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0521830362 - Jesus' Defeat of Death: Persuading Mark's Early Readers

Peter G. Bolt

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

The project

General orientation to the topic

This project is an inquiry into the impact of Mark's Gospel on its early Graeco-Roman readers. It argues that the supplants in the thirteen healing/exorcism scenes have an important role in engaging the implied readers, and, because they represent a sample of life from the real world, the supplants enable flesh-and-blood Graeco-Roman readers to 'become' the implied readers, enter the story, and so feel its impact.

Each supplant begins under the shadow of death, but their circumstances are changed as a result of their encounter with Jesus, who brings life where there once was death. Their stories are told as part of a larger narrative which presents Jesus, as Son of God, as an alternative leader for the world, who leads the way into the coming kingdom of God. Mark's early flesh-and-blood readers also lived under the shadow of death. When they entered the story through 'becoming' the supplants, the larger narrative would have caused them to focus upon Jesus whose life, death and resurrection addressed their mortality and gave them the hope of their own future resurrection. In this way, Mark's message about Jesus' defeat of death had the potential to make a huge impact upon Graeco-Roman readers, and so to play a large role in the mission, and the remarkable growth,¹ of early Christianity.

¹ This remarkable growth is plainly a fact of history, even if it cannot be adequately described. Although the portrait of growth depicted in the NT cannot be taken as entirely informative, for there was no-one who had the means to gain accurate statistics, it is 'a fact of great importance' that the church took encouragement from its own 'consciousness of steady and irresistible growth'; Judge, 'Penetration', 6.

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General orientation to the method

The Gospel's 'powerful drama and impact'² are often acknowledged, but its exact nature and the means by which it is achieved await further exploration.

In the last decades there have been many good studies engaging in literary analysis of Mark, paying attention to the role of plot, character, space, time, movement and the like.³ Although literary study can be done ahistorically,⁴ an examination of Mark's potential impact on its early readers must take into account the fact that the Gospel appears to be written as history, albeit in apocalyptic mode.⁵

Many literary studies deal well with Mark's 'narrative world', i.e., the world within the text, constructed by the text, but stop short of the problematic interface between 'text' and 'real world'. This is often due to a profound scepticism about whether this divide can or should be crossed. When such a crossing is attempted and questions of textual impact on real readers are actually broached, it is usually (*post-*)*modern* rather than ancient readers who are in view. But, since 'one of the principal means of bridging or at least diminishing the distance between later readers and the text is examination of the presumed effect of the story on its original audience',⁶ this study seeks to assess Mark's 'narrative impact' on its *early* readers. As such, it is an exercise in 'literary reception', for it seeks to move beyond the literary study of Mark's *narrative world*, to understand Mark's reception in the *real world of first-century Graeco-Roman society*.⁷

In order to do this, this ancient reading experience (which for most in the first century would have been a 'hearing' experience)⁸ is approached

² Dwyer, *Motif*, 201.

³ For discussion of such methods, see, for example: Moore, *Literary Criticism*; Anderson and Moore, *Mark*; S.H. Smith, *Lion*.

⁴ This is the complaint levelled at Fowler, *Loaves*, by Beavis, *Audience*, 10. It has been a self-conscious strategy amongst many literary interpreters to restrict themselves to the world in the text, rather than the world outside the text. This is an extremely important step, for it allows the narrative to be understood on its own terms. Nevertheless, understanding of the impact of the narrative on real people requires a further important step.

⁵ See Collins, *Life*? ⁶ Van Iersel, *Mark*, 24.

⁷ My method is similar to that of Beavis, *Audience*, 11, who seeks to apply insights of reader-response criticism and Graeco-Roman rhetoric – complaining that this has rarely been done. In my case, I seek to combine reader-response criticism and social description of relevant aspects of the first-century Graeco-Roman world. This combination enables reflection on Mark's narrative rhetoric, i.e., the potential persuasive power of this narrative in that setting.

⁸ This point is now commonly recognised and, in what follows, it should be assumed at every mention of the early 'reader'.

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from two directions: first, 'outwards' from the text towards the textual construct known as the implied reader, and, secondly, 'inwards' from the real, flesh-and-blood readers towards the text. This twofold approach will now be explained in more detail.

Text to (implied) reader

The approach taken in this analysis is reader-oriented.⁹ Although there is a variety of approaches with an interest in readers, the method adopted here is one which grants control of the reading experience to the text.¹⁰ This means that, instead of simply providing what amounts to a set of subjective impressions, the analysis seeks to identify and explain textually embedded devices which are oriented towards producing an effect in the reader.

A text-controlled reader-response approach assumes that reading is a temporal experience,¹¹ in that the early parts of the narrative prepare the reader for the later parts through such devices as anticipation and retrospection, gaps, repetition and variation, in which a later scene echoes an earlier one, and the like. Adopting such a dynamic view of the reading process renders certain formalist approaches to Mark somewhat inadequate.¹²

⁹ There are now three commentaries that provide a sustained focus upon the reader: Heil, *Gospel of Mark*; and van Iersel, *Reading Mark and Mark*. Heil's reader orientation consists in using each character in a particular scene to draw out exemplary lessons for the reader. Van Iersel's work is more sophisticated, paying attention to the interpretive value of the larger formal features of the text.

¹⁰ Cf. Steiner's imagery, in which the critic is 'judge and master' of the text, the reader is its 'servant'; 'Critic"/"Reader"', 449. Text-controlled critics include Wayne Booth, and the early Stanley Fish, i.e., in *Self-Consuming*, and see also *Surprised*; see Fowler, 'Reader – Reader-Response?', 13, who says they both believe in 'the rhetorical power of the text'. Fowler positions himself with Booth's view of the implied reader being 'the reader implied in the text' (p. 15, cf. p. 13). Iser's phenomenology of reading, which speaks of an interaction between text and reader, is, in practice, a close relative. This is also evident in Fowler's method ('Reader – Mark?', 53), for he grants to the text the role of 'direction', and to the reader the responsibility of making sense of the 'indirection' (ambiguity, irony, paradox, etc.). He later explored this method at length in *Let the Reader*. Van Iersel, *Mark*, 28 n. 21, dismisses the more subjective approaches, arguing that he has adopted an approach which is concerned with 'objective textual phenomena'.

¹¹ Cf. Iser, 'Reading Process'; 'Interaction'; Fowler, 'Reader – Reader-Response?', 18–21. This is acknowledged by van Iersel, *Mark*, 24–5, who therefore adopts the 'fiction of the first reading' in his commentary, although his work still shows an abiding influence of formalism.

¹² For example, the dynamic experience of reading can be somewhat lacking in analyses of Mark which rely upon 'concentric structures'; e.g., Standaert, *L'Évangile*; Stock, *Method*; Dewey, *Public Debate*, and even van Iersel, *Mark*.

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This discussion adopts an analysis of the parties involved in a narrative transaction that is now fairly commonplace amongst reader-response critics. These 'narrative dynamics' can be diagrammed as in figure 1.¹³ The inner box represents the text itself, with the real author and reader existing in the real world outside of the text and so not being easily accessible through simply reading the text. On the other hand, the *implied* author and reader are textual constructs, that is, their portraits are painted by the text itself. The implied reader, therefore, 'amounts to the textual elements that invite the actual reader to respond to the text in certain ways'.¹⁴

In regard to the movement from text to implied reader, this study assumes the distinction, still not widely utilised in Marcan studies, between the 'story' level of a narrative (i.e., what actually happens in the narrative) and the 'discourse' level (i.e., how the narrative connects with readers).¹⁵ Literary studies of Mark have tended to deal with aspects of the 'story' level. However, given that the focus of this study is the interaction between text and reader, it is mainly concerned with the 'discourse' of Mark. It should be noted, however, that it is artificial to suggest that the two can be discussed in isolation from one another, especially since any study of the 'discourse' must also deal with the 'story', since the former also encompasses the latter.¹⁶ The key analytical tools used here are drawn from Booth (dynamics of distance) and Genette/Bal/Rimmon-Kenan (focalisation), but frequent reference will also be made to Fowler's work, since it represents the only sustained treatment of Mark at the level of 'discourse'.¹⁷

¹³ Chatman's diagram suffices for my purposes, although I have added 'characters' to it, for they can operate on either 'side' of the equation, speaking for the author or aligning themselves with the reader. It has been slightly modified by Danove and van Iersel. For discussion and diagrams, see van Iersel, *Mark*, 16–21. Fowler also discusses the place of the 'critic' and the 'critical reader'; 'Reader – Reader-Response?', 5–10; *Let the Reader*, 4–5, 263–4. The 'narrator/narratee' axis is not useful for Mark, for the transaction simply involves the implied author/reader; Fowler, 'Reader – Mark?', 40.

¹⁴ Van Iersel, *Mark*, 17–18. That the 'implied reader' is a textual construct must be stressed, given the tendency for some to use the term loosely, in such a way as to bestow a real-world existence upon the implied reader.

¹⁵ The distinction is drawn by Chatman, *Story*, 10, 19, who deals with Story in chs 2 and 3, and Discourse in chs 4 and 5. Fowler, *Let the Reader*, 256, complains that a failure to distinguish these two levels often troubles literary analyses of Mark. Van Iersel, *Mark*, 22, correctly stresses that the discourse level 'totally embraces the narrative level'.

¹⁶ Van Iersel, *Mark*, 22.

¹⁷ There are, of course, many 'literary' studies of Mark, but Fowler's almost unique contribution is his analysis of the 'discourse' level, i.e., the level at which the text communicates with the reader. In 1989 Beavis, *Audience*, 14, referred to his *Loaves* (1981) as 'the most important reader-response interpretation to date' (cf. p. 10), and *Let the Reader* (1991) focused even more sharply on the discourse level.

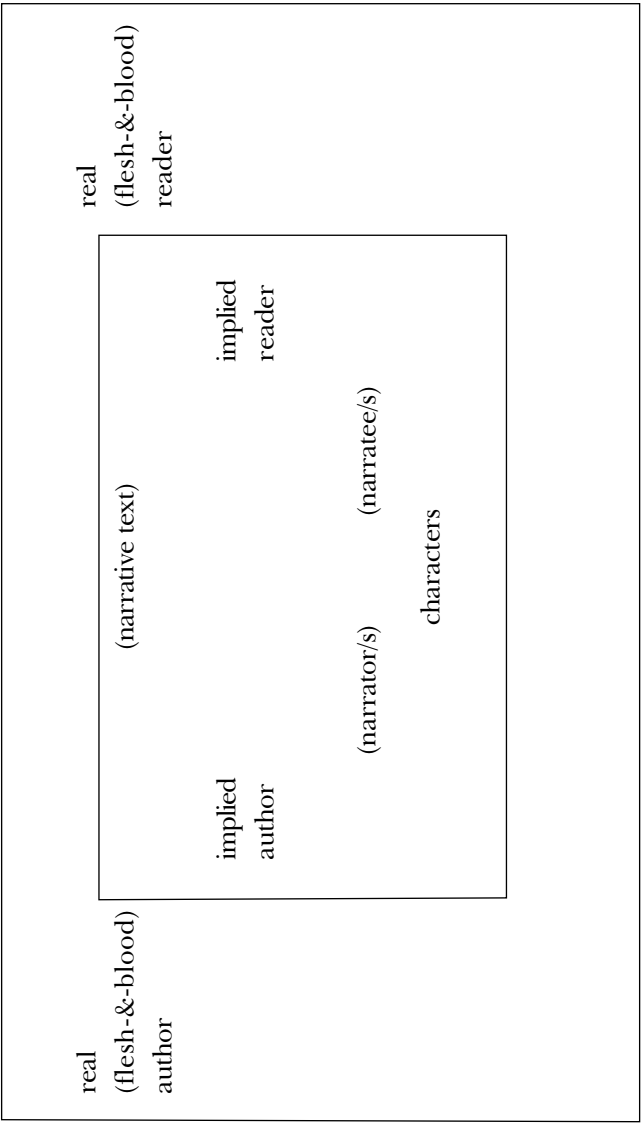


Figure 1 Chatman's narrative dynamics

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A key question at the 'story' level of Mark's communicative dynamics is the role played by the various character groups with respect to the reader. It is usual to identify Mark's 'major' characters as Jesus, his disciples, and his opponents. The other characters are labelled as the 'minor' characters. Alongside the many studies discussing the role of the disciples in Mark's process of communication, the key role of these 'minor' characters has also been recognised.¹⁸

Since Williams has provided the fullest and most recent discussion of the 'minor' characters, he will be another conversation partner in this study. He divides the 'minor' characters into those appearing before Bartimaeus in the narrative and those appearing after him, arguing that the former play the role of 'suppliant', whereas the latter act as 'exemplars'¹⁹ – Bartimaeus being a transitional figure with both roles. I suggest that a further subdivision is possible, however, for there is a group of 'minor' characters who change allegiance and so can be called the 'cross-over characters'.²⁰ These subdivisions enable a group of thirteen 'minor' characters to be isolated,²¹ beginning with the man in Capernaum and ending with Bartimaeus, who, with greater precision, can be termed 'suppliants'²² because they need healing or exorcism (for themselves or others) and they receive extraordinary help from Jesus (1.21–28; 1.29–31; 1.40–45; 2.1–12; 3.1–6; 5.1–20; 5.21–24a, 35–43; 5.24b–34; 7.24–30; 7.31–37; 8.22–26; 9.14–29; 10.46–52). These are the 'minor characters' of interest to this study, although, since I will be arguing that they play a 'major' role in Mark's communicative dynamics, I prefer the more descriptive label 'suppliants'.

The role of these suppliants in Mark's communication process has not yet been satisfactorily discussed. Considering them as 'foils for disciples'²³ has effectively eclipsed their own importance and perhaps even opened up the possibility of the disciples usurping Jesus' role as the story's

¹⁸ Minor characters have received attention from Rhoads and Michie, *Mark*, 129–35, Malbon, 'Disciples', and, most recently, J.F. Williams, *Other Followers*.

¹⁹ Williams, *Other Followers*, 167f., refining Malbon, 'Jewish Leaders', 159.

²⁰ The eager young man (10.17–23); the scribe (12.28–34), see S.H. Smith, 'Opponents', 177f.; the centurion (15.39); Joseph of Arimathea (15.42–47); and Judas. Although the category is my own, these characters have often been recognised as exceptions.

²¹ The 'unknown exorcist' (9.38ff.) and the children (10.13–16) involve interactions between Jesus and his disciples, rather than properly being 'minor character' stories. A number of features distinguish them from the thirteen healing/exorcism scenes.

²² The term, adopted from others, is not entirely satisfactory, since the actual 'supplication' can be made by the needy person, or by someone on behalf of another, or be absent altogether.

²³ Cf. Rhoads and Michie, *Mark*, 132–4.

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protagonist.²⁴ Even Williams so subordinates these figures to the disciples that their role towards the reader is negligible. Although he admits that Mark also moves the readers to associate with characters other than the disciples,²⁵ he means those after and including Bartimaeus. His study therefore deems most important the 'minor' characters about whom the narrative says least and overlooks the importance of those about whom it says most.

In contrast to Williams, the present study argues that, when the analysis proceeds beyond the story level to the discourse level, it becomes clear that it is the suppliants in the healing and exorcism stories with whom the narrative most strongly associates the implied readers (see pp. 11–25 below). This, in turn, means that they play an extremely important part in the production of Mark's impact upon his real readers.

The (flesh-and-blood) readers to the text

This work seeks to understand Mark's persuasive impact on its early readers. The step of crossing from text to early audience to examine Mark's rhetoric has not often been taken: 'Mark has rarely been studied against the background of reader-response criticism and Graeco-Roman rhetoric, and [...] scholars have rarely undertaken to describe the Gospel's social setting.'²⁶ In order to understand Mark's persuasive power, it is necessary to move from the reader-oriented analysis of the text to an attempt to recover the 'cultural mind' of Mark's early readers through social description.

Understanding Mark has been likened to understanding a joke from another culture: 'You have to know what ideas and information are being assumed before you can "get" the meaning.'²⁷ Discussion of the healing and exorcism scenes, i.e., those involving the 'suppliants', has rarely delved into the ancient assumptions about the conditions represented in them, which limits the extent to which the interpreter 'gets' these scenes. Through an examination of relevant ancient literary and non-literary sources this study attempts to recover some of these assumptions as a step towards appreciating the impact the scenes would have made.

²⁴ Although it is true that, in Mark's web of relationships, these figures will have points of comparison and contrast to the disciples, their more important role will be to act in some way as 'foils' for the protagonist. In this web they take the part of 'the ficelle', who 'in innumerable ways [acts] as foil to the protagonist, creating [...] the perspectives of depth' (Harvey, 'Human Context', 242).

²⁵ J.F. Williams, *Other Followers*, 151.

²⁶ Beavis, *Audience*, 11.

²⁷ Rhoads, 'Social Criticism', 137.

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The flesh-and-blood readers of interest to the study are not Mark's 'first', or 'original', readers, but its 'early' readers, i.e., those who potentially read/heard Mark once it was placed in the public domain. If all we can say about Mark's provenance is that 'the [G]ospel was composed somewhere in the Roman Empire',²⁸ it makes good sense to conceive of its early readers in correspondingly general terms, i.e., as those who lived in the Graeco-Roman world of the latter part of the first century.

Such generality allows Mark to be examined in terms of three broad features of first-century Graeco-Roman culture. These features are not chosen arbitrarily, but because they share vocabulary and/or concepts with Mark.

- (1) The expectation of the coming kingdom of God is the framework within which Mark's story is played out and its themes gain meaning. This intersects with the political framework of the Roman world, and, in particular, with the place of its rulers within it.
- (2) The healing/exorcism stories, which are the main interest of the study, inevitably touch upon various sicknesses. This project considers them as forms of 'illness', i.e., the social condition of being ill, rather than 'disease', i.e., the product of some pathological causality.²⁹ Such a focus avoids the 'etic' question of how a modern person might diagnose an ancient disease, in favour of the 'emic' question of how the ancient sufferer might have experienced it.³⁰
- (3) Any interest in illness and *daimones*³¹ in the ancient world automatically requires a corresponding interest in ancient magical practice. The various conditions experienced by Mark's sufferers overlap with those found in magical curses and spells. Jesus' treatment of these conditions has similarities to the practice of the magicians, albeit with important differences.

²⁸ Hooker, *Mark*, 8, who adds 'a conclusion that scarcely narrows the field at all!'. Cf. Fowler, *Loaves*, 183. This generality, however, is an asset, not a liability; cf. Bauckham, 'For Whom?'.
²⁹ Douglas, *Purity*, 29, labelled the fallacy that the only task called for is 'scientific explanation' of the disease 'medical materialism'; cf. Pilch, 'Leprosy', 108.

³⁰ For this sociological distinction see Pike, 'Etic', 152ff.

³¹ Except in quotations from other authors, this study consistently uses the transliteration '*daimon*', instead of the more common English term 'demon'. Even though the English spelling finds the occasional counterpart in the sources (e.g. *P.Harris* 55 l.8–9 (2nd c. AD); *DT 22–36* (3rd c. AD)), in popular parlance it tends to connote a metaphysical view of these beings which, I suggest, needs re-examination.

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Flesh-and-blood readers come to a text with a 'repertoire' already in place, i.e., the conceptual resources which they bring to the reading of the narrative.³² To put it more linguistically – and perhaps in a way that highlights the real-world context a little more – when a text is heard by an audience, its vocabulary and concepts have to engage with the 'mental register' that the audience already possesses. In order to make an impact, the language of the Gospel of Mark would have to engage in a meaningful way with its early readers' mental register. The particular features of Graeco-Roman life highlighted here are chosen because they share Mark's particular vocabulary and conceptualisation. They would be important – in fact, probably unavoidable – components of the mental register of the early readers seeking to make sense of Mark. Although local variation no doubt existed, each is a general feature of the Graeco-Roman world: it would be a rare place in the Roman world in which the effects of the Caesars, or illness and death, or magic, were not felt and experienced.

To understand the rhetoric of Mark, the persuasive strategy of the narrative itself *vis-à-vis* the reader needs to be understood, which is where reader-response criticism is useful. But real flesh-and-blood readers come to the text with an already-established 'repertoire' in their minds, by which they seek to understand Mark's narrative. The more we can understand the repertoire of a particular set of readers, the more we can understand the potential impact the narrative holds for them. If we wish to understand the potential impact of Mark on its early Graeco-Roman readers, then it is important to attempt to understand the repertoire of someone whose social setting was the first-century Graeco-Roman world.

In seeking to recover aspects of the early readers' mental register, the study attempts to assess the evidence of primary material not sufficiently utilised in previous Marcan studies. This has required the discussion of secondary material to be necessarily brief, although it will be obvious that decisions have been made about textual and exegetical issues discussed in the literature. This curtailment of lengthy discussion of secondary material is not meant to suggest that this discussion is irrelevant or inadequate, but simply represents a necessary compromise allowing the less familiar primary evidence to speak, at the expense of more familiar secondary material.

³² Cf. van Iersel, *Mark*, 23–4, who speaks of the 'intended' reader, with whom the flesh-and-blood author shares much in common, such as language, literary conventions, shared presuppositions, world-view, fund of general knowledge, and a number of comparable experiences and ideas.

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A focus on the Graeco-Roman readers does not imply that all of Mark's readers were Graeco-Roman, for, in fact, it is highly likely that there was a substantial Jewish component amongst Mark's readership. Neither does it imply that the Jewish material is not relevant to the concerns here. On the contrary, Mark is a Hellenistic document arising from a Jewish context, much the same as the LXX, the *Sentences* of Pseudo-Phocylides, and the writings of Philo and Josephus. The OT is essential for understanding the theological framework by which Mark evaluates Jesus. The Jewish thought world is important as a context from which the events of the story arose and against which they make sense. From time to time, in order to understand our text, reference will be made to this background, but much more could have been said. It should also be remembered that any Jewish readers would also be part of the Graeco-Roman world,³³ and by virtue of that position, despite their Jewish distinctives, they would share much of the same mental register as Gentile Graeco-Romans.

For the sake of a clear focus, the flesh-and-blood readers of interest here are those who inhabited the Graeco-Roman world of the first century. If Mark played a part in the movement towards the 'conversion of Rome',³⁴ then these were the people who read it. In order to understand how Mark's narrative rhetoric would have worked on them, we must attempt to expose relevant features of their cultural repertoire.

Jesus' defeat of death

This study argues that such text-to-reader and reader-to-text analysis leads to the conclusion that, in Mark, Jesus deals with death and its many invasions into human life. It will suggest that this message would have had a high potential impact on early readers, since their world provided ample occasion to feel the distress inflicted by human mortality, since, as depicted by Seneca (4 BC/AD 1–AD 65): 'Most men ebb and flow in wretchedness between the fear of death and the hardships of life; they are unwilling to live, and yet they do not know how to die' (*Ep.* 4.6).

A few studies have recognised in passing that Mark's presentation confronts the problem of human mortality, – either in parts,³⁵ or as a

³³ Cf. Cotter, 'Cosmology', 119, who complains that, in regard to cosmology and miracles, 'although we are now agreed that a common cultural influence was shared throughout the Mediterranean world, we have yet to take seriously the implications of Hellenization on the first-century Jewish understanding of the cosmos'.

³⁴ The phrase alludes to the title of the essay by Edwin Judge, *Conversion*.

³⁵ For example, 4.35–5.43 is clearly about Jesus' defeat of death in various forms. See McVann, 'Destroying Death', 125–9; Kotansky, 'Jesus'.