
Isaiah in Mark

Lesson 2

“Chapter 1”

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.

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

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.

As Mark begins his account with the words, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, (the Son of God),” he then turns to introducing his next words with “As it has been written in Isaiah the prophet.” Despite this introduction, his next quote is not actually totally from Isaiah. Instead, he quotes a passage from Exodus 23:20 from the Old Greek translation (the Septuagint)¹ almost verbatim: he leaves out the conjunction “and” (Καί) along with the preposition “I” (ἐγώ).² The leaving out of these two words is not really notable, what is perhaps more notable is that from an English perspective these verses will look very, very different. Normally, when Exodus 23:20 is translated into English, we see the word “angel” (ἄγγελόν), that same word is then translated in Mark as “messenger” (ἄγγελόν) when it is translated into English. The context of Exodus 23:20 makes it clear that we are talking about what we would term a “divine messenger,” or an “angelic” being. In Mark, the reference will be to John the Baptist, who is not an angel in the sense of being what we would see as an heavenly being, but nevertheless John acts as the

¹ Exodus 23:20a - Καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ ἀποστέλλω τὸν ἄγγελόν μου πρὸ προσώπου σου, - LXX: ἰδοὺ ἀποστέλλω τὸν ἄγγελόν μου πρὸ προσώπου σου, - Nestle-Aland 28th.

² Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord* (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 12.

divine emissary leading the way for Jesus Christ. In this way he fulfills the same function as the messenger of Exodus 23:20 and thus the same wording is used for both.

This seems to be to be an incredibly powerful connection that is being made here. Certainly, the Jews of the first century A.D. will have understood the magnitude of having the angel go before their ancestors in the wilderness as a divine agent in the Exodus account. This was a formative moment for them as a people, this is about their birth as a nation. Even in our nation, at times, there is an almost reverent respect for the founding fathers of the United States. How much more reverence would there be if a part of your founding heritage were associated with a divine emissary? That is what Exodus is saying; Israel became a nation because God sent his emissary to lead the way for the people into that reality. Israel is a nation because of Yahweh's very direct divine intervention. Mark now picks up this powerful and inspiring imagery and applies it in his Gospel account as part of this telling of the "good news." How much more moving and inspiring should it be for this emissary to lead the way for the very son of God who would then introduce the people,

not to an earthly nation, but to the kingdom of God. John acts as the holy emissary, the divine messenger, in a sense he is here honored as an “angel” (a messenger) of God. The word that we so often translate as angel (ἄγγελος) most often is used in Greek as simply the word for “messenger,” or “envoy.”³ It need not be applied to a special class of heavenly being, it is more directly related to the mission of an agent.

Mark here seems to be interpreting this great moment, and this great character (the angel of Exodus) as a type that was to follow; John the Baptist now will take over the role as the archetypal divine messenger pointing the way for God’s people. Notably, in the Gospel of Mark, this is the most complete and explicit citation of Scripture in the entire work.⁴ Surely Mark wants us to understand that this is an incredibly important point. Without understanding this point we are not going to be able to properly understand what follows. Mark is routing what he is about to say deeply into the visions of Isaiah the prophet. He is not proof-texting, or footnoting, in the way that we do

³ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, compilers, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, revised and augmented by Henry Stuart Jones, assisted by Roderick McKenzie, with 1996 revised supplement (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), s.v. ἄγγελος.

⁴ Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark A Commentary*, in the Hermeneia Critical and Historical Commentary of the Bibles series (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2007), p. 135.

today. He wants to tap into the dream, the vision that was delivered by Isaiah the prophet, and had now for centuries has acted as the source of hope and inspiration for generations of those seeking God and his kingdom. Mark prepares to reveal that hope here in his Gospel account.

The prophet Malachi had also picked upon that hope and his message of hope at some point became associated with the Exodus 23 passage. In rabbinic exegesis the Exodus passage and Malachi 3:1 were connected.⁵ There are numerous theories as to why Mark conflates these Scriptures together the way he does, but none seem more convincing than just stating that often the Rabbis connected passages and Mark is doing something similar, even connection some that they connected. The Rabbis were not prone to give explanations when they connected passages, they anticipated that the audience would comprehend the message. Finally, at verse 3, Mark does quote from Isaiah 40:3, or almost quotes. There is a change at the end of the verse where Mark changes the word from “our God” (τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν-- לַאֱלֹהֵינוּ) to “him” (αὐτοῦ). Mark makes this substitution for

⁵ Krister Stendhal, *The School of St. Matthew and Its Use in the Old Testament* (Ramsey NJ: Sigler Press, 1990), p. 50. *Exodus Rabbah* 32.

what are apparently Christological reasons.⁶ This makes sense here as Mark is introducing the story of Jesus and he is making a connection here with the prophesy of Isaiah. It is perhaps the case that Mark is in a subtle way indicating the divinity of Jesus, or perhaps it is not so subtle. It may be, that, since clearly Mark is referring to the fact that John is preparing the way of Jesus and this passage from Isaiah is quoted, the audience would be familiar with the Hebrew text and would understand that the way that Isaiah prophesies about was the way of *Yahweh* (יהוה). If that is indeed the case, they would have understood that Mark is even here proclaiming the divinity of Christ. The word *kupios* (κύριος) is the word that is used to translate the word *Yahweh* (יהוה) into Greek in the Old Greek translation (the Septuagint).

Mark, at the very beginning of his Gospel account, is making incredibly powerful connections to both the history and the prophesies of the Jewish people while at the same time tapping into their dreams and hopes as he uses these passages that were touchstone passages for the Jewish people. He reorients, and

⁶ Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2000), p. 62.

reinterprets these passage, hopes, and dreams in light of his message about Jesus Christ proclaiming while boldly and powerfully that Jesus is the fulfillment of all their dreams, and hopes, and more. The implications, of this message, are nothing short of earth-shattering. Such a message transforms the world-view along with the hopes and dreams of the people of God in a way that can be described as a quantum shift. The message of Jesus would shatter many of their long held and sacred dreams of the domination of others, of greatness and of success. The message of Mark should do the same for us today. It should challenge us to see the world differently, through the lens of the Gospel message, a message that shows us a power and a use of power that are unexpected and startling. God will use his power, expressed in the ultimate form, the most powerful and God-centered form, love. He will love us literally to death, his death. Surely this magnitude of love was never conceived of in the heart of man before. I think that is why people struggle so much in their efforts to comprehend the Gospel message.

At verse 4, the story begins to unfold, the story of the proclamation that has been forecast in the first three verses of the

Gospel account and we have another major theme: the theme of the effect that this message should have on those who hear it. John comes proclaiming a *baptism* (βάπτισμα) of repentance. He calls upon the people of Israel to change their ways, to change their way of thinking, to act and think in a new way. This then would lead to the “forgiveness of sins.” So many times today, we think that sins only entail wrong actions, but in reality wrong thinking will be brought forward by Jesus as sin. He will equate thinking something, such as lusting after a woman, as equivalent to doing that thing and being guilty of it. It is interesting that each time Jesus is challenged by the teachers of the Law he will not lower the standard, but raise the standard that is expected. Today, in much of biblical theology there is a tremendous tendency toward the lowering of the standard and the expectation for Christians, but this seems to be an alien concept to the Jesus of the Gospels. Jesus calls for a higher standard, a more challenging perspective. A case that really highlights this is John 8 with the woman caught in adultery. This passage challenges not only the woman, but even those who brought her to him, to a higher standard, and to a recognition of the forgiving nature of God.

God is not who, or what we so often make him out to be in our hearts and minds.

We need to be aware that the baptism of John is not the same as Christian baptism. Baptism was practiced by the Jews as a ritual of purification. This was an especially prominent feature of the Essene community at Qumran (the Dead Sea Scroll community). They practiced ritual washings in what was called a *Mikva* on a regular basis. Where John is baptizing is actually in close proximity to the settlement at Khirbet Qumran. The washings at Qumran were repeated, self-administered ritual washings. Some have speculated that John was influenced by their practice. In a manner similar to the Essenes, John called fellow Jews to repent and prepare for the coming eschatological events. The Greek word for “repentance (*μετάνοια*)” signals a profound conversion: a transformed mind, or a change in the way one actually appropriates reality.⁷

John was not simply challenging those that heard his message to participate in some form of ritual, he was actually challenging them to change the core of their being, their compass of life. He was

⁷ R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007), p. 46.

challenging them to recognize that the status quo would not continue forever. Things were about to change. Verse 5 indicates that people came from all over the region to participate in what he was calling them to do. The region where he was baptizing was isolated and not really on the way to, or from, anywhere; it was in the wilderness. I think a big part of the reason people went there was because of the prophecies of Isaiah. This was where they were to expect God to come, as foretold in those prophecies of the Old Testament. This is where movements, such as the Essenes, went because of the prophecies of Isaiah to establish their communities and wait for the Lord. This is where God sends John as his emissary to proclaim the coming of his son. This expectation had been a part of Jewish expectation because of these prophecies of Isaiah. This may not be a quote from Isaiah, but it was certainly dependent upon it.

From verse 6 onward there are repeated allusions to the Old Testament such as Zechariah 13:4 that refers to the hairy mantle of prophets and 2 Kings 1:8 that identifies Elijah the Tishbite by his dress. At Leviticus 11:22, we are told that locust are indeed on the Kosher diet list as clean foods. John proclaims, according to Mark's

Gospel, as the divine emissary, the coming of Jesus, one greater than himself. The one coming will baptize them with the Holy Spirit and not simply with water. There are links in Judaism between the Holy Spirit and water (cf. Isaiah 32:15; Ezekiel 36:25-27; 1QS 4:20b - 22 - “Then God will refine, with his truth, all man’s deeds, and will purify for himself the structure of man, ripping out all spirit of injustice from the innermost part ²¹ ; of his flesh, and cleansing him with the spirit of holiness from every (sic - מכול) wicked deeds. He will sprinkle over him the spirit of truth like lustral water (in order to cleanse him) from all the abhorrences of deceit and (from) the defilement ²² of the unclean spirit, in order to instruct the upright ones with knowledge of the Most High, and to make understand the wisdom of the sons of heaven to those of perfect behaviour....)⁸ These links also appear in the New Testament (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:13; Titus 3:5-6).⁹ Mark’s Gospel requires his readers to have an extensive knowledge of the Old Testament and Jewish culture in order to properly understand the

⁸ Florentino Garcia Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*, Vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 78-79.

⁹ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, in the Anchor Bible series, vol. 27 (New Haven CT: The Anchor Yale Bible, 2005), p. 152.

magnitude and power of his message. Without that background, distortion and misunderstanding are certain to be rampant.

From their understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures, it was expected, and anticipated, that Mark's audience would understand that John was the expected return of one like Elijah. That does not even have to be said here; it was expected. It is not until verse 9 that we are introduced again to Jesus in the narrative. He is baptized by John and the heavens are "split" (σχίζω). This is the same word used in the account of the Red Sea being split when the Israelites crossed over in the Exodus account. This time the heavens themselves are split, or ripped, not a sea; a dove descends, and a voice comes from heaven and delivers a message that is a near exact quote of Psalm 2:7 (from the Old Greek translation, the Septuagint).¹⁰ The normal word for this type of thing would be to "open," here it seems the heavens are ripped in an a manner indicated that he cannot easily be undone. It is at this point that the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness. That perhaps should not seem strange other than the fact that he was already in the wilderness. Clearly, this

¹⁰ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, p. 162.

phrase is meant to emphasize a connection for the audience. This is the place of testing for the people of Israel, Elijah was 40 days in the wilderness, sustained by the angel, and there is even a tradition in the Pseudepigraphical writings of the Jews that associates the number 40 with the temptation of Adam while in the garden. We are told here that angels waited upon him.

At verse 14, we are told of the arrest of John the Baptist, and of Jesus coming to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God. What is the “good news?” Is it a message of salvation, or forgiveness of sins that is so often today, what we are told is the good news, the gospel? NO, the gospel is that the “kingdom of God” has come near. This is the “gospel,” the “good news,” that was prophesied by the prophet Isaiah. As a result of this news the people are called to repent and to believe it. This eschatological message is to be understood in the context of the Old Testament. This message is that the old evil age of Satan’s dominion is now fulfilled (1:15) and the new age of God’s reign is now near. The age is coming when God will reign as king over the earth as he currently does over the heavens, remember the Lord’s prayer. In light of this proclamation, Jesus then begins to call

disciples, calling Simon and Andrew to become fishers of men and James and John to follow him. Jesus (verse 21) then enters Capernaum where he teaches in the synagogue. Have you noticed that before in anything more than a passing way? Who do you think was in the synagogue? Jews were in the synagogue. Jesus came as a Jew, and his ministry was totally concentrated on the Jews. They had the background and the history to understand what Jesus was going to say and do. God had prepared the people for this time, to hear this message. The preparation had taken thousands of years from at least the time of Abraham to the coming of Jesus.

They were astounded at his teaching and notice that right in the midst of the synagogue itself there was a man with an unclean spirit. So much for all those movies that make a holy place, a location of safety from such creatures. I wonder how many this morning in our own churches are dominated by unclean spirits and we do not even know it. Jesus demonstrates the in-breaking of the kingdom of God by commanding this spirit to “be silent” and to “come out of him.” The kingdom of Satan is beginning to crumble, his dominance is at an end. At this point, those who heard the message of Jesus

recognized that this was different than what they had heard before and they recognized that this was something special. The fame of Jesus spreads (verse 28). At verses 29 -31 Jesus demonstrates that not only can he deal with evil spirits, but he can also deal with another mark of the kingdom of Satan; sickness. He heals Peter's mother-in-law. In verses 32-34 signs of the in-breaking of the kingdom of God continue as he heals the sick and drives out demons. The signs are there, the kingdom of Satan is cracking, if not crumbling away.

In verse 35, we are told that Jesus went out early in the morning and prayed. After he is found by his disciples they go to the neighboring towns so that he might continue to "proclaim the message." A simple message, "the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." This is the Gospel message. It is simple and to the point. This was what had been promised to the people down through the centuries by the prophets of God and now the time has come. The signs that Jesus performs substantiate this message as he heals the leper at verse 40 and following. Without the background of the Old Testament to anchor the words of Mark here

the message can become unhinged and blown by the wind to mean all sorts of things and this is one of the things that has happened down through history and one of the reasons there are so many different churches; so many different opinions as to what is the essential message of the Gospel. Mark here gives us a beginning of that message, a beginning of the story of the Gospel message and he firmly anchors it in the Old Testament as he quotes, or alludes to the Old Testament time and time again. As we go through this study we will see that he does this more and more and the message that is proclaimed cannot be properly understood apart from the foundation that God had put down for so many centuries in the his dealings with the Jewish people. An understanding of the Old Testament is essential if we are to comprehend the message of the New Testament. [Come, Lord Jesus Come.](#)

Synopsis

Mark begins his Gospel account by linking it powerfully to the hopes and aspirations of the Jewish people as they were recounted by Isaiah the prophet. In a very rabbinic fashion Mark links the words from a variety of biblical books into his opening proclamation of the “Good News.” He links John the Baptist with the divine emissary that went before Israel in the formative stages of their nation in the Exodus account. This portrays the magnitude of the account that Mark is recounting. This is to be seen as an event greater, in importance, than the exodus in the time of Moses. Mark creatively and powerfully, using rabbinic ways of doing things, carefully reinterprets passages of Scripture in light of the coming of Jesus. In doing this he will reshape the audiences understanding of God and his nature. All of this is deeply anchored in the history and the expectations of the Jewish people while at the same time reorienting things in powerful and surprising ways that convey a God of tremendous love and compassion.

We have the account of the baptism of Jesus at the hands of this emissary, passing on the mantle, pointing the way to God's Messiah. John makes the issue of repentance a critical issue in Mark's Gospel and it acts as a theme that will be woven into the account and lend credence to the reorientation of these Old Testament passages in ways that challenge and draw the people to change direction. Baptism, which had been practiced before by the Jews was given fresh impetus as a marker of change. Jesus undergoes baptism and the heavens themselves are torn open and the veil of separation between heaven and earth is ripped while the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus. We are then informed by the voice from heaven of who Jesus is, and then there is his testing in the wilderness that will act as a prelude to his ministry. Jesus then calls disciples and begins his ministry in powerful ways as the kingdom of God breaks into the realm of men and the kingdom of Satan begins to be pushed back. This is evidenced by Jesus teaching and especially in the driving out of demons. In this way the beginning of kingdom of God coming to earth is announced.

Questions

1. What is the essence of the Gospel message?
2. What are some reasons that you think it is important that Mark linked the Gospel message to the prophecies of Isaiah?
3. What is significant about John the Baptist in Mark 1?
4. What do you think it means for a person to be divinely commissioned?
5. What is the role of the Jews in the Gospel message?
6. What are some of your dreams for the church today? Why are they your dreams?
7. How do you insure that your dreams are aligned with the dreams of God?
8. Do you think Mark is in any way proclaiming the divinity of God in this first chapter of Mark? Why, or why not?
9. Why do you think it is important, or not important, for Mark to connect Jesus to God in this first chapter?
10. What do you think Mark's Gospel says about the connection between the church and Israel?

11. What are some ways that you can see Mark reorienting the thinking of the Jews even here in his first chapter?
12. What role do you see repentance playing in the coming of the kingdom of God?
13. What role do you think the wilderness plays in the preparation of a person for ministry?
14. What do you think the significance of the coming of the Holy Spirit is at the baptism of Jesus?
15. Why do you think God speaks from heaven at the baptism of Jesus?
16. What does the speaking of God, at the baptism of Jesus, tell you about its importance?
17. How do you see the coming of God's Messiah as an assault on the status quo in Satan's dominion?
18. What do you think is meant by the phrase "the kingdom of God"?