah in the New Testament*, in *The New Testament and the Scriptures of Israel* series (London: T & T Clark International, 2005), pp. 35-49.



Watts says of Mark that “The thorough-going Jewishness of Mark’s Gospel seems undeniable.”<sup>7</sup> This was not nearly so significant a problem for Mark’s original audience as it is for us today. One of the misperceptions that we have is that on the day of Pentecost the church separated from Judaism at that moment, but that is incorrect. Dunn, in his book *The Partings of the Ways* indicates that from his studies one of the the lasting impressions he has with regard to this topic is “*the enduring Jewish character of Christianity.*”<sup>8</sup> The issue of when Christianity and Judaism finally parted ways is not as simple as we have so often been led to believe. It was something that happened gradually and not all at once. Certainly it was the case that initially Christianity was seen as a part, a sect, of Judaism certainly by the Roman authorities. The church met in the Temple even after the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:46). When Paul went out preaching the Gospel message many times the very first place he went when he entered a new town, city, or village, was the synagogue (Acts 9:20; 13:5; 13:14; 14:1; 17:1-2; 17:10; 18:4; 18:19; 19:8). Before Paul

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<sup>7</sup> Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark*, in the Bible Studies Library series (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 1997), p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> James. D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways*, Second Edition (London: SCM Press, 2006), p. 337.

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became a Christian the place he looked for Christians was in the Synagogue (Acts 22:19). Dunn at one time proposed that the Jews and Christians finally parted ways with the second Jewish rebellion that began in around A.D. 135, but that is an oversimplification that he later corrected as being too simple and overarching. The parting of the ways came over a lengthy period, at different times in different places, in different ways and over different issues. Certainly after the second Jewish revolt, the first thirty to thirty-five years of the second century a great many of the threads that had at one point united these two groups were ultimately ripped apart.<sup>9</sup>

Noting this longer period of parting is important to our discussion because so often we, especially in Churches of Christ, have acted as if on the day of Pentecost the New Testament dropped into the lap of the church and the church went a separate way from the Jews. Those that became Christians on that day, and for a considerable period afterward, were all Jews and it would be a great many decades before Gentiles would come to be the dominant group within the church. As I said earlier, the Scriptures of the early church

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<sup>9</sup> James. D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways*, xxiii-xxiv, 318.

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were the Old Testament, they did not have the writings of the New Testament. When they read Scripture in church it was from the Old Testament. Later, probably much later, perhaps a hundred or so years later, churches would begin to have several of the books that make up our New Testament. Books were expensive and rare. When the emperor Constantine ascended to the throne of the Roman empire in the 4th century A.D. his gift, his imperial gift, was fifty copies of the Bible. Each one was copied by hand, bound by hand, and delivered by hand. This was at a time when books were being widely used, while in the first century scrolls were much more likely to be used; especially by the Jews, and the scroll of one book could be more than twenty feet long. Try carrying the whole Bible on scrolls to church one Sunday, that will build not only character, but muscles too.

All of this, and more, should be noted as important for how we understand the Gospel of Mark, written by a Jew, to an audience that was certainly very familiar with Judaism if not significantly Jewish. In light of this, it is important to note that the founding moment for Israel as nation was the Exodus. It shaped their national identity, their character, and set the stage for the work of the prophets that

would be so important before, during, and after the Babylonian exile began. The prophets used the Exodus as a paradigm for the deliverance that they announced. Many groups within Judaism would take up this paradigm as a way to describe themselves and their movement. Such groups as the Essenes, who established their community in the desert at Qumran (the Dead Sea Scroll community), and even the group that in the Book of Acts is described as “the Way,” (Christians) would take up this paradigm. As conflict arose with other groups within Judaism it was often the case that the prophets, and especially Isaiah, was used as a source of material to support the claims of one group over against another as happened with the Essenes and Christians, especially as they related to other Jewish groups.<sup>10</sup>

As we undertake this study we will note with special attention how Mark uses Isaiah in his Gospel account. When we studied Isaiah, the focus was upon how the original audience will have interpreted what Isaiah delivered to them. Here the focus will be different, and we may at times note what that original audience probably

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<sup>10</sup> Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark*, pp. 3-4.

understood in the time of Isaiah, but the focus here will be on understanding how the first-century audience would now understand Isaiah's prophecies and how Jesus now fulfilled many of those prophecies and the expectation for further prophecies to be fulfilled. Isaiah's prophecies were seen as a new exodus for the people taken into captivity in Babylon. The Jewish nation was given a new start in their quest to be the chosen people of Yahweh. By the time we come to the first-century the prophecies of Isaiah were very much seen by the Jews as yet unfulfilled, or at least still awaiting full fulfillment. These prophecies served as a source of inspiration and hope for an oppressed and impatient people. One thing to note is that there was not just one interpretation of these prophecies among the Jews. We can see that there were multiple interpretations. The Essenes appear to have interpreted these passages in one way which led them in a quest to wait for the coming of Yahweh in the desert. Among other groups these Scriptures would act as inspiration and as a catalyst for person after person to arise as a Messianic figure among the Jews, and for rebellion after rebellion to be ignited.

Our quest in this study will be to try and comprehend the message that Mark truly intended for his audience. A lofty and difficult task to be sure, but one that must certainly be worthy of our efforts. To imagine our task perhaps we might imagine an Englishman telling the story of King Arthur and the Round Table to a group of Eskimos that have never had contact with this story before. In order to truly comprehend and enjoy such a story it is important for the audience to share a certain set of expectations and experiences. If these are not shared, the story will certainly not communicate to this audience of Eskimos the same message that it would to an Englishman. For people of my generation and before, growing up in America, you can begin by saying, "We the people of the United States," and most people can finish that sentence, but say the same to people from another country and they very often have no idea what is being said. Even if they do, the impact of these words does not resonate with them in the way that it does for those who have grown up in the environment of the United States.

As we approach our study of Mark it is the hope and dream is that we can enrich our understanding, but also that our lives will be

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changed and challenged in a way that is more and more in alignment with what God intended for his people. The challenges of time and culture are certainly barriers to this, but they need not be impenetrable barriers. With time, patience, and effort we can, together progress toward a deeper and richer understanding of the riches of the word of God. Our study of Mark, in this way, can open new vistas and new avenues of understanding so that we can more and more walk as disciples of Christ, undergoing transformation of our entire being into the image that God destined us to be.

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# Synopsis

The aim of this study is to understand the message that the author of the Gospel of Mark intended to convey to his original audience, first. Secondly, to understand that message, with the implications of its meaning, for our own time and context. Finally, to be challenged by that message to live lives that are transformed by what we learn so that we live in the way that the Gospel challenges us to live as sons of God and followers of Christ. In order to accomplish this, it is essential that we come to a better understanding of how the author uses Isaiah since he uses Isaiah as a touchstone, and as a template for his message. The different time and culture that we live in today makes this task more challenging as we can so easily reinterpret the words of Mark in a way that reflects our time and culture and would have been alien to the author and his audience. Understanding more fully how the first-century audience will have understood Isaiah and then how it is reoriented in Mark's Gospel should provide enlightenment in our quest for understanding and enlightenment.



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It is essential for us to continually hold in focus the fact that for the early church their Scriptures were the Old Testament. We need to realize that though many things may not apply to us today, such as offering animals as sacrifices on the altar there is still a great deal to be learned from the Old Testament about God, our responsibilities, the kingdom of God, and hopes and dreams for the future. Some of these, such as our view of what happens after death should be heavily impacted by the Old Testament Scriptures. This will aid in correcting the influence of Greek (Western) ideas on our perspective of life after death, the body, and heaven. The Old Testament also provides tremendous help in understanding the nature of the kingdom of God and its relationship to our present government in the U.S. Isaiah will have heavily impacted any ideas of government for Mark's original audience.

In the Gospel of Mark, it is imperative that we understand that the "Good News" is seen as the fulfillment of promises made by God hundreds and even thousands of years previously. For this people, currently under the domination of the Roman regime, this was truly a liberating and powerful message. Mark will indicate that the

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fulfillment of the message of Isaiah comes in Jesus Christ in surprising and more comprehensive ways than they had previously envisioned. It is critical for us to remember that much of Mark's original audience will have likely been Jewish and there is a tremendous expectation that Jewish ideas and concepts will be comprehensible to this audience. The separation of the Christianity and Judaism did not take on the level of separation that we see today, and have often perceived to have happened on the day of Pentecost, for perhaps several centuries after the death of Jesus.

It is critical for us to realize that there is a cultural, temporal, and historical gap that separates us from the people that hear the Gospel of Mark for the first time. Many things were assumed by the author as a contextual background that will be difficult for us to comprehend without doing some digging. With some digging, and careful study, we can remove many of these barriers to proper comprehension and the message of Mark can be more fully opened up to us, in order that it might challenge us as it did its first audience to be like Jesus.

# Questions

1. What do you think Mark might intend to convey to his audience by connecting his rendition of the “Good News” to the message of Isaiah?
2. Why do you think Mark mentions “Isaiah the prophet,” so prominently at the beginning of his account?
3. What are some ways that you can think of that misunderstanding sometimes occurs among people from different cultures?
4. Why do you think it is important for us to have an understanding of the Old Testament in order to understand the message of the New Testament?
5. What are some things that would be difficult, if not impossible, for us to understand today without the background of the Old Testament?
6. How do you think having the New Testament should change our view of the Old Testament?
7. When Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, does he use the Old Testament or the New Testament in his defense? Why do you think he does that?
8. What are some ways that we equate the “kingdom of God,” with the nation of the United States today? Is this a biblical perspective? Why, or why not?
9. How might Mark’s view of the “kingdom of God,” impact our view of our own government?

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10. How might a proper understanding of the Gospel of Mark impact our view of Heaven?
  11. How do you think it might be comforting to know that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies?
  12. How does knowing how a Jewish person, from the first-century, would likely interpret the words of Mark help us today?
  13. How does understanding that on the day of Pentecost the church and Judaism did not become totally separate, but continued to interact with each other, impact our understanding of the Gospel message?
  14. How do you think Mark challenges his primarily Jewish oriented audience with his Gospel account?
  15. How can we as people trying to follow Christ more fully be transformed by the Gospel message into what God has called us to be?