

The Hodder Bible Commentary

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Edited by Lee Gatiss

MARK

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STOUGHTON

The Hodder Bible Commentary
Series Editor: Lee Gatiss

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Series Preface

The unfolding of your words gives light
(Psalm 119:130)

The Hodder Bible Commentary aims to proclaim afresh in our generation the unchanging and unerring word of God, for the glory of God and the good of his people. This fifty-volume commentary on the whole Bible seeks to provide the contemporary church with fresh and readable expositions of Scripture which are doctrinally sensitive and globally aware, accessible for all adult readers but particularly useful to those who preach, teach and lead Bible studies in churches and small groups.

Building on the success of Hodder's NIV Proclamation Bible, we have assembled as contributors a remarkable team of men and women from around the world. Alongside a diverse panel of trusted Consultant Editors, they have a tremendous variety of denominational backgrounds and ministries. Each has great experience in unfolding the gospel of Jesus Christ and all are united in our aim of faithfully expounding the Bible in a way that takes account of the original text, biblical theology, the history of interpretation and the needs of the contemporary global church.

These volumes are serious expositions – not overly technical, scholarly works of reference but not simply sermons either. As well as carefully unpacking what the Bible says, they are sensitive to how it has been used in doctrinal discussions over the centuries and in our own day, though not dominated by such concerns at the expense of the text's own agenda. They also try to speak not only into a white, middle-class, Western context (for example), as some might, but to be aware of ways in which other cultures hear and need to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

As you tuck into his word, with the help of this book, may the glorious Father 'give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better' (Ephesians 1:17).

Lee Gatiss, Series Editor

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The Series Editor would like to thank the following Consultant Editors for their contributions to the Hodder Bible Commentary:

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The Prologue

MARK 1:1–15

1. *The beginning and the herald* • Mark 1:1–8

The beginnings, or Prologues, of the Gospels set up all that follows. They introduce us to key people and key themes, and also place the text in the context of the Scriptures as a whole.¹

We are given the privileged role of an insider, and as we go through the remainder of the Gospel, *we* know who Jesus really is: he is ‘the Messiah, the Son of God’. We can read with an understanding that escaped nearly all those with whom Jesus came into contact. We can join the dots. We can read with faith.

Mark’s Prologue is made up of the first fifteen verses of chapter one, a section that begins, ‘The beginning of the *good news* . . .’ and then finishes with, ‘Repent and believe the *good news*’ (my emphasis). As we will see, Mark is keen on the literary device known as an *inclusio*, a way of marking a section of text by repeating a phrase or theme at the beginning and at the end. Everything between the repeats is meant to fit together, and so this device is sometimes known as ‘sandwiching’. The ‘bread’ and the ‘filling’ go together and interpret each other.

The bread of this particular sandwich is ‘the good news’, sometimes translated as ‘gospel’. The filling is the prophetic message of verse 2, which begins to be fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus’s baptism with its accompanying voice from heaven. This section, then, is the introduction to all that follows in the Gospel.

¹ Elizabeth Struthers Malborn, ‘Ending at the Beginning: A Response’, *Semeia* 52 (1991), 177–81. This approach is also seen in wider classical literature. Peter Phillips, *The Prologue of the Fourth Gospel: A Sequential Reading* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2006), 42.

John the Baptist prepares the way

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah,^a the Son of God,^b **2** as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

‘I will send my messenger
ahead of you,
who will prepare your way’^c –
3 ‘a voice of one calling in the
wilderness,
“Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.”’^d

4 And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went

out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the River Jordan. **6** John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt round his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. **7** And this was his message: ‘After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. **8** I baptise you with^e water, but he will baptise you with^e the Holy Spirit.’

a ¹ Or *Jesus Christ. Messiah* (Hebrew) and *Christ* (Greek) both mean *Anointed One*.

b ¹ Some manuscripts do not have *the Son of God*.

c ² Mal. 3:1

d ³ Isaiah 40:3

e ⁸ Or *in*

The Old Testament foundation (1:1–3)

Straight away, Mark puts Jesus at the forefront of his Gospel. Christ is the heart of all that follows and is the good news that is to be proclaimed. The church has often been tempted to offer some other thing to the world – prosperity, self-fulfilment, morality, good works, wholeness – but none of these is the gospel. A gospel without the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is mere morality. A Christless church is no church at all.

This Jesus is then presented to us as both Messiah and Son of God, and here we discover that we are dealing with no mere teacher: we have a figure who is both divine and human. Yet once more we find the church tempted to offer something less – a teacher, a moralist, an example – a Jesus who is all too human, who simply had a presence of the divine within him. A godless saviour who has no power to save. B. B. Warfield (1851–1921) is surely correct when

THE PROLOGUE

he states, ‘The doctrine of the Incarnation is the hinge on which the Christian system turns. No Two Natures, no Incarnation; no Incarnation, no Christianity in any distinctive sense.’²

Having established who Jesus is, Mark then places him into the history of redemption. Jesus is no Plan B, but the fulfilment of God’s plan of redemption which springs from Genesis 3:15.³

The quote from Isaiah is, in fact, a compound one, with the first two lines coming from Malachi 3. A puzzling question arises: why did Mark announce a quote from Isaiah and then begin by citing words from Malachi? While some might suggest that Mark made a mistake, this is a rather simplistic response. Given that the quotation from Isaiah, which speaks of the way of the LORD, is the main focus of the hybrid quote, and given the importance of Isaiah for Mark’s Gospel as a whole, it is more likely that Mark was referring to that prophecy. The quotation from Malachi simply served to introduce us to the one who heralded the fulfilments of Isaiah’s prophecy, and so was secondary in importance. It was Isaiah who was in focus here.

This introduction from Malachi prepares us for the forerunner, the messenger who would announce this return of the LORD.⁴ Later, in the penultimate verse of the Old Testament – Malachi 4:5 – this messenger was identified: ‘See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you

² Benjamin B. Warfield, ‘The “Two Natures” and Recent Christological Speculation: I. The Christology of the New Testament Writings’, *The American Journal of Theology* 15, no. 3 (1911), 337.

³ ‘And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel’ (the words of God to the serpent). This verse was, from early times, seen as a prophecy of Christ. See, for example, the fifth century Jacob of Serug who imagined Mary as saying: ‘the babe who is in me will crush the head of the great serpent; by Him Adam having been expelled is restored to his heritage’. *Homilies*, 679. Translation from Jacob of Serug, *On the Mother of God*, trans. Mary Hansbury (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 82.

⁴ It is worth noting that Elijah’s return is to herald the day of the LORD and *not* the Messiah. In the literature that survives from this era, there is no linking of the return of Elijah with the coming of a Messiah. For a discussion of this, see Morris M. Faierstein, ‘Why Do the Scribes Say That Elijah Must Come First’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100, no. 1 (1981); Dale C. Allison, ‘Elijah Must Come First’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103, no. 2 (1984); Joseph A. Fitzmyer, ‘More About Elijah Coming First’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, no. 2 (1985). The imagery of Elijah, then, points to something greater than a mere Messiah: the coming of the LORD himself.

MARK

before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes,' and it is in this context that, a few verses on, Mark introduced us to John the Baptist. That John is equated to Elijah was hinted at in Mark 9:13 and made explicit in Matthew 11:14 where Jesus declared, 'if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come' (see also Luke 7:27).

Malachi's prophecy echoed Exodus 23:20, and the prophet re-applied this promise to the community who had returned from the Exile.⁵ He promised not only a re-entry to the Promised Land but also a return of the LORD to the Temple, something we will see fulfilled in Mark 11.⁶

So much for the messenger; what of the message? Here Mark turned to Isaiah 40:3:

a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'

This was a direct engagement with Isaiah: the hoped-for return of the LORD was about to begin. Centuries had elapsed, and patience is often required in the providence of God. We all too readily come up with swift and easy solutions when God has richer purposes in mind. The old Scottish hymn writer put it well:

Smooth let it be or rough,
it will be still the best;
winding or straight, it leads
right onward to thy rest.⁷

⁵ In Greek and Hebrew, the word translated 'angel' can also be translated 'messenger'.

⁶ In Exodus we read, 'See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared. Pay attention to him and listen to what he says. Do not rebel against him; he will not forgive your rebellion, since my Name is in him' (Exodus 23:20-2). This is echoed in Malachi, which reads, "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty' (Malachi 3:1).

⁷ Horatius Bonar (1808-89), 'Thy Way, Not Mine, O Lord'.