

Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel

Richard A Horsley. Westminster John Knox Press, 2001

Introduction:

Question assumptions:

1. Separation of religion and politics is modern mind.
2. Assumption that Gospel will be about theology.
3. Christ brought new religion vs Judaism is not biblical.
4. Judaism was neither monolithic nor only religion.
5. Pharisees, Essenes, Sadducees, etc. were tiny literate minority.
6. Galileans were not under Jerusalem's control at time of Jesus. (only under Jerusalem for 100 years just prior to Jesus' birth. Separate for 800 years!)
7. Gospel originally performed not written.
8. Synagogues were not religious buildings but local Knesset meetings.
9. No standardized Jewish scripture existed.
10. A-historical apocalyptic is eisegesis

If we read Gospel not as separate *pericopes* but whole story:

1. Main plot: Jesus as Moses/Elijah-like prophet working for societal renewal of Israel through the Galilean villages.
2. The first sub-plot is that this renewal is opposed so it proceeds through conflict with southern powers to confront Jerusalem rulers (who are not normative Judaism but of different social and geographical location)
3. A second sub-plot of the Twelve Disciples as negative example who contradict then betray and abandon him.
4. A third sub-plot of women as paradigms of following and serving.

So Jesus stands for renewal of Mosaic covenantal teaching.

Chapter One: Taking the Gospel Whole

No modern-style Linear plot, characters do not develop, not primarily a ‘religious’ story (redaction criticism assumption), no private individual reader assumed, not non-contextual. Narrative is intended to persuade so *pericopes* make sense only within overall plot.

‘GOSPEL’: no contemporary literature like it. Hellenistic-Roman biographies or Lives (Matt & Luke similar) but Mk has no miraculous birth, etc.

Chapter Two: Submerged People’s History (incl pp 116-7)

Equivalent of third world colonized country, although church stressed dependence on Peter, the Rock of Rome.

EXODUS: Egyptian Empire. Sea Crossings, Feedings, Commandments of God, founding twelve tribes,

KINGSHIP:

David alluded to as liberating king, but built imperial monarchy, son Solomon imposing forced labour for Temple, under his son ten northern tribes in area of Galilee and Samaria separating. Ahab tries Canaanite style so Elijah resists. Assyria placed Galilee under separate admin divisions. So after Babylon both nations under imperial controls.

Persians: set ruling élite in Temple, and encouraged composition of Torah as colonial constitution, and we know that even scribes distrusted priestly caste as imperial lackeys. Seleucids pressed Hellenistic culture. People blamed ‘unclean demons’ for their ills – rebellion.

Hasmonean Maccabees eventually also set selves up as High Priests in imperial style, destroyed Gerizim temple at Samaria (John Hyrcanus 120BC?) and subjecting *Galilee (104 BC)*. *First time for 800 years they are not independent.*

Josephus says they imposed “law of the Judeans” on Galilee. (Ant. 13) probably using Pharisees uniting the two nations under Jerusalem. But Rome then took over Galilee, enslaving and crucifying.

Herod’s Hellenized Temple. After Herod’s death northern and southern rebelled, each offering their own king, attacked Sepphoris to take back their property and debt records.

4BC: After only 100 years of united country, Romans separated the two once more so that High Priests no longer had authority but they still tried to dominate north.

Antipas: Roman-educated. Sepphoris and Tiberias (20AD) in view of every village, Antipas living in their midst. Josephus tells of constant hatred of the two cities and how Joshua and Moses were revered in the area. The Fourth Philosophy group taught no king but YHWH.

Under tribute to Rome, taxes to Herod, tithes to Temple. Strong tradition of resistance. “Jewish Revolt” 66AD misnamed: Galilean, Idumean, Judean peasants +some ordinary priests and people of Jerusalem only revolted. Then the Jerusalem provisional government sent Josephus and others and Pharisees to control Galilee. Isaiah almost uses the well-known term ‘Galilee of the Gentiles’ (Is 9:1) – see it almost as pagan.

Village Community: was the fundamental form of organization over the family. Village self-sustaining autonomous community with Knesset (*ekklesia* likewise Greek assembly controlling religious and secular affairs as one) Pharisees and Scribes not members of local synagogues because not local villagers.

1. Jesus teaches communities not individuals. Did not found new communities but worked with existing ones. Uniting them in solidarity.
2. He extends that into areas subject to different rulers! Unusual.
3. Proclaims from the first an alternative Kingdom.
4. Rome crucified only those who rebelled against imperial order.
5. This movement extends after Jesus’ martyrdom.
6. Galilee must have been ethnically mixed region, not “Jewish”.
7. Even in Matthew it’s not till end that Jesus sends them to make “disciples of all nations”, having said “only lost sheep of Israel” (M10:5-6) Luke says the centre of the new community is Jerusalem! Then out to Rome! But Mark’s Jesus builds seamlessly from village to village, Galilee, all around then Jm.

Mark’s gospel still resonates with villagers – Pliny four decades later tells of villages as well as town Christians.

Archaeology: landed estates in Judea (so landless labourers) but in Galilee peasants living still on ancestral land. But taxes imposed forced debt. Semi-autonomous

villages as long as they paid up. (they would therefore have fears that southern-style estates would be set up – all very fragile. Malnutrition and illness, tensions.)

Lower Tradition in these villages would have had regional differences and cross-over with Greater Tradition

Chapter 3: Mark as Oral Performance

Jeremiah, the writing prophet, could not write! (Baruch) Papias preferred oral to written for authority. Ezra's reading of Torah was enforcement of power ceremony.

Written text as Aide Memoire. Greek shows patterns, mnemonics, repetitions etc, multiplying stories with KAI. Unlikely that only one performer created Gospel.

No mass production. No spaces between words so even reading allowed required familiarity. Gospel stories used to evoke memories of the traditions. But do not tend us to abstraction. Hearers would have been interacting as a community with the stories. For example, Mark's open ending....

Chapter 4: Disciples become deserters.

4: 35-41 Crossing sea of Galilee – fearful

6: 35 f – exasperation of Jesus that they don't understand 5,000

8: 31, 9:31, 10: 32 – don't get that Js says there must be suffering and death.

8:32 Get behind me Satan

9: 14 – cannot exorcize the demon.

11-12 – play no role in confrontation with Jerusalem rulers

14:17 f – all protest innocence at Last Supper

14: 27-50 Fall asleep at Gethsemane (three times)

Judas betrays others flee

14: 53 ff - Peter betrays (three times)

Disappear from story before crucifixion.

Do not witness empty tomb.

Told to go back to Galilee, but no evidence that they did. (Looks like HQ in Jerusalem as leaders of the old style! – “acknowledged pillars” Gal.2:9)

All of Peter references show him misunderstanding, stupidity or faithlessness (and this after Peter was already revered as ‘main’ apostle in Rome).

Mark does not have stories of rehabilitation.

“They are negative examples, not paradigms of discipleship.” p91

As soon as the message is proclaimed they get it wrong (4:35-8:21), and they fail to ‘remember’ (a term which would indicate observance of Covenant) shows failure of faith.

When in Mark 3:31-35 story of the family may be a way of saying James is no more important either than those (his new family) who hear the words and follow them. Also Mark 9:38-41 shows Jesus accepting the ministry of non Jerusalem-accredited exorcists. Mark 10: 42-45 – Jesus explicitly rejects claims of primacy in inner circle. Matthew: Peter is Rock of the Church, I Cor 15, witnesses to resurrection, and this witnessing gives Peter and John their ‘authority in Early Church. Church focussed then on personal ‘discipleship’ piety some of which resonates with Western individualism.

12 are restoration of Israel: 12 are undergoing renewal.

Mark’s Jesus more than ‘gatherer of disciples’

Elijah seen as restorer of tribes of Jacob (early scribal literature). John Baptist restores and prepares way. Jesus 40 days in wilderness (like Elijah and Israel) After wilderness He chooses the 12 (Elijah after wilderness chooses Elisha disciple who immediately leaves and follows). Jesus comes down from Mountain to choose 12 like Moses from Sinai. (Elijah also ascends the Horeb mountain to be with God).

Sea crossings, wilderness feedings, Transfiguration, blood of covenant meal.

Mission of the Twelve 6:7-13 – Jesus gives instructions for mission journey (not holy life-style teaching) with direction on proclamation, exorcism and healing, just like Jesus’ own mission. Pairs staying and working in ‘places’ (village communities if

Jesus' style is to be continued). Renewal of village communities in accordance with Covenant. (Elijah and Elisha also ministered beyond the Promised Land) Shake off dust if village refuses mission (not individualistic picture). The Covenant is the villages' constitution of the Kingdom and "guide for social-economic-political relations in village communities, the fundamental social form of society." p108.

[Woman 12 years haemorrhage and 12 years old, 12 baskets]

CHAPTER 5: READING STORY WHOLE. A Political Reading.

Jesus is not creating new universalist religion! There is no Judaism anyway! He attacks Judean Temple denial of the Covenant and ends as the King of the Judeans! Jesus dies not for our sins but as martyr to Kingdom of the Covenant relationship with God (which involves mercy.) John Baptist "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" is re-enactment of Mosaic covenant.

Wilderness gathering into 100s etc is like preparation for Joshua's invasion.

The mustard seed grows a tree which is anti-imperialist in that from village by village it shelters all, and in the region of Decapolis the 4000 fed and 7 baskets collected. Pigs come out of 'Legion' into the Sea, from whence they came. The people are haemorrhaging due to the exploitation.

The Temple too is exploiting for the Romanish Judeans – Korban (7:1-13) Jesus enters the Cit a week before Passover (14:1-2) celebration of liberation from Egypt. The 'Hosanna' cry from Ps 113 was sung at Passover and recounts pre-entry to Land. Cites part of Jeremiah's condemnation – den of thieves. (Jer 7:11)

Mark 12: 28-33 – a Scribe admits Jesus' is right to critique on basis of Mosaic Covenant – the summary of the law is more important than Temple sacrifices.

He creates new ritual of blood covenanting at Last Supper 'poured out for many'. (Mark 14: 22-25 cf. Ex. 24:3-8)

Main Plot: conflict between Rulers and Ruled in Roman Palestine

The dominant conflict was not Jews/Gentiles. Tribute was against Covenant but Temple High Priests raised it. Sent thugs to take village tithes from threshing floors

leaving priests to starve. Jesus steers clear of Antipas' cities. Lavish mansions in New Upper City on hill over Temple (66AD populace destroyed them – Josephus explains the uprising was populace vs H.Priests and then Romans came to put it down). “Take up your cross.

Subplots: Conflict between Jesus and disciples; renewal of Mosaic Covenant as integral to presence of God's Kingdom; women as paradigm for renewal.

CHAPTER 6: STRUGGLE AGAINST ROMAN RULE

Entangled with *divine conflict with demons*. It shows Satan has been bound (Legion; disciples commissioned to cast out; Syro-Phoenician woman; stranger exorcizes is acceptable (9:38-40) and then no more in Mark! Moses and Elijah are elicited. Jesus rebukes and 'casts out'. Have you come to destroy us? (1:24) Not used to glorify wonder-worker.

Southerners saw 'Galilee of the Gentiles' : his power not accredited from Temple so he talks of their 'house' where Satan is first bound.

Legion: (5:1-20) unbound burning and attacking their villages, but he bows down and begs not to be sent out of the country. 'herd' is term for military recruits. They are 'dismissed' and 'charge' into pigs and sea (liberation)

Belief in demons blames others not themselves for the horrors and ignores worst features of oppression, and prevents direct confrontation with oppressor (suicidal), but no need to blame their own god (which covenant theology might have emphasised) but is a misdirected protest against Rome. Naming him Legion demystifies all these elements so from here on Mark's story shows conflict with Leaders not demons. Cleanses Temple and says cast the mountain into the sea. Also the conflict is real struggle against Jerusalem rulers.

Section on modern notions of Apocalyptic: Mark is not a-historical in this way. No evidence that peasants used this style. Son of Man title is used three times in different ways, all of them indefinite. Jesus' account of Temple destruction is not what actually happened and so is forecast not prophecy after the event. Mk 13 is full of typical experience of present history of oppressed. The theme is Watch and do not

invest these events with too much importance – don't let them divert you from task of renewal – not apocalyptic!

CHAPTER 7: CONTESTING THE TRADITION

Who were the real Pharisees? Vast majority of people were not in these elite groups. Josephus sees Pharisees as political party esp under Hasmoneans. Keep Jesus under surveillance, dining with him. Considered able lawyers but Lax rulings compared with Qumran. Herod imposed his regime above Temple and Pharisees lost influence. Antipas would have been against Temple tithes to south! Pharisees would have been a memory in Galilee at time of Jesus. They had produced 'traditions of elders' during Hasmonean period.

Jerusalem-based Torah vs. Popular Israelite Tradition:

Several strands and traditions in Palestine

1. No standardized text of Torah yet authoritative. Priests had own traditions as in Deut. 33:8-11, prob own version of Torah, but Dead Sea Scrolls indicate legal interpretation differences between high-priestly traditions. So Pharisees could not have been 'authorised' interpreters of Torah which was not yet set.
2. Variant scripture and oral traditions plus different interpretations thereof – tithing, oaths, divorce, Sabbath, diet, purity codes. Struggles everywhere.
3. Jerusalem/Galilee complex relationship. Eight centuries of separation, under Jerusalem 100 years before Christ. Before that, the two were under different imperial administrative districts. Hasmoneans allowed Galileans to remain only if they lived "according to the laws of the Judeans" (Ant. 13:296-7, Josephus). This must have included Torah (plus the Pharisees supplements of their 'traditions of the ancestors' – since Pharisees were legal-policy experts in Jerusalem high-priestly government). So Torah was imposed top-down on Galilee (via the Pharisees, before Jesus' period).
4. In agrarian societies anthropologists distinguish Great and Little traditions. Interrelated, parallel, but different – given oppression of one by other. Local custom ruled peasant village synagogues, so would have been more diverse even than the priestly Jerusalem traditions. Remember, no unifying factors like public media or texts. Later rabbinic legend: Yohanan ben Zakkai, "O Galilee, Galilee, You hate the Torah!" (y.Sabb. 16:8). Jerusalem used Hebrew,

peasants, Aramaic. Great Trad was developed during separate kingdoms then enforced 100BC. Little Trad continued to be cultivated throughout (since poor not deported by Assyria)

5. Rabbinic scholars see differing 'halakhah'(legal interpretation) in Galilee – e.g. “the people of Galilee are not familiar with the contribution to the sanctuary..[and]..consecration offerings which are set apart for the priests.” (m.Ned.2:4) So tithes not customary, different and stricter Passover and Day of Atonement celebrations in Galilee.
6. Galilee Little Trad: Mosaic Covenant, Sabbath, Exodus, northern heroes and heroines (Deborah), Stories of rebellion against Jerusalem, resisters to oppression like Elijah and Elisha. Jerusalem Torah used as temple-state constitution.

Jesus renews popular Israelite Tradition

The Little Tradition would have acted from death of Herod as symbolic criticism of elite values and beliefs – not just minor differences in style.

1. Plucking Grain on Sabbath. (Mk 2:23-28) Gleaning rights. Jesus quotes the story of David in I Sam. 21:1-6 in a different version from our own Septuagint Greek text – Jesus seems not to be quoting from a text at all but oral tradition! He even has the impure David *entering* the Temple! Subsistence trumps elites need for holiness.
2. Korban (Mark 7:10-23). Kettles and washing was hierarchical practice – the Pharisees were putting themselves on high plane. Korban money is for Temple as against Mosaic rulings, family support was fundamental to village economy.
3. Divorce and Marriage (Mark 10:2-9). Herod Antipas' brother's Hasmonean wife. Elite used divorce to increase power and land. Galilean custom was more conservative than Judean so a man's note of divorce seen as southern liberal laxity. Jesus shifts debate to positive marriage. Acts as new Moses – 'let no one put asunder'.

Jesus renews Mosaic Covenant as part of his renewal of whole of Israel.

See anthropologist : James C.Scott: Protest and Profanation: Agrarian Revolt and the Little Tradition in “Theory and Society” 4(1977):3-32, 159-210.

7. RENEWING COVENANTAL COMMUNITY

Shema plus love your neighbour is very good condensation of Covenant Code.

“this is my blood of the (new) covenant.” Talk of illness along with sin shows strong sense of covenant and wellbeing interrelationship.

Jesus is not addressing individuals as called ‘disciples’, nor offering a new religion.

New God’s Regime includes beyond Galilee – Jesus goes to villages of Tyre, Caesarea Philippi and Decapolis, even the dogs at table are fed, so not new Gentile religion on death of Jesus.

Pliny the Younger to Trajan (Epistles 10:96-97) has, 3 generations later, Jesus-believers in villages across empire. Oppressed Villagers everywhere would have warmed to message and Regime style. Mosaic law built for just this.

Covenant of Essenes was dissident priests and scribes – Hasmoneans had accommodated to empire so went into desert under a *Community Rule*. Blessed are those in the community and cursed are those in darkness – Jesus broadens that.

MARK 10: the Renewed Covenant. A community Rule?

Framed by two episodes of healing blind men.

Marriage and Divorce: Marriage is inviolable since grounded in creation, not property.

Membership of the Community: who receives a child receives me and the sender. Receive the Kingdom like a child – as a ‘not-yet a person’ person.

Covenantal Economics: Not covet, not steal, false witness.

Only the wealthy would ask about inheriting eternal life, the poor’s concern for the next meal! Great wealth means he had broken sharing covenant!

Not interested in ‘voluntary association’ but restored households. (10:28-31)

Covenantal Politics: Son of Man must suffer and die. James and John request power. But brigands are on right and left at crucifixion kingdom and share his baptism.

Mark 10:42 calls for radically egalitarian political relationships.

Plus, as above:

Transfiguration colleagues, sea crossings, John’s baptism of repentance, forgiveness of sins of paralytic, Jesus’ familial community (doing the will of God 3:35), scribe’s

assent to covenantal teaching (12:28-34) more important than burnt offerings in Temple! Not even Hellenistic Jewish literature attests attachment of love God and Neighbour – peasants’ fundamental right to security more important than Temple. “blood poured out for many.”

CHAPTER 9: WOMEN AS REPRESENTATIVE AND EXEMPLARY

The twelve misunderstand, betray and disappear. Mark’s women unnamed or indoors. Yet Haemorrhaging Woman appears in public and touches him & Syro-Phoenician argues. Mary Magdalene and anointer do not have male superiors. His own family lacks a patriarch.

End of crucifixion: “Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome used to follow him and serve him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem. “(15:40-41) They are paradigms of following and witnessing.

- Simon’s mother in law: serve him like the angels just have.
- Haemorrhaging woman & 12 year old: symbolize Israel. “daughter your faith”
- Syro-Phoenician bests him and forces him to expand policy.
- Widow is forced to give last mite (devour widows)
- Anoints – makes messiah, like prophets did – while Judas talks of money.
- At tomb the women are the only ones to hear the message.

Notes: there is no indication that menstruant was impure in society or that Jesus could not touch corpse, since he was not on way to Temple. Menstruant takes total initiative and *her* faith makes her whole. 12 year old (daughter of the synagogue leader) is passive, but both have life ebbing away as representative of Israel – bled to death by oppressions. Now ready to bear fruit and restored.

Notes: Most living around Galilee were Syrian greek-speakers. But in these villages ethnic purity was not as important as it was to Pharisees etc. She’s in need and a hybrid, like many poor. She is representative of expansion of movement – a new Israelite. She’s tough but settles for the crumbs, insisting that non-Israelites be included.

Marriage, Family Community in Mark

Family status symbolized village structures. Husband-father, village elders were men of prominent village families, women almost as property. Roman imperialism sent many family members into slavery or day-labour. This breakdown in patriarchal village status brought shame and frustration.

Mark 10:2-12 – marriage vs Pharisees. Agrarian village productivity centred around husband-wife teams – stability was fundamental to well-being of village. Jesus founds this in creation of equal beings not just legal contract.

Issue then becomes divorce for remarriage (v10-12): Herodian élite practised this.

Mark 12:18-27 – Levirate marriage. Secured inheritance – no interest to poor! God is more interested in the living than securing inheritance from the dead.

Mark 3:31-35 – Who is my brother, sister? Does not point to breaking off relations. Folk would have assumed patriarchy but Jesus refers to ‘those who do God’s will’. Jesus omits mention of father and puts in sisters – chance?? So even when families are breaking under strain of empire, there remains belonging.

Leadership in Paul’s early communities included women. Phoebe ‘ministers’ at Cenchreae. (I Cor 3:5) But Apostles delegate *lower* service to deacons (Acts 6:1-6!) Only model of leadership oppressed have is their oppressors, so Mark presents women as the sign of revolution. Domination is at an end (like a child).

CHAPTER 10: SCRIPTS IN MARK.

Literacy minimal, no defined canon of scripture, many traditions, oral communication, no print culture, no ‘scripture’,

Ordinary people left no record. Leaders left movements (Moses) or Oracles (prophets) or disciples (Elijah, Moses)

There’s a *Prophetic script* – baptism endows him as such, wilderness like Elijah. Teaching about forgiveness of sins and Will of God. Anti-Temple like Jeremiah. There’s a *Mosaic Messiah script* – Jesus rebukes Peter’s understanding. Rides donkey like Zech 9:9. But Jesus refutes usual titles. Title is on cards during crucifixion narrative. ‘are you Messiah/King?’