

The
Gospel
according to
Mark

A COMMENTARY

By Sidney L. Poe

Contents

Introduction	7
I. Coming of the Servant (1:1-13)	21
A. Title of the Book (1:1)	23
B. Ministry of the Baptist (1:2-8)	23
C. Baptism of Jesus (1:9-11)	29
D. Temptation by Satan (1:12-13)	31
II. Ministry of the Servant (1:14-13:37)	33
A. Ministry in Galilee (1:14-4:34)	37
B. Withdrawals from Galilee (4:35-9:50)	105
C. Journey to Jerusalem (10:1-52)	199
D. Ministry in Jerusalem (11:1-13:37)	233
III. Self-Sacrifice of the Servant (14:1-15:47)	303
A. Foes and Friends of Jesus (14:1-11)	307
B. Passover Observance (14:12-25)	319
C. Garden of Gethsemane (14:26-52)	331
D. Trials of Jesus (14:53-15:20a)	345
E. Account of the Crucifixion (15:20b-41)	363
F. Burial of the Body (15:42-47)	375
IV. The Resurrection of the Servant (16:1-20)	381
A. Women Coming to the Empty Tomb (16:1-8)	383
B. Ending of Mark (16:9-20)	385
Figures	
1. Partial Family Tree of Herod the Great.	135
2. Temple Areas at the Time of Christ	245

I.

Coming of the Servant (1:1-13)

A. Title of the Book (1:1)

(1) The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Verse 1. The gospel, the good news (Greek *euangelion*), did not begin with Bethlehem or with John the Baptist. Moses and the prophets envisioned Christ's coming and His work as far back as Genesis 3:15. God knew Him as His Son, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). Mark chose the point of John the Baptist (cf. Acts 1:22; Matthew 11:12; Luke 16:16; John 1:6) to begin his gospel story of the identity, words, and activities of Jesus Christ.

B. Ministry of the Baptist (1:2-8)

(Matthew 3; Luke 3:1-22; John 1:6-34; 3:23;
Isaiah 40:3; Malachi 3:1)

(2) As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. (3) The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. (4) John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the

remission of sins. (5) And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins. (6) And John was clothed with camel's hair, and with a girdle of a skin about his loins; and he did eat locusts and wild honey; (7) and preached, saying, There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose. (8) I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost.

Verse 2. Mark cites two prophets who declared that a messenger was to be sent before the Messiah. The first prophet was Malachi (3:1), who stated that a messenger would prepare the way. This was a threat to the unfit priesthood in Malachi's day. The messenger was to cleanse and purify the Temple worship, which from time to time fell into a shameful condition. When the Lord came, certain conditions had to be met; people needed to repent and purify themselves from foul deeds and embrace a sanctity acceptable to a holy God.

Verse 3. Second, Isaiah (40:3) declared that a voice in the wilderness would cry to prepare the way. The cry of the herald was to make a straight path in anticipation of the coming of the Lord. The phrase "in the wilderness" comes from Israel's experience in departing from Egypt and occupying the Promised Land. Spiritually it connotes a dry, barren, testing, trying place where the flesh learns submission to the Spirit through trials but through which, as Moses faithfully led Israel, Jesus faithfully leads those who follow Him.

Verse 4. John the Baptist (Baptizer) was that mes-

senger, as signified by his appearing in the wilderness as prophesied. His message called for a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. His method was to preach or proclaim the requirements to make “his paths straight” and then to baptize (dip by immersion) all believers. John worked in and out of the wilderness (Greek *eremos*), often meaning uncultivated, barren lands, frequently pasture lands lying outside the towns. Although he might have been acquainted with Jewish monastic groups near the Dead Sea wilderness, it is more likely that until the day he appeared publicly (Luke 1:80), he maintained a solitary existence in the wilderness.

Verse 5. People of Judea and the city of Jerusalem flocked to hear John. Many believed his message and obeyed, accepting baptism in the Jordan River and confessing their sins. The use of “all” is a figure of speech in which the whole represents a great part.

The baptism of John has been debated and still generates questions in the mind of scholars. Jesus Himself asked the Pharisees about its origin and meaning: was it of God or man? Several things about John’s ministry are clear. First, his message was to the Jews; second, it announced a baptism of repentance or moral reform; and third, John made a proclamation that One infinitely greater was to come (verse 7). Several meanings of John’s baptism are possible.

1. The ritualistic Jews washed and bathed themselves repeatedly because they believed they were daily defiled by touching various items (Leviticus 11-15).

2. Proselytes to the Jewish faith (Gentiles) were required to (a) be circumcised, which marked the Abrahamic Covenant, (b) have a sacrifice offered for them by

the priest, and (c) undergo a baptismal cleansing. This baptism was no mere ritual of sprinkling but a literal bath (immersion), plunging the entire body into the water. As a forerunner, it appears that John asked the pious Jews to confess their sins and to be baptized (*baptizo*, dipped, plunged) after the manner of a Gentile in anticipation of Him who was to appear.

3. Baptism was accompanied by confession—an acknowledgment of sin and wrongdoing—as part of repentance. Three confessions were required of the candidate: first, to himself as an admission of being a sinner; second, to those he had wronged, misled, hurt, injured, or grieved; third, to God. If pride ends where forgiveness begins, there can be no forgiveness without humiliation. When a man humbly admits, “I have sinned; I am a sinner,” then God willingly extends mercy unto forgiveness. Baptism represents a dramatic and visible expression of inner remorse and contrition.

Verse 6. John’s dress and diet, described in simple yet vivid terms, were after the tradition of solitary prophetic figures. Perhaps because of his lifestyle as much as the content of his message, people came to hear him. He was different from the religious sects who instructed others how to live but exempted themselves from the rules. John lived a life of religious protest. His domicile was rural areas that also housed wild beasts. John shunned the cities filled with corruption and the sin of man’s failing efforts to govern himself.

In dress, John was most humble: camel’s skin girdle covering the loins, tied with a leather belt around the waist after the style of Elijah (II Kings 1:8). He excited no envy as a fashionable orator of the day; his dress avoid-

ed the soft and effeminate luxuries that fail to challenge manhood and kill the soul with ease. In food, he was also consistent—nature provided roughage of locusts and wild honey. The locust of John's diet was probably a beanlike pod produced by the carob tree and gathered by the poor as food for themselves or their livestock. However, the grasshopper (*Locustidae*), an herb-feeding insect, was permitted as food (Leviticus 11:22-23). The honey in John's diet was either the sticky resinous exudate from the cambium of certain trees, or as more commonly believed, the condensed nectar gathered from flowers by the wild honeybee. No one questioned that John lived his message; for this reason people desired to hear his words.

William Barclay suggested that John was effective for four reasons.¹ First, he lived his message, unlike the Pharisees and other religious leaders of his day. He preached a simple antimaterialistic message, and his lifestyle was consistent in where he lived, what he wore, and what he ate.

Second, John was effective because he told people what they knew about themselves. The people had heard no prophet's voice for four hundred years, and John's had the ring of authenticity that their longing hearts craved.

Third, John was effective because of his humility. He viewed himself as unfit to be even a slave to the Master. He was yielded, a vessel, a forerunner of Messiah.

Finally, John was effective because he pointed to Someone greater than himself. All great persons have a burning cause with which they are consumed. John baptized in water; the One coming would submerge them in the Holy Ghost. Water might cleanse the body; the Holy Ghost would cleanse and purify the heart and life of

a person. John did not attempt to gather a following to himself; rather he drew people for Jesus Christ.

Verses 7-8. Luke 3:10-14 specified sins that John called on the Jews to confess and abandon: greed, fraud, violence, false accusation. Not only did he require a turning from sin, but John preached the coming of a great One to whom he was not even a worthy servant. This One would baptize converts with the Holy Ghost. Mark contrasted the baptism of water, a complete submersion, with the equally complete deluge of the coming Spirit.

Baptism of the Holy Spirit presented a new concept even for the Jews. The Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary and wrought conception (Matthew 1:20); here it is the Spirit of God at work among people. The Spirit cannot literally be poured as liquid over one, nor can a person be dipped in the Spirit as in water. The One to come would pour out His Spirit in such a great flood that a deluge of the very presence of God would be at work purifying, purging, and sanctifying the people. Acts 1:5 uses the conjunction "*but* ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost" (emphasis added). This promise and its fulfillment are essential to be Christian, for the Spirit dwells (resides) within the believer and without the Spirit there can be no claim of belonging to Christ (Romans 8:9). The beginning of the church (Acts 2:1-4) was marked by the active influence of the Holy Spirit come to dwell in the believer as prophesied in Joel 2:28.

Like Moses who saw the Promised Land but did not enter in, John the Baptist stood on the threshold and declared that the kingdom of God had come but did not himself enter in. The least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he (Matthew 11:11; Luke 7:28). John's baptism marked the threshold of this great kingdom.

C. Baptism of Jesus (1:9-11)

(Matthew 3:13; Luke 3:21)

How was Jesus prepared for ministry mentally, physically, and spiritually? First came baptism by John, then a testing in the wilderness. Proven worthy, He then began a ministry of supernatural power, miraculous healings, and deliverance designed to demonstrate that Jesus was indeed the Holy One of God, the Messiah.

(9) And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan. (10) And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him: (11) and there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

Verses 9-11. Jesus departed Nazareth (His home place in Galilee), sought out John, and began His public ministry in a most humble manner—by submitting to baptism in the Jordan River.

Perhaps by this time John had baptized thousands of ordinary men with no special signs. “Straightway” (Mark’s word for “at once” or “immediately”) an unusual experience occurred when Jesus was baptized. Upon emerging from the water, three things happened: the heavens (the atmosphere or regions overhead) opened, the Spirit like a dove descended upon Jesus, and a voice from heaven spoke, proclaiming Him the beloved Son “in whom I am well pleased” to dwell. These events in a unique way signaled that here at last stood the Messiah. John, after the

manner of Old Testament priests, declared Him manifest to all Israel: “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). The baptism of Jesus both confirmed to John and made manifest to Israel their Messiah.

John’s baptism represented a cleansing for the penitent sinner who wished to be purged of his sins, but this purpose did not apply to the sinless Jesus. Even the devil acknowledged that Jesus is the “Holy One of God” (Mark 1:24). For Jesus the baptism represented something more.²

First, Jesus’ baptism represented a marker event of His moment of decision. After thirty years of typical Jewish upbringing and manhood, He needed to mark a time to launch into public ministry. The appearance of John baptizing in Jordan must have served as a clarion call for Jesus. Baptism was a response to the summons of the Spirit—the appointed time had come, and there would be no retreat.

Second, baptism for Jesus singled Him out as one of those associated with a move back to God. He was not part of the rebellious crowd who defied Rome or the hypocritical religious system who defied the law and God.

Third, baptism provided divine approval and sanction for Jesus. Scripture is silent about Jesus’ prayer life before this time, but now there was a relationship with God for all to see. Jesus prayed frequently and the transcendent God of Israel, silent for four centuries, now spoke directly through the man Jesus. God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself (II Corinthians 5:19).

Fourth, baptism represented a yielded commitment to the urging and dictates of the Spirit. It was a moment of

surrender; from this point on the Spirit commanded, dictating and driving steadily and assuredly toward the final resolution of man's sin problem.

The gentle and peaceful descending dove provided a sharp contrast to the preaching of John about One coming who would sift, purge, fan, burn and condemn (Matthew 3:7-12; Luke 3:7-13). It was good news that Jesus would conquer not by force of violence but by love.

Finally, the words of John take on deeper significance in light of Old Testament sacrifices. John announced to the world the Lamb of God who takes away their sin. The Lamb was now placed under observation and intense scrutiny for flaw, defect, illness, or injury to determine its suitability to be the paschal lamb sacrificed at Passover. It was a death sentence, because such lambs died to provide a blood atonement.

D. Temptation by Satan (1:12-13)

(Matthew 4:1; Luke 4:1)

(12) And immediately the Spirit driveth him into the wilderness. (13) And he was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him.

Verses 12-13. Jesus, surrendered to the dictates of the Spirit, was driven into the wilderness, the solitary, lonely reaches outside urban centers where no one but beasts were His companions. In the wilderness for "forty days" (a Hebrew idiom referring to a span of time), He was open to opposition by Satan. The devil (slanderer, one who lies or misrepresents) confronted Jesus, challenging

what had been established at baptism. Luke 4 indicates that Jesus was tempted to prove or doubt His identity, misuse His position as the Son of God, and compromise the method to accomplish God's will.

Jesus chose a response that bridged the gap to humans—not power to coerce them, fearful fire from heaven to destroy them, nor dictatorial power to enslave them, but love to appeal, allure, and bind the crushed, defeated human will to Himself. In resisting all these temptations—lust of the flesh, lust of the eye, and pride of life (I John 2:16)—Jesus became an unwavering example of dedication to the will of God. After the experience, the angels, helpers of God, ministered to Him.

Notes

¹William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 7-8.

²*Ibid.*, 9-1