Mark and Mission: Insights from Mark 1:1-15

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Abstract: While we are aware of the significance of Matt 28:16-20 and Luke 4:18-19 as mandates for mission, and to a lesser extent of John 20:22-23, it is more difficult to locate missionary mandates in the Gospel of Mark. In this paper I want to show how Mark 1:1-15 is an important text for the contemporary missionary. In particular, Mark's theology of the Spirit found in these verses serves to challenges those theologies that countenance a certain type of dualism and that encourage "high" christologies, two theological emphases that are inimical to the contemporary exercise of mission in a diverse and pluralistic society.

Key Words: Bible N.T. Mark 1:1-15; Christian mission; New Testament Christology; New Testament pneumatology;

In the 18th century, Catholic priest and historian Alban Butler wrote his famous The Lives of the Fathers, Martyrs and Other Principal Saints. The entry for Francis Xavier, the 16th century Spanish Jesuit who journeyed to the Far East begins:

A charge to go and preach to all nations was given by Christ to his apostles. This commission the pastors [bishops] of the church have faithfully executed down to this present time; and in every age men have been raised by God and filled with his Holy Spirit for the discharge of this important function who, being send by the authority of Christ and his name have succeeded the apostles in the government of his church, have brought new nations to the fold of Christ for the advancement of the divine honour, and filled up the number of the saints. This conversion of nations according to the divine commission is the prerogative of that Catholic Church, in which it has never had any rival.1

Butler's theology of mission is not one with which many contemporary Catholics, or other Christians, would feel comfortable. And yet prior to Vatican II (1962-65), many Catholics subscribed to such a position. In Butler's emphasis on the bishops as those who "faithfully execute" Christ's commission we can identify theologies of mission that derive from an interpretation of Jn 20:21-23 (Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained") that has proved foundational for Catholic teaching on apostolic succession, and episcopal responsibility for the direction of mission.2

The second emphasis on bringing "new nations to the fold of Christ" finds its scriptural foundation in Matt 28:19-20 (Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them

to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Butler's comments reinforce the beliefs that missionary activity belongs primarily to pope and bishops, that mission is the prerogative of the Catholic Church alone, that mission is about the conversion of nations, and that mission is about the establishment of the church. Importantly, we can infer from such missiologies that mission does not belong to all Christians by virtue of their baptism.

Given the contemporary unease that such an understanding of mission can engender, it is perhaps helpful to locate other NT texts that can enable us to broaden the parameters of mission. In this respect, South African missiologist David Bosch suggests that the history and the theology of the early church, those writings we now call the New Testament, are first of all "mission history" and "mission theology." Senior and Stuhlmueller say something similar: "The Gospels are mission literature in the fullest sense of the term ... They are mission documents for the church itself, meant to justify, renew and motivate the church's claim on the heritage of Jesus' own ground-breaking ministry." If this is true then it behoves us to appreciate the different missionary orientation of the various NT texts if we are to advance our thinking about the contemporary exercise of mission.

In this paper I will examine Mark 1:1-15 as it is a text that with important missiological implications. Traditionally, Mark's gospel has not received the same attention as the other gospels when it comes to finding a mandate for mission. No Markan text that has aroused the same enthusiasm for mission as Matt 28:19-20, a text which led Western churches, Catholic and Protestant, to undertake extraordinary missionary activity in the 18th through to and including the 20th centuries, and which led to the growth and spread of Christianity all over the world. John 20:21-23 also reads as an explicit missionary mandate. The risen Jesus sends forth his disciples and breathes his spirit upon them. Here the notion of mission as being sent forth is emphasised, and within the Catholic tradition, it is a text that has legitimated episcopal direction of all missionary activity. Finally, the contemporary importance of Luke 4:16-19 (When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor) with its call to be actively engaged in the liberation of the poor cannot be underestimated. It is a call to mission that reflects socio-economic imperatives rather than the territorial imperatives associated with Matt 28:19-20, or the ecclesial imperatives often extrapolated from Jn 20:21-23.

When we turn to Mark's gospel, we recognise that while it offers many insights about how Jesus carried out his mission, it is more difficult to identify a text comparable to the Matthean, Lukan and Johannine texts cited above, texts that have constituted defining moments in understanding more what mission entails. However, if Bosch is correct is

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claiming that all the NT texts are “mission history” or “mission theology” then what insights can Mark offer?

Today, scholarly opinion is divided as to the geographical locale of Mark’s community. Some commentators argue that it is a persecuted community living in Rome during the persecution of Nero while recently there is growing support for the opinion that it was written for a Christian community living in Syria or northern Palestine. Whatever outcome current scholarly debate may produce, in both instances we are talking about a Christian community exposed to the reality of persecution or war. Both scenarios suggest a community that experienced political oppression and its corollary of economic deprivation, in other words a situation that is analogous to those different OT situations into which prophets moved as God’s emissaries.

Into this world step John the Baptist and Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the anointed one. “The beginning” (Mk 1:1) evokes the opening words of Gen 1:1 (“in the beginning”), and suggests that the reader is about to witness a fundamental turning point in salvation history, the possibility of a new creation, a fact that is confirmed by Mark’s OT citations in 1:1-2 (Exod 23:20; Mal 3:1; Isa 40:3). Mk 1:1-3 invites the reader to make connections between Jesus Christ, the anointed one, and the prophets empowered by the Spirit in the OT. Yet the text also makes it clear that Jesus Christ is more than a prophet. New beginnings in human history are possible because Jesus is the Son of God (cf. vv.1-2).

The scene then shifts to the appearance of the Baptist in the wilderness. Again “wilderness” suggests new beginnings analogous to those Israel experienced in the wilderness in Exodus. In other words through his use of OT motifs, Mark makes clear his belief that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God whose mission will effect wondrous changes for Israel. For these changes occur, it is necessary for the Spirit to descend upon Jesus (cf. 1:10).

Before I explore Mark’s theology of the mission in these opening verses, it is helpful to recognise that while the NT contains diverse christologies, one significant christology located in the first four chapters of both Matthew and Luke is the story of Jesus who is conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit, and who is led by the Spirit in his ministry. Similarly, the Spirit’s role is accented in Mark’s first chapter. In 1:10, we learn that Jesus begins his mission after the descent of the Holy Spirit. Later in 1:12 (cf. Matt 4:1-11; Lk 41-13) Jesus is driven into the desert by the Spirit. In other words, the synoptic authors make it clear that Jesus can only begin his mission through the power of the Spirit. Sadly, the christological controversies of the 4th century in their concentration on the equality of Jesus with the Father meant that a christology that depicted Jesus as led by the Spirit was virtually abandoned.

I believe that this “amnesia” regarding the empowering mission of the Spirit has been problematic for the exercise of mission. In particular, a focus on the post-Easter Jesus through whom the Spirit comes (cf. John 20:21-23) has encouraged “high” christologies that have their corollary, “high” ecclesiologies, “high” missiologies and “low” pneumatologies. Such “high” theologies were often enough grounded in a eurocentrism that we belatedly recognise as often detrimental to the proclamation of the good news. I now wish to turn to a more detailed examination of Mark1: 1-15 because I believe that it can provide gospel-based missiologies that have the potential to subvert “high” theologies.

MARK 1:1-15

1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your
way; 3the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,' 4John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

These opening verses of Mark have an eschatological quality as the proclamations of the Baptist and Jesus suggest that one era is passing and a new age is being inaugurated. The Baptist's call to repentance is later complemented by Jesus' annunciation that the Kingdom of God is near. One significant indication of a new age is that John's ministry in the wilderness can be interpreted as breaking with the Temple's religious rituals: the people are coming to the Jordan River to be cleansed of their sins, not to the Temple where tradition stipulated they participate in the purification rituals demanded by the law. In this enacted condemnation of the Temple, John stands in the tradition of the OT prophets.

Furthermore, in 1:5 we learn that "people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to meet him" (the Baptist). OT books from post-exilic Judaism are characterized by two contrasting attitudes to non-Jewish peoples. On the one hand, as Ezra and Nehemiah indicate, there is opposition to marriage between Jewish men and foreign women (Ezra 9:2). Those who have married Gentiles are considered to be "unclean with the pollution of the peoples of the lands with their abominations: (Ezra 9:11). As Donahue and Harrington note, "the program of these returning reformers involved the rebuilding of the Temple, codification of the Law, strong prohibitions against intermarriage, and building a wall around Jerusalem." On the other hand, there are OT texts such as Trito-Isaiah, Jonah, Ruth and Judith whose "universalist" thrust contrasts sharply with the "separatist" character of Ezra and Nehemiah. The Markan emphasis in v. 5 on all the people for the Judean countryside and Jerusalem coming to John situates Mark in the tradition of the "universalists."

The Baptism of Jesus (Mk 1:9-11; cf. Mt 3:13-17; Lk 3:21-22; Jn 1:29-34)

9In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The baptismal text is important in pointing to the essential relationship between the mission of Jesus and the mission of the Spirit. The author of Mark has been influenced by OT texts (Mk 1:10, “the spirit descending upon him” cf. Isaiah 11:2; 61:1; 42:1; Mk 1:1 “you are my son,” cf. Ps 2:7). Such OT allusions allow the author to confirm what he has already stated in 1:1 – Jesus is the Son of God. However, the “high” christology that emerges from the usual readings of Mark 1:1-11 should not distract from the fact that Jesus does not/cannot begin his ministry until the Spirit descends upon him.

Let me now identify in Mark’s account of Jesus’ baptism four important questions that I believe flow from a missiological reading of this text:

First, in Mark 1:9 we read that Jesus has come from Nazareth, in Galilee. Throughout his gospel, Mark reminds the reader of Jesus’ lowly status as a Nazorean (1:24; 10:47; 14:67; 16:6). Similarly Mark directs attention to the opposition Jesus experiences from the Temple authorities who dwell in Jerusalem (3:22; 7:1ff.; 8:31; 10:33; 11:18; 14:10. In other words, the stage is being set for conflict between those on the margins, and those at the centre of power, Jerusalem. Does this suggest those who are from and who live among

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the marginalized more effectively exercise mission than those who inhabit the ecclesial centre?

Second, Jesus is baptised by John along with all those who came from the Judean countryside and all of Jerusalem. This suggests that Jesus and those other Jews who submitted themselves to the baptism of John are turning from traditional ties with the Temple. As Ched Myers expresses it: “The new creation [initiated by Jesus] begins with a renunciation of the old order.”

Third, does this text implicitly advocate the desirability of more egalitarian structures in the Markan community? On the one hand, John’s baptismal ritual appears to be inherently hierarchical: John, depicted as a prophet in the tradition of Elijah, baptises those who have repented of their sinfulness. Jesus, like “people from the whole Judean countryside” is baptised by John. On the other hand, Mark 1:11 directs attention to Isaiah 42:1 (Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations). Mark is introducing the reader to the servant theme that later he will develop in greater detail throughout the gospel (Mk 9:33-37; 10:41-45). This suggests that the social structure of the Christian community should be different from highly stratified Hellenistic society of which it is part. Though Mark 1:8 emphasises the superiority of Jesus over John, the subsequent role reversal enshrined in the baptismal narrative “counteracts hierarchy which has prompted scholars to conclude that the Markan ideal was an egalitarian social structure.”

Fourth, the language for describing the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus (Mk 1:10) appears again in the text of the rending of the temple curtain (Mark 15:38 ἐσχίσθη “torn in two” cf. Mark 1:10 σχιζόμενος, “torn apart”). Both texts (1:10 and 15:38) are linked in that the two acts of rending are the prelude to theophanies that affirm the truth that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God (cf. Mk 1:11 and Mk 15:39; Isa 64:1 “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down”). The first rending in Mk 1:10 proclaims the descent of the Spirit into Jesus. Mark 15:37 states that “Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last” which Matthew renders as giving up his spirit (ἀφήσας τὸ πνεῦμα Matt 27:50, cf. L23:46; Jn 19:30). Just as the first rending led to the descent of the Spirit, can we argue that at the moment of Jesus’ death, the rending of the curtain points to another descent of the Spirit? Can Mark 15:38-39 represent a Markan Pentecost? As Jesus breathes his last, it would seem as if his spirit comes to rest upon the centurion and the “women looking on from afar”, those who acknowledge him as Son of God. Therefore, if the rending of the heavens in Mk 1:10 signalled the descent of the Spirit, then the rending of the temple curtain suggests another descent of the Holy Spirit. On Calvary, outside of the holy city, God’s Spirit through the death of the Jesus becomes accessible to all humankind. Now the divine

6 See Ched Myers, Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 129.
8 There were two curtains in the Temple. There was a veil between the Holy of Holies and the Holy Place, and another that separated the sanctuary from the forecourt, and which could be seen by the populace. Heb 6–9 points to a tradition about the curtain of the Holy of Holies being rent (cf. Heb 9:6-14). Given such traditions, it is probably correct to see Mk 15:38 as a reference to the curtain between the Holy of Holies and the Holy Place.
is no longer separated from humanity by man-made barriers, such as that represented by the temple curtain. In this respect, can we disagree with Juel's insight that we understand the heavens "as a great cosmic curtain that separates creation from God's presence, [and which] are in the process of being torn open?"  

The Spirit drives Jesus into the Wilderness (Mk 1:12-13; cf. Mt 4:1-11; Lk 4:1-13)

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.  
13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

In Mark, Jesus is driven out (ἐξῆκα καλεῖ), not led (ἀνήκηθην, ἵππεο) as in Matthew and Luke, an expression that we find used later in Mark to refer to the expulsion of demons (cf. Mark 1:34; 3:39). Such language points to the power of the Spirit at work in Jesus, allowing us to see that one aspect of his mission should be understood as a cosmic struggle between God's Spirit present in Jesus and evil spirits.

There are differing interpretations regarding the symbolism associated with the wild beasts. First, perhaps the author, influenced by Isaiah 11:6-7, is referring to a future messianic kingdom, or perhaps he is looking back to the harmonious relationship of humankind with the rest of creation described in Gen 1. Second, the Exodus story may be more helpful in understanding this text, because it reminds the reader that Israel's liberation out of Egypt first led them into the wilderness. Jesus too is led into the wilderness, but unlike Israel resists temptation while in the wilderness. Third, the text directs attention to the cosmic nature of Jesus' ministry. Traditionally the desert was where the demons dwelt, and when Jesus struggles against them, he is involved in a struggle with the forces of darkness. Jesus leaves the desert to begin his ministry in Galilee, "after John was arrested" (Mk 1:13). The concluding reference to John's arrest leaves the reader in no doubt as to the political context in which Jesus was to exercise his mission. It is not long before there is talk of Jesus' impending arrest and death (Mk 3:6).

Jesus begins his Mission in Galilee (Mk 1:14-15; cf. Mt 4:12-17; Lk 4:14-15)

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,  
15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Jesus begins his public ministry in Galilee and proclaims the good news of the Kingdom of God to the people. Unlike Lk 4:14, Mark does not explicitly confirm that Jesus begins his mission through the power of the Spirit, but 3:29 makes it obvious that rejection of Jesus and his work is in fact a rejection of the Holy Spirit working through him. Eduard Schweizer notes, "'When Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, the last of the prophets died, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel,' declares one rabbi, and already Psalm 74:9 (written perhaps between 168 and 165 B.C. asserts: 'There is no longer any prophet, / and there is none among us who knows how long.' In a Jewish document of the end of the first century A.D. we read: 'The prophets have fallen asleep' (Syr. Bar. 85:3)." 12 The appearance of the Spirit-empowered Jesus announces that the time of absence of the Spirit is drawing to a close. Now the time is fulfilled. The preceding narrative reveals that the Spirit-empowered Jesus is the one who will proclaim the good news of the coming of God's kingdom. The remainder of the gospel will show how this is to happen. Mk 1:15 serves as a summary.

statement that concludes Mark's prologue and at the same time heralds the beginning of his public ministry.

**IMPLICATIONS OF MARK 1:1-15 FOR THE CONTEMPORARY EXERCISE OF MISSION**

There are a number of conclusions that emerge as important. These conclusions are offered not as definitive, but rather I hope that they provide an entry point into appreciating what being missionary in the 21st century might entail.

First, the mission of Jesus is predicated upon the Spirit empowering him for that mission, a mission that has as its goal the coming of the Reign of God. Although we cannot extrapolate a developed trinitarian theology of mission from Mark 1:1-15, it is possible to see that the coming of the Reign of God occurs through the mission of the Spirit and the Son. Understanding mission in this way allows us to move beyond an overly christological approach to mission that collapses into christocentrism. Australian Catholic theologian David Coffey, commenting on the Fourth Gospel’s “high christology” states:

> The official doctrine of the Trinity developed from the doctrine of Christ peculiar to the Fourth Gospel... John, alone among the Gospels, presented a descending Christology. That is to say, just as the divine Son, Son of Man and Word of God, was sent down from heaven by the Father and in turn sent the Holy Spirit, the “other Paraclete,” from the Father, so in the Godhead itself the Father generates the Son and the two together breathe forth the Holy Spirit (according to the Western form of the doctrine).\(^{13}\)

The opening verses of Mark’s gospel where the empowering agency of the Spirit in relation to Jesus allow us to move beyond such “high christologies,” and the “high” ecclesiologies and missiologies that they can engender.

Second, the references to the rending of the heavens in Mark 1 and 15 may hint at God’s reluctance “to be confined to sacred spaces.”\(^{14}\) If God is present through his Spirit, in creation, in history and in culture, this means that in today’s political climate, where ethnic, cultural and religious differences are often causes of tension and conflict, belief in the presence of the Spirit in other cultures and religious traditions perhaps exemplifies a more fitting approach to contemporary mission. In this manner, dialogue rather than monologue becomes more characteristic of mission.

Third, if mission, following the example of a Spirit-empowered Jesus, is reigno-centric rather than christocentric or ecclesiocentric, this should encourage the missionary to be involved with others in a shared struggle for the truth, for justice, for the Kingdom of God. This is an understanding of mission that churches committed to the institutional growth of a particular Christian community may find difficult to accept.

Fourth, if we can locate in the story of Jesus’ baptism a servant ethos that is further developed in the gospel of Mark, this has important implications. In the past, missionaries have unconsciously often considered themselves culturally superior to those to whom they were sent. Often enough, they were, and are, sent to a particular ethnic people or socio-economic class because they have something those people do not have – education, economic resources, technology or whatever. I believe that the dangers of feeling superior to those among whom we are sent in almost impossible to escape if we are talking about missionaries from Europe, North America or New Zealand. Even if we do not want superiority it will be thrust upon us.

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To conclude, a careful examination of Mark 1:1-15 offers important directions for us in the exercise of our mission, whether we are talking of mission as cross-cultural ministry within our own country, or overseas. It offers us a way of working for the Reign of God that allows us to abandon older realities of superiority that at the end of the day are inimical to the exercise of mission as we see it exemplified in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, the Spirit-driven Servant of Yahweh in the gospel of Mark.

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