

# Mark – The First Gospel

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## 002 – What’s So Great About Repentance? Mark 1:9-15

All outlines, audio recording of discussions, and works referenced may be accessed and viewed at <http://markthefirstgospel.blogspot.com/> .

### First Thoughts

“Repentance” is not a popular word. In popular use it is most frequently associated with sin, guilt, evil, and shame. But in Mark’s opening verses repentance (or the call to repent – *metanoieite*) is an intimate part of the good news, the gospel, *euangelion*. How is the call to repentance and repenting, “good news”? Could it be that modern, English connotations associated with repentance is somewhat off the mark?

Perhaps the key to recovering what Mark intended is found in the fact that Jesus undergoes a “baptism of repentance”. If repentance only has to do with “turning away from sin” then a baptism of repentance makes no sense for Jesus. Maybe Mark is trying to help us understand something far deeper and foundational about repentance than merely the act of rejecting sin. And/or perhaps “sin” needs to be also redefined.

### Baptism of Repentance (1:9-11)

*9 In those days Jesus came [erchomai, elthen] from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And when he came up out of the water, immediately [euthys] he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."* (ESV)

1. Verse 4 provides the setting and context for vv. 9-11

*John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.* (ESV)

2. Mark knew Jesus was the Son of God, therefore, sinless – but he does not bring up this point

Unlike Matthew, Mark seems to have no difficulty with Jesus undergoing John’s baptism of repentance even though Jesus had no need to repent. <sup>1</sup>
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- a. Matthew 3:14 – John tries to prevent Jesus from baptism
- b. Matthew and Luke both describe, in detail, Jesus’ origins
- c. Luke details John’s origins
- d. John’s gospel account omits the actual baptism event

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<sup>1</sup> *Exploring Mark*, p.43. I will add that Jesus had no need to repent of his own personal sins. But as the rest of this study will show, Jesus’ act of repentance was very much a necessity for his work of redemption of humankind.

It does not occur to Mark, as it does to Matthew, that the parallel with the other baptisms requires the explanation that Jesus had no sins to confess. This is important, because the Markan portrait places Jesus firmly within the tradition of the prophet who identifies with the sin of the people even as he accepts his call to the prophetic vocation (Isa 6:5).<sup>2</sup>

- e. Through form criticism, we know that Mark had to have before him the tradition on which the other gospels were written
- f. Through redaction criticism, we need to determine why Mark chose to highlight Jesus' act of "baptism of repentance" by omitting his origins and John's reluctance to baptize Jesus

This impression points up the fallacy of reading Mark through the eyes of any other evangelist. It is imperative to view the account in Marcan perspective.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Exploring the text

- a. Just as John simply "appeared" in the wilderness, Jesus "comes" from Nazareth of Galilee without any fanfare or warning
- b. The Baptist simply baptizes Jesus. The Baptist seems to have no idea who Jesus is.
- c. "Immediately" (euthys) – occurs 40-50 times in Mark's gospel account<sup>4</sup> – one of his favorite words

It imparts a sense of speed and urgency and often introduces a new incident or a surprising turn of events within an incident.<sup>5</sup>

- d. Heavens being torn apart – a violent image – "... Here God's invasion becomes personal; this is not just an encounter, but a possession."<sup>6</sup>
  - i. Isaiah 64:1, "Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down..." (ESV)
  - ii. A prayer calling for God to act on behalf of his people
- e. The Spirit descending – prophecies of a new exodus – Isaiah 32:15; 44:3; 63:10-14
- f. In the Markan account, only Jesus sees the heavenly manifestations, the Spirit, and God's voice

Jesus' baptism must be seen from the aspect of his self-concealment. He was baptized as any other person who came to John. There is no indication in Mark that anyone other than Jesus understood the significance of that event.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Reading Mark*, 1:1-13.

<sup>3</sup> *NICNT: Mark*, 1:12-13. Although this commentary is for vv.12-13 regarding the brevity of the temptation account of Mark vs. the other gospels, the general principle applies: let each gospel author speak for himself.

<sup>4</sup> *NICNT: Mark*, note 48 on 1:9-11.

<sup>5</sup> *ESV Study Bible*, note for Mark 1:10-11.

<sup>6</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, location 716.

<sup>7</sup> *NICNT: Mark*, 1:10-11.

It is important to notice, however, that the heavenly voice speaks only to Jesus, not to the crowd (as in Matthew) and not to John (as in the Fourth Gospel), which means that only Jesus and the audience know about his commission from God.<sup>8</sup>

- g. Beloved Son – echoes of Genesis 22:2; Psalm 2:7; Isaiah 42:1
  - i. Genesis 22:2, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”
  - ii. Messianic prophecies, but also the sacrifice of Isaac – the word “beloved” does not occur in Psalm or Isaiah, only Genesis<sup>9</sup>
- 4. What significance of Jesus’ baptism is Mark trying to communicate?
  - a. Western Christianity regards sin and salvation as primarily legal and personal
    - i. We need to let go of this assumption when reading Mark
  - b. For Mark, sin infects the entire community (all of humankind) and salvation is found in community
    - i. Wrong-doing is a result of wrong concepts of relationship within community
    - ii. Restoration of right basis of relationships will naturally correct wrong-doing and lead to right-doing
  - c. By undergoing a baptism of repentance, Jesus identifies himself with sin and humanity

However, the baptismal scene in Mark makes it clear that if a firm line is drawn between the holy, sinless God and sinful humanity, Jesus takes his stand on the human side of that line in solidarity with sinful humanity. Jesus’ “confession of sin” was his identification with his fellow human beings.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than being set apart from the rest of us sinners, he partakes of the same baptism, joining all the unclean there in the waters.<sup>11</sup>

- i. Jesus repents of humankind’s sin because humanity cannot do so on its own or does not realize it needs to repent (c.f., 1:5 where the people confess but do not appear to repent)
- ii. Repentance, too, is a gift of grace from God
- iii. Jesus identifies with sin and accepts its full consequences (judgment)
- iv. Jesus commits/turns himself toward faithfulness to God’s purposes
- v. Jesus is forming a new community – who will join him?

... Ch. 1:5 and Ch. 1:9 stand in relationship to each other. Both sentences are built in exactly the same way, so that the verses correspond, but they exhibit a deep contrast... In Ch. 1:5 *all* of the people come forth to be baptized by John; in Ch. 1:9 *one* single representative is introduced... By this correspondence and contrast Mark suggests that

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<sup>8</sup> *Reading Mark*, 1:1-13.

<sup>9</sup> *Reading Mark*, 1:1-13.

<sup>10</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, location 826.

<sup>11</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, location 863.

all of those from Judea and Jerusalem who came out to John prove to be yet rebellious and insensitive to the purpose of God. Contrary to expectation, only the one from Galilee proves to be the unique Son who genuinely responds to the prophetic call to the wilderness. In doing so he identified himself with a rebellious generation in need of redemption. Mark is concerned to indicate from the very beginning that Jesus is not an isolated individual who is responsible only for his own righteousness. From the point of introduction Jesus shares the heritage and predicament of the people, and like Moses in the first exodus (Ex. 32:23), he does not set himself apart from their sins. This is the startling emphasis of verse 9, that the bestower of the baptism with the Spirit humbles himself to receive the baptism of repentance. With a company of others, he heeds John's call to the wilderness as the place where Israel's sonship to God must be renewed.<sup>12</sup>

- d. Like Israel going through the Red Sea and their consecration at Sinai leads to God speaking to them, Jesus' baptism and anointing opens the heavens from which God speaks. The pattern of the first exodus is repeated in this new exodus.

The pattern had been established already in the first exodus that God could not come down until the people had been consecrated (Ex. 19:10 f.). For this reason Jesus expressed a vicarious confession of sin on behalf of the many. He walked into the waters of baptism in obedience to the Father's will. He had consecrated himself in faith, even as every other man must do. But in this instance God came down, and there was striking attestation that sonship has been re-established through the one true Israelite whose repentance was perfect.<sup>13</sup>

- e. Jesus undergoes a "reverse exorcism" in his filling by the Spirit so that he can go out and dispossess others of the demons that inhabit them<sup>14</sup>

## Deeper into the Wilderness (1:12-13)

*12 The Spirit immediately [euthys] drove him out into the wilderness. 13 And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him. (ESV)*

1. The "wilderness" theme continues
  - a. Jesus is already in the wilderness – the Baptist was baptizing in the wilderness
  - b. "Wilderness" must mean something more than its physical aspect

Since he was already in the desert, because that was where John was baptizing (1:4), the repeated reference to *eremos* cannot be a change of scene, but must have symbolic

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<sup>12</sup> NICNT: Mark, 1:9.

<sup>13</sup> NICNT: Mark, 1:10-11.

<sup>14</sup> Feasting: Mark, locations 724, 736, 751.

significance. Indeed this is the case; for Jesus, as for Israel after the exodus, the desert is the place of testing (*peirazomenos*).<sup>15</sup>

2. Mark describes Jesus as being “driven” into the wilderness by the Spirit
  - a. It is much more forceful than either Matthew or Luke – “led” into the wilderness
  - b. Mark’s point may be that a wilderness experience is a necessary part of God’s plan
  - c. At the very least, “wilderness” does not mean God’s abandonment

Though we do not really know what was behind Mark's choice of words here, the effect is to make the temptation seem more of an unsought and uncomfortable experience, an ordeal. The fact that it is the Spirit who drove him into the desert means that the testing there was God-ordained, part of the necessary preparation for God's chosen Son.<sup>16</sup>

3. The description is very brief, unlike Matthew and Luke that go into far greater detail
4. The period lasts forty days
  - a. Should not be interpreted as literally forty days
  - b. It is a round number, symbolic of the period in which Moses spent time on Sinai, the forty years of Israel’s in the wilderness, the time of Elijah’s wanderings to Mt. Horeb
  - c. Forty is a common biblical theme for a period of testing and preparation
5. Being tempted by Satan - Tempted in what way?
  - a. Mark does not provide details – we must not here bring in Matthew and Luke

Jesus is thrust into the wilderness in order to be confronted with Satan and temptation. It is this confrontation which is itself important, since it is sustained throughout Jesus' ministry. This explains why Mark does not say anything about the content of the temptation: this whole Gospel constitutes the explanation of the manner in which Jesus was tempted.<sup>17</sup>

- b. By excluding details of the testing, all temptation and testing found in human experience is addressed by Mark<sup>18</sup>
6. “Wild animals” is unique to Mark
  - a. It speaks to persecuted Christians who literally have to face wild animals
  - b. It may be symbolic of a deity’s special protection; it may indicate that the protected person is righteous<sup>19</sup>
    - i. Both Greek/Roman and Jewish traditions have stories in which a righteous or virtuous protagonist is given special protection from wild animals
  - c. It may indicate the imminent ushering in of the new kingdom with peace and reconciliation throughout creation<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Reading Mark*, 1:1-13.

<sup>16</sup> *UBC: Mark*, 1:9-13.

<sup>17</sup> *NICNT: Mark*, 1:12-13.

<sup>18</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, location 952.

<sup>19</sup> *Reading Mark*, 1:1-13.

<sup>20</sup> *Reading Mark*, 1:1-13.

- d. Wilderness is associated with the realm of Satan, in which wild beasts symbolize danger<sup>21</sup>
- 7. The angels minister throughout, rather than merely at the end as in Matthew and Luke
  - a. Allusion to the first exodus where angels were said to have led Israel
  - b. Matthew and Luke's accounts have angels marking the end of the temptation
  - c. Significance of Mark's account: that testing and temptation do not have an end for the Christian as long as they are part of this world, but angels minister amongst the forces of evil that threaten

This is an appropriate description, for the Marcan account of the ministry of Jesus is dominated by his confrontation with demonic forces and the sustaining of temptation. Jesus' obedience to God is affirmed and sustained in the wilderness, the precise place where Israel's rebellion had brought death and alienation, in order that the new Israel of God may be constituted.<sup>22</sup>

- 8. The temptation account has no ending in Mark's account

It is significant that Mark does not report the victory of Jesus over Satan, nor the end of the temptation. It is the evangelist's distinctive understanding that Jesus did not win the decisive victory during the forty days nor did he cease to be tempted.<sup>23</sup>

- 9. Jesus continued to be tempted – self-preservation may be the greatest test/temptation/sin

When we find ourselves in the wilderness, we too are tempted to preserve ourselves, to do whatever is necessary to stay alive, to relieve our own fears or pain or anxieties as quickly as possible, no matter the cost in pain and harm to those around us. In those moments, Mark's terse verses offer us a reminder that God's Spirit dwells in us, just as it did with Jesus, and remains with us in even the most difficult places. Therefore we are freed from the ever-present human temptation to preserve ourselves, because we can live in trust that we have already been rescued. In every circumstance, our lives rest in the hands of the one who came to save.<sup>24</sup>

## Announcing the Kingdom (1:14-15)

*14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came [erchomai, elthen] into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, 15 and saying, "The time [kairos] is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent [metanoete] and believe in the gospel."* (ESV)

- 1. These verses act as a hinge
  - a. They close the Prologue and begin the actual ministry of Jesus
- 2. The first year or so of Jesus' ministry is missing (c.f., John's gospel account)
  - a. Jesus did first minister in Judea, near the Baptist

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<sup>21</sup> NICNT: Mark, 1:12-13.

<sup>22</sup> NICNT: Mark, 1:12-13.

<sup>23</sup> NICNT: Mark, 1:12-13.

<sup>24</sup> Feasting: Mark, location 1081.

- b. For Mark, Jesus' ministry cannot begin until the Baptist goes away from the scene
- 3. The messages of the Baptist and Jesus are similar and different
  - a. Their messages are similar (gospel, repent)
  - b. But also different – Jesus' message is the "gospel of God," and from *the time is coming to the time is fulfilled*

It is not that historical circumstances were waiting to be "ripe," so Jesus could make an entrance into the world. Instead, with his coming, time has now received its "fullness" and, ultimately, its meaning. As Karl Barth put it: "The mission of the Son actually brings the fullness of time with it, and not vice versa. With the mission of the Son, with His entry into the time process, a new era of time has dawned, so far-reaching in its consequences that it may be justly called the fullness of all time."<sup>25</sup>

- c. John said nothing about the kingdom, but Jesus' proclamation is all about the kingdom

"The kingdom of God" here means the rule of God, and Jesus' message signifies that God has begun to establish his rule in a world viewed by many religious Jews as under the tyranny of Satan and evil.<sup>26</sup>

- 4. Why is repentance critical to the gospel, and why is it such good news?
  - a. Repentance has less to do with sin as acts than with sin as orientation toward something other than God

Jesus' action in confronting Satan, sin, disease and death, and subduing nature is the sign that the end stands as the next act of God in man's future. Provision has been made for men to repent, but there is no time for delay. Only through repentance can a man participate with joy in the kingdom when it does break forth... Either a man submits to the summons of God or he chooses this world and its riches and honor. The either/or character of this decision is of immense importance and permits of no postponement. That is what repentance is all about.<sup>27</sup>

- b. Jesus is the pattern of human repentance
  - i. Jesus had no sin, but his "repentance" was orienting all of his thoughts and actions to fulfilling God's will and purposes
  - ii. As a result Jesus calls for the rest of humanity to follow after him, renounce the world, and re-orient their desires toward God
  - iii. Jesus publicly identified with sin and sinners in baptism. We are called to publicly identify with Jesus in renouncing sin.

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<sup>25</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, location 1109.

<sup>26</sup> *UBC: Mark*, 1:14-20.

<sup>27</sup> *NICNT: Mark*, 1:14-15.

In Mark's situation, as in our own time, believers were tempted to keep their faith a personal, private thing. In baptism, one publicly identifies with Jesus.<sup>28</sup>

## Repentance is Good News

Repentance is the rejection of old patterns of thought and is the only method of entry into the kingdom of God. The time is now (*kairos*). An extended selection from *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark* –

Jesus is asking us to turn around (*metanoia*) from our own preconceived belief system to accept Jesus' real presence in Galilee. This is the hope of God's kingdom and the good news Jesus came to announce. It is an invitation for all of us (not just racial ethnic minorities) to enter liminal spaces and times and let the kingdom begin its work in us...<sup>29</sup>

Without question, *Metanoete!* carries with it the notion that we have some changing to do, some new directions to take; its primary orientation, though, is toward God's future rather than our past. In Mark, *Metanoete!* is an invitation to trust in a future made possible by the grace of God. The first word Jesus speaks in Mark's Gospel is "*Metanoete!*" Why? Because in Jesus, God makes it possible for God's people to do more than rerun the past. That is the gospel, the good news, the glad tidings toward which Jesus invites us to stop, turn, or turn again, and hold on to for dear life. *Metanoete!* says our Lord; things do not have to stay the way they are now! In fact, to follow Jesus means that things cannot stay the way they are...<sup>30</sup>

Do not forget that *Metanoete!* is a plural verb. Over the years, in English, we have downsized this powerful Greek verb into a singular, private affair. Of course, a person's decision whether or not to follow Jesus is deeply personal, but *Metanoete!* is a plural imperative that extends beyond one's personal decision. Mark refuses to reduce *Metanoete!* to a privatized response, as though the invitation of Jesus involved "just me and Jesus." Mark will have none of that. "Believing the gospel" is a group effort. Christian life is lived in community, always in community, no matter how many blemishes or scars.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, why Jesus could "repent" without having any fault of his own. He is establishing a kingdom based on principles that are not of this world –

To prepare for participation in the reign of God means a complete reversal of mindset (*metanoete* is usually translated "Repent!" but this is much more all-encompassing than mere regret or admission of fault). This reversal of mindset amounts to putting unreserved trust in the good news from God and about God that will unfold in the course of the narrative. That is all the Markan Jesus asks- a complete reversal of humanity's values, priorities, and ground of security.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, location 815.

<sup>29</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, location 1187.

<sup>30</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, location 1260.

<sup>31</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, location 1284.

<sup>32</sup> *Reading Mark*, 1:1-13.