

# Introduction

## to this commentary on the Gospel of Mark

Living in Aramaic-speaking Galilee twenty centuries ago, Jesus and his first companions constituted the event of revelation that birthed the Christian faith. But without Paul's interpretation of the meaning of cross and resurrection for the Greek-speaking Hellenistic Jewish culture, we might never have heard of Christian faith.

Mark, whoever he was, lived during the lifetime of Paul and was deeply influenced by Paul. In about 70 BCE, Mark, like Paul, was a major turning point in the development of Christian faith. Mark invented the literary form we know as "the Gospel." This remarkable literary form was then copied and elaborated by the authors Matthew and Luke, and then revolutionized by John. These four writings, not Paul's letters, are the opening books of the New Testament that Christians count as their Bible (along with the Old Testament). "Gospel" (Good News) has become a name for the whole Christian revelation.

We might say that Mark was the theologian who gave us the Christianity that has survived in history. The Markian shift in Christian imagination was important enough that we might even claim that Mark, rather than Paul or Jesus, was the founder of Christianity. However that may be, Mark's gospel is a very important piece of writing. And this writing is more profound and wondrous than is commonly appreciated.

Of first importance for understanding the viewpoint of the following commentary on the Gospel Mark, I want us to understand that the figure of "Jesus" in Mark's narrative is a fictitious character—based, I firmly believe, on a real historical figure. But let us not confuse Mark's "Jesus" with what we can know through our best recent scientific research about the historical Jesus of Nazareth. For our best understanding of Mark, we need to view Mark's "Jesus" with the same fun and sensibility we have toward Harry Potter when we read J. K. Rowling's novels about this unusual character.

In other words, Mark is the theologian that we are reading in the Gospel of Mark, not Jesus or Paul, and not Luke or Matthew or John. Mark is himself an unusually clever writer and a profound theologian. This truth is fundamental for this commentary.

## What is Theology?

Not all religions have a theology, but Judaism, Christianity, and Islam do. Buddhism has Dharma sutras and many Dharma talks that are still being given today. These thoughtful efforts of the Buddhist religion are something like a theology. It is fair to say that all religions have a "theoretic"—something that its members do to reflect upon the core topics that characterize that religion's ongoing community of thoughtfulness about their life together, their message, their mission, as well as their religious practices and ethical guidelines.

Christian theology begins its thoughtfulness with reflections upon a specific event (a specific complex of happenings in history). The happenings that constitute this "event"

are understood to reveal the profound essence of every event in human history. That event has been given the name “Jesus Christ.” An ordinary first century man named “Jesus,” understood to be the “Messiah,” was viewed as a revelation about living in an ultimate devotion to that Ultimate Reality we encounter in every event of our personal lives, and in every event of our social history.

Judaism does something similar in its theologizing, but in this case the core revelatory event is “The Exodus from Egypt of a collection of slaves plus their revolution in law-writing.” Islam also treasures a revelatory event—in this case, “the Advent of Mohammad as a Messenger of the One Ultimate Creator of all things and events.” Obviously, in each of these religious groupings, there is good theology and bad theology, depending on whether those theological reflections appropriately reflect what their revelatory event revealed about the essence of living a human life. Good theology also depends upon whether a particular bit of theological thoughtfulness has resonance with living people in their contemporary settings.

This commentary on the Gospel of Mark intends to be “theology” in the sense just defined. I prefer the word “theologizing,” for I see Christian theology as an ongoing process of a community of people. My contribution to the ongoing process of Christian theologizing may be minor or large, but that is not entirely up to me. The community of those who are grounded in the Christ Jesus revelation will value or not value, preserve or not preserve, my contributions to the ongoing theologizing process of those who are captivated by the Christ Jesus revelation.

I see myself doing a *radical* form Christian theologizing. It is “radical” because this thoughtfulness is my attempt to return to the “roots” of the Christian revelation from the perspective of a radically contemporary understanding of the nature and role of religion in human society.

“Religion,” as I now understand that word, is not a set of stable doctrines and moralities allied with a once-and-for-all finished set of solitary and communal practices. The only stability that a religion has is its radical root. Religious doctrines and moralities, as well as religious practices are all in flux. Today, that flux is huge for every religion on Earth. The sort of Buddhism that is sweeping the North American continent is not stuck in the ruts of previous centuries. It is a fresh, creative accessing of ancient roots. In Christianity we are seeing something similar. I count this commentary part of that fresh effort to see the Christian revelation with new eyes and ears.

## **The Death of a Metaphor**

Some members of the Christian community speak of “the death of God” or even “the end of theology.” In this commentary (and in all my theologizing), I take the view that “the death of God” does not refer to an end of all use of the word “God.” I choose to understand “the death-of-God discussion” as pointing to the end of something temporal—namely, the obsolescence of an ancient metaphor of religious thinking held in the word “transcendence.” For 2000 years Christian theologizing has used this familiar metaphorical narrative: a vivid story-time imagination about a transcendent realm in which God, angels, devils, gods, goddesses, and other story-time characters are

living in an other-than-ordinary “realm” and “coming” from that “realm” to “act” within our ordinary human space and time. That is metaphorical talk. Being metaphorical, however, is not the problem. The problem for us today is the obsolete quality of that metaphor.

I am using an alternative metaphorical system of religious reflection in my mode of Biblical interpretation. I view our ordinary lives as well as our profound lives as participants in One realm of being. This One Reality has a depth that is invisible to both human eye and mind. This profound Depth shines through the passing realities of time that are visible to eye and mind. This Invisible Eternity can be said to “shine-through” temporal events. An ordinary bush can indeed burn with Eternity. An ordinary human being can indeed glow with the Presence of Eternity. But this Eternity is a not another realm that is different that our ordinary space/time of living. Importantly, this fresh view of Eternity does not imply a contempt for the temporal realm. Rather, it implies a fulfillment for each and every ordinary temporal event of our lives. Each temporal event has an Eternal depth or glow or burn to the eyes and ears and guts of our profound humanness.

In this new context the metaphorical words “ordinary” and “extraordinary” are seen as mere categories of human perception. We live in One, and only One, realm of Reality with many aspects. Among these many aspects, we may properly speak of this basic polarity: the impermanent and the permanent—the temporal and the Eternal. This polarity is not in Reality itself, but in our human consciousness of Reality. Temporal and Eternal are both aspects of our experience of an invisible One-ness that our minds cannot comprehend.

Indeed, this One-ness is an aspect of faith, not sight of the eye or mind. We do not see One-ness directly. One-ness is a devotional category that means that we are devoted to serve all aspects of our Real experience, rather than seeing the Real as part friendly and part enemy. From this One-ness point of view, the only enemy is human estrangement from the One Reality within which our own selves and all other persons dwell.

This One-ness viewpoint within Christian faith is not a denial of the diversity of our experiences of the Eternal or of the temporal. Differentiation and multiplicity obviously characterize our temporal lives. Multiplicity also characterizes much of our God-talk. In the God-talk of the Bible, there are many angels or servants of the ONE that express and carry out the actions of the One. But this One-ness is maintained in spite of the manyness that is understood to be aspects of the Eternal, sourced from this One-ness. In the opening verses of the Bible, the One God says to some angels, “Let there be light!” and this was done by the One’s many servant forces. Such poetry was intended to preserve the One-ness of Reality, not to fragment the One-ness of what is worshiped.

### **Interpreting Scripture Today**

Today, Christian theologians, who want to go to the roots of the first century Christian “*revelation*” and “*faith*,” face the reality that people in the first century used a two-tier, story-telling metaphor. That old manner of talking about ultimate matters was

and had been the way of talking about ultimate matters for as long as anyone could remember. As already noted, that way of talking is no longer adequate for us today.

Nevertheless, we cannot claim to be Christians if we fail to interpret our scriptures. Therefore, to do scriptural interpretation adequately, we must translate for our era of culture what those early writers meant in their own lives when using a form of metaphorical talk that is now basically meaningless to us. Throughout this commentary, I will be illustrating what such metaphorical translation looks like.

Christian theologians today also face a second challenge. Within our current culture we tend to overlook metaphorical meanings altogether. We tend to view all statements literally. We learned to be literal from the prominence today of the scientific mode of truth. In the scientific style of thinking, words mean something only if words point to something in the realm of facts, observable by the human senses. Influenced by this overemphasis on facts, both religious agnostics and religious literalists fail to see the poetic or contemplative type of truth that is contained in the wild stories of the Bible. The agnostics are right to see that many stories of the Bible are preposterous when viewed literally. And religious literalists, who think they are defending Biblical truth with their literalism, are actually ignoring the profound truth that is hidden in these wildly creative stories.

For example, Mark could tell a story about a 12-year-old Israelite girl being lifted from the dead, and his hearers could understand without qualms that this was a story about the 12 tribes of Israel being called back to life from a sleep-like-death. Listeners to such writing caught on to these metaphorical meanings without any need for help from a word like “metaphorical.” Why? Their minds were not yet characterized by an overemphasis on literal truth.

Fictitious stories still mean a great deal to most of us today. Thousands of youth and adults have enjoyed deeply the stories of Harry Potter. We know that these are fiction, that Harry’s magical ways are not to be taken literally. Yet we identify with him and his close friends in being magical persons who do not fit into the general society and who need to keep their true nature secret from most people. In other words, we can still see truth in fictitious stories, if we let ourselves do so.

So as we read the Gospel of Mark, we need to keep in the forefront of our thinking that Mark is composing his “good news” in a hot-fiction mode of truth. We need to interpret Mark’s preposterous story telling in a contemplative, descriptive way, saying how we have these same life experiences in our own lives today.

## **Why I Am Starting this Commentary with Chapter 14**

In Chapter 14, 15, and 16, Mark clarifies what Mark means by “cross” and “resurrection.” Until we see that these two words are pointing to everyday experiences that may happen to you or me in our lives today, we have no hope of understanding anything that Mark is saying. Also, these passages toward the end of Mark’s story, if understood as Mark meant them, make the first 13 chapters of Mark’s narrative more easy to fully understood. Through this commentary, I will attempt to show why I believe that this order of understanding is best for us today.