

Choreographing the Suffering Messiah in Mark's Gospel

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Abstract

In a general sense, this essay represents an exploratory effort to illustrate how the author of Mark's Gospel can be viewed as a wily, witty, and crafty choreographer who treats biblical textual passages much like a dance choreographer organizes and arranges the physical movements of dancers for on-stage performances. From the very beginning, Mark frames or choreographs, if you will, a vibrant suffering-Messiah leitmotif in such a way as to effectively counter dominant theological and cosmological paradigms at that time including the Greek-cultural view of Jesus. To make this argument, the essay first addresses the general features of Mark's compositional structure and then reviews some of the questions involving 'turning points' in his narrative. It then proceeds to identify and explore several theological themes Mark contains while discussing some of the related debates and controversies involved. The essay concludes by discussing some of the serious implications deriving from the choreographic genre of biblical writing for the ability of modern-day Bible readers to accurately interpret and comprehend biblical content.

Keywords: choreography; narrative structure; turning points; Markan priority; Mark's Gospel; leitmotif; dominant themes; suffering Messiah; biblical; synoptic problem.

Introduction

The first part of this essay on the Gospel of Mark will follow the traditional descriptive outline of its general features regarding compositional structure. Part II will discuss some of the questions surrounding ‘turning points’ in the narrative structure including the abrupt ending. Part III will explore several theological themes it contains. Along the way, some of the core debates and controversial issues involved in Mark’s Gospel will be identified and discussed.

Part IV of this essay will examine the first few verses at the very beginning of Mark’s Gospel in an effort to underline some of the central themes the author employs to frame different events, activities, speech, and characters throughout the text. This part of the essay will be used as a fledgling effort to illustrate how the author of Mark’s Gospel begins by first framing or choreographing the ‘suffering messiah’ message of Jesus in such a way as to counter the dominant Greek cultural view of Jesus as a divine human being from the very onset of writing.

Then the final part of this essay will attempt in a more concerted manner to portray the author of this Gospel as a wily, witty, and crafty choreographer by focusing on another textual part. The metaphor of ‘choreographer’ is intended to illustrate how the author of Mark’s Gospel treats textual passages much like a dance choreographer organizes and arranges physical movements for dancers on stage.

Generally speaking, the argument here is that genuine understanding of ancient biblical writings cannot even be approached to any meaningful degree without modern Bible readers themselves first becoming 1st-century scholars and listeners. That is, they need to place themselves into the first-century Hebrew cultural mindset of an oral tradition uncontaminated by modern historical, ideological, philosophical, and foreign cultural biases and prejudices whether manifest or latent, intentional or not.

The claim here is that the basic requirement for authentic biblical interpretation is to engage in this kind of deep biblical reading or first-century cultural reading rather than the typical shallow 21st-century reading of Mark's Gospel, or any part of Scriptures, for that matter. Perhaps another visual way of making the same basic point is to suggest that modern Bible readers need to understand that biblical authors are presenting and arranging script or text describing ancient events and characters in much the same way as a conductor might arrange the music of a symphony orchestra. The conductor is using musical notations to arrange and organize sounds while biblical authors are employing sophisticated literary devices buried deep in ancient Hebrew culture to 'conduct' or choreograph biblical script for the eyes and ears of scholars and listeners buried deep within oral tradition.

Accordingly, one brief example of this biblical choreography from within Mark's Gospel will be provided to demonstrate the validity of the argument being made. Lastly, it goes without saying that the interpretations, analyses, and claims made in this essay are necessarily exploratory and tentative in nature regardless of how forceful or assertive they may be presented here.¹

¹ Viewing gospel writers as choreographers arranging and sequencing various textual units to make them perform a certain 'dance' on the stage of the 'page', if you will, OR viewing them as conductors of symphony orchestras for the same purpose, is not so farfetched as it might seem at first. Even Perkins (2007) argues that many contemporary Biblical scholars are starting to believe that imagining gospel writing as a "performance script" may indeed promote a greater understanding of its meaning that standard theoretical and methodological techniques have allowed to date. That is to say, in the present context the author of Mark's Gospel had to have been concerned with making the textual units of his writing 'perform' a story about a sacred 'messiah' that was not only acceptable to ancient Biblical and cultural audiences but, as well, one in which they could themselves actively participate.

Part I: Composition

The compositional structure of Mark's Gospel typically refers to its historical dating, authorship, and style of writing. Although some modern scholars would prefer to believe that the authorship of this particular gospel is hopelessly anonymous because it goes unnamed within that gospel itself (Sanders, 1995, pp. 62-65), many Biblical scholars seem to think that the real author is the same John Mark referred to in many places of the Bible especially in the book of Acts and the Pauline epistles (Acts 12: 12, 25; 13: 5, 13; Col 4: 10; 2 Tim 4: 11; Phil 24 – See Appendix 1 for some examples). In those Biblical texts, John Mark is characterized as a possible associate, interpreter, disciple, or some other kind of fellow worker of the apostles, particularly St. Peter.

He is also viewed as someone who never saw or heard Jesus himself but who accompanied St. Peter during his last few years in Rome and wrote down stories about Jesus passed on to him orally by Peter. He is also believed to have been a relative of one of the leaders of the Antioch church at the time named Barnabas and may have accompanied him and St. Paul on many of their missionary journeys all the while taking note of his conversations and experiences.

Acknowledged as the shortest of all the gospels, this seems to suggest that the Gospel of Mark is an older and more reliable source about the Bible because it was based on oral source materials; it depended heavily upon the oral tradition of stories related by one of Jesus' disciples, Peter. This oral source of the writings in Mark's Gospel has been confirmed by both the writings of an early church father named Papias circa 140 A.D. and another early church historian named Eusebius in the early 4th century (Nickle, Chapter 3, p. 23; Perkins, pp. 3, 14-19, 39-41, and Chapter 4).

In terms of dating in history, the discussion in Chapter 13 in Mark's Gospel about "things to come" is commonly taken as a

reference point. There Jesus is sitting with His disciples on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, and the disciples are commenting on how “wonderful” the stones and the buildings of the temple are, to which Jesus responds: “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another which will not be torn down.” (Mark 13: 2)

This verse is usually taken to mean that Mark’s Gospel was written just before or immediately after the destruction of the Second Temple in A.D. 70. This is why most Biblical scholars think that Mark’s Gospel must have been written at some point during 66-74 A.D. when the first war between the Jews and Romans occurred (Crossley, 2004). However, there is a very recent argument that most texts of the New Testament were written 20-30 years earlier than assumed by most contemporary Biblical scholars, with the notable exception of the Pauline epistles (Bernier, 2021).

Very importantly, Mark’s Gospel was written in Greek for a largely gentile Greek audience. That probably means that the author of Mark had to have been concerned about presenting the “gospel of Jesus Christ” framed in a storytelling format that would be understood and well-received by that gentile Greek audience accustomed to hearing stories within their culture in their own cultural ways (Perkins, 2007; Burkett, 2002).

In addition, it must be firmly remembered that texts in ancient Greece as elsewhere tended not to have much life of their own independent from their “oral performance and interpretation”, as Perkins points out (Ibid., p. 46). Quite beyond significant contributions in sculpture and architecture as well as philosophy, astronomy, medicine, and mathematics, the other major feature of ancient popular Greek culture was literature and theater.

Indeed, literature and theater were intimately intertwined in ancient popular Greek society long before the emergence of Greek theater in Athens in the sixth century. Here we must

consider that the works of playwrights like Sophocles (the use of irony in “Oedipus the King”), Aristophanes, and especially Aeschylus laid the foundation for modern theater by developing theatrical devices already present in the popular oral Greek cultural tradition and later in written form. Even Homer’s epic poems, “The Iliad” and “Odyssey”, were performed orally in popular Greek culture long before they were assembled into text form. It goes without saying that ancient Greek culture strongly influenced Roman culture itself (Burckhardt, 2002; Sansone, 2016).

What all of this talk about the ancient Greek culture makes clear is that Biblical authors writing stories about the gospel of Jesus Christ for a gentile Greek cultural audience (whether educated or not) had to be preoccupied about making Biblical texts ‘perform’. That is to say, they had to be concerned about choreographing that text to make it suitable for that particular audience, and to choreograph it in such a way as to solicit their active intellectual and emotional participation and gratification in the Biblical script.

This means that the genre of ancient Biblical texts was more than just a simple subset of ancient biography (for example, the “bios” genre mentioned in Lincoln, 2004, p. 133), much more. More pointedly, perhaps it means that it should be viewed as a separate literary genre of presentation in and of itself where the Biblical author is viewed as some kind of an artist employing a great variety of unique literary devices to arrange Biblical script in ways powerful enough to convey central messages and themes they contain (Edwards, 2002, pp. 1-6).

Another key aspect of the compositional structure of Mark’s Gospel is the so-called ‘Synoptic Problem’. Basically, this means that the script within Mark’s Gospel share remarkable similarities to the gospels of Luke and Matthew. In other words, much of the written material contained within Mark is shared word-for-word with the other Synoptic Gospels. Yet, despite their obvious interdependence they also display certain

significant differences from each other. The ‘Synoptic Problem’, if you will, is to explain this interdependence.

The most widely accepted hypothesis is that Mark’s Gospel was the first gospel to emerge (typically referred to as the Markan Priority) and then Matthew and Luke drew upon Mark’s writings as a prime resource for their own gospels. That’s why Koester (2000, pp. 43-48) points out that the sequencing of the events and script in Luke and Matthew are only identical to each other when they also agree with the sequencing of those same events and script in Mark’s Gospel.

The debate about the historical veracity of Mark’s Gospel is another feature of its compositional structure that influences interpretation of its contents. Since this gospel was for a long time widely believed to be the earliest and most concise of all the gospels, it was also believed to be the most reliable source for accurate historical information about the life of Jesus. From the 1950s, many Biblical scholars argued that Mark’s Gospel was not as concerned about reporting accurate history as it was concerned about proclaiming “the gospel of Jesus Christ”. For example, the earlier reference to Wrede’s identification of the ‘Messianic secret’ editing motif employed by the author of Mark’s Gospel seemed to undermine its use as valid resource to understand the historical Jesus.

In essence, this made it appear as though the history of Jesus was being reconstructed rather than accurately reported. In actuality, the historical facts were not being intentionally distorted but, rather, embellished editorially in order to make the Christian message receptive to a culturally hostile audience. In other words, the form of the main message of the Christian faith according to Mark was being choreographed, but the core of it remained unchanged.

Perhaps another social factor which significantly influenced the compositional structure and content of Mark’s Gospel is the veritable cultural setting within which it emerged and then later

developed, namely, the ancient Hebrew culture. In other words, it is pivotal to recognize the fact that Christianity emerged from within the Hebrew culture, not from outside of it as was the case with Hellenic Christianity. After Jesus Christ was put to death on the cross by Pontius Pilate, some of His followers who claimed to have witnessed His resurrection formed an 'ekklesia', from the Greek meaning "assembly" (Lossl, 2010, pp. 42-43).

To make sense of this resurrection and other key concepts such as 'kingdom of God', 'messiah', 'sin', 'son of God', redemption, baptism, and so forth, these early Christians to a considerable extent depended upon the cultural resources available within the Hebrew literature and scriptures (Gamble, 1995, pp. 22-24). And, of course, what tied together the importance of all these major concepts and ideas was the belief shared by both the small band of Christians and the Hebrews that the end of the world as they knew it was quickly coming to an end, the imminent end of world history understood within an apocalyptic vision. God was returning at any moment to punish the wicked unbelievers and reward the righteous believers.

Within this cultural and historical context, the gospels in the Bible were most likely written to solidify and reassure the faith of believers, not necessarily to persuade wicked unbelievers to become 'believers' as they later came to be viewed. Therefore, on the one hand the author of Mark had to be concerned with presenting the historical Jesus narratives in such a way as to address the particular cultural concerns of the many small 'ekklesia' or 'assemblies' of believers existing at that time whose faith was constantly under criticism, attack, or questioning. On the other hand, the author of Mark also wanted to write these narratives from a 'suffering messiah' motif that emphasized salvation of mankind in order to counter the Greek view of Jesus as the 'divine man' or 'Son of God' that emphasized the heroic divine features of Jesus (Aune, 1987, pp. 58-61).

Part II: The Narrative Structure

Both Perkins (2007) and Nickle (2001) mention that there is very little if any consensus among biblical scholars about the structure of Mark's Gospel except to bring attention to noticeable turning points in the narrative, the first of which occurs at Mark 8: 27-33. All the miracles, healings, preaching, and other activities that happen in Galilee before that point are drastically reduced after that point as the focus becomes Jesus teaching the disciples and preaching to gentiles and the scene of activity shifts to an unfriendly Judea (Cole, 1989, pp. 85-89).

What occurs in Mark 8: 27-33 that merits its description as a 'turning point' in the Gospel of Mark? What occurs is Peter's confession of Christ:

“...He questioned His disciples, saying to them, “Who do people say that I am?” They told Him, saying, “John the Baptist; and others Say Elijah; but others, one of the prophets.” And He continued by questioning them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered and said to Him, “You are the Christ.” And He warned them to tell no one about Him. And He began to teach them that the Son of Man Must suffer many things and be rejected by the Elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And He was stating the matter plainly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. But turning around and seeing His disciples, He Rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind Me, Satan; for You are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's.”

The extensive quotation here is necessary in order to underscore the central organizing principle of Mark's Gospel, namely, the 'suffering messiah'. That is why the “Son of God” language changes to the “Son of Man”, and the discussion from Mark 8:34 to Mark 8:38 is about Jesus talking to the crowd and

His disciples about how they should behave in the world and what they should believe in order not to “forfeit his soul” and reach eternal life.

That is why Peter’s confession of Christ has been described as the watershed of Mark’s Gospel or the central textual point into which most if not all of the major themes, issues, and events contained in the other gospel passages flows or drains. In other words, it is that particular textual area which forms the central thematic principle that guides and drives the author’s choreography of all the remaining script in Mark’s Gospel.

Another fairly recognized turning point in Mark’s Gospel occurs at the end of Chapter 10 with the fairly well expected confrontation between temple authorities and Jesus when He arrives in Jerusalem. It is ‘expected’ because of many sections immediately prior to Chapter 10 which go into some detail about the sufferings, death and resurrection of Jesus foretold. Therefore, in Chapter 10 when Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem with his followers and tells His disciples the horrible things that will happen to Him at the hands of the chief priests and the scribes and the Gentiles (He will be mocked, spit on, scourged, and killed), it is ‘expected’.

Here the ‘suffering messiah’ motif in Mark’s Gospel is over and over again emphasized, but always tandem with overcoming adversity and achieving the Holy mission in the sense of “three days later He will rise again”. The veritable certainty of Christ’s Holy mission being fulfilled is underscored. Christ is God’s messenger with a Holy or spiritual mission, sent by God to suffer for the sins of mankind so that God may reclaim or redeem mankind and offer eternal life. It is evident that this is the central choreographic theme that arranges and organizes the textual components of Mark’s Gospel.

The last controversial issue regarding the narrative structure of Mark’s Gospel is its abrupt ending. Most contemporary Biblical scholars believe that the original ending was much shorter than

what it later came to be (Edwards, 2002, pp. 36-39). The oldest manuscripts of Mark's Gospel appear to locate the ending at Mark 16:8 with women running away from the empty tomb in fear "...for trembling and astonishment had gripped them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Slight additions were made later to achieve a smoother or less abrupt conclusion by providing brief descriptions about the appearances of Jesus after resurrection, the reproachment of the disciples for their disbelief, the commissioning of the disciplines to "preach the gospel to all creation", and finally the ascension of Jesus "...up into heaven" to sit "down at the right hand of God" (Mark 16: 8-19). Several scholars have pointed out that the majority of all the manuscripts of Mark's Gospel contain this lengthier ending (Edwards, 2002; Schroter, 2010; Horsely, 2007; Nickle, 2001; Perkins, 2007).

Part III: Some Theological Themes

It is evident that the identity of Jesus in Mark's Gospel is located firmly in the 'suffering messiah' motif. This is the central thematic organizing principle that choreographs the textual units or components of this gospel by presenting them from within in this particular thematic form. In so doing, as mentioned earlier, Mark appears to be countering another much more dominant Greek cultural view of Jesus as the divine man which places greater focus and emphasis on the divine features of Jesus such as miracle-worker, healer, and exorcist. However, choreographing his gospel in this relatively unthreatening manner allows the author of Mark to acknowledge the legitimacy of many of these heroic divine features while simultaneously emphasizing the much more significant core salvific elements of Jesus' suffering messianic identity to a potentially unreceptive gentile Greek audience.

This suffering messianic identity motif is considerably supported by several other major theological themes it contains. One of these major themes that runs through Mark's Gospel

almost from the start is the feeble disciple theme. More specifically, on many occasions throughout this gospel various disciples are portrayed as weak-minded, fearful, imperceptive, obtuse, and outright failing to

comprehend basic messages and truths about Jesus even when they are coming out of Jesus' own mouth.

At many points, Jesus even rebukes the disciples for not having enough faith in Him. The feebleness of the disciples is even generalized to the problem of human fragility itself when some of the disciples first see Christ walking on water, or when they are stuck in a boat far out into the water during a storm while Jesus is sleeping, or when the three women run away from the empty tomb and fail to report the good news about the resurrection of Jesus, or Rejection, fearful flight, denial, and lack of comprehension seems to be central features of the human character more generally, not just the disciples and other Jesus followers. What's more, even when Jesus pointedly tells the disciples He must suffer and die as the suffering servant, still they don't get it and Jesus must rebuke them for their weak faith on several occasions throughout Mark's Gospel.

In perceiving Jesus' identity as the righteous suffering savior, it seems that the author of Mark the Gospel is representing a major theme firmly situated within the Biblical writings of the ancient Hebrew culture. As Perkins (2007, p. 120; Morris, 1986;) and many other scholars have pointed out, narrative models for the suffering righteous person were already well established in ancient Hebrew stories about the death of prophets and martyrs.

Look no further than the 'suffering servant' songs of Isaiah, the Psalms about the afflicted and imperiled, Jeremiah, Job, and the Wisdom literature all providing more than adequate thematic models for the suffering messianic identity of Jesus. The theme of God's reconciled and hopeful salvific love of mankind despite being met by human failure and rejection is a constant theme in ancient Hebrew scriptural writings.

Another major theological theme emerging from Mark's Gospel is the injunction to 'remain silent', sometimes applied to messianic identity and sometimes not. That is to say, many places in this gospel we read that Jesus desires some kind of information to remain hidden from the general public, and not only about his true messianic identity (Wrede, 1971; Perkins, 138-140).

Sometimes these remain silent injunctions are addressed directly to people that Jesus heals or for whom he performs a miracle. For example, after healing a leper while preaching in a synagogue in Galilee, Jesus sends him away saying: "See that you say nothing to anyone..." (Mark 1:44); for a synagogue official whose sick daughter had died, Jesus brings her back to life while giving "strict orders that no one should know about this..." (Mark 5:43); and for a deaf mute that had been brought to Him while He preached by the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus restored both the hearing and speech disabilities while telling everyone present "... not to tell anyone..."(Mark 7:36).

Interestingly enough, sometimes these remain silent injunctions are also addressed to *demons*. The point here is that silencing people is one kind of injunction, but silencing demons is quite another. This action strongly implies the wielding of a type of other-worldly authority (exorcistic) beyond the limited capacities of the human realm. The fact that Mark's Gospel begins with this kind of remain silent injunction is quite telling, and goes a long way towards revealing its dominant choreographic feature.

Jesus is preaching inside one of the synagogues in Galilee on the Sabbath day when an "unclean spirit" cries out loudly to him. "What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who You are – the Holy One of God!" Jesus sternly commands him, saying: "Be quiet, and come out of him!" The unclean spirit obeys, but the news about this event spreads across Galilee nonetheless (Mark 1:22-28).

By the time evening comes on the same day, crowds come to the house of Simon and Andrew where Jesus was staying wanting to be healed and exorcised. But this time, contrary to what the reader might expect, Jesus "... was not permitting the demons to speak, because they knew who he was..." (Mark 1:34). Days later, Jesus and His disciples find themselves by the sea in Galilee with a great crowd around them. In the course of healing several of them, many "unclean spirits" continually approached Him falling down before Him shouting, "You are the Son of God!" Again, Jesus emphatically implores them "... not to tell who he was." (Mark 3: 7-12).

In terms of remain silent injunctions referring to the messianic identity of Jesus, those injunctions actually begin in the very first chapter of Mark's Gospel when they are addressed to various demons, as mentioned earlier. But they are also addressed to the disciples themselves when they make reference to it. For example, in reference to Peter's confession of Christ contained in his response to a question posed by Jesus, "But who do you say that I am?". Peter answers, "You are the Christ". However, Peter's subsequent behavior leads the reader to believe that he doesn't understand what the word "Christ" really means from Jesus' point of view.

Still, at that point Jesus turns to all His disciples present and "... warns them to tell no one about Him" (Mark 8: 29-30). Again, after Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up on a mountain to witness his transfiguration, later as they are coming down from that same mountain Jesus "... gave them orders not to relate to anyone what they had seen, until the Son of Man rose from the dead" (Mark 9: 2-9). All these types of remain silent injunctions play a central choreographic role in cosmologically framing the other textual units in Mark.

Another major theological theme in Mark's Gospel is represented by the many direct and implicit eschatological references to the 'return' (or second coming) of Christ always viewed as imminent. Here the theological emphasis is on the

‘suffering messiah’, as mentioned earlier in another context, the One who must suffer and die on the cross in order for God to be able to redeem the lost souls of mankind caused by the original disobedience to God. Before the resurrection and return of Jesus can occur, He must undergo suffering as ransom or payment for a spiritual debt owed (to God).

Several passages in Mark’s Gospel make reference to the ‘suffering messiah’ theme in the death, resurrection, and glorious return of Christ at the ever-imminent Second Coming. The extensive quotation of Isaiah and reference to John the Baptist preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins at the very beginning is the theological context within which the “Son of God” designations should be understood. Ostensibly, this is why the “Kingdom of God” allusions in Mark do not necessarily appear to be a future physical kingship and territory in Israel but, rather, another completely different spiritual kingdom of “eternal life” (Mark 10:30) via spiritual communion with God, again much more Pauline in nature. For the author of Mark, even sins committed against the Holy Spirit are “eternal sins”, that is, never forgiven (Mark 3:29).

So, then, it is relatively clear that for the author of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus the “Son of Man” (Mark 2:10; 10:33) has come and will come again to destroy evil, not necessarily to establish a Jewish “kingdom” characterized by physical material attributes or features. Still, even here the “Son of Man” designations have ancient Hebrew cultural roots in the apocalyptic Ezekiel, Book of Enoch, and even Daniel (7:13) where royal attributes of kingship and glory are assigned to this “Son of Man” (Witherington, 2001; Donahue, 2005). What the author of Mark appears to be doing here is politely, diplomatically, if you will, genuflecting spiritually to the Hebrew culture and Jewish-Christians.

However, the author of Mark’s Gospel also wrote at a time when both Jews and Jewish-Christians were expecting a messenger or ‘messiah’ from God to establish an earthly rule over Israel, a

human being chosen by God as God's "son" who would establish the "Kingdom of God" in Israel (Burkett, 2002, p. 69). By contrast, this "Son of God" designation meant something quite different in the ancient Greek culture, as alluded to earlier. In that culture, this phrase meant a divine human being gifted with supernatural powers to perform wondrous feats in the legendary tradition of Hercules and the like (Dunn, 2003; Telford, 1999).

So, then, it appears that both 'Son of God' (Mark 1:20; 3:11; 14:61) and 'Son of Man' (Mark 2:10; 10:33) are both frequently used in Mark's Gospel as titles of messianic identity indicating the deity of Jesus Christ, but the associated meanings vary. On the one hand, the 'Son of Man' designation indicates the Jewish apocalyptic view of Jesus as the messiah expected to come in the glory of a king to destroy Israel's enemies and establish the Jewish kingdom. Here kingship, glory, and conquest are the central features of messianic identity. On the other hand, the 'Son of God' designation indicates a Hellenistic view of Jesus as a divine human being with supernatural powers to heal illness, exorcise demons, and perform incredible miracles.

Mark pays homage to both types of messianic identity, but his focus appears to be much more strongly placed on the Hellenistic supernatural powers motif. In between the "Son of God" designation mentioned at the very beginning (Mark 1:1) and the "Son of God" designation noted at the end of Mark's Gospel through the mouth of a Roman soldier (Mark 15:39), the constant theological emphasis is the 'suffering messiah' identity of Christ. Here the focus is on the necessary suffering, crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Christ as payment for the sins of mankind which makes redemption and salvation possible through reconciliation with God, a theological message more congenial to the Pauline view of salvation. In order to better understand how the author of Mark choreographs his gospel to emphasize the Pauline meaning of salvation through the suffering, crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Christ, we need to take a closer look at the beginning of this gospel.

Part IV: The Beginning of Mark's Gospel

It is absolutely essential to take notice of the way Mark's Gospel begins for it orients our understanding of the sacred significance of not only the content of the script that follows but, as well, the form in which it is arranged and presented. Here there are at least three points to keep in mind. First, the humble author of Mark is merely presenting the "beginning" gospel of Jesus Christ, not the comprehensive last word truth about it. The author of Mark does not profess to know perfectly and purely everything that needs to be known about Jesus Christ nor His ministry. In other words, he presents his Gospel as representing only a "beginning" understanding. As such, it can be expected to contain some imperfections because, after all, it is a beginning 'human' understanding of Christ.

The second point to keep in mind about how Mark's Gospel begins is his use of the word "gospel" in the first line of the first verse, namely, that what he is reporting about in his writing is the beginning of the "Gospel" of Christ. Except for Paul, Mark uses the "gospel" word more frequently than any other author of the New Testament. When translated literally from the Greek word "evangelion", the word gospel means the "good news". Whereas Paul appears to employ the "good news" concept to mean the core salvific importance of Christ's crucifixion, death, and resurrection, Mark enlarges or broadens it to mean all aspects of Christ's life, teachings, and preaching.

In other words, Jesus Christ wasn't the Messiah only at the times when he died and resurrected but, more significantly, throughout His ministry. That's why the author uses the phrase "Son of God" in that same first verse of Mark's Gospel (Aune, 1987, pp. 17-55; Morris, 1990, p. 95). More importantly, it underscores the sovereign reason why Mark and the other "gospels" were written, namely, to authenticate the messianic identity of Jesus Christ as the eschatological Savior of humankind.

That is why the author of Mark choreographs the script of his “Gospel” the way he does, that is, to focus upon themes and issues that confirm and validate this messianic identity such as the continual unreasonable fears and misunderstandings of the disciples and enemies of Christ defining miracles and healings as sorcery or magic tricks. Even the constant warnings from Jesus to others (even to daemons) to keep secret about his messianic identity is well choreographed into the script of Mark’s Gospel.

Finally, the last point to keep in mind about how the beginning of Mark’s Gospel plays a central choreographic role in our understanding of the remaining text is the direct link Mark makes between the messianic identity of Christ, ancient Hebrew writings, and the Old Testament more generally. It is not by accident nor by mindless repetition of dogma that the author of Mark follows up Verse 1 about the “beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ” with Verse 2 about the prophecy of Isaiah in reference to John the Baptist:

“Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You, Who will prepare Your way; The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight.’ “(Mark 1:2-3)

Here the messianic identity of Christ as “the Lord” is foretold by the Hebrew prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament, thereby forging a direct unbreakable bond between the Old Testament and the “gospel” of Jesus Christ. In the first 13 verses, Mark pursues and solidifies this spiritual link through the sacred meaning of baptism as symbolic repentance for the forgiveness of sins in clear intimate reference to Creation Doctrine and the Fall.

Further, the central “wilderness” theme in the actions of John the Baptist as a voice crying out in the “wilderness” is placed side by side with the voice or “gospel” of Jesus Christ alone in the wilderness. Therefore, it stands to reason that all of these

connections to the Old Testament at the very beginning of Mark's Gospel and throughout make clear that the "gospel of Jesus Christ" cannot be genuinely understood separated from ancient Judaic Biblical culture and writings constituting the Old Testament.

Part V: The Choreography of Peter's Confession

That choreography actually begins much earlier in the same chapter when Jesus performed the miracle of feeding a large crowd of 4,000 people that had been with him for three days with nothing to eat using only seven loaves of bread and a few small fish His disciples had at the time (Mark 8: 1-9). Then Jesus gets in a boat with the disciples for a visit to Dalmanutha where he has a brief run-in with some Pharisees demanding a "sign from heaven to test Him".

After responding that no sign will be given, Jesus gets back in the boat with the disciples to go to Bethsaida. In the boat on the way there, the disciples notice they only had one loaf of bread because they had forgotten to take more with them. So, they began to talk with each other about having no bread. Jesus is upset: "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart?"

The key feature in Mark's choreography of this gospel text comes at this point when Jesus continues:

"Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember, when I broke the five thousand...? When I broke the seven for the four thousand ...?" And He was saying to them, "Do you not yet understand" (Mark 8: 13-21)

At this point in the narrative, they arrive at Bethsaida and a blind man is brought to Jesus. The people urge Jesus to touch him but, instead, He grabs his hand and takes him out of the village. Jesus then spits on his eyes while putting his hands on

the blind man, asking him, “Do you see anything?” The blind man looks up and says to Jesus, “I see men, for I see them like trees, walking around.” Jesus puts His hands on him again this time on his eyes and suddenly the blind man “... began to see everything clearly”, after which Jesus sends him away ordering him not to go into the village (Mark 8: 22-25).

So, then, what we have prior to Peter’s confession of Christ is Jesus constantly telling His disciples that they really “do not yet understand” who He really is and a blind man whose restored sight first perceives people walking around like trees. The implication here is that the disciples don’t seem to have a faith strong enough to “see” or “understand” the real identity of Jesus. They are like the blind man whose sight has only been partially restored; their faith is not strong enough, so they are walking around with “hardened hearts” or like trees with hard outer bark covering.

This implies that Peter’s subsequent confession of “You are the Christ” is simply something spoken but not fully comprehended. It is unlikely that Peter understands clearly what type of messiah Jesus Christ really is. It is evident that Peter doesn’t have a clue about it because he rebukes Jesus when He tells him that the “Son of Man must suffer...and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31). In response to Peter’s rebuke, Jesus looks at His disciples and rebukes Peter, “Get behind me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s” (Mark 8:32-33).

Twice during the Peter’s confession passage the Jewish designation for the messianic identity of Jesus is used, “Son of Man”, not by coincidence or arbitrariness but by choreography. The author of Mark’s Gospel is here countering the Jewish apocalyptic vision of a messiah sent by God to destroy Israel’s enemies and establish a glorious kingship in Israel. To a certain extent, both the Hebrew and Hellenistic cultures shared this glorious supernatural legendary king version of messianic identity. That’s why the notion of a suffering or crucified

‘messiah’ didn’t make much sense to them.

However, the author of Mark’s Gospel is here choreographing quite a different messianic narrative where the divine mission is death and resurrection. That’s why Peter’s rebuke of Jesus when He insists that He must “suffer... and be killed...and rise again...” itself meets with Jesus’ harsh rebuke of Peter in front of the disciples, “Get behind Me, Satan...” In other words, Peter’s rebuke of Jesus likely represents the Jewish cultural perception of the Christ mission. By contrast, the author of Mark’s Gospel wants to argue against this characterization of messianic identity (Keith, 2011).

There is another way in which the Peter’s Confession passage can be considered the choreographic watershed of Mark’s Gospel. The author of Mark weaves together a story about a blind man first stumbling to restore his sight clearly with the ‘blind’ disciples first stumbling to clearly comprehend Jesus’ true mission. Like Jesus taking the blind man out of the village to restore his sight, He takes the disciples away from the crowded lakeshore into the villages of Caesarea Philippi to clarify their ideas or thinking (sight?) about His messianic identity and mission, imploring secrecy in both cases.

Why is the injunction for secrecy here so important? Once again, perhaps the answer is related to how Jewish people viewed Jesus at the time. Based on the writings in the Hebrew culture about the great fearless men of God who battled against insurmountable evils, injustices, and inhumanities of every kind like John the Baptist and the prophets Ezekiel, Isaiah, Elijah, and others, Jesus was probably not viewed as the great prophet of love and gentleness as He has come to be viewed in modern times (Wright, 2002).

They were expecting a fearless king to deliver Israel from its enemies, not the divine redeemer of mankind. But Jesus was announcing the Kingdom of God in the world, not only the Jewish kingdom. The secrecy was necessary because Jesus’

real messianic mission was a threat to the Roman Emperor who viewed himself and was viewed by others as a god, albeit a gentile or pagan ‘god’.

What that meant was clear. The announcement of the ‘Kingdom of God’ by a ‘messiah’ called Jesus was a direct threat to the Roman Empire. In a sense, Jesus is taking a serious risk of redefining traditional Hebrew conceptions of ‘messiah’, so secrecy is certainly called for in many respects. Otherwise, the divine mission may be sabotaged or curtailed or cut short, and the plan of salvation through death and resurrection rendered moot or open to uncertainty.

Conclusion

So, then, it turns out that the author of Mark’s Gospel organized, arranged, and sequenced different textual units or parts of his writings into a form containing different levels of meaning in order to counter dominant theological and cosmological paradigms operating at that time. The textual units were organized and arranged, or choreographed, in order to express particular theological themes and meanings. As noted earlier, in this way the author of Mark could present a formidable challenge to competing theological and cosmological paradigms in vogue at that time. By logical implication, then, it must be assumed that Mark is not the only biblical author choreographing textual passages.

It should be clear that this choreographic genre of biblical writing has serious implications for the ability of modern-day readers to accurately or reliably interpret and comprehend biblical writings without reading them through the first-century cosmological lenses of biblical writers themselves. First and foremost, it would suggest that contemporary Bible readers and scholars cannot even begin to understand biblical text sufficiently enough without being first-century listeners and scholars themselves. Among other things, this would require them to be well-versed about the literary devices that were in

vogue during those times.

The parallelism,² irony, and metaphor devices employed by the author of Mark's Gospel would seem to make clear that Bible writers were not by any means the primitive literary hacks they are sometimes made out to appear when foreign theoretical models containing questionable ideological and philosophical presuppositions are projected into or superimposed upon ancient literary forms. In this way, modern day Bible readers can perhaps begin to appreciate in greater measure the depth and profundity of the masterful choreography sewn into the fabric of that which has been called the 'Good News' of the Holy Bible.

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² This simply means a stunning correspondence in themes or ideas often expressed in successive and even different portions of the Hebrew Bible. Hebrew writings are filled with figurative and symbolic language rich in imagery such as irony, metaphor, and simile.

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