

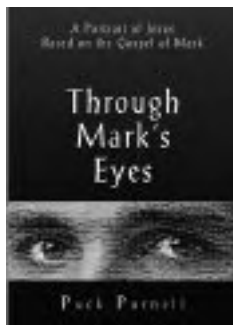


Traversing the Literary Landscape of Mark's Gospel

A Review of Puck Purnell's *Through Mark's Eyes*



Puck Purnell '64



Puck Purnell, class of 1964, has recently published *Through Mark's Eyes: A Portrait of Jesus based on the Gospel of Mark* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006). Rather than a translation of the original Greek, Purnell has written his own “recapitulation” of Mark’s Gospel in an attempt to “illustrate the original... gospel with word pictures almost as artist would do” (preface, p. ix). Eminent readable, the short book offers the contemporary reader easy access to the often complex landscape of Mark’s thought.

The *Gospel of Mark* is the shortest of the four canonical Gospels, the authorship of which has been dated between 65 and 70 CE, making it in all likelihood the first Gospel ever written.¹ In the year 65 a deadly conflict broke out between Judea and Rome at the instigation of the Zealots, a group of Jews who looked back to the Maccabees’ defeat of the Greeks² for inspiration of their hope of ridding their country of Romans.

Although the Pharisees had long opposed such a war (as had Jesus himself, almost forty years earlier), the Zealots were successful in provoking Roman wrath. The results of the war were devastating: Jerusalem was sacked and the Second Temple was destroyed. As had happened six hundred years earlier when Babylon sacked Jerusalem and destroyed Solomon’s Temple, the Jews asked themselves why would God allow this to happen? Mark’s Gospel provides one possible answer: we choose to think like Zealots rather than embrace the Kingdom of God as taught by Jesus Christ. In Mark 15:38, as soon as Jesus is crucified (circa 30–33 CE) it is symbolically suggested that the destruction of the Temple (70 CE) has become inevitable.

Mark’s Gospel, aside from being the first Gospel written, is also the shortest of the four canonical Gospels. Mark wrote no birth narrative and included very little concerning the Resurrection, leaving the story ending enigmatically at the mouth of an empty tomb, with no Resurrection Appearance Narratives whatsoever. The *Gospel of Mark* would later be rewritten by two persons unaware of each other’s efforts, the authors of *Luke* and *Matthew*, about a generation later (circa 85–90 CE). The author of the *Gospel of Luke* rewrote *Mark* for a largely Hellenistic audience where-

as the author of the *Gospel of Matthew* rewrote *Mark* for Christians who were, and continued to be, Jewish and who saw “Christianity” as the culmination and fulfillment of Judaism. Both Luke³ and Matthew added birth narratives to Mark’s short narrative and each expanded on the Resurrection. More than expanding on a very short narrative and telling stories which Mark left untold, Luke and Matthew were also faced with the daunting task of making sense of some of Mark’s more puzzling elements.

Mark, as the author of the first Gospel, had the daunting task of redefining the concept of “Messiah.” It was immediately problematic to give Jesus the title Christ Jesus (Christ being the Greek translation of the Hebrew “Messiah”) since Jesus in no way fit the definition of first century messianic expectation. Past examples of Messiahs include King David and even the Persian King Cyrus Koresh, whose conquest of Babylon allowed the Jews to return to Judea in 538 BCE and rebuild Solomon’s Temple. A Messiah is one whose actions have political and, often, militaristic consequences. King David defeated the Philistines and consolidated the borders of the Jewish nation after its enemies were routed. Cyrus Koresh—not even a Jew!—gave the Jewish people back their political independence. Jesus, however, ended up executed and had no immedi-

ate political impact on the Roman occupation of his nation. In Mark 8:27–33, in a most famous scene between Jesus and Peter, Mark has the opportunity to speak in Jesus' voice and redefine the meaning of Messiah when Peter makes a brilliant mistake. Peter calls Jesus "Messiah" but for all intents and purposes, Peter is thinking in the first century sense of the term: Jesus is the one who will lead the people to (political) liberation. Jesus silences Peter and defines what he means by "Messiah."

In that moment, something changed. The air changed. The feel of the ground under their feet changed. The energy between them changed. Something in Jesus changed. Something in what they were all about changed. In fact, right then and there Jesus told them that the Son of Man—that was the term he used—would suffer greatly. He said the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes would reject the Son of Man and then kill him (Purnell 63).

Kill him? Messiahs defend and lead others against the enemies of Judaism; they do not themselves get killed (certainly not the ignominious death Jesus would suffer). Peter does not accept this interpretation; Purnell describes how "Peter poked his finger at Jesus' chest and scolded him for what he'd said about getting killed." Here is the heart of the entire Gospel: what Peter, the average first century Jew, and indeed humanity in general, *expect* to happen is not going to happen; rather, God will transcend everyone's expectations and in so doing both reveal man's nature to man and offer the path to salvation despite our violent nature.

Jesus refers to himself as the "Son of Man" and this is a puzzle. No one has yet figured out what this meant to Mark

or to Jesus himself. The reference seems to be to a phrase in Daniel but even the brief reference to "one like a son of man [coming] with the clouds of heaven" does little to reveal its significance to a first century person. What was Jesus' self-understanding? Why does he refer to himself in Mark as the Son of Man, remain largely misunderstood by his own disciples, and yet demons call him the Son of God? Mark opens more questions about Jesus' identity and self-understanding than he answers.

In Mark we meet the teacher of the Kingdom of God: up until the eighth chapter in which Jesus and Peter argue about the nature of Jesus' identity Mark presents Jesus as an exorcist and healer but above all, as a teacher. What Jesus has come to teach is the Kingdom of God, a way of life, a "path" of sorts, and Jesus teaches the Kingdom in parables. When Jesus is rejected, it can be read that it is his *teaching* which is rejected—a way of life revolving around radical forgiveness, a renunciation of the "right" to retaliate and the idea that our relations with one another affect our relationship to God. Unlike John, who would not craft his Gospel until nearly two generations later circa 100 CE, Mark is careful to preserve the historical dynamics of first century Judaism; e.g. it is not "the Jews" who question Jesus and are opposed to him but specifically the Sadducees, the priests who run the Temple in Jerusalem and who were concerned only with their own logic of sacrifice. And also in Mark, the disciples are painted in the worst possible light. Their misunderstanding of who Jesus was and what he taught is brought to the foreground in an uncompromising fashion. These are but a few of the questions which Mark presents to

his readers: who was Jesus, what did he teach, why was he killed, what does it mean to take responsibility for these events? The fact that we are still, to this day, walking the literary landscape of his thought is itself testament to the fact that this very short sixteen chapter narrative had and continues to have a profound impact on its readers.

The *Gospel of Mark* is the place to begin to explore the mystery of the person contemporary scholars have called a "marginal Jew" (John P. Meier) and a "Mediterranean Jewish peasant" (John Dominic Crossan) and to begin to ask, what would it be like to see the world as a first century person saw it? Puck Purnell offers those who are game for the journey a highly readable, engaging narrative bridging the gap between the first century and the 21st allowing us to seek and gaze upon Jesus through another set of eyes once more. 🐼

David Patrick Greene, Ph.D.

- 1 There always exists the historical possibility that a text, or texts, no longer extant, were written which predate Mark; however it is not a likely possibility. Prior to 65 CE there was no overwhelming need for a narrative concerning Jesus as teacher; Jesus' teachings had served the burgeoning Christian community quite well. However, after the Zealots efforts to provoke a war with Rome produced deadly fruits, Jesus' literary resurrection into Gospels served the need of addressing Christian opposition to violence. The so-called Gospel of Thomas has been dated as being written much earlier than Mark, but Thomas is not "Gospel" in the sense of being a narrative exploration of the person of Jesus. Instead, Thomas is a collection of Jesus' parables and sayings, largely agreed to have been one of Mark, Matthew and Luke's sources. As far as historical, literary and form criticism has been able to ascertain, Mark remains the first Gospel written.
- 2 See the apocryphal 1 and 2 Maccabees for an account of the war. I often suggest, in our required course Theology I: Sacred Stories, that Mark was written in direct opposition to Zealot assumptions regarding God's approval of war and conflict and that Mark purposefully took Judas Maccabee from the book of

Maccabees and rendered him Judas Iscariot. John Dominic Crossan (*Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus*; HarperCollins, 1995) reads Judas as a fictional character. Other authors have similarly read the character Judas in widely disparate fashions, each according to his or her own interpretive paradigm. Judas is, to say the least, a difficult character to fathom; it is at least curious that prior to Mark no

account exists of a “single, betraying, disciple.” The character was so problematic that Matthew and the author of *Acts of the Apostles* each decided Judas ought to have committed suicide—in Mark, Judas simply vanishes from the narrative landscape. I have contended elsewhere (*For the Sake of Sorrow: Christian Holocaust Theology and the Interpretation of the Resurrection*, UMI 2001) that Judas is the shadow of Peter and therefore unnecessary after the infamous “kiss”

dropping to the background and vanishing as Peter is brought to the fore.

- 3 The names of the Gospels were decided in the fourth century; the actual authorship of the canonical Gospels remains unknown. For the sake of convention I will refer to “Luke,” “Matthew” and “Mark” as the authors of their texts from here on.

Through Mark’s Eyes: Another View

Forty-five years ago I was a third former, and in the midst of my first Holy Week at Kent School. For someone who had only experienced Methodist Sunday School, Fr. Newton’s Maundy Thursday Service, complete with a procession to the Oratory where the Altar of Repose was waiting, was intense. I was not really looking forward to a three-hour Good Friday service, but it was looming, with only Greek class in between me and High Church.

Mr. Handford, my Greek teacher, was provoked that we had school at all on Good Friday, and so he had a special class for his three students. Tammy, Bron and I were invited to sit around Mr. Handford’s desk and read the passion from the Gospel of Mark. There it was, real Greek that we could, with a bit of coaching from our teacher, actually translate. I can remember the wonder of suddenly leaping from the conjugations and declensions of Chase and Phillips’ *A New Introduction to Greek* into the real thing.

I had that same experience of ‘the real thing’ when I read Puck Purnell’s *Through Mark’s Eyes*. I had forgotten how much healing Jesus did in this Gospel, such as the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law:

Jesus crossed the front room and went through the open door to the back of the house. An oil lamp flickered. The sickly woman lay on a low, narrow bed. Jesus sat on the wooden edge. The long fingers of his left hand slipped around her limp hand. He touched her face with the back of his hand. He wiped the sweat from her brow.

Simon’s mother-in-law awoke. Jesus smiled into her glassy eyes. “There. There,” he said. “You’re OK now. Come now.” And he stood up next to the bed. Without letting go of her hand, Jesus helped the woman sit up. She swung her feet over the side of the bed. Together they waited. Simon’s mother-in-law caught her breath. She steadied herself. “I’m better. I think I’m better,” she murmured. “You’re OK,” Jesus affirmed. “Yes. Yes,” she replied. “I’m fine now. Thank you.” (7)

Through Mark’s Eyes also shows a Jesus who gets hungry, who gets dirty, who gets impatient. Teaching the disciples could not have been easy! For example, the parable of the seed sown upon the ground:

Jesus was excited. He became so animated telling this parable that he nearly fell out of the boat! One moment he was gesturing with his hands and arms, pretending to plant

seeds, and the next he was standing up in the tipsy boat, pretending to be a sprouting plant. James and John balanced the craft. They were laughing half the time at the thought of Jesus tumbling into the water.

After Jesus finished the parable about the sower, he sat down and waited a while. He always looked right into people’s eyes. Quite suddenly, he threw back his head and laughed out loud. Then, he snapped his fingers and said, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” (28)

Jesus’ laughter is something I have always missed in the Gospels, and I thank Puck for including this in the picture of Jesus that he presents.

If you are a fan of the “verily verily I say unto you” versions of the Gospel of Mark, you will not feel comfortable with Puck’s presentation. But if you are looking for a fresh view of the Son of Man, if you are leading a discussion of the Gospels or trying to introduce teenagers to scripture, *Through Mark’s Eyes* is an excellent choice. 🐼

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