

Mark's Language of Religious Conflict as Rhetorical Device

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In Mark's Gospel Jesus warns his opponents against committing blasphemy in their evaluation of his ministry (3:28-29). Conversely, Jesus' opponents accuse him of blasphemy at his trial (14:64). Such language tends to characterize intra-Judaic religious controversy in the first century. Mark, the implied author of the second Gospel, uses the language of religious conflict rhetorically in his narrative to persuade his implied reader to accept the authority of Jesus' message as expressed in his story and to reject the counterclaims of Jesus' opponents.

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The application of literary criticism to the Synoptic Gospels has stimulated many new readings of Mark's¹ Gospel. In particular, one application of rhetorical criticism² invites the interpreter to discern the various ways in which the author seeks to direct the implied reader to a specific conclusion. In the case of Mark's Gospel, attention has turned to elements such as characterization, the insertion of editorial comments, and the use of irony, to mention only a few of the

1. The second Gospel will be referred to as *Mark's Gospel* in this paper. I am fully aware of the continued discussions relating to issues of authorship. The term Mark refers to the assumed author of the narrative as the church traditionally has understood this.

2. Various NT scholars use the term *rhetorical criticism* to describe different kinds of textual studies. In this essay the third category of rhetorical criticism described in C. Clinton Black's essay "Rhetorical Criticism," published in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (ed. Joel Green; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 256-77, is used. Such investigations have their "centre of gravity . . . in the text's power to move an audience or community of readers, whether ancient or modern" (p. 264). The goal is to determine how the text is shaped in such a way as "to motivate people to *act right*" (p. 263, quoting from an article by Elisabeth S. Fiorenza). Cf. Luke T. Johnson, "The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic," *JBL* 108 (1989) 439.

proposed authorial markers. For example the way in which the authority of Jesus' words receives emphasis coupled with his dramatic actions encourages the reader to pay particular attention to his teaching in contrast to what the Jewish religious leaders might say. Or, Mark's instruction at 13:14, "let the reader understand," seems to be an editorial comment³ asking the reader to consider carefully the implication of Jesus' words. Many writers also have commented on Mark's use of irony, particularly in the story of Jesus' arrest, trial, and death.⁴ Each of these devices in its own way, implicitly or explicitly, seeks to guide the reader to a specific understanding of the events described in Mark's narrative and a particular, personal response to "the gospel of Jesus, Messiah, Son of God."⁵

One means which the author uses to convince his reader that the claims made in the narrative about Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus' particular vision of Israel are true and compelling involves the language of religious conflict.⁶ Charges or warnings of blasphemy, curses, and derisive statements or stories find expression both on the lips of Jesus and in the words of his opponents. While some would argue that such language vents the anti-Judaism,⁷ or worse, the anti-Semitism of the emerging Christian church, others have demonstrated that these verbal forms were normal weapons employed to establish competing claims between rival religious groups within Judaism.⁸ Such expressions employed in Mark's construction of Jesus'

3. What exactly the intent of the author was in making this comment is open to debate. Perhaps it was a statement to the oral reader of the narrative not to "correct" the preceding grammatical structure—masculine gender participle (ἑστηκότα) modifying a neuter nominal referent (τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως). Or it could be a general instruction to one who read the text to pay particular attention to the interpretation of this special phrase. Other interpretations are also possible. Other examples of such editorial guidance might be 2:10; 7:19. This specific comment also occurs in the Matthean parallel (cf. 24:15). Cf. Robert Fowler, "The Rhetoric of Direction and Indirection in the Gospel of Mark," *Semeia* 48 (*Reader Perspectives on the New Testament*; 1989) 115-24.

4. One example would be the words Jesus speaks in response to the High Priest's question 'Are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed One?' (14:62). The expectation that those involved in the trial would "see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" becomes a statement of judgment for his accusers but a statement of promise and vindication for himself. Those accusing him regard it as the final proof they require to justify his execution. Cf. Stephen Smith, *A Lion with Wings: A Narrative-Critical Approach to Mark's Gospel* (Biblical Seminar 38; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996) 192-233.

5. Mark 1:1.

6. Several investigations of Mark's use of conflictive language have outlined the general nature of its character within his narrative. However, defining the purpose for such language as part of the narrative and its contribution to the rhetorical agenda of the author deserves closer study.

7. S. Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

8. R. Guelich, "Anti-Semitism and/or Anti-Judaism in Mark?" in *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity: Issues in Polemic and Faith* (ed. Craig Evans and Donald Hagner;

ministry highlight the "clash of authorities" which Jesus' activities created in first-century Judaism.⁹ It is the purpose of this article to explore and define several of the ways by which Mark¹⁰ uses the language and activity of religious conflict rhetorically to persuade his reader to accept the authority of Jesus' words and reject the counter-claims of his opponents.¹¹

Within Mark's narrative five "characters" primarily¹² interact: Jesus, the disciples, his extended family, the crowds (sometimes individualized in a specific person such as Jairus), and Jewish religious leaders of various kinds. Jesus, as the prologue to this narrative demonstrates (Mark 1:1-13),¹³ occupies the central position, and the other "characters" gain certain definition as they interact with him. The focus of the action in the story usually follows two lines: how is

Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993) 80-101. He concludes that "a careful, historical, literary reading of Mark's narrative will demonstrate that one can in no way speak of 'anti-Semitism' and only in a highly qualified manner of 'anti-Judaism' in Mark's Gospel" (p. 101). For a general overview of the debate, reference can be made to Craig Evans's article in the same volume entitled "Faith and Polemic: The New Testament and First-century Judaism."

9. While it is not possible to prove beyond doubt that Mark's depiction of the conflict between Jesus and some of the Jewish religious authorities is historically accurate, the kind of language that Mark uses to characterize the confrontation between Jesus and his opponents can be paralleled in contemporary Jewish documents (i.e., Dead Sea Scrolls, *Psalms of Solomon*, etc.). For example, in *The Rule of the Community*, those who are governed by the spirit of deceit are described as possessing a . . . blasphemous tongue, blindness of eyes, hardness of hearing, stiffness of neck, hardness of heart in order to walk in all the paths of darkness and evil cunning. And the visitation of those who walk in it will be for a glut of punishments at the hands of all the angels of destruction, for eternal damnation for the scorching wrath of the God of revenge . . ." (1QS IV 11-12). The translation is that of F. G. Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated* (Leiden: Brill, 1992) 7.

10. I assume the priority of Mark within the Synoptic complex. In addition, various elements in his narrative which are not found in Matthew or Luke or, if present, are located much later in the sequence of those narratives, indicate how significant this issue of conflict is for Mark in the presentation of his message. Attention will be directed to several examples in footnotes. However, the language of "hardening" (πωρόω, πώρωσις) seems to be a particular focus for Mark in distinction from Matthew and Luke.

11. One attempt to discern Mark's rhetorical purpose with this language of rejection was that of T. A. Burkill in "Blasphemy: St. Mark's Gospel as Damnation History," in *Christianity, Judaism and Other Graeco-Roman Cults—Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty: Part One, New Testament* (ed. Jacob Neusner; Leiden: Brill, 1975) 51-74.

12. There is some argument to support the addition of spiritual beings, such as God and demons, and Roman officials to this list.

13. The exact extent of Mark's prologue is debated, with some arguing that it ends at v. 8 or v. 13 or v. 15. However, the use of the particle δέ, the infinitival clause of time, the transition between John and Jesus, the mention of the name of Jesus as subject, and change of geographical setting all seem to suggest that 1:14 is the point of transition from the prologue into the body of the narrative. Cf. R. A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26* (WBC 34A; Dallas: Word, 1989) 3-5.

Jesus responding to the "character" in this event, and how is the "character" responding to Jesus?¹⁴ For example, Jesus' first speaking engagement to a crowd in a Galilean synagogue (1:21-28) begins with a description of his teaching (vv. 21-22). But then the story narrows to the exchange between Jesus and the "man in an unclean spirit." At the conclusion we observe the response of the crowd in the synagogue to Jesus' exorcism and teaching.¹⁵ Although Jesus in this story responds to the crowd and also to the individual in the crowd, these interactions happen sequentially, with the crowd moving into the background as Jesus challenges the unclean spirit's control of this person. The crowd emerges once again in vv. 27-28 as its reaction to Jesus' teaching and actions is recorded. All are "fearfully perplexed" (ἐθαμβήθησαν¹⁶ ὅπαντες), because they do not know what to make of this astonishing event, or of the teaching of Jesus which accompanies it. The deep impression which Jesus makes upon this crowd gains concrete expression as Mark ends the story with the comment that the whole region of Galilee learned of Jesus' reputation.

Jesus responds to the crowd by teaching and to the demon-possessed man by releasing him from that spirit's control. The man/demon obeys Jesus and the crowd is duly astonished. Such binary (i.e., actions between two parties) interactions lead the reader to ask the same question posed by people in the crowd ("What is this? A new teaching with authority?" [1:27]). As well, Jesus' total command over this evil spirit and the freedom the man experiences as a result encourage the reader to consider how Jesus' authority might bring healing to his or her personal context. Fundamentally, the reader comes face to face with the issue of Jesus' authority (ἐξουσία). The reader must begin the process of evaluating this authority and coming to some estimate of its reality and implication. Mark's use of key words such as ἐξουσία, the title the demoniac uses to address Jesus ("the Holy One of God"), and the rhetorical questions embedded in the story intentionally guide the readers to focus on specific issues.¹⁷

14. For a fuller evaluation of Mark's use of characterization, see David Rhoads and Donald Michie's *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 101-36.

15. The inclusion of one story within another is a frequent narrative device used by the author.

16. W. Grimm in his analysis of this term in the LXX and NT links it to examples of people responding to theophanies. Cf. H. Balz and G. Schneider (eds.), *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 2.128-29.

17. Mark's placement of this story at the very beginning of his narrative as Jesus starts his Galilean ministry highlights Jesus' authority and contrasts with Matthew, who omits this story, and Luke, who places it at the end of chap. 4 after Jesus' inaugural teaching in Nazareth.

Mark's narrative continually defines Jesus' authority through situations of conflict. In 1:21-28 the response to Jesus, whether that of the demon or the crowd, consistently recognizes his authority. As we move into the series of interchanges retold in 2:1-3:6 we encounter a different set of responses.¹⁸ Jesus is accused of blaspheming (2:7), his social practices are attacked (2:16), his religious laxness is questioned (2:18; 2:24; 3:2), and as a result a conspiracy arises between the Pharisees and Herodians for his execution (3:6). The groups responding to Jesus in this fashion have various descriptions:

- 2:6 some of the scribes (τινες τῶν γραμματέων)
- 2:16 the scribes of the Pharisees (οἱ γραμματεῖς τῶν Φαρισαίων)
- 2:18 the disciples of John and the Pharisees (οἱ μαθηταὶ Ἰωάννου καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι)
- 2:24 the Pharisees (οἱ Φαρισαῖοι)
- 3:6 the Pharisees . . . with the Herodians (οἱ Φαρισαῖοι . . . μετὰ τῶν Ἡρωδιανῶν)

While there is some variation, one group consistently appears: the Pharisees. Mark does not define who this group is or what it believes. He expects his reader to have some awareness or to figure out from the clues in the text that the people are a Jewish religious group of some prominence. In 3:22 we learn that "the scribes" come from Jerusalem. Their preoccupation with issues such as fasting, sabbath observance, relationships with "sinners," and God's reputation, allows the readers, if they were not acquainted with these Jewish groups, to gain some idea of their religious context and practices. The prominence of the Pharisees in this series of stories suggests that they have a special interest in Jesus' activities—that is, perhaps they are wanting to discern whether Jesus really is Messiah as Mark declares (1:1), as well as have some recognized religious authority. The repeated response of these religious groups, especially the Pharisees, towards Jesus is characterized as negative and condemnatory.

As we trace the involvement of these Jewish religious groups in these stories (2:1-3:6), their relationship to the action varies. Yet, by whatever means Mark chooses, it is Jesus' response to these people or their response to him which ends up being at the center of each

18. A. J. Hultgren's study of the conflict stories in the Gospels (*Jesus and His Adversaries* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979]) examines their "form and function." On pp. 180-84 he defines "Mark's use of conflict stories." They demonstrate that Jesus is "victor over his adversaries," but they would not recognize his authority because of their "hardness of heart." These early conflicts "show a continuity between the conflicts of Jesus with his adversaries in his earlier ministry and the final conflict in Jerusalem" (p. 184).

account. For example, in 2:1-12, the first five verses of the story focus entirely upon the paralyzed man and Jesus' response to his need. It is Jesus' pronouncement "Your sins are forgiven" (v. 5) which precipitates the entrance of the scribes into the story. They regard such a statement as "blasphemy" (i.e., a slander against God) because in their mind only God has the right and authority to forgive sins. For Jesus to assume this ability is an affront to God, in their opinion. As Mark articulates these thoughts in the story, the whole account shifts and begins to deal with the religious question of Jesus' authority, rather than the plight of the paralyzed man. The serious charge of blasphemy expressed by the silent, rhetorical question of the scribes again draws the attention of the readers to this issue. Although in the end the man is healed, the reader is left wondering whether the scribes participated finally with the rest of the people¹⁹ in declaring their astonishment, giving glory to God, and exclaiming, "we have never seen anything like this!" Perhaps the scribes altered their initial charge of blasphemy²⁰ when they saw the man get up and walk away at Jesus' command.

As the other stories follow, each one in its own unique fashion—whether through a question addressed directly to Jesus or to his followers by religious leaders or through its description of their silent, accusatory scrutiny of Jesus' actions (3:2)—keeps the readers' attention riveted upon this dramatic interaction. As others have observed, the first and last stories combine elements of confrontation with miracle²¹—the total healing of the person's malady in irrefutable terms. In response to Jesus' command, the paralyzed man gets up and carries his bedroll home in front of everybody (2:11-12), with everyone, including the scribes, astonished. In the concluding story, the man extends his withered hand and discovers its perfect restoration (3:6), as everybody looks on, but now the Pharisees and Herodians enter into conspiracy to kill Jesus. In between, Jesus responds to the three reli-

19. Mark writes that the paralyzed man "went out before them all, with the result that all were astonished and glorified God . . ." (2:12). The term "all" in the first instance defines the entire group watching this event and this includes the "scribes sitting there." If this definition is correct, then the "all" in the succeeding result clause would normally have the same referent because Mark offers no alternate antecedent. This assumes, of course, that Mark's language is intentional at this point of his narrative.

20. For further discussion of Mark's use of the term "blasphemy" and its implications for his purpose, see Charles Anderson, "The Trial of Jesus as Jewish-Christian Polarization: Blasphemy and Polemic in Mark's Gospel," in *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity, Volume 1: Paul and the Gospels* (ed. Peter Richardson and David Granskou; Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986) 107-25.

21. Joanna Dewey, "The Literary Structure of the Controversy Stories in Mark 2:1-3:6," *JBL* 92 (1973) 394-401. She demonstrates many parallels in structure between the first and last stories in this sequence. Yet, there is contrast in the concluding evaluations by those observing Jesus' actions.

religious questions addressed to him with authoritative pronouncements about his power (i.e., "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath," 2:28) and his mission (i.e., "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners," 2:17) or with parabolic riddles (i.e., about wineskins, garment repairs, and marriage customs, 2:19-22) which explain in some way to Jesus' audience and to Mark's readers the significance of his presence and message. Jesus never retreats from these confrontations.

The notice of conspiracy to kill Jesus with which this sequence of stories concludes (3:6) leaves the reader in a quandry.²² Given the endorsement of Jesus by God Himself in the prologue ("You are my beloved son; in you I take pleasure," 1:11), as well as the astonishing things which Jesus does (i.e., casting out demons, healing lepers, enabling paralyzed people to walk, etc.), how is the reader to make any sense of the religious leaders' response to Jesus? Their questions and accusations demonstrate an increasing gap between Jesus' claims and their respect for those claims. On the one hand, the religious leaders accuse Jesus of blasphemy. This is a serious religious charge, which, if true, would disqualify Jesus from any consideration as Messiah or even prophet. Along with this, they claim that he shows no respect for Jewish religious practice or traditions, refusing to fast and failing to observe sabbath rites, as they define them. So serious is all of this in their view that Jesus must be destroyed before he does serious damage in Israel. His teachings have no authority and his claims must be rejected. On the other hand, God has endorsed Jesus, Mark claims that Jesus' presence fulfills the promise of the Jewish sacred writings, Jesus demonstrates a power which certainly exceeds normal human ability, and his teachings have a prophetic ring to them. So what are the readers to believe? Which kind of response should characterize their reaction to Jesus? Which evaluation should they trust? What are the consequences of their decision?

Jesus' analysis of the religious leaders' response creates more uncertainty. In 3:5, as Mark describes Jesus' action, he claims that Jesus is "grieved at the hardness of their hearts,"²³ and he is angry ($\mu\epsilon\tau' \acute{o}\rho\gamma\eta\varsigma$) at their refusal to accept what God is doing through him. He accuses them of failing to understand their own sacred writings (2:24-25), based upon which they are judging him. He warns them that their view of their own "righteousness" is faulty (2:17) and that they must reassess their entire religious understanding in the light of the "bridegroom" who has come (2:19-20). So the readers have some hard choices to consider. Whose rhetoric and hermeneutic will they

22. Matthew only reveals this conspiracy in 12:14. The parallel in Luke 6:11 indicates angry, animated discussions among the religious leaders, but no specific mention of conspiracy to kill him.

23. Neither Matthew nor Luke in the parallel passages mentions Jesus' wrath coupled with grief or this evaluation of the religious leaders' attitude.

believe--that of Jesus, partially supported by the crowds and the disciples, or that of the contemporary Jewish religious leaders? The strong language which each party uses to define the other demonstrates the clear alternatives. The readers can side with Jesus and accept the curse pronounced by the religious leaders, or they can identify with the religious leaders and share with them the accusation made by Jesus of a hard-hearted attitude to God's initiative and failure to understand God's purposes.

The accusation of blasphemy is not the sole property of the Jewish religious leaders. At the end of chap. 3, Mark tells two intercalated stories, both of which reinforce the same theme of conflict and rejection. The story which forms the frame for this part of the narrative concerns Jesus' family and their evaluation of him. Although Mark 3:21 can be read in different ways, one thing seems certain: Jesus' family show deep concern about his actions. If they are included in the subject of ἔλεγον (3:21), and this seems hard to avoid, then they had concluded from what they were hearing about Jesus that "he was mad" (ἐξέστη).²⁴ So they set out to find him and bring him home. However, when they arrive (vv. 31-35) and deliver their message, Jesus refuses to go with them. Rather, he redefines the nature of his family relationships and includes in this new kinship relation "whoever does the will of God" and rejects any hold his natural family may seek to exercise over him. In the midst of this family business Mark situates the accusation from the Jerusalem scribes (3:22) that Jesus' power and authority have their source in the satanic kingdom (Beelzebub; the prince of demons).²⁵ In other words, Jesus is demon-possessed but controlled by an exceptionally powerful demon.

These two evaluations of madness and demon-possession mutually reinforce each other. Jesus rejects the first, inviting his human family to join with him in a new kinship relationship, "doing the will God." He rejects the second, responding with a series of "parables"²⁶

24. The concept of ἔκστασις, the cognate noun, expresses "the behaviour of a person who is no longer controlled by his normal reason" (W. Mundle, "Ecstasy, Astonishment, Distraction, Horror, Madness," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* [ed. Colin Brown; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975] 1.526ff.). This could be due to religious trance caused by an external spiritual power or by the loss of one's wits. In the case of Jesus, the Gospels record no specific religiously ecstatic experiences (unless the Transfiguration should so be classified) and so most commentators construe the meaning of ἐξέστη in Mark 3:21 as a reference to mental instability. It is also important to note that neither Matthew nor Luke reports how Jesus' family were evaluating his actions at this point in his ministry.

25. In several Qumran documents, the members of the community also are warned to beware of the activities of people, such as the wicked priest, who are under the control of "Belial."

26. This is the term Mark uses to describe these riddle-like expressions.

and concluding with a very serious warning about "not having forgiveness forever" (3:29). The parables point out first the absurdity of the scribes' accusation: Why would satan engage in a self-destructive civil war? And then second, Jesus asserts through the parable about "binding the strong man" that he is plundering satan's kingdom because he is stronger than satan. The only logical conclusion, then, is that Jesus' source of power must lie in God, who alone is more powerful than satan according to theological perspectives within Judaism.

Jesus warns these religious leaders that they risk blaspheming God's Holy Spirit should they persist in such accusations against him. This countercharge of blasphemy is set in an ἀμήν saying (3:28-29), which normally signals a statement which has special authority. God's eternal curse, Jesus claims, rests upon those who continually ascribe the Holy Spirit's work to satanic influence. Such people refuse by their unbelief to accept God's means for covenant relationship. No matter what sacrifices they may offer, pious rituals they may perform, or religious beliefs they may hold, if they blaspheme God's Spirit in this way, they are "guilty of a sin which has eternal consequences" (3:29). Even Jesus' own family, should they persist in their view that Jesus is "mad," run the risk of such a curse.²⁷

The readers of Mark's narrative are now placed in a very tight spot. The Jewish religious leaders accuse Jesus of blasphemy.²⁸ Jesus accuses the scribes from Jerusalem of blasphemy. Which accusation is true? They both cannot be right. Both claim the sanction of religious authority and accuse the other of opposing God's work.

Mark follows these stories of conflict with the discourse on parables (4:1-34). As many have noted, in vv. 10-12 Jesus introduces the distinction between "those around him with the twelve" to whom are given "the mystery of the kingdom" and "those on the outside" for whom "everything happens in parables." In some sense this logion constitutes the key to understanding the parable of the soils which immediately precedes. When the disciples cannot figure out this connection, Jesus, in Mark's narrative, provides the explanation. He, is talking about the ability of people to respond to his words

27. Perhaps Matthew includes the logion about "speaking a word against the Son of Man" (12:32), which is not found in Mark's account, in order to preserve Jesus' family from committing the "unpardonable" sin. In agreeing with the assessment that Jesus is "mad," they "speak a word against the Son of Man" but do not sin against the Spirit by ascribing Jesus' power to demonic sources. I am indebted to Dr. Brian Rapske for this observation.

28. Is Mark's placement of this story so near the beginning of his narrative, in contrast to Matthew (12) and Luke (11), another indication of his special concern for this issue of conflict?

appropriately. Whether or not Jesus intends his parable to be a picture of Israel's historical track record of responding to God's revelation, telling "the story of Jesus' ministry, as the fulfilment of that larger story, with a paradoxical outcome," as N. T. Wright argues,²⁹ in Mark's narrative this segment surely outlines for the reader the importance of hearing correctly Jesus' message and the terrible consequences of being deaf and blind to his teaching. The reason the religious leaders and others do not hear and understand is related partially to God's purposes (as the allusion to Isa 6:9-10 indicates) but also to their own refusal to accept the vision for Israel which Jesus is bringing. Jesus goes on to say that everything would be made plain (vv. 21-23). Also, he warns that those who continue to reject his message eventually will find that "what they had would be taken away from them" (vv. 24-25). The parables themselves become another test for the readers. Will they grasp the "mystery of the kingdom" contained within them or not? Will they produce "fruit" or like the other soils fail to respond as God intended?

Jesus' ministry in Nazareth brings these issues to a poignant junction (6:1-6a). The story begins with elements of normalcy and success. Jesus arrives in his hometown (εἰς τὴν πατρίδα αὐτοῦ) after an astonishing series of dramatic miracles (4:35-5:43) and on the sabbath meets with his neighbors and disciples in the synagogue where he teaches them. The first recorded response is one of astonishment (ἐξεπλήσσαντο, v. 2). The people wonder about the source for Jesus' wisdom and powerful miracles. They cannot conceive how this "construction worker," this "son of Mary," this one whose brothers and sisters rub shoulders with them all daily, knows and does all of this. As they discuss and think about it, their response changes and Mark tells us they become "offended" (ἐσκανδαλίζοντο,³⁰ v. 4) at him. A further twist comes in the story as Mark shares Jesus' response to their dismissal. He acknowledges how hard it is for his neighbors and former customers to think of him as a prophet, but still he "marvels" (ἐθαύμαζεν,³¹ v. 6) at their unbelief (ἀπιστίαν αὐτῶν).³² His ministry is limited precisely because of their faithlessness. As witnesses, the people who know Jesus best, his own family and townspeople, show their lack of trust and confidence in his claims. They refuse to recognize him even as a prophet, much less Messiah. If those who know

29. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 230-39.

30. This verb and the previous one are both in the imperfect indicative, signaling an inceptive action or state which continues—that is, began to be offended or began to be astonished.

31. Mark again uses an imperfect form.

32. Mark is alone in emphasizing Jesus' "amazement" at their unbelief.

him well reject his claims, what should readers do, who have never met, seen, or heard him? Is Jesus right to claim that their unbelief is the source of their rejection, rather than their correct appraisal of his status?

One of the most extensive conflict pericopes in Mark's narrative is built around the Pharisees' accusation that Jesus' disciples "do not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat food with unclean hands" (7:5). Implied in this charge is that Jesus rejects the ancestral practices of Judaism, and so his claim to be a faithful prophet must be rejected. Jesus responds to this accusation with some very strong language. He uses material from Isaiah (29:13) to describe these Pharisees as people whose "heart is far from me [God]" and whose "teachings are the commands of human beings" rather than God. They have abandoned God's commands (ἀφέντες τὴν ἐντολὴν τοῦ θεοῦ, 7:8) and replaced them (ἀθετεῖτε τὴν ἐντολὴν τοῦ θεοῦ, 7:9) with human traditions (7:8). At the end he states that they "annul God's word by their tradition" (ἀκυροῦντες τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ, 7:13).³³ Here again the reader faces two similar accusations. The Pharisees claim that Jesus is departing from the Jewish, divinely-revealed practices which define the covenant people of God in their view. Jesus, in turn, claims that the Pharisees are subverting God's revealed word by their humanly constructed religious traditions. Jesus, conversely, seeks to substantiate the plausibility of his argument through the parable of digested food (7:14-23) and the principle that the inner self of every human being is the source of evil, making each person unclean by thought, word, and deed. These religious leaders again have failed to discern the true intent of God in giving Israel such sacred instructions. By focusing on the externals they have lost sight, apparently, of the internal, sinful pollution which these rituals seek to remedy. Mark leaves his readers wondering if Jesus' analysis is right, with the implication that Pharisaic tradition, based upon human interpretation, is flawed, and only God's revelation as interpreted by Jesus is trustworthy.

As Jesus' ministry in Galilee draws to a conclusion, Mark includes one more confrontation with the Pharisees (8:11-13), followed by Jesus' strong warning to his disciples (8:14-21) about the Pharisees' attitude. In the OT Moses set forth some criteria by which Israel might evaluate the claims of a prophet (cf. Deut 13:1-5; 18:14-22).

33. The triple use of verbs beginning with the alpha privative as well as the repeated emphasis upon "the command of God" or "the word of God" in contrast with the "tradition of human beings" (παράδοσις) build tremendous forcefulness in this encounter. The reader is being challenged again whether she will also "annul" God's word and heed human teaching.

Moses warned the Israelites not to be fooled by miracles or signs. These were not a sure indicator of divine authority. Rather, with the signs there also needed to be orthodoxy. But he also indicated that the announcements of true prophets would prove true. So the Pharisees require that Jesus forecast a "sign from heaven" in order to demonstrate his authority and its true source in God. Given his unorthodox response to sabbath practice and fasting, in their opinion Jesus needs to show clearly his orthodoxy by performing a divine sign "from heaven." However, Jesus refuses because he realizes that their request is rooted in unbelief not belief. They seek a reason to destroy him. If the miracles he has already accomplished and which they have observed do not bring them to the point of faith, nothing he does in addition will sway them.³⁴

Subsequently, Jesus warns his disciples about the "leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod" (8:15). By this metaphorical term "leaven" (i.e., yeast), Jesus seems to mean their "hard-heartedness" (8:17). He reinforces this by paraphrasing terms from Isaiah 6³⁵ in 8:18 (blind eyes, deaf ears). Even his own intimate followers can succumb to this disease of unbelief and refuse to recognize Jesus for who he is, despite the powerful deeds and words which they see and observe first hand. As Mark's readers consider this text, they are reminded of their own danger and warned to be aware of the problem of unbelief. If Jesus' own disciples struggled to understand him, Mark's readers should take note and realize their own vulnerability.³⁶ The accusation of "hard-heartedness" is used by Jesus several times in Mark's narrative as the explanation for the failure of the religious leaders to respond to his message. Such terminology echoes the criticism of Israel by God, because their hardness of heart historically led them to reject his leadership and blinded them to God's grace and goodness.³⁷

34. In the sections of his narrative which follow this confrontation (chaps. 8-10), Jesus repeats a prophetic word about his demise in Jerusalem. Chapters 11-16 demonstrate how this forecast does in fact come true. Not only the prophecies from the OT (i.e., Zechariah in Mark 14:27) are fulfilled by Jesus' arrest, trial, death, and resurrection, but also his own statements.

35. Consider Mark's reference to this same material in 4:10-12.

36. When Judas does betray Jesus, these words give us the clue to his motives—hardness of heart and unbelief. Perhaps he began to realize, once Jesus entered Jerusalem, that there was going to be no national, militaristic revival led by Jesus. Maybe his betrayal happens because he understands Jesus' intent sooner than his fellow-disciples and rejects Jesus' mission of suffering.

37. In Mark's Gospel this terminology occurs at 3:5; 6:52; and 8:17. Isaiah accuses the priests and prophets of rejecting God's word because they are a hardened people (cf. Isa 6:10). Jeremiah criticizes God's people for obstinacy, heeding false prophets and disregarding God's true messengers. Ps 95:8 urges Israel "Harden not your hearts!" Jesus' accusation stands in the line of those previously made by Israel's recognized

Again the rhetorical question which concludes this scene, "Do you not yet understand?" challenges the readers also.³⁸

After this scene, Jesus concentrates his attention in the narrative upon the faith-formation of his own disciples, eventually arriving in Jerusalem (8:27-11:1). The frequently repeated prophecy about his own death and resurrection (8:31; 9:9, 31-32; 10:32-34) perhaps functions ironically as the "sign" which the Pharisees asked for but which they refused to consider, at least prior to his death. As Jesus moves closer to Jerusalem and his forecast of personal tragedy becomes his constant refrain, the readers of Mark's narrative must wonder if the conspiracy of the Pharisees and Herodians (3:6) will become the means by which Jesus' prophecies are fulfilled.

At the beginning of chap. 10, Mark informs the readers that Jesus and his followers are moving towards Judea. The first pericope we encounter after this geographical note³⁹ and important advance in Jesus' plans concerns the question of the Pharisees about the appropriate guidelines for divorce. The questioning by the Pharisees is characterized as a "testing" (10:2).⁴⁰ In his response, Jesus again returns to the issue of scriptural interpretation. He reviews the commands of Moses and also the intent of God expressed in the creation account of Gen 2:24 (cf. 10:7-8). By focusing upon Moses' directive in Deuteronomy 24 and giving this priority, Jesus argues, the religious leaders have failed to discern God's intent regarding the marital relationship as expressed originally in Genesis 2.⁴¹ Moses' instruction responded to Israel's "hard-heartedness" (10:5) and by

prophets. His use of such rhetoric serves to categorize the refusal of the religious leaders to respond and as a serious warning to his own disciples. In chaps. 8-10 Jesus' disciples demonstrate their spiritual obtuseness in many different ways.

38. Mark's conclusion of this incident with the rhetorical question contrasts with Matthew's account, in which he continues to explain the meaning of Jesus' words (16:11-12) after this question. This seems to decrease the potential rhetorical effect of this question in Matthew's Gospel upon the reader.

39. Most interpreters of Mark's Gospel consider the geographical notation about Caesarea Philippi in 8:27 as the signal for Jesus' inauguration of his final journey to Jerusalem. However, there is no indication at this time that Jesus intends to venture outside of Galilee. At 9:33 Jesus still is in Capernaum. So the note in 10:1 that Jesus "having arisen went into the regions of Judea and beyond the Jordan" is the first intimation of his journey to Jerusalem in Mark's Gospel.

40. This term *πειράζω* expressed satan's attack upon Jesus in 1:13 and also the Pharisees' request for a sign in 8:11. It will recur in 12:15 when Jesus accuses them of "testing him" in the matter of paying taxes to Caesar.

41. Mark, by citing Jesus' criticism for the religious leaders' failure to understand God's fundamental intent and, as a result, misinterpreting the law's teaching about marriage and divorce, once more views the leaders as annulling the commands of God (cf. Mark 7:6ff.).

extension, because the religious leaders have not perceived this, they continue to demonstrate "hard hearts." Jesus concludes by summarizing what he considers to be God's intention for marriage among His people.

The significance of Jesus' action in the Jerusalem temple (11:15-19) receives various interpretations. Whether it is a call for restoration and renewal or a prophetic, symbolic act of the temple's impending destruction and replacement by something entirely new,⁴² Mark makes it clear that Jesus' action incensed the religious leaders and as a result "the high priests and the scribes⁴³ heard and began seeking how they might destroy him" (11:18). The crowds in Jerusalem during this Passover time (14:1ff.), Mark notes, again are "astonished at his teaching" (11:18),⁴⁴ but this serves to amplify the fear⁴⁵ about Jesus' actions which the religious leaders experience. Mark requires the reader to consider once again the question of Jesus. Is he indeed the terrible danger and threat that the religious leaders perceive him to be, and thus is his destruction warranted? Or does he stand in the line of Isaiah and Jeremiah, the prophets he quotes (11:17), and thus, deserves to be heard? The destruction of the fig tree, which the disciples alone observe, indicates to the reader something of the authoritative power of Jesus. When this is coupled with Jesus' promise to his followers that faith in God could cause "this mountain [i.e., the temple mount] to be removed and thrown into the sea" (11:23), the potential effect of Jesus' authority is multiplied significantly in the mind of the reader.

Through the remainder of chaps. 11 and 12, Mark's narrative presents numerous scenes where various Jewish religious groups seek to discredit Jesus before the crowds as well as to gather incriminating evidence by asking contentious questions. They hope his answers will provide the ammunition necessary to arrange for his arrest with

42. Mark's intercalation of this event within the "cursing of the fig tree" episode (11:12-14, 20-25) urges the reader to see some connection between these events—that is, the cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple. Only Mark intercalates this event with the cleansing of the temple.

43. In 3:6 it was the Pharisees and Herodians who began conspiring to destroy Jesus.

44. Mark repeats his exact words from 1:22, his account of the first response of a synagogue congregation to Jesus' teaching. Other notices of this response occur at 6:2 (synagogue at Nazareth); 7:37 (people in the Decapolis); 10:26 (disciples' response to Jesus' words about wealthy people and the kingdom).

45. "Fear" is an appropriate response to God's actions in the OT, as His holiness impresses itself upon human beings. The response of the high priests and scribes to Jesus' actions in the temple is also "fear," but this is not the respectful response of worship which God deserves but rather a fear of the political/religious consequences should Jesus' actions be left unchallenged and the crowds rally to his mission.

minimal public agitation. Sequentially the high priests, scribes, and elders (11:27), some of the Pharisees and Herodians (12:13), the Sadducees (12:18), and one of the scribes (12:28) put their questions to Jesus. Finally, after Mark notes that "from then on no one dared ask him any more questions" (12:34), Jesus in his teaching of the crowds questions the religious leaders' interpretations of Scripture (12:35-37), raising doubts about their ability to understand their own religious traditions, and openly criticizes their public behavior. He ends with a strong warning that "such men will be punished most severely" (12:40).

The first confrontation centers around the source (11:28) of Jesus' authority (ἐξουσία), the attribute which the crowds first noted about Jesus' teaching in 1:27. Earlier Mark has indicated that some religious leaders, "scribes from Jerusalem," considered that satan provided Jesus with his authority (3:22), an accusation he had denied vigorously. Despite all that Jesus had done in between, these leaders persisted in their belief that Jesus was a false prophet, demonically inspired. By responding with a question of his own, Jesus puts the leaders on trial, because he requires them to express publicly their opinion of John the Baptist's ministry—was his message of baptism "from heaven or from human beings?" (11:30).⁴⁶ Mark then records the discussion which ensues among the religious leaders (11:31-32) as they sort out their options. They know precisely the implications of both answers. They also know that the majority in Israel believed John was a prophet from God. When they respond by saying "we do not know" (11:33), their credibility is seriously eroded in the mind of the reader. But even more, the reader who has the advantage of knowing what John has said and done and Jesus' evaluation of his ministry (i.e., 9:11-13), realizes that John's authority came "from heaven," and so then must the authority of Jesus as well.

The parable which follows in 12:1-11, however, does give Jesus' answer to their question. The story of the vineyard resonates with the story told by Isaiah (5:1-6) about Israel. There, as also with Jesus' parable, the vineyard belongs to God. When it does not produce the fruit He expects (i.e., justice, righteousness, etc.), He announces that He will destroy the vineyard. Similarly, Jesus warns that the farmers leasing the vineyard and refusing to provide the owner with his rightful share will be severely punished. The vineyard will be taken away from them, and the owner will "give the vineyard to others" (12:9). In the midst of the parable, the owner's "beloved son" is sent

46. This question, of course, condenses wonderfully the key issue which Mark has been considering since the beginning of his narrative. This is the primary question which the readers must answer about Jesus.

as the final attempt to bring the farmers to their senses. However, they kill him and throw him out of the vineyard (v. 8). Jesus ends the parable by quoting from Ps 118:22-23 the prophecy about the "stone"⁴⁷ which the builders rejected" and how "the Lord" makes it "the head of the corner." Plainly, Jesus asserts that his authority comes from God, that his mission is sanctioned by God, even while acknowledging once more that he will be killed and rejected by the religious leaders, just as God had predicted in the Jewish Scriptures. In response the religious leaders try to arrest Jesus on the spot, because "they knew that he spoke the parable against them" (12:12). Fear of the crowds again stymies them. In a mysterious way the very rejection which Jesus is experiencing contributes to his credibility because it precisely matches, in his view, what God had prophesied previously in the OT. Their rejection confirms his status.

In quick succession Mark recounts the question from the Pharisees and Herodians designed to "catch Jesus in his words" (ἵνα αὐτὸν ἀγρεύσωσιν λόγῳ, 12:13). With flattering and deceitful words ("we know that you are truthful . . . in truth you are teaching the way of God, 12:14) they throw out their query about paying taxes to Caesar. They anticipate that Jesus will condemn himself no matter what answer he provides. The author reveals Jesus' awareness of their "hypocrisy" and their intent to "test him" (12:15), but none of this dissuades Jesus from responding and, in the process, avoiding the political and religious pitfalls they had set. Instead of glee at his entrapment, they are forced into amazement (ἐξεθαύμαζον)⁴⁸ at his brilliant rejoinder. The Sadducees fare no better as they attack Jesus' convictions about resurrection (12:18-27). Despite their extreme example, which they think demonstrates that the idea of resurrection is absurd, Jesus, pointing them to study and understand the very Scriptures they quote to him, accuses them of error because they do not understand their sacred writings, nor do they appreciate the power of God. He repeats his charge in v. 27, claiming that they "are badly mistaken."

Who is winning the religious debate? No matter how difficult the issue or how cunning their intent, the religious leaders in the end lose the argument. If they cannot sustain their religious credibility in the temple precinct, the management of which validates their position and authority in the minds of contemporary Jews, why should the reader accept their assessment of Jesus as blasphemer, demon-possessed, deceiver, and false-prophet? Rather, they emerge

47. It is probable that Jesus here is using a play on words as the parable first talks about the "beloved son" (*ben* in Aramaic) and concludes with a reference to the "stone" (*'eben*).

48. Once again Mark uses the imperfect tense to suggest a continuing, if grudging, respect for Jesus.

as opposing God's intent in John and Jesus, as well as misunderstanding their own religious tradition and identity. Yet, the discussion about the greatest commandment (12:28-34) does indicate that even among these religious opponents some do respond and recognize that Jesus, as teacher, does "speak truthfully" (12:32).⁴⁹ Jesus acknowledges this insight of faith and says that this scribe is "not far from the kingdom of God" (12:34). Not all are deaf or blind to Jesus' message. As in Nazareth, there are a few in Jerusalem who exercise faith. Mark concludes this series of confrontations with the comment that "from then on no one dared ask him any more questions" (12:34). The reason seems obvious—Jesus knew Jewish theology, God's intentions, and Jewish Scriptures better than any of these religious leaders. Their credibility is in tatters.

But the author is not content to leave matters here. Jesus in the narrative proceeds to challenge a fundamental belief presented by these scribes—namely, that the Messiah is the "son of David" (12:35), a messianic title which does not occur in the OT.⁵⁰ By reference to Ps 110:1,⁵¹ Jesus indicates that David regards the Messiah as his "Lord," which seems to contradict the suggestion that the Messiah would be his "son" or descendant. Jesus asks for the canonical source of their assertion. They claim to know the Scriptures and yet they use titles for the Messiah which have no basis in these Scriptures.⁵² Again, Jesus erodes their credibility in the eyes of the temple crowds (12:37), as well as for the reader of Mark's Gospel.

A final blow to the status of the religious leaders comes in 12:38-40. Jesus pillories the religious attitudes and pretensions of the scribes ("for a show [they] make lengthy prayers," 12:40) and at the same time condemns their lack of compassion for and just response to the precarious condition of defenseless widows. This language reflects the accusations of injustice and corruption leveled by earlier prophets (i.e., Isaiah and Jeremiah) against religious leaders of their day. Jesus implies that nothing has changed, and the current religious leaders similarly "will be punished most severely," presumably by God.⁵³

49. Compare this affirmation about Jesus' truthfulness with the sarcastic statements made in 12:14.

50. Its first occurrence in the extant literature is in *Pss. Sol.* 17:21.

51. Whether Jesus is the first Jewish interpreter to discern the messianic implications of Ps 110:1 is uncertain. Plainly, as subsequent use of this text in other parts of the NT shows, it had a powerful impact upon the church's understanding (cf. Acts 2:34-35; Heb 1:13).

52. For fuller discussion, see R. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 717-19.

53. This perspective complements Jesus' warning in the previous parable (12:9) that the owner of the vineyard will "come and kill the tenants and give the vineyard to others."

The cryptic oracle of judgment uttered by Jesus (Mark 13:2) against the temple (and by extension the religious leaders who are responsible for its operations), and presumably Jerusalem as well, responds to his disciples' expression of awe at the magnificence of the temple's construction. It seems to bring closure to this period of temple activity which began with Jesus' action to "drive out those who were buying and selling there" (11:15), continues with his controversial debates with the various religious leaders, and includes the parable of the tenant farmers. Just as Jeremiah had pronounced God's judgment upon Jerusalem and the temple because the people and leaders had refused to respond to his prophetic calls for repentance (Jeremiah 7), so Jesus ends his period of public ministry in Mark's record with this disclosure to his disciples that God similarly will destroy Herod's magnificent temple. Given all that has transpired in Mark 11-12, the reader must assume that such judgment comes because of the opposition to Jesus and the failure by the religious leaders to accept Jesus' authority, message, and role. The commentary which Jesus provides in private to Peter, James, John, and Andrew (Mark 13:3-37) merely elaborates how and when this judgment will occur, the way in which it relates to the Son of Man's future activity, and the responsibilities of Jesus' followers as all of this happens. As he draws his commentary to a conclusion, Jesus affirms once more the authority of his words:

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.⁵⁴

The reader must ponder, then, the implications of such a strong assertion. Such hyperbole underscores the authority which Jesus claims for his message, which responds to the prophetic promises in Dan 7:13-14 (alluded to in Mark 13:26), for example, and contrasts with the inability of Jewish religious leaders to interpret correctly the prophetic words which God had given to them in previous generations. Their inability or unwillingness to hear the real message which Jesus brings and the implications which this has for the destruction of Jerusalem send a stark warning to the readers lest they also be found in a similar context of judgment because they too have failed to heed Jesus' words. "What I say to you, *I say to everyone*: 'Watch!' " Jesus urges at the conclusion of his discourse (13:37).⁵⁵

As the final stages of Mark's narrative focus upon Jesus' arrest, trial, and death, we discover that Jesus becomes more and more isolated. His closest followers betray or desert him. Alone he faces the

54. Mark 13:31.

55. Only as the readers also respond to the words of Jesus will they have opportunity to be included in the "elect" whom the Son of Man will gather when he returns (13:26-27). Neither Matthew nor Luke includes Jesus' command "to all" in his parallel account.

inquisition of the religious leaders and the interrogation by the Roman governor, Pilate. The religious leaders conversely seem to gather boldness as their conspiracy succeeds. Jesus is executed, condemned by his own claim to be "the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One," warning his accusers that they "will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (14:61-62). His death by crucifixion seems to verify the opinion of the scribes that he was a blasphemer. Surely, if he were the Messiah, God would have miraculously intervened to protect him, to enable him "to come down from the cross, that we may see and believe" (15:32). Mark describes their activity as mockery, scorn, and insult as they heap verbal abuse upon Jesus, using religious slogans to discredit him (15:29-32). Pilate confirms Jesus' death directly from the centurion responsible for the execution (15:44-45). The record of his burial by Joseph of Arimathea and some of Jesus' female followers (15:46-47) brings closure to the conspiracy to "arrest Jesus and kill him" (14:1). If the conspiracy has succeeded, should this not lead the readers to conclude that the religious leaders' evaluation of Jesus was right all along? The repeated use of the title "King of the Jews" in chap. 15 challenges the readers to consider how this crucified religious criminal could possibly be the Messiah, King of the Jews.

Of course, the readers know that Jesus had prophesied these precise events numerous times in chaps. 8-10.⁵⁶ In ironic fashion, the attempts by the religious leaders to silence Jesus by execution serve to affirm the authority and truth of his prophetic words. Further, Jesus claims that all of these events precisely fulfill the plan which God previously had revealed in the OT.⁵⁷ The inability of the Sanhedrin to find convincing witnesses as the basis for a guilty verdict⁵⁸ against Jesus and their forced reliance upon Jesus' own admission also suggest that he is guiding this process in some way. And then there are the various extraordinary actions—darkness at noon and the tearing of the temple veil—which suggest that something unusual is occurring with Jesus' death. Even the Roman centurion in charge of the execution detail, when he observes the manner of Jesus' death, concludes that "this man was the Son of God!"⁵⁹ (15:39).

56. Mark 8:31; 9:9-10, 30-32; 10:32-34.

57. Jesus cites Zech 13:7 in Mark 14:27 and later states as he is arrested that "the Scriptures must be fulfilled" (14:49).

58. In the Markan narrative, Jesus is portrayed as completely innocent of any charge brought by the Sanhedrin or by Pilate.

59. Exactly what the Centurion would have meant by this assertion is debated. The nominal structure "son of God" may be anarthrous because it functions as the predicate in a nominal sentence. However, recent suggestion has been made that it is a direct reference to Augustus' title or name *dei filius*, with some contrast being drawn between Jesus and Augustus.

The readers must decide what Jesus' death signifies. Is it the end of Jesus' vision? Are the disciples of Jesus doing the only thing possible when they scatter in fear for their lives as Jesus is arrested? Is Peter's denial of any association with Jesus the appropriate response in the face of a project gone awry? Should the readers imitate this response to Jesus' death, affirming the judgment of the religious leaders that Jesus is a blasphemer, and like Peter deny him with cursing? Or, on the contrary, does Jesus' fulfillment of his own prophetic word by his arrest, trial, and death engender confidence that ultimately his message should be trusted and that his life does complete the purposes of God Himself? Should the readers echo the centurion's admission that Jesus surely is the Son of God? The lack of cogent witnesses at Jesus' trial, the motivation of envy attributed to the religious leaders, the ironic insults of the chief priests and teachers of the law, the darkness and rending of the temple veil—all these various elements plus the prophetic-fulfillment motif direct the readers to conclude that Jesus is who he claims to be. His crucifixion does not nullify his mission but, rather, establishes its credibility. The empty tomb, the announcement of Jesus' resurrection by the mysterious "young man dressed in a white robe," and the promise that Jesus' followers would see him again in Galilee (16:6-7) constitute Mark's closing argument, giving his readers reason to acknowledge that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

Final vindication for Mark's view of Jesus and his claims comes in the fulfillment of the resurrection prophecies. He is both Jesus of Nazareth and Son of God.

In conclusion, it seems apparent from this analysis that the author of Mark's Gospel uses a variety of rhetorical strategies to guide his implied readers⁶⁰ to specific conclusions. In particular, the language of religious conflict compels the hypothetical reader to choose between the competing interpretations of Jesus and his message. By means of specific rhetorical questions, repeated key words, debates about the correct interpretation of scriptural materials, characterization of the religious leaders⁶¹ and Jesus, and the fulfillment of OT and

60. Rhoads and Michie in *Mark as Story* indicate that we must distinguish between the "implied reader" and the "first century reader." The "implied reader" is "an imaginary reader with the ideal response implied or suggested by the narrative, experiencing suspense or feeling amazement or sympathizing with a character at the appropriate time" (p. 137). A "first century reader" in contrast is "an actual reader," who "would have seen the events of the story world in relation to the events of the real world at the time of writing"(p. 140).

61. Whether the narrator considers the Jewish religious leaders to be cautionary examples or a continuing threat to the Christian community or a combination of the two cannot be ascertained without more precise information concerning the circumstances which gave rise to this narrative. If the narrative was circulating prior to

Jesus' own prophecies, the author seeks to guide such readers to the conclusion that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of God" who will return in glory "on the clouds of heaven." Even when the religious leaders seem to have triumphed with the execution of Jesus, they have only contributed to the completion of God's plan and the final confirmation of Jesus' credibility. The narrator strives to remove spiritual blindness, deafness, and hardness of heart in the implied reader.

If this Gospel was written in the context of the Jewish-Roman war (66-70 CE) and in Rome, to help the church in that center, then this narrative affirms Jesus' message and role in contrast to the failed conspiracy of the Jewish religious leaders to eliminate him. It would serve to reassure first-century Jewish Christians⁶² particularly that, when they accepted Jesus' vision for Israel, they had chosen correctly. The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, whether imminent or history, could be interpreted as God's judgment upon those who reject the Messiah (Mark 12:1-12), regardless of their ethnicity. Even the political events occurring in Palestine continued to confirm and vindicate the truth of Jesus' claims, especially his promises related to the return of the Son of Man in glory. And if, as some argue, this church was facing persecution,⁶³ then this narrative, vindicating as it does Jesus' vision and message, would be strong encouragement to persevere.⁶⁴

or during the first stages of the Jewish-Roman conflict, then perhaps the continuing vitality and political influence of the Jewish community in the Empire would be seen more as a threat.

62. Paul's discussion of the place of Israel in salvation history found in Romans 9-11 indicates how important such issues were within the Roman church even in the early 60s of the first century. Of course, other venues have been proposed for the origin of Mark's Gospel (i.e., Galilee, Alexandria, etc.). However, the crisis within Judaism and those movements closely associated with it by the Jewish revolt in 66 CE would generate significant and continuing discussion about the meaning of these events in terms of God's plans for His covenant people.

63. Joel Marcus, "Mark 4:10-12 and Marcan Epistemology," *JBL* 103 (1984) 557-74.

64. Rhoads and Michie also describe how a sympathetic first-century reader might hear Mark's narrative and respond in his or her given context (*Mark as Story*, 140-42).