

## Study Guide for the Gospel of Mark

### *Approaching the Gospel of Mark: Initial Reflections*

**Assigned Reading:** Gospel of Mark, Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, chapters 4,5,7.

After you listened to the lecture, and have done the reading in Ehrman, the study guide has a twofold purpose:

- 1) To facilitate continued reflection and integration of the material by appropriating in the reading of select themes and passages in the Gospel of Mark.
- 2) To provide focus questions for group discussion of the Gospel of Mark in the light of the lecture and the reading.

Before you work through the study guide do the following:

- Make a brief list of the ideas and insights you encountered in the lecture and the textbook that challenged your working assumptions about the Gospels in general and the Gospel of Mark in particular.
- Make a list of questions you would like to investigate further or discuss with others engaged in the class.

In interpreting the Gospel of Mark or any of the Gospels one important goal is to get a sense of the narrative as a whole. Read through the Gospel of Mark again in one sitting and do the following:

- Summarize in your own words what you think Mark's story of Jesus is about.
- Make a list of important themes and some of the ways your own understanding of Mark is different from what you heard in the lecture and read in Powell. Identify important questions the lecture and reading raised for you, and select key ideas and passages you would like to revisit.

### *Deeper Engagement with the Gospel of Mark*

The Gospel of Mark tells the story of Jesus from a particular point of view in order to persuade audiences to embody the story in their own lives and communities. The lecture pointed out that the central theme of the Gospel is stated in 1:15: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." The entire Gospel is organized around Jesus' struggle to establish God's rule or "kingdom" in the face of obstacles and opposition. Jesus mediates the Divine presence and power in ways that challenge the status quo, and the ensuing conflicts reveal the core values and practices of those who would follow Jesus in contrast to other cultural and religious values and practices.

Both the lecture and your textbook emphasized that Mark is rooted in a Jewish worldview. Two important and intertwined themes in Judaism that feature prominently in Mark are Temple and holiness or purity. One of the central values and practices in Judaism was "holiness" or purity. Holiness in Second Temple Judaism is associated with

the Divine presence, and the preeminent locus of holiness was the Jerusalem Temple. If the Temple was destroyed around the time Mark was written, probably just before, then this raised all kinds of important questions about access to Divine holiness and presence.

### *An Exercise in the Practice of Interpretation*

The following is an exercise for you to do on your own in which you will apply what you are learning about the Gospel of Mark by investigating in a little more depth the Temple and holiness or purity themes by doing the following:

- Read Leviticus 19 and note all the various meanings and dimensions of holiness or purity.
- Look up the word “holy” in all its forms in Mark by using a concordance. Then read the passages in Mark to see how the word is used. This would include Mark’s use of the phrase “*Holy Spirit*”. In other words, “holy” is an adjective that modifies the activity of the Spirit.
- Look up the term “holy”, “holiness” or “purity” in a Bible dictionary or the Jewish Encyclopedia (<http://jewishencyclopedia.com/index.jsp>). If you are ambitious, you could read Paula Fredriksen's article “Did Jesus Oppose the Purity Laws?” ([http://www.bu.edu/religion/faculty/bios/fredriksen/purity\\_laws.pdf](http://www.bu.edu/religion/faculty/bios/fredriksen/purity_laws.pdf)), which challenges the prevailing notion that Jesus abrogated the purity laws, or Jerome Neyrey’s article “A Symbolic Approach to Mark 7” (<http://www.nd.edu/%7Ejneyrey1/symbolic.html>).
- Read the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees in Mark 7:1-23. How does Jesus understand holiness, and how is it different from the Pharisees’ understanding?
- There is a brief description of the various groups of religious authorities in Judaism in your textbook on page 71. How is Jesus’ perspective and practice of holiness/purity different from other Jewish groups? For example, what does the exorcism of “unclean spirits” imply about Jesus’ understanding of holiness? What about the healings? One way of looking at Jesus’ interaction with other Jewish leaders is that he is debating with them about the nature and modus operandi of Divine presence and power. What are some examples of how some of these Jewish groups understand the Divine presence and power? How does Jesus embody the Divine presence and power?
- Read the account of Jesus in the Temple in Mark 11:15-33. If the Temple is the locus of Divine presence and holiness, what are the central issues and values here, and how do they relate to the central plot of Mark? Look up the passages from the Old Testament that Jesus quotes here, especially the words from Jeremiah’s Temple sermon in Jeremiah 7.
- Look at Mark’s account of Jesus’ trial before the Jewish council in Mark 14:53-65. How do you understand the charges brought against Jesus in the light of the view that the Temple was regarded as the locus of Divine holiness and presence, especially if for hearers the Temple has been destroyed? What is meant in v.58 by a Temple “not made with hands”? What might be the significance of the rending of the Temple veil (Mark 15:38) in the light of this theme?

### **Discussion Question**

Jesus is a Second Temple Jew who was committed to the Temple and the practice of holiness, and yet he mediated the Divine presence and power in ways that brought him into conflict with Jewish authorities that had different conceptions of holiness.

- How is Jesus' embodiment of Divine holiness, presence and power different from that of other religious leaders in Mark?
- When you think about contemporary conceptions of Divine power and presence, both religious and non-religious, what significance does Mark's depiction of Jesus' struggle to establish God's rule have for your own life of faith and practice of ministry?