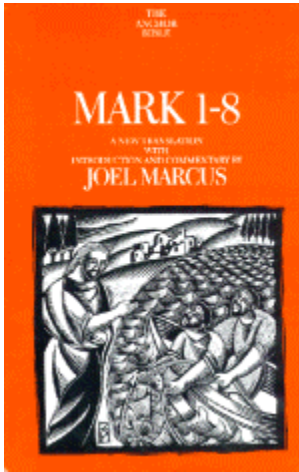


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Marcus, Joel

Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary

Anchor Bible 27

New York: Doubleday, 1999. Pp. xix + 569, Cloth, \$42.50, ISBN 0385423497.

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The Anchor Bible finally has the first installment of a strong replacement for C. S. Mann's embarrassingly weak commentary on Mark. Despite its title, Marcus's volume stops at Mark 8:21. After preliminaries come a new translation of Mark's text, 67 pages of introduction, 51 pages of bibliography, 381 pages of repeated translation with notes and comments, plus a short glossary and various appendices and indices. Marcus's writing style makes arguments easy to follow. Flashes of humor enliven the discussion, as when he says of Herodias that "she seems to have liked uncles and men named Herod—and there were a lot of both around, thanks to Herod the Great" (p. 395). Unexpected literary references adorn the commentary; for example, pages 418-19 contain quotations from Emily Dickinson, St. Teresa of Avila, and Toni Morrison. And some pastoral touches yield another bonus.

Marcus thinks it probable that a Jew named Mark—perhaps John Mark of the NT—wrote the Gospel, but doubts the Papiian tradition that the author was closely associated with Peter. Marcus also argues against the view that Mark and the other evangelists wrote for the church at large, and against the view that Mark wrote to provide Christians with an evangelistic tool. Marcus's argument that especially the call narratives (1:16-20; 2:13-17) do not suit an evangelistic purpose fails to convince, however; for the first one has to do with evangelism ("I will make you become fishers of human beings"), and the second reaches its climax in an invitation to the banquet of salvation ("I have not come to call righteous people, but sinful ones"). Moreover, Marcus has to admit that "gospel" (1:1)

occurs in the NT usually in a missionary setting (five of his six proposed exceptions still having to do with evangelism, so far as I can tell). Yet, he propounds, Mark wrote the Gospel as a liturgical drama for his local Christian community, situated in Syria, not in Rome, suffering persecution from Jewish revolutionaries shortly before or after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., not from Nero somewhat earlier, and excited at the prospect of the Son of Man's coming soon after the tribulation of the Jewish War. Accordingly, the core of Mark's community consisted of Christians who had fled to Pella from Judea because of the abomination of desolation, which Marcus takes to have been a desecration of the Temple by Zealots (though that desecration did not leave the Temple deserted, as "desolation" requires). Since the Romans had made the cities of the Decapolis, among them Pella, part of Syria and since Marcus mentions no further migration of the Christians from Pella to another locality in Syria, presumably he thinks Mark's community still resided in Pella. But he does not explain the discrepancy between the natural understanding of "the mountains" to which "the ones in Judea" are to flee according to 13:14 as the mountains of the Judean wilderness, a traditional refuge, and the location of Pella at the base of low-lying foothills in the northeastern Jordan Valley.

Marcus admits that though there is plenty of direct evidence for other persecutions of Christians, we lack any direct evidence for a persecution of Christians during the Jewish War. This lack is especially surprising if, as Marcus thinks, Mark equated the Jewish War with a tribulation so severe that nothing like it had ever occurred before. Equally surprising is Mark's failure to portray the Son of Man's soon coming as a vindication of persecuted Christians and a judgment on their persecutors. Nevertheless, Marcus bases his commentary on the hypothesis that a persecution of Christians during the Jewish War provided the backdrop for Mark's Gospel. Thus the evangelist presents Jesus as a paradigm of the suffering and martyrdom to which Mark's audience are falling victim, and of the resurrection to which they can look forward. Marcus does not think Mark is correcting a theology of glory with a theology of the cross, however. The massiveness of Mark's emphasis on Jesus' miracles and exorcisms forestalls such a correction. But neither does Marcus regard this emphasis as designed to counteract the shame of Jesus' crucifixion. Rather, Mark wants to call his community to faith in Christ's presence with them as they suffer, this presence mediated through the Eucharist and evident in their own miracles and exorcisms. One may question whether Mark stresses the Eucharist and the disciples' miracles and exorcisms enough to bear the weight of this hypothesis. The only supernatural deeds mentioned as being performed during Mark's time of the Jewish War, according to Marcus's view of it as the tribulation, are those performed by false christs and false prophets (13:22). Those of the Twelve lie in the past so far as Mark's text is concerned. To maintain his view Marcus suggests a highly symbolic interpretation of the leftovers from Jesus' feeding miracles, so that the large volume of leftovers "may symbolize the continuity of the eucharistic miracle into the Markan present . . . so that the church may be fed from the overflowing baskets" (p. 421). But nothing in Mark's account of the feedings or of the Institution of the Lord's Supper suggests that the bread and wine of Jesus' body and blood encourage the endurance of persecution.

Marcus dates canonical Mark prior to the Secret Gospel of Mark; doubts Mark's use of Q; believes in Mark's use of preformed collections; sees a pervasive motif of messianic secrecy; thinks the true identity of Mark's Jesus cannot be publicly revealed till his death and resurrection have occurred (but see 14:62); allows for Mark's and John's independently using the same or similar tradition now and then (likewise in regard to the Gospel of Thomas, though it also betrays dependence on the Synoptics); and in general considers Mark "a creative shaper of inherited traditions" (p. 59). For those who want a commentary that advocates these and aforementioned mainstream opinions, *Mark 1-8* will prove admirably useful. It shows great depth and breadth of research in both primary and secondary literature.

On the other hand and apart from my fundamental disagreement with Marcus over Mark's purpose, *Mark 1-8* suffers from what many readers, I suspect, will adjudge over-interpretation, specifically, a straining to relate Mark's text to its putative background in the Jewish War, to hear multiple and subtle echoes of the OT, and to discover intratextual allusions within the Gospel of Mark. To be sure, historical allusions, OT echoes, and Markan intratextuality are not to be denied altogether or out of hand; and Marcus often seasons his interpretations with a "probably," "perhaps," or subjunctive mood (which for brevity I shall omit below). But the distinctive if not dominant flavor of the commentary comes from these interpretations themselves. Here are examples:

The threat of a lake-storm to the disciples' lives echoes the story of Jonah and symbolizes a persecution of Christians by the Jewish rebels. (One wonders how a storm that God sent against Jonah for his faithless disobedience represents non-Christians' persecution of Christians for faithful obedience.) The disciples' "being tortured in their rowing" likewise symbolizes a persecution of Mark's community by the Jewish rebels, partly because the verb for "rowing" can connote persecution. (But when the verb carries this connotation, it is the subject of the verb that does the persecuting, whereas in Mark the disciples are the subject—hence, the persecutors? Hardly what Marcus wants!) Jesus' defending table fellowship with Levi's fellow tax collectors and sinners gives Mark's defense against the Jewish rebels' charge that by sharing table with Gentile sinners Mark's community is traitorously giving aid and comfort to the enemy, and Jesus' charging the scribes with unforgivable blasphemy reverses another charge that the Jewish rebels are aiming at Mark's community. (But 13:9-13, which Marcus cites, does not mention such charges against Christians.) Jesus' instructing the Twelve what to do when rejected in a locality (6:10-11) is to be understood against a background of active persecution and even murder. (Yet Jesus defines the rejection only as a refusal of hospitality and a refusal to listen.) The smallness of Mark's persecuted community leads him to use the neuter in describing the masculine grain of mustard as small: "the mustard is so insignificant that it cannot even retain its gender!" (p. 324). (Although "grain" is masculine, however, the word for "mustard" is neuter.) The pigs into which Jesus allowed Legion to enter represent the Roman army that was occupying Palestine; and the occasional use of "pig" as slang for female genitalia, the wild behavior of the pigs on

Legion's entry, and the possibly martial connotations of sending, commanding, and rushing headlong combine to symbolize the Roman army's raping of local women. (In fairness to Marcus, he states his uncertainty whether Mark himself shares this anti-Roman symbolism.)

The disciples' making a way by plucking ears of grain echoes preparing the way of the Lord in Isa 40:3, quoted in Mark 1:3. (Marcus fails to mention that a Latinism, such as Mark likes to use, favors plucking ears of grain as the disciples journey along an already existing path, and that Mark mentions Jesus' traveling through a grain field before he mentions the disciples' making their way, so that presumably they are following him, as usual, not preparing his way ahead of him.) Because of a Markan apocalyptic eschatology that puts end time in parallel with primitive time, the voice from heaven that echoes Isa 42:1 ("in you I am well pleased") echoes as well God's good pleasure in and at his creation of the world. Similarly, Mark's using the verb "make" for Jesus' appointment of the Twelve echoes Genesis 1 in an allusion to the eschatological creation of a new world. The Pharisees' hard-heartedness echoes that of Pharaoh, especially because of the near homophony between "Pharaoh" and "Pharisee," thus to support the ministry of Jesus as a new Exodus. The descent of scribes from Jerusalem echoes with negative connotations the Israelites' descent to Egypt and the descent of Satan and his angels from heaven. (The descent of the Spirit at Jesus' baptism does not get the same negative twist, and one doubts that the descent of Jesus with Peter, James, and John from the Mount of Transfiguration will get it, either.) Some might find it hard to think that Mark expected an audience who needed his explanation of Jewish handwashing and other purificatory practices (7:3-4) to hear such OT echoes. Ignorance of those practices would seem to imply at least a relative ignorance of the OT. Marcus suggests that only some of the audience needed an explanation, but does not address the question how it could be that a community the core of which had recently emigrated from Judea would contain Gentiles unacquainted with obvious Jewish practices.

In the LXX "parable" translates the Hebrew מִשְׁלָּה which may be etymologically related to מָשַׁל, "to rule," so that by this route Mark's use of "parable" alludes intratextually to God's rule, or kingdom, a prominent theme in Mark. The use of ἐξίστημι for the false view that Jesus is mentally unstable contrasts with the use of ἵστημι for the true view that Satan's kingdom is politically unstable. The Pharisees' "coming out" in 8:10-13 links them with "the outsiders" of 4:11. (But the Pharisees come out to Jesus, not away from him.) The exorcisms in Mark 1 imply that in 2:1-3:6 Jesus' opponents are being used by demons. Jesus' "casting out" a cleansed leper correlates with Jesus' casting out demons. (Yet it is the man, not his leprosy or a demon of leprosy, that is cast out, not to mention Jesus' having been cast out by the Spirit.) The casting of mourners out of Jairus's house likewise correlates with Jesus' exorcisms. (As though the mourners play a demonic role? What about James Barr's warning against "illegitimate totality transfer"?) Jesus' and the apostles' not having a chance (εὐκαιρῶν) to eat relates in an unspecified

way to Herodias's having a chance (εὐκαίρου) to do away with John the Baptist, to Judas Iscariot's seeking a chance (εὐκαίρως) to betray Jesus, and to the time (καιρός) of good news (εὐαγγέλιον). (Another instance of "illegitimate totality transfer"?) The demon's stripping the Father's "beloved" from "Son of God" shows their hatred of Jesus. (Will Marcus draw the same inference from the centurion's failure to attach "beloved" to "Son of God"?)

Nonetheless, *Mark 1-8* contains a very great deal of value. By all means buy it, but beware of over-interpretation. Strangely, the book jacket features a picture of boatmen bringing to Jesus, who is standing on the beach, a haul of fish—an episode narrated in John but not in Mark. And have the copy editors at Doubleday decided that gerunds do not require the possessive for a subject?