

Politics and Peacemaking Series:
essay 1

The Gospel of Mark and the Mission of Christ:
The Good News in the Context of Politics, Nationalism and
Idolatry.

by r. scot miller

Common Spirit Church of the Brethren

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God
Mark 1:1

Nothing grabs the attention of political power brokers like the suggestion that they may not be in charge after all. The Gospel of Mark makes just such a claim; for those who have ears to hear. That Mark's author uses the Greek term *euangelion* (or gospel) is a claim that something of immense importance to the empire has occurred. The "good news" was an announcement of earth-reverberating importance to everyone within the Roman world. The good news announced accounts of military victory for Rome, or, that a new emperor had ascended to rule the world. Mark's good news proclaims a changing of the guard in a far different sense.

Reference to Jesus as the Christ, "the anointed one," had political overtones well understood throughout Palestine. The *Ioudios* (Jews) heard this proclamation of the *christos* as alluding to the individual who would liberate Israel, inaugurating YHWH's plans concerning a change in the direction of human history. Circumstances of most Jews in the ancient near-east conflicted with religious understandings of promises they believed were made by the God of Abraham and Sarah. Yet, they believed that God's anointed one would deliver the promised land from Rome and restore the throne to the line of David. Only the power of Rome stood in the way.

Evocative political imagery continues. Mark claims that Jesus is the king and his rule is equal to or surpasses that of Caesar. When Mark and the early church called Jesus the "Son of God," it was a challenge to Roman leadership, as Caesars referred to themselves as the "son of god."¹ Later Christian claims of the ascension of Jesus (Acts 1:9-11) are comparable to witnesses of the ascension of spirits of deceased Roman rulers, conferring "divine" status to the ruler, and,

¹ Boring, Eugene *The Gospel of Matthew* New Interpreter's Bible (NIB) VIII Nashville; Abington Press; 1994

to heirs the status of sons of the divine.²

Each claim mentioned above is evident in the first sentence of Mark's gospel, and such politicized claims challenge both Roman rule and the Jerusalem Temple authorities. These challenges appear to be inherent to the Jesus as Christ lived ministry. They also give meaning to his death, and resurrection, and the earliest claims of the church.

Mark as a gospel is a literary device meant to guide the early church in its response to Roman rule, and its place in the shadows of Jerusalem corruption. Mark also addresses the Roman-Jewish war, a disaster that stood to vindicate or unravel the nonviolent path of resistance that Jesus and the early church had hewn out of an otherwise militant Jewish response to imperial domination. Mark is not just a *literary* instrument of faith, it is a *political* instrument that challenges the early church to trust Jesus and carve out the kingdom of God without violence, and without collaboration with militant Judean and Galilean resistance. There are misconceptions, as well as a staunch tradition of scholarly interpretation of Mark, and we should wade through this before discussing more nuanced interpretations.

One tradition assumes a primary audience of a mainly Gentile church in Rome. That the author thinks it necessary to explain Aramaic expressions at various points (3:17; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 14:36; 15:34), and at other times explain Jewish customs (7:3-4), is suggested as proof of a Gentile audience. At places, the author seems unfamiliar with some of the geography of Palestine, indicating that, while Jewish, the author may not be from Palestine. Conservative scholars state Mark is "concerned to record a description of who Jesus was and the impact he had

² Wright, N.T. Upstaging the Emperor *Bible Review* Vol.14, No.1, Feb. 1998; *The Resurrection of the Son of God* Minneapolis; Fortress Press; 2003 p.653

on those who came in contact with him.”³ Others have concluded that the suffering highlighted in Mark is depicting the circumstances facing Christians under Nero’s reign.⁴ The implications of challenges to Sabbath laws (2:23-28) and dietary codes found in Mark (7:14-23) may further indicate Hellenistic views toward Jewish traditions as opposed to a Palestinian perspective that would put greater emphasis on such values, as the author of Matthew does in apparent response to Mark’s handling of the material.

Making sense of the actions of the primary actors in Gospel have led to a variety of characterizations. That the disciples are generally lacking in intellectual capital is assumed by many interpretations. Others have characterized the gospel as a Jewish apocalyptic work in response to the ongoing persecution suffered by the Jewish-Christian community.⁵ (Wright emphasizes that “*Mark’s whole telling of the story of Jesus is designed to function as an apocalypse.*”⁶) Dating Mark has not been a consistent endeavor. Scholarship places the period of authorship as preceding 70 CE. This places Mark’s authorship at or before the war, and this context of insurrection in Jerusalem is critical to interpreting the text.

Recent scholarship places the Gospel in the Jewish War context by proposing that it is the literary product of Galilee. As stated above, a close study of Galilee, the surrounding socio-economic circumstances at the time of Jesus, and the influences of empire and aristocracy upon rural communities, lend to a different reading than the arguable consensus. While dysfunctional disciples, apocalyptic literature, and Gentile Christians all play an important role in the Markan drama, there is more than meets the eye.

³ Elwell, Walter A. and Yarbrough, Robert A *Encountering the New Testament: A Historical and Theological Survey* Grand Rapids; Baker Book House, 1997 p.90

⁴ Perkins, PHEME *The Gospel of Mark* NIB VIII

⁵ Freedman; TBD p.858f.

⁶ Wright, N.T. *The New Testament and the People of God* Minneapolis; Fortress Press; 1992; p.395 Italics original

Assuming messianic Galilean assemblies as Mark's community of origin, this article first documents the economic plight of Galilean communities, the effects of forced subordination to both empire and the Jerusalem aristocracy, and the various responses of Galilean Yahwists and Jewish revolutionaries to these circumstances. I will then delve into the anti-imperial nature of the text, inviting readers to accept the contextualization of Mark as a basic if not normative context for early Christianity. Readers can then consider how Mark, as the earliest gospel narrative, can be applied to the political nature of the church in the context of 21st Century American civic religion.

Mark's author states that Jesus was born in Nazareth, located in lower Galilee and not far from the Hellenistic city of Sepphoris. This is where Jesus begins traveling throughout the region visiting the synagogues of various towns to preach the kingdom of God.

Galilee was a more cosmopolitan place than some think, with most assuming it was one of the out-of-the-way backwaters of the Roman empire. That it was on the periphery of the empire, however, is important to understand the region's shared identity, especially because Herod's building projects were having an impact on this identity. Galilee was rich in agricultural resources, but Josephus reported Galilee to be "thick" with both Hellenistic cities and rural villages. Galilee, said Josephus, was "full of people."⁷ The region was also home to rugged terrain that harbored militants and gangs who consistently targeted privileged travelers. Such bandit and revolutionary elements claimed Galilee as their own and resisted Hellenization for decades or more.

⁷ Josephus, Flavius ed. by Whiston, William *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* Peabody, MA; Hendrickson Publishers; 1985; *War* 3:3:1

Horsley depicts the people of Galilee as fiercely independent,⁸ and Josephus describes Galileans as “enured to war from their infancy.”⁹ The Hebrew Song of Deborah and Barak is the first biblical example of Galilean hill-people fighting for Israel, as Horsley suggests that Judges 5:7-21 records.¹⁰ The people who populated the region during the height of the Egyptian Empire are thought by some to be the *Hapiru* militants that roamed the ancient Near East, as reported by ancient records dated to the second millennium BCE. Loosely translated, the word means “robbers, pillagers, brigands” and is derived from the Akkadian word meaning “killer, or outlaw.”¹¹ Gottwald sees similarities between these *Hapiru* and the earliest Semitic tribes that confederated as Israelites, proposing that independent groups of bandit-revolutionaries forged relationships driven by mutual hostility toward the Canaanite monarchy, under a monotheist treaty authority (YHWH).¹² Fast-forwarding to the either side of the year of the birth of Jesus, one finds that Galilee has maintained its independent streak, even as the people found themselves continuous victims of one ruler or another.

In the first century, Caesar claims the promised land, including Galilee, for Rome. The aristocracy of Jerusalem played an oppressive role as well. Galileans, Israelite remnants of the Assyrian-imposed exile, and poor Jews lived in tension with the foreign oppressors just as the legendary memorialization of pre-monarchic past illustrates in Judges.¹³ That Rome and the demands of temple authorities made life hard for most Galilean Yahwists is without question. Due to the social and political circumstances of Galilee during the period in question, the people

⁸Horsley, Richard *Galilee* Valley Forge, PA; Trinity Press Int.; 1995 p.21

⁹Josephus *War* 3:3:2

¹⁰Horsley *Galilee* p.20

¹¹Freedman **TBD** p.549-550

¹²Gottwald, Norman K. *Tribes of Yahweh: Sociology of the Religion of a Liberated Israel* Maryknoll, NY; Orbis Books; 1979

¹³ibid. p.40-42

of the hill country were ripe for revolution. This is the Galilee in which Jesus of Nazareth begins his ministry.

Rebellion was not an idle discussion topic among Jesus' contemporaries. The idea that Jerusalem could be the reconstituted Israel free from Roman rule fueled the aspirations of many. A revolution producing short-term independence from imperial rule of the Seleucids and Antiochus IV Epiphanes took place during the 160's BCE. Under the rule of the priestly Hasmoneans, Judea enjoyed semi-independence for nearly 100 years. This perceived liberty enjoyed by Judea was its first since the Babylonian exile of 586 BCE. Hasmonean home-rule lasted until 63 BCE when the Romans entered Jerusalem.

In Galilee, it is unclear whether this Hasmonean rule was welcomed. 1 Maccabees 5:21-23 records the annexation of the region by Judean forces in 104 BCE. The Maccabean text suggests that Galilean "Jews" were rescued from an oppressive pagan environment, but Josephus tells a different story. Josephus' record in *Ant.* 13:11:3 refers to the takeover of Idumea by the Hasmoneans and applies to military excursions into Galilee as well. Ptolemy documented forced circumcision as indicative of the terror of the Hasmonean conquest that left Jerusalem to sweep up the Mediterranean coast and east toward Galilee.¹⁴

Fifty years before the birth of Jesus, Galileans faced the brutality of the Romans, who responded to Galilean resistance to the imperial conquest of the region by reportedly enslaving 30 thousand revolutionaries after a battle near Magdala.¹⁵ Galileans later faced threats from a Judean client king. In 40 BCE, in response to the appointment of Herod the Great as "king of the Jews," Galileans opposed Herod's original plan to take Galilee by force. Animosity against

¹⁴Horsley, *Galilee* p.42

¹⁵ Josephus, *Ant.* 14:7:3; *War.* 1:8:8

Herod yielded three revolts in three years.¹⁶ The death of Herod the Great precipitated popular insurrections throughout Palestine. In Galilee, a would-be king, Judas, son of (the robber) Hezekiah, led a force of militants on a raid on the armory at Sepphoris, asserting independence from Roman dominance. In response to this revolt in 4 BCE, Roman troops sacked the city of Sepphoris, enslaving survivors.¹⁷

Rome then separated Galilean authority from Judea and Jerusalem. Taking over for Herod the Great as tetrarch was his son Antipas, who did little to foster relations between Galilee and Rome, or with Jerusalem.¹⁸ Heaping insults upon the Galilean poor, Antipas decided that after he rebuilt Sepphoris into “the security of all Galilee” he would build a new imperial city, Tiberias.¹⁹ He then populated it with peasants, forcibly relocating them from every part of Galilee to serve the elite class that would benefit from the town. While Antipas was indeed providing housing for the poor, he failed to respect Torah and longstanding taboos by building the city over a Jewish graveyard. All who lived there were ritually unclean.²⁰ The Hellenist city was a gentrified cemetery. Antipas further alienated himself from Torah faithful by placing images of animals on coins and on his palace, by marrying the wife of his brother, and beheading John the Baptist, a political critic.²¹

Other regions of Palestine were rebellious. Two uprisings coincided with the Galilean uprising of 4 BCE. Simon of Perea led warriors in burning the royal palace of Antipas at Jericho. A shepherd named Athrongeus gathered an army and ransacked Hellenistic cities and

¹⁶Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel* Louisville; Westminster John Knox Press; 2001; p.34

¹⁷Josephus, *War.* 2:4:1; 2:5:1

¹⁸Horsley, *Galilee* p.65

¹⁹Josephus, *Ant.* 18:2:1

²⁰ibid. 18:2:3

²¹Horsley, *Galilee* p. 65

Roman troops throughout Palestine and Galilee proper. In response to this self-proclaimed king, Rome rounded up two-thousand insurrectionists, marching them through Galilean cities to Jerusalem and crucifying every one of them.²² Popular revolts also took place in 66-70 CE, and 132-35 CE. These started in Judea and included Galileans, as revolutionary ideals such as “no king but YHWH” were found amongst a sect of tax protesters that lived throughout Palestine and were led by Judas the Galilean.²³ However, animosity still existed between rural Galileans and the Jerusalem elite. There were heightened tensions between rural dwellers and the Hellenists of the cities as well.

Cities such as Sepphoris, Tiberias, and Jerusalem could not survive without exploiting surrounding rural peasants. Elites of the cities exacted excessive rents, charged exorbitant taxes, and helped drive peasants deep into debt. Herzog writes that “it took ten peasants to support one landed urban elite.”²⁴ The writings of Josephus and other historical evidence points to a high degree of hostility on the part of Galileans toward Sepphoris and Tiberias.²⁵ The presence of the Herodian bureaucracy and its role in the heavy taxation and debt collection fueled rural-urban animosity. Wealthy elites used the existing tax and debt systems to place repressive burdens on their rural counterparts.

In Jerusalem, aristocrats distributed amongst themselves accumulated temple-derived wealth. They would then lend these profits to rural peasants, who after taxation could not afford to plant crops. “The only logical reason to lend was thus the hope of winning the peasant’s land

²²Josephus, *Wars* 2:4:1-3

²³ibid. 2:8:1

²⁴Herzog, William R. *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation* Louisville; Westminster John Knox Press; 2000; p.93

²⁵Freyne, Sean *Galilee, Jesus and the Gospels: Literary Approaches and Historical Investigations* Minneapolis; Fortress Press; 1988; p.146

by foreclosing when the debt was not paid off.”²⁶ Mattison figures that when temple tithes were combined with the required rents, tolls, taxes and tribute, the peasants and artisans were expected to pay somewhere near forty percent of their total incomes.²⁷ While the temple authorities had no army to enforce temple taxes and tithing, it did have the power to declare folks as “unclean,” and therefore, unable to participate in temple rites, a central aspect of Yahwistic faith. The animosity between the peasants and the urban elites was such that, when the war with Rome began in 66, the first thing Zealot insurrectionists did was burn the debt records stored in the temple.²⁸ Differing interpretations also made manifest the tension between Galilean Yahwists and Jerusalem elites.

Part 1 Conclusions

Between 160 BCE and 135 CE, all of Palestine, including Judea and Galilee, was a region where insurrection, banditry, and violence were often a response to imperial and class domination of an historically independent peoples. Peasants and urban elites, governors and the governed, and competing interpretations of Jewish Law led to tensions that were constantly bubbling beneath the surface, sometimes boiling over. Scholars such as Freyne resist painting Galilee as a place ripe for violence,²⁹ rather insisting that organized resistance was viewed as futile. Wright challenges this, stating that while revolution was more likely in Jerusalem, it “was by no means impossible in Galilee.”³⁰

Evidence shows that revolutionary activity was apparent in the Galilee’s history, and that

²⁶Herzog, *Jesus, Justice* p.104, Goodman, Martin *The Ruling Class of Judea: The Origin of the Jewish Revolt Against Rome AD 66-70* Cambridge; Cambridge University Press; 1987

²⁷Mattison, Mark *The Jesus Revolution: A Socio-Political Reading of the Gospel* 2000
www.concentric.net/~Mattison/Jesus

²⁸ Josephus, *War* 2:17:6

²⁹Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus and the Gospels* p.162

³⁰Wright, N.T. *Jesus and the Victory of God (JVG)* Minneapolis; Fortress Press; 1996 p.158

it was fresh in the memories of Galileans, prompting significant occurrences of insurrection which occurred about every forty years. Crossan states that “throughout the century leading up to the first Roman-Jewish War in 66 CE there was consistent peasant unrest...”³¹ Such attitudes contextualize the ministry of Jesus as a nonviolent co-conspirator in inaugurating the kingdom of God.

Part Two

Mark 1:14 quotes Jesus as calling people to repent; “the kingdom of God is at hand.” This is an explicitly political statement. The term “kingdom of God,” (or kingdom of heaven) in the context illustrated in Part I is a loaded one, and Mark uses the phrase 13 times.

God’s kingdom was originally pictured in historical terms, such as the restoration of the Davidic empire. Nationalist hopes for Israel’s restoration were important to most expressions of Jewish faith.³² “The phrase carried unambiguously the hope that YHWH would act within history to vindicate Israel.”³³ Jesus’ ministry was communicated in this well-understood language -- perhaps nuanced in ways not so obvious to 21st-century readers. Despite variations and layers of meaning often attributed to kingdom language, there would have been little mistaking what Jesus and the early church were referring to when using this term. When Jesus heralded “the kingdom of God,” he evoked an ancient storyline evidenced in the Hebrew texts. Jesus, however, re-told the story in such a way as to “subvert and redirect its normal plot.”³⁴ Wolfgang Schrage states that “Jesus obviously understood his own ministry in word and deed as

³¹Crossan, John Dominic *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* San Francisco; Harper Collins Publishers; 1995 p.XII

³² Schrage, Wolfgang trans. by Green, David E. *The Ethics of the New Testament* Philadelphia; Fortress Press; 1990 p18

³³ Wright *JVG* p.203

³⁴ *ibid.* p.199

a sign of (the kingdom's) appearance.”³⁵

Commentators have attributed an “end-time” meaning or have assigned a “future” eschatological significance to this kingdom language. This portrays the kingdom community as a “heavenly” or “otherworldly” realm reached upon the *parousia*, or “second coming” of Jesus. This traditional reading does not fit first-century Jewish expectations. Instead, a realized eschatology renders the accurate interpretation of the terminology. Wright states:

Far more important to the first-century Jew than questions of space, time and cosmology were the key issues of temple, land, and Torah; or race economy and justice. When Israel's god acted, Jews would be restored to their ancestral rights and would practice their ancestral religion with the rest of the world looking on in awe.”³⁶

That is not to say that Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom was not apocalyptic, or did not fit with contemporary Jewish interpretations of the kingdom. It simply did not represent an eschatological belief that the kingdom of Heaven would be the result of some cosmic catastrophe, and that the earth's end was in sight. Rather, it projects Satan's fall from dominance over the created order.³⁷ End-time theology is not biblical “eschatology” and apocalyptic is a referent to an *all-transforming* act of God. “God's action in the coming kingdom would be ‘final’ not in the sense of ‘last’ or ‘end’ but only in the sense of ‘finally; or ‘at last.’”³⁸ When Jesus announces the kingdom of God in Galilee, he is calling for a termination of the old world order.³⁹ This is what Palestinian Jewish rebels had been working toward. Yoder writes:

It hardly needs to be argued that the kingdom of God is a political term...The language “kingdom” and “good news” is chosen from the political realm...The kingdom of God is a social

³⁵ Schrage p.19

³⁶ Wright *JVG* p.285

³⁷ Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine (JSV)* San Francisco; Harper and Row Publishers; 1987; p.160

³⁸ *ibid.* p.168

³⁹*ibid.*

order...⁴⁰

The kingdom is a “political metaphor or symbol” and states that Jesus’ ministry is “representative of socio-political... human relations as willed by God.”⁴¹ Accordingly, the phrase “kingdom of God” indicates that Israel’s God rules the world - and according to Wright - “Caesar, Herod, or anyone else of their ilk, does not.”⁴²

Mark is a politically charged document. Can we see Jesus as a political individual or prophet? He does not refer to himself as the son of God in Mark.⁴³ Jesus does not refer to himself as a king (contra: before Pilate? Matt. 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:2,3). The supposition of some scholars is that Jesus tried to remain non-political, and non-messianic. This is an incorrect assumption. Details of the gospels seem to reject that Jesus had been referring to himself as a king or messiah and liberal scholars especially propose that Jesus thought of himself in no such way. However, Wright and others suggest that Jesus did think of himself in such terms, and intentionally acted in a way to be understood as an explicitly political religious leader.⁴⁴

Messianic claimants to the “throne” of Israel were common in the time around Jesus.

Revolutionary hopefuls such as Menahem, Simon bar Giora, and the famous Bar-Kochba all made messianic claims, and Bar Kochba even had coins minted in his honor.⁴⁵ Yet there was something that set Jesus, and his leadership apart from these Jewish militants seeking freedom from pagan rule and temple authorities; Jesus’ insistence upon non-violence as a response to the

⁴⁰Yoder, John Howard *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* 2nd edition Grand Rapids; William B. Eerdmans; 2002; p.28

⁴¹Horsley, *JSV* p.170

⁴²Wright *JVG* p.302

⁴³see John 3:16,18

⁴⁴Wright *JVG* p.478-9

⁴⁵ *ibid.* p.483

evil of oppression.

The idea that Jesus was a non-violent revolutionary is not far-fetched, but is the most accurate reading of Scripture and the historical realities of Palestine's first-century social and political context.⁴⁶ There is a history of non-violent resistance in the Judean and Galilean response to imperial oppression that sets a tone for actions like those undertaken by Jesus. Effective nonviolent resistance was embedded in the Jewish experience.⁴⁷ Horsley writes about a "Fourth Philosophy" which emphasized to Judeans that there was "no master but God" and prompted followers refuse paying Roman taxes or to engage in the Roman census. The leaders of this 6 CE movement are prime examples of nonviolent resistance and noncooperation.⁴⁸

In 45 CE a Judean procurator named Cumanus ordered Roman troops into a village to avenge the politically motivated robbery of a constituent. An impulsive soldier tore a Torah scroll in half, outraging the Judeans, who then march to Caesarea demanding and securing punishment of the soldier.⁴⁹ There were two other significant nonviolent actions during the Roman occupation, the first in 26 CE, the second during the reign of Gaius Caligula in 38 CE.

In the latter episode, Caligula became incensed at Judean refusal to obey an arrangement of emperor worship. He ordered another official, Petronius, to erect a statue of the emperor in the temple. Insurrectionists marched to meet Petronius at the city of Ptolemais while thousands of Galileans engaged in a general agricultural strike.⁵⁰ The former incident, occurring in 26 CE, is significant because of its proximity in time to the life's work of Jesus, and its possible influence

⁴⁶Wink, Walter *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* Minneapolis; Fortress Press; 1992; Chapter 9 *passim*; Wright *JVG* p. 449-50; Herzog *passim*; Crossan p.105-06

⁴⁷ Yoder, John Howard *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* 2nd ed. Grand Rapids; William B. Eerdmans p.89f

⁴⁸ Horsley *JSV* p.88

⁴⁹ Josephus *Antiquities* 20.5.4

⁵⁰ Josephus *Antiquities* 18:8

on his ministry.

At the beginning of the reign of Pontius Pilate in Judea he decided to winter troops in Jerusalem. With the troops came busts of the emperor and other images - idolatry to the Judeans. In response, protesters marched to the imperial quarters and lobbied for six days for the removal of images. Josephus wrote:

When the Jews petitioned him, he gave a signal to his soldiers to encompass them, and threatened their punishment should be no less than immediate death... unless they would go home. But they threw themselves to the ground, and laid their necks bare, and said they would take their death very willingly rather than the wisdom of their laws be transgressed.⁵¹

Pilate, impressed by the courage of the dissenters, spared their lives. He removed the offensive items from the temple to Caesarea. It is evident from these episodes that nonviolent struggle was an important part of the Judean and Galilean response to Roman oppression.

There is also a tradition of nonviolent response to empire in the Hebrew scriptures. Jeremiah and Daniel are examples of Jewish recognition that political power is not necessarily the will of God. Yoder recites rabbinic criticism of the Maccabean, Zealot and Bar Kochba movements and their subsequent failures as evidence of a deep tradition of nonviolence (and suffering) as an answer to pagan domination.⁵² I see Jesus as drawing heavily from, or carrying on this long-standing tradition.

Jesus' non-violent approach to injustice is three-fold. First, disciples are instructed to love unconditionally. Secondly, followers are exhorted to love even their enemies. Third, Jesus asks believers to give up the right to revenge as a means of incurring justice for wrongs done against

⁵¹ Josephus *Antiquities* 18:3:1

⁵² Yoder, John Howard ed. By Cartwright, Michael G. and Ochs, Peter *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*. Grand Rapids; William B. Eerdmans; 2003 pg. 188-193

them.⁵³ Wink calls these revolutionary tactics “Jesus’ Third Way: Nonviolent Engagement.”⁵⁴

The oft-maligned command of Jesus that disciples should not resist evil; the common insistence that cheek turning, extra mile walking, coat and shirt giving responses to evil called for by Jesus are doormat philosophies are not accurate. While there is not space here for a full recital of Wink’s *Engaging the Powers* thesis, his word study of resist in Matthew 5:39 is a means of considering Jesus’ as a promoter of non-violent revolutionary tactics.

The Greek word ἀντιστηναί is most always translated as “resist” in 5:39, which reads; “do not resist an evil doer.” This word is sometimes translated as “oppose.” Wink states that “purely on logical grounds, ‘resist not’ does not fit the aggressive nonviolent actions”⁵⁵ of Jesus, such as his judgment upon the temple. Translators often fail to recognize the frequency with which the term is used in a *military* context. Liddell-Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon* identifies ἀντισταναί as “to set against” or “withstand” *especially in battle*.⁵⁶ Ephesians 6:13 is a perfect example of the term’s military usage: “Therefore take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.”

In the LXX, the term is used to describe military encounters 44 of 71 times, and Josephus uses the word for *violent struggle* 15 of 17 times. Wink writes, “In the context of the Roman occupation, resistance could only have one meaning: lethal violence.” Resist, in Matthew 5:39, is a military term.⁵⁷

What does this mean for our interpretation of the Matthean account? Jesus is not calling

⁵³Anderson, Paul N. ed. By Miller, Marlin and Gingerich, Barbara *The Church’s Peace Witness* Grand Rapids; William B. Eerdmans; 1994 p.109-10

⁵⁴Wink p.175

⁵⁵Wink p.184

⁵⁶Wink p.185

⁵⁷ibid.

on disciples to cease resisting evil altogether, but in the context of first-century CE Palestine, *to cease using militarism when confronting evil*. Wink goes on to portray Jesus and his followers as using creative non-violence in Matthew 5:38-48 as a means of radically reflecting YHWH's love for creation and passion for justice.

Each of the exhortations found in Matthew 5:38-47 is an exhortation by Jesus for disciples to turn convention upside down. Turning the right cheek toward an assailant forced the "superior" to use a closed fist, thus conferring equal status to an "inferior." Stripping naked in a court of law makes a mockery of unjust proceedings, and carrying a soldier's pack and extra mile could get a soldier in trouble for breaking Roman rules for conscripting subject peoples.⁵⁸ While these examples are not all-inclusive of Jesus' nonviolence, another witness to the creative political resistance of his followers follows presently.

There are clear indications that the earliest Christian tenets concerning violence are those of pacifist resistance. There is no firm evidence from the close of the Greek Testament period through 170 CE that any Christian served in the military. There is evidence from 173 CE onward that some believers did serve (most often in a nonviolent capacity), but there is no widespread acclimation to militarism. Until the age of Constantine, participation in the military conflicted with church teachings. Driver states that the early Church resisted temptation to lower its teaching to accommodate those serving in the military.⁵⁹

Early Christians originally opposed military service professions mainly because of the idolatry of the Roman army.⁶⁰ Origen wrote "The Christian lawgiver...nowhere teaches that it is

⁵⁸Wink p. 175-182

⁵⁹Driver, John *How Christians Made Peace with War* Scottsdale, PA; Herald Press; 1988 p.14-15

⁶⁰ibid. p.29

right for His own disciples to offer violence to anyone, however wicked... Christians were taught not to avenge themselves upon their enemy.⁶¹ If new Christians joined from the ranks of the military, strict rules applied. Hippolytus expressed an early Christian consensus toward militarism and soldiering in three articles. The first directs a soldier of inferior rank not to kill anyone, even if ordered. Secondly, if a soldier did not accept the mandate to nonviolence, he was dismissed from the Church. An addition to the second article declared that anyone with the power of the sword, or the magistrate of a city “who wears purple, let him give it up or be dismissed.” The third article states that any Church member who aspires toward military service should be dismissed from the Church because “they have despised God.”⁶²

Documents like the *Didache* and church apologists such as Tertullian, Justin Martyr, Athenagoras of Athens among others, all declare against members of the church dedicating themselves to militarism. This basic tenet of the Church was rooted in Jesus’ teaching and tested in 66-70 CE and beyond. Pacifism is the standard, however, that Christians were exhorted to meet.

Part 2 Conclusions

Jesus and his disciples were, in announcing the “kingdom of God,” making an overt challenge to political and religious authorities. The kingdom would be a community that resistant to the oppression of Rome and the Jerusalem aristocracy, but rejected the violence of would-be messiahs that engaged in military opposition to such power. Jesus preached nonviolence as the most politically savvy way to confront oppressors, the most reflective of the will of YHWH, and as the foundation of relationships for the new community of God.

⁶¹Driver p.44

⁶²ibid. p.48-49

This approach to the worship and obedience, attributed to Jesus by the apostolic church, shows that the Gospel of Mark is the reminder for a growing church to maintain consistent opposition to the claims of Rome, and the temptations toward violence that permeated first-century Palestine.

Part Three

The Gospel of Mark wastes no time in challenging the political authority of the Roman empire. In Mark, the use of the term “gospel,” the title Christ, and the claim that Jesus is “Son of God” are all political statements that are also statements of faith. The gospel’s broad political strokes paint a radical picture of faith throughout the book. While this project is not a commentary on the first gospel, it identifies specific aspects of Mark that will identify Jesus as a messiah who was a politically relevant actor as well as a religious leader. First, a brief overview of the first chapter, including Jesus’ relationship to the ministry of John the Baptist. Then comes those aspects of the healings, exorcisms, miracles, and even street theater recorded in Mark as political acts. Afterward are insights into Jesus’ challenges to the Jerusalem aristocracy, his parables, the “Little Apocalypse” of Chapter 13, and finally, the passion and empty grave.

If the first verse of Mark was not bold enough, what follows immediately reels in those wanting to hear more about Jesus. “Behold, I send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way.” This text from Malachi 3:1 is a clear invitation to recall the Elijah figure of Malachi 4:5, who appears before the “great and terrible day of the Lord.” This precedes the use of Isaiah 40:3, a prophetic announcement of Israel’s redemption. The messenger who appears in the wilderness of this text is recalled by John the Baptist’s appearance in the Judean wilderness,

inviting Israel to national repentance and forgiveness of sins.⁶³

Both John and Jesus are following the example of Elijah, who went into the desert to escape political persecution.⁶⁴ John's calling of people into the Jordan River wilderness has political meaning. Whether to avoid problems with Jerusalem's authorities, or, as a direct challenge, the Baptist mimics crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land; a wilderness revival and reform that would have provoked the ruling class to reaction. "(John's) activity was clearly political as well as religious" offers Wright. John's baptisms for forgiveness in the desert explicitly state that forgiveness was available without Jerusalem's priesthood or its temple.⁶⁵

Josephus identifies John's threat to Herod. Perkins writes "Josephus alleges that Herod executed John because Herod feared the popularity the baptizer had with the people. Such persuasive speech could lead to rebellion."⁶⁶ Herod takes John into custody. Jesus uses John's ministry as a springboard for his own work. John is neutralized by Herod, and Jesus goes to Galilee to begin a renewal movement of his own, announcing that the "kingdom of God is at hand;"⁶⁷ a material, socio-political realm, not a future spiritual reward.

This reference to the kingdom is followed by a not-so-obscure reference to economic justice. Long understood as an invitation to win souls for God, Jesus' call of his first disciples as "fishers of men" is part of an economic challenge to men who help manage a family fishing business to reject their economic stability and work for the kingdom. "Fishers of men" has a dual meaning. This statement by Jesus recalls Jeremiah 16:16, and Amos 4:2 and is a statement about

⁶³Meyers, Ched *Binding the Strongman: A Political Story of Mark's Story of Jesus* Maryknoll, N.Y.; Orbis Books; 1988 p. 126

⁶⁴ibid.

⁶⁵Wright *JVG* p160

⁶⁶Perkins p.531-32

⁶⁷Mark 1:15

God's justice in an economically unjust world. Fish hooks were a tool of judgment by YHWH against the rich. The Amos verse reads "When they take you away with meat hooks, and the last of you with fish hooks." This judges those "who oppress the poor, who crush the needy." (Am. 4:1) Only 17 verses into Mark, we have indicators of the radical changes that Jesus is working towards.

While the first chapter of Mark foreshadows political conflict, Mark is better known for its cycle of exorcisms, healings and miracles. Jesus' political act is to perform an exorcism in a synagogue. While exorcisms were common enough occurrences in the first-century, those performed by Jesus had a significance as political metaphor, such as in Mark 5:1-20.

In this exorcism, the demon dwelling within the man standing before Jesus identifies itself as "Legion, for we are many." A legion is a division of Roman troops. It is right to understand this demon to be representative of occupying forces.⁶⁸ It is the destructive threat posed by Legion that drives its victim to self-destructive behavior, as listed in 5:3-5.⁶⁹ This story is coded to be understood in light political struggle.

First, Legion runs and bows down before Jesus, an example of Jesus' challenge to Rome. The demon begs not to be sent "out of the country," (5:10) referring to the region that Romans are occupying. While the term "herd" (5:11) is not appropriate for swine, the Greek term *αγελη* is a term found throughout ancient literature in reference to military recruits. When Jesus allows the demon to enter the swine (5:13) the Greek term *επετρεφεν* is a term used by officers to dismiss troops. Legion runs into the sea, recalling the drowning of Pharaoh's army during the

⁶⁸Meyers p.191

⁶⁹Horsley *Hearing* p.140

Exodus.⁷⁰

French psychologist Frantz Fanon helps interpret the exorcism stories found in Mark.⁷¹ Demon possession in colonized nations is not unique to the first-century. Fanon's *The Wretched Earth*⁷² suggests that demonic possession was common in Algeria during the French colonial period. He writes that brutally oppressive colonial violence is often reasonably unanswerable by those oppressed. If resistance by native populations is similarly violent, it triggers increasingly brutal suppression. Often, acts of revolutionary violence become a practice in self-destruction like in the possession narrative.⁷³

Due to the severity of socio-economic circumstances, the oppressed begin questioning the power or existence of their deity. This wavering is a threat to identity, and can be catastrophic to cultures. In response to the power that empire apparently has over the deity, circumstances indicate the deity to be losing an ongoing struggle with evil, an evil often manifested in the colonizer.⁷⁴ If God cannot be considered as the cause of the evil empire (a Ronald Reagan term for the Soviet enemy of the United States), then personified evil must be held responsible. (i.e.: The United States as the Great Satan in some Muslim circles)

According to Fanon's work, to avoid the self-destruction brought about by violent resistance to colonization, the struggle takes on a spiritual dimension that brings individuals under the influence of demonic powers who represent the causes of socio-economic and emotional ills that befall the oppressed peoples.⁷⁵ For instance, the mental illnesses resulting

⁷⁰Meyers p.190-91

⁷¹Horsley *Hearing* p.141

⁷²Fanon, Frantz *The Wretched of the Earth* New York, Grove Press; 1968

⁷³Horsley *Hearing* p.141-42

⁷⁴ibid.

⁷⁵Horsley *Hearing* p.144

from chronic poverty, community erosion, and violence that typically strangles oppressed people are viewed as the results of demonic forces that need to be battled spiritually.

The narrative of Jesus and Legion might reflect Fanon's thinking and the effects of imperial violence upon the colonized. The victim, the Gerasene Demoniac, suffers from a displaced protest against foreign domination, exhibited in a manner that is anchored in a desire for self-preservation in the absence of a self-determination. Jesus' exorcism of Legion (Rome) restores the man, now "clothed, and in his right mind."

Accounts of healing in Mark carry a socio-political significance. Mark illustrates how Jesus, and the sufferers of disease or illness, subvert the exclusive authority of priests and the temple cult. That most of Jesus' healings occur after Sabbath has begun reveals the political undertones of each episode. Indeed, after the healing of Mark 3:1-6, the Pharisees and the Herodians conspire "as to how they might destroy him."

Especially among the poor, colonization brings disease, hunger, and other dangers that are not as apparent in assimilated individuals or skilled workers.

The popular character of these [healing] stories is that in them people whose social and economic position left them no other outlet...It seems to me that a degree of class correlation in the primitive Christian miracle stories can hardly be denied.⁷⁶

First century Palestinian Jews associated sickness and disease with impurity or sinfulness, which excluded them from worship and ritual. Poverty was also viewed as a consequence of sin. Meyers writes that the healings (and exorcisms) are episodes in which Jesus "challenges the very structures of social existence."⁷⁷

⁷⁶Theissen, Gerd *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition* London; T. Clark; 1983

⁷⁷Meyers p.148

Individuals who were ritually unclean were considered a threat to community stability. As they were excluded, their healing is an act of restoring social wholeness. The deeper meaning behind the healing stories is that Jesus is challenging an unjust system that marginalized those who “had no other outlet.” By healing and declaring believers clean by his own authority, Jesus begins to render the temple aristocracy and the priests of Jerusalem socially impotent to exclude individuals from community.

Leviticus 13:2-14:57 states lepers be allowed back into community only after receiving ritual cleansing from a priest. By healing without priestly intervention, Jesus subverts the hierarchy. More importantly, the leper who takes the initiative to go to Jesus for healing is just as subversive.⁷⁸ If the populace no longer needs the temple aristocracy to forgive sins (2:5) and render one clean, the temple cult can no longer be used as a socio-economic gatekeeper to full personhood.

Jesus’ healings are not significant because they are deemed miraculous by the modern church. Healings were common occurrences in first-century Palestine.⁷⁹ Healings are significant because they symbolically challenge the existing economic and social power used to deem others socially deviant and deny them access to resources guarded by elites.

Now for the narratives in which Jesus feeds the multitudes. First, a crowd of 5000 is fed by Jesus (6:33) using limited resources. The miracle is not necessarily that Jesus feeds the large crowd. The disciples have 200 denarii with which to purchase food. The triumph is Jesus’ rendering of an oppressive economic system that allowed people to starve amid the excesses of empire. Jesus feeds the crowd by redistributing the scarce resources of the community at hand

⁷⁸ *ibid.* p.153

⁷⁹ Meyers. p.145

and rejecting market-controlled options that enriched the wealthy.

More politics are evident in the way the crowd is divided by Jesus. A crowd of 5000 out in the wilderness, already been identified as a gathering place for revolution, may have been preparing to revolt. At the beginning of the story, Mark 6:34 states that Jesus saw the crowds who had gathered as “sheep without a shepherd. This is a Hebrew phrase that refers to “an army without a general, a nation without a leader.”⁸⁰ Indeed, Jesus divides the crowd into groups of 50 and 100, indicating military formation. Horsley identifies the divisions not only as military groupings in Exodus (18:25) but also in the exodus narrative of Numbers 31:14. He also identifies “sheep without a shepherd” as a reference to Israel under the rule of Herod.⁸¹ Both texts support political interpretations.

Clearly, linking Jesus - as one who attends the hunger of the crowds in the wilderness - is meant as a criticism of the political economy of Palestine and the ruling class who profits from it.⁸²

Jesus symbolic exorcisms and miracles against Rome define his healings as actions undertaken against Jerusalem elites. Tensions between Jerusalem and its rural neighbors and with Galilee have always run high and Jesus challenges the oppressive urban elites at every opportunity. Horsley writes that the Gospel of Mark makes it clear that the scribes and Pharisees of the story are “representatives of the Jerusalem high-priestly rulers.”⁸³ There were other marginalizing factors as well.

There were not yet any canonical Torah texts in Palestine, but rather competing versions

⁸⁰ibid. p.207

⁸¹ Horsley *Hearing* p.105

⁸²Meyers p.209

⁸³Horsley *Hearing* p.151

of long-standing traditions that lent to a variety of interpretations regarding God's desire. Conflict between temple priests and rural peasants was common, and regional religious leaders saw urban interpretations of Torah as suspect, if not entirely oppressive. Horsley states that the Galilean or peasant versions of Torah "would have been, in effect, a symbolic criticism of elite values and beliefs."⁸⁴

Several of the particular conflicts Jesus has with the Pharisees and scribes in Mark's story... were not simply about minor matters of keeping purity laws of a strict code of Sabbath observance, but about fundamental political-economic matters such as adequate food, the disintegration of marriage and family, and the siphoning of economic resources needed locally to support the temple and empire.⁸⁵

Three examples of Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees and scribes exhibit the socio-political nature of these fundamental disagreements. The first is found in Mark 2:23-28. Meyers asserts that this pericope concludes that the poor of Israel, and the hunger suffered by them, is more important than Sabbath worship.⁸⁶ In telling the story of David and his men eating the consecrated bread, Jesus defends the rights of the poor to meet basic needs in tough economic times, and gives priority to this interpretation of Torah over concerns for holiness and strict observances of traditions, satirically mocked by the plucking of grain as a violation of Sabbath laws about doing work.⁸⁷

Mark 7:1-23 identifies further tension between the needs of the economically oppressed and the purity and legal standards served to maintain benefits enjoyed by Jerusalem elites. Jesus confronts the practice of the *korban* vow in which the individuals practices the consecration of one's property and resources to the temple, and, though still in the hands of the owner could not

⁸⁴ *ibid.* p.161

⁸⁵*ibid.* p.162

⁸⁶Meyers p.160

⁸⁷Horsley p.166

be used. The conflict described between Jesus and the Pharisees concerning the practice stem from the latter's insistence that resources be used for temple tax instead of going to the care of elderly parents. Succumbing to temple demands often rendered individuals unable to use resources to take care of elderly parents. Thus, the *korban* legal tradition of the Pharisees violated the commandment to honor one's mother and father, who were often in need.

Jesus teachings on divorce and marriage show similar concern for the poor. Mark 10:2-9 exhibits Jesus' disgust with the Pharisees protection of decidedly unholy divorce and remarriage practices. Poor families rarely divorced. The family unit was the primary unit of production, and all hands were needed to by unified if an existence was to be eked out. The Jerusalem practice of divorce and remarriage, however, were common as a method of "securing, rearranging and consolidating political-economic power."⁸⁸

Holy Week

It is difficult to limit discussions of the events of Passover week in first-century Jerusalem to Mark's portrait. For instance, the drama of Jesus in Matthew recalls him preparing the disciples for his execution. "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem," he states, "where the son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death."

Luke foretells the Passover pilgrimage early on, revealing to the reader that Jesus is preparing a movement for the event. "He set his face toward Jerusalem..." Luke informs us, and in preparation Jesus sends out teams of disciples to build this movement despite evidence that most reject his ministry. While the Samaritans refuse safe passage to the messianic movement (compelling James and John to threaten militant annihilation of the region), other disciples return

⁸⁸Horsley p.173

with stories of great success. “Even the demons are subject to us in your name,” they report, and one can only remember the demon Legion being driven to the sea. Jesus himself reveals a sensation of impending joy related to outcomes anticipated during the upcoming Passover. “I was watching,’ Jesus tells them, “Satan fall from Heaven like lightning.”

John’s account recalls an earlier organized movement among his two Passover accounts. In the account leading up to the second journey, Jesus feeds 5000 in the hills of Galilee who are, as mentioned in the Markan account above, in military array preparing to march on Jerusalem in a hungry and angry mood. Jesus moves away from the crowd when they misinterpret his motives and means. John indicates that Jesus began to sense “they were intending to make him king (of the Jews) by force, (and) he withdrew himself to the mountain by himself alone.”

Just before he makes his entry into Jerusalem, he is anointed in the manner of all prophets and kings, but in John’s memory, the anointing is (χριστος, Christos, Christ: anointed one) performed by a woman rather than one of typical religious authority, and Jesus has his feet anointed, wiped clean with the woman’s hair rather than by more ritually honorable means and materials.

That the story of Zechariah is recalled is as politically important as any of the claims made about Jesus as the Son of God or King of the Jews, for Mark and the other gospel accounts all describe Jesus as the author of an intentionally enacted political sketch, an extraordinarily choreographed piece of street theater that explicitly displays Jesus as a King -- the king -- of the Jews. In Zechariah, the King of the Jews, or of restored Israel, would enter Zion “humble, riding on a colt, the foal of a Donkey.” The rest of the Zechariah passage is left assumed. While Mark indicates the donkey is found right where Jesus tells them where they will find it for him, the verse Mark leaves out but is understood by everyone is certain to be on the minds of all those

prepared for Passover conflict with the Romans. The king of Zion “will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations.” Non-violence is a key to Jesus’ Holy Week message.

At the very time that Jesus is preparing to lead a motley crew into Zion through a back gate, another procession would be taking place at the main entrance into the fortified City of David. This procession would also be making claims of ruling authority, embodied divinity, and the authorship of peace. Pontius Pilate and Roman soldiers would be coming to represent the power of Caesar and control unruly rebelliousness that might occur during the festival.

Borg writes “two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30.” He shares the meaning of the differences evident in the two groups, calling the Jesus movement “a peasant procession” and the other “an imperial procession.”⁸⁹ With Jesus on a donkey leading peasants who were shouting “save us,” at one city gate, an imperial representative was demanding that Jerusalem recognize Caesar as “savior of the world” and Rome as the “Empire bestowed upon them by the gods,” entering through another.

“Pilate’s military procession was a demonstration of both Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology,” writes Borg.⁹⁰ Such military processions were common place and a common occurrence in Jerusalem, Palestine, and the rest of the empire. It was an obvious reminder to all Jews and early Christians that Rome was in charge, and also, that Rome was watching closely. Passover was a celebration of the liberation of Israel from just such an empire as Rome. Passover week was a fuse soaked in fuel surrounded by hearts sparking with militancy

⁸⁹ Borg, Marcus, and Crossan, John. *The Last Week: A Day by Day Account of Jesus’ Final Week in Jerusalem* San Francisco, Harper Collins; 2006. p2.

⁹⁰ Borg, p.2.

and rebelliousness, if not religious zeal.

As stated, the Rebellion of 66 that led to the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in 70 began during Passover. The Romans were ever intent on redirecting or suppressing such rebellion as soon as it caught that spark. Jesus making a similar triumphal entry not only reminded Jews of the promises of Zechariah, of humble kings and a restored Zion, but that it was to be a kingdom of peace that produced a non-violent rule of God. It also made a mockery of the pretensions of Rome, which made claims that all Jews knew were reserved for the God of Abraham and Sarah, and perhaps now, for Jesus the Christ.

Jesus spoke the political language of first-century Palestine and used parables as both teaching tools and propaganda, and his week in Jerusalem is described by Mark as so much political rallying in contest with several other sects and more mainstream Judean nationalists. The parable of the mustard seed, and another concerning vine-growers (12:1-12), are examples of parables as political speech. The parable of the mustard seed, and its reference to “birds of the air,” is a reference to Ezekiel 17:23, and 31:6, as well as Daniel 4:12. The imagery of a tree in the Hebrew Bible emphasizes the concrete political nature of the kingdom.⁹¹

Yet, the mustard seed is a shrub. According to Herzog, it spreads more like a dangerous weed, growing indiscriminately, and is a nuisance or even a threat to those trying to cultivate a different type of kingdom. The mustard seed is a picture of any revolutionary movement, starting small, and perhaps inconspicuously, but growing into a political movement that threatens the firmly entrenched empires of the world, whether they be Babylon or Rome. Interestingly, the parable is also a commentary on Levitical law (19:19), which prohibits the sowing of two

⁹¹Mattison, Mark *The Subversive Parables of Jesus* 2001; <http://www.concentric.net/~Mattison/Jesus/Parables.htm>

different types of seed in the same soil.

In the parable of the vine-growing tenants (Mark 12:1-12) is often interpreted, and not mistakenly, as a parable concerning YHWH's sending of the prophets before Israel, and finally YHWH's own son; only to see them turned away and the word of God rejected. However, there is an important double meaning behind this parable that would have been clearly understood by listeners. It implores peasants not to use violence when combating unjust economics.

In first-century Palestine, many families were losing their land to debtors when they failed to pay back loans.⁹² After losing their land, they would often become wage slaves, working on the very land they had owned. Tensions existed, especially when the new landlords collected the harvest.

In Mark 12, Jesus tells the story of tenants of such a landlord, and their response to his attempts to collect a profit from land that previously belonged to the peasants. They injured or killed each messenger, believing such violence would facilitate reclaiming the land. Jesus, however, reveals in the parable that high expectations infused into rebellion are always frustrated. The landlord simply responds with reactionary violence of his own.⁹³

The parallels to this parable, Matthew 21:33-41 and Luke 20:9-19, are interesting. In Matthew, the Pharisees respond to the parable, representing the Jerusalem aristocracy, and suggest the peasants deserve death as a consequence of violence. In Luke, however, a crowd of peasants are the audience, and they are aghast at Jesus' warning regarding violence. They recognize the ending of the story as indicative of consequences related to militant violence.

⁹²Horsley *JSV* p.31

⁹³Herzog, William R. *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* Louisville, Westminster/John Knox; 1994

Part 3 Conclusions

A political reading of Mark reveals a depth of political meaning that is often overlooked by commentators and pastors. However, because a political meaning can be attributed to Mark's story, spiritual readings are not undermined. There was no separation of faith from politics in the first-century, and Jesus conformed to this cultural context. If YHWH was to act in history, it would impact political spiritual realities regarding salvation, not would go to heaven, but rather that there would be justice in one's lifetime.

Jesus makes the claim that YHWH's kingdom is being realized in his ministry. He forces confrontation with Rome and the Jerusalem aristocracy. Jesus will be charged with a political crime. The Holy Week narrative of Mark will bear this out.

Part Four

Jesus' inaugurates confrontation with Rome by riding an ass into Jerusalem. "Hosanna!" is bellowed as he enters the city. Meyers writes that "Jesus comes... not a pilgrim demonstrating allegiance, but as a popular king ready to mount a nonviolent confrontation with the ruling class."⁹⁴ This entrance, says Meyers, is satire; political street theater on the part of Jesus and his disciples. Reenacting prophetic scriptures with messianic overtones (Zec. 9:9), Jesus rides a donkey into Zion. That the crowd meets Jesus with leafy branches and shouting praise recalls a very different tradition than that of 1 Maccabees, when revolutionary Simon Maccabaeus enters Jerusalem "with praise and palm branches, and with hymns and songs."⁹⁵ Both Jesus and pilgrims are making specific claims during the week of the Passover, the annual celebration of

⁹⁴Meyers p.290

⁹⁵Meyers p.294

the liberation of Hebrew slaves.

Upon entering Jerusalem, Jesus goes straight to the temple. Meyers suggests “it is the ruling class interests in control of the commercial enterprises in the temple market that Jesus is attacking.”⁹⁶ He enacts judgment the Temple cult as corrupt, referencing a “Den of robbers” as an allusion not only to the ruling elite of Jeremiah’s era,⁹⁷ but to contemporary Jewish collaborators with Rome who are using the Temple to enrich themselves and maintain control over the economic resources of Jerusalem and Palestine.

In a similar vein, Mark’s story is no stranger to apocalyptic writing. Chapter 13 is often called “little apocalypse.” Jesus’ references to Daniel 7, 9, and 11 lend considerable credence to the identification of Jesus’ movement as non-violent. While there was plenty of apocalyptic literature circulating in the first-century CE, Daniel was amongst the most popular. Jesus’ use of Daniel reflects not only its popularity, but his favoring of nonviolent response to the oppressiveness of empire rather than Daniel’s contemporary works, 1 and 2 Maccabees and 1 Enoch, or the Qumran War Scrolls. Yoder identifies the nonviolent readings of Daniel (and Jeremiah) in the first century as being in tension with widespread belief in Palestine that militant responses to Rome better reflected the way YHWH works in history.⁹⁸ Daniel insists God acts in history, absent of indications that the outcome results in end-time cataclysm. That is not the purpose of apocalyptic literature. Rather, apocalyptic contends with the realities of radical change.

Jesus is makes clear in Mark 13 violence revolt will certainly lead to destruction. “See

⁹⁶ibid. p.300

⁹⁷ Jeremiah 7:1-11

⁹⁸Yoder, *Jewish -Christian Schism* p.188-193

that no one misleads you,” says Jesus, “Many will come in my name, saying ‘I am he!’ and will mislead many.” He warns against the militants who claimed messianic roles but led armies toward destruction. The wars, or rumors of war Jesus refers to in Mark 13 did come about; the Jewish uprising against Rome is contemporary with Mark’s authorship.

Further, Jesus attests to anticipated suffering, even when the path of nonviolence is followed. “They will deliver you before the courts, and you will be flogged in the synagogues.” The terror of war against Rome is discussed in Mark 13, as Jesus warns of the results of insurrection: “Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days... For those days will be a time of tribulation such as has not occurred since the beginning of creation...and never will.” (13:17-19)

Jerusalem tended toward restlessness during Passover. Judas Iscariot, perhaps believing Jesus’ call to nonviolence is betraying Judean hopes, betrays the pacifist messiah.⁹⁹ Jesus is turned over to the Roman authorities, arrested “as you would a robber.” The term robber, or ληστην, is applied to political bandits or revolutionaries charged with insurrection, according to first century literature. Jesus is crucified between two other “robbers,” Political indeed, especially regarding one who claims to be king.

Pilate asks Jesus if he is “king of the Jews.” Jesus answers to affirm the messianic contention that YHWH is king, and Caesar is not. Yet, after being betrayed, rejected, humiliated, scourged, and executed, Jesus is recognized as the true Son of God by no other than a Roman centurion. This is not the way revolutions begin. The cross is where revolutions end. If anything, Jesus was viewed by onlookers as he murmured from the cross as a failed messiah. Like those

⁹⁹Cullman, Oscar *The State in the New Testament* New York; Charles Scribner’s Sons; 1956; p.16

before and after him, life ended with nothing to show for effort. His disciples should have scattered, and the crowds should have learned the lesson: if you provoke authority you pay with your life. Something happened, however, that convinced his followers that something about Jesus was different.

Mark records a burial, then claims that Jesus' tomb was discovered empty just days later. Was the grave robbed? Did Jesus suffer some further post-mortem humiliation? This had never happened to other leaders. While Jesus confronted authorities and suffered the price, his obedience to the will of YHWH, his insistence upon nonviolence as the faithful manner to confront the claims of Caesar somehow disrupted someone enough to steal the body away. Or was there something else that Mark was portraying, such a hope that Jesus' was somehow vindicated by God? Had resurrection, such as it is taught by the Pharisees and in Daniel, occurred in the instance of Jesus' death?

The possibility of resurrection motivated disciples that God was indeed acting to vindicate Jesus. He had ended the struggle against the evil of the Roman empire, of all empires, and against Satan, who was leading Israel and the rest of the world away from the will of God.

And this is the premise behind the Gospel of Mark. During a time of great turmoil, when their Jewish kin were prepared for the final struggle with evil, and the Jewish War of 66 CE was inevitable, the early Christian *ekklesia* was faced with a decision. Do we fight against the empire? Will our group survive persecution? What will become of us in the face of such trials? Remember that by this time, Nero had launched his persecution of the Church, as had Synagogue leaders. Many were martyred, and early Christian writings suggest this was becoming burdensome on a community that was struggling for identity.

The Gospel of Mark constructs this much needed identity for the fledgling community. It remembers the struggle of Jesus against Rome, and against Jerusalem aristocracy. Mark remembers the revolutionary nonviolence, and the subverting of traditional symbols of power. Mark remembers the suffering, and apparent victory by Rome that turned into victory for humanity despite the worst Rome had to offer. Mark tells the story of vindication for Jesus' obedience, a way of living and serving God that was to be carried on by Palestinian Christians, and later those Gentiles who lived throughout the empire. Mark called upon the ancients to commit to Jesus and a new way of confronting the claims made by empire. Mark calls upon the modern Church to do the same, especially when the Church benefits not only from the machinations of empire but works in fact to maintain empire.

It often appears that the modern Church may have lost faith in Mark's claim of vindication - the resurrection that will put the world to rights. Just as importantly, the modern Church has denied the political struggle inherent in making such a claim against empire. Jesus, and the Gospel of Mark, calls upon the Church to live in faithful obedience, to nonviolently expose the wrongs of the world, and to believe that our struggle, in the end, will be remembered as righteous.

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