

JESUS' DEFEAT OF DEATH AND MARK'S EARLY READERS¹

Peter Geoffrey Bolt

This thesis is an inquiry into the potential impact of Mark's Gospel upon its early Greco-Roman readers. The Gospel of Mark's powerful drama and impact is often acknowledged, but not enough has yet been done concerning the nature of this impact and the means by which it is achieved.

In order to examine Mark's 'narrative impact', this thesis is an exercise in literary reception. The last decades have seen a spate of studies which seek to apply literary tools to the understanding of Mark's narrative. Many such studies stop short of the problematic interface between 'text' and 'world' and are often sceptical about whether this divide can or should be crossed. If questions of textual impact on real readers are broached, it is usually modern rather than ancient readers who are in view. This thesis seeks to move beyond the literary study of Mark to its reception in the real world of first-century Greco-Roman society.

It focuses upon the role of the thirteen healing/exorcism accounts in this communicative process, arguing that these scenes forge a link between Mark and the flesh-and-blood readers. The examination of this ancient reading experience is approached from two directions: firstly, 'outwards' from the text towards the textual construct known as 'the implied reader', and, secondly, 'inwards' from the real 'flesh-and-blood' readers (broadly conceived) towards the text.

Many literary studies of the characters in Mark have underestimated the importance of the characters within these scenes, known as the 'suppliants' (*i.e.*, those in need who come to Jesus for help). This is,

¹Peter Geoffrey Bolt, *'Do you not care that we are perishing?' Jesus' Defeat of Death and Mark's Early Readers* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, King's College, London, 1997); supervisor: Professor Graham N. Stanton.

to a large degree, because they have operated with a 'weak' notion of 'identification' in which the reader somehow adopts a character as a role model. Consequently, the main focus has been upon the role of the disciples *viz a viz* the reader, and even the few studies dealing with the 'minor characters' have underestimated the importance of the thirteen suppliants. However, if the manner in which readers become aligned with characters is more carefully analysed, a 'strong' notion of identification is required in which any identification is produced by the text manipulating the readers to adopt a positive stance towards various characters. In terms of the 'text-to-implied reader' axis, it is suggested that there are various devices in the text which work towards strongly aligning the implied readers with the suppliants in these scenes. The suppliants therefore emerge with a very significant role in the communicative process between Mark and the (implied) reader.

But how can we move beyond the text and its implied reader (for this figure remains a textual construct) to the real world of the first century in which Mark was first read? What would the early readers have brought to the act of reading/hearing Mark? Mark makes its impact through engaging with early readers' 'repertoire'—*i.e.*, the conceptual baggage brought to the reading of the narrative. To appreciate the impact of these stories on early readers, the thesis attempts, therefore, to recover relevant aspects of the pre-understanding which Greco-Roman readers could be expected to bring to their reading of Mark. Three broad cultural features of their world would be important—if not unavoidable—components of this repertoire: (1) the emperor, (2) illness and death, (3) magic. Although local variation no doubt existed with regard to these three features, each was a general feature of the Greco-Roman world; there was nowhere in the empire which did not feel their effects. Moreover, these particular features of Greco-Roman life 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 empire, and, in particular, with the place of the emperor within it.

2. The healing/exorcism stories, which are the main interest of the thesis, inevitably touch upon various sicknesses. These are considered as forms of 'illness' (*i.e.*, the social condition of being ill) rather than 'disease' (*i.e.*, the product of some pathological causality), and the thesis inquires into how they might have been experienced by the ancient sufferer.
3. Any interest in illness and *daimons* in the ancient world automatically requires a corresponding interest in ancient magical practice. The various conditions experienced by Mark's sufferers are touched upon by the magical curses and spells. Jesus' treatment of these conditions has similarities to the practice of the magicians, albeit with important differences.

When read from this reconstructed perspective, the healing/exorcism scenes show Jesus dealing with death. Each of the conditions represented in these scenes have a connection with death, although the connection is different in each case. Each suppliant would therefore be seen as being under the shadow of death before their encounter with Jesus, who would then radically change their circumstances so that he brings them out from the shadow and enables them to live anew.

To the early flesh-and-blood readers, who also lived under the shadow of death, the suppliants would have represented a 'slice of life' through the real world they knew only too well. This means that the first readers would have been able to recognise their own world in the circumstances of the suppliants and so to 'become' the implied readers. Thus the suppliants provide various 'entry-points' for the first Greco-Roman readers into the story, drawing them into the story-world which then seeks to move them by its message about Jesus and the coming kingdom.

Mark's larger narrative presents Jesus the Son of God as an alternative leader for the world, who leads the way, through resurrection, into the coming kingdom of God. After entering the story through 'becoming' the suppliants, Mark's early readers would have discovered that the larger narrative addressed their mortality and brought the hope of resurrection. Portrayed as a king who brings life

to those under the shadow of death, Jesus would be seen as an alternative to the Roman emperors. He had no apotheosis which removed him from death, but he truly died. His emptied tomb therefore speaks of a genuine resurrection which inaugurated the kingdom of God, and which provides genuine hope for those who continue to live under the shadow of death.

Such a 'text-to-reader' and 'reader-to-text' analysis leads to the conclusion that Mark's Jesus deals with death and many of its invasions into human life. This message would have had a high potential impact on early readers, since their world provided ample opportunity to feel the distress of human mortality. On this analysis of the communicative dynamics of the gospel, Mark had the potential to make an impact upon the early readers' sense of mortality. Jesus had defeated death.