

Reading Mark Reading Isaiah

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This study attempts to make a contribution to the increasing awareness of and attention to the influence of Isaiah on the Gospel of Mark. Until recently, the tendency in Markan studies has been to agree with A. C. Sundberg's 1959 pronouncement that "Daniel is the most important book to Mark" and that Isaiah ranks only fifth in importance to the evangelist.¹ It is, of course, the case that Daniel figures prominently in the Markan apocalypse and is the source of the mysterious "abomination of desolation," about which the hapless reader is exhorted to "understand" (13.14). But although the Markan outlook is thoroughly apocalyptic, Daniel is actually quoted only twice in Mark 13 and only once elsewhere in the Gospel.² That one instance (in 14.62) repeats a prediction from 13.26 to the effect that the Son of Man will come in (or with) the clouds. A number of the Markan phrases for which the marginal notes in Nestle-Aland²⁶ suggest a reference to Daniel are merely the common stock of apocalyptic imagery and do not require dependence on the text of Daniel.

Mary Ann Beavis has called attention to the fact that "Isaiah is the only prophet named in Mark (1.1; 7.6)... and the prophet quoted most often in Mark..."³ In fact the evangelist quotes Isaiah more often than any other biblical document.⁴ Isaiah is quoted directly eight times in Mark (1.2-3 / Isaiah 40.3; 4.12 / Isaiah 6.9-10; 7.6-7 / Isaiah 29.13; 9.48 / Isaiah 66.24; 11.17 / Isaiah 56.7; 12.32 /

Isaiah 45.21; 13.24 / Isaiah 13.10; 13.25 / Isaiah 34.4). In fact, Isaiah is quoted directly in the Markan apocalypse as often as Daniel is, i.e., twice.⁵

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If the investigation is widened to include not only direct quotations, but allusions and motives, the impression is strengthened that from the evangelist's point of view, the good news began "just as it was written in Isaiah the prophet" (1.2a). In fact, Joel Marcus used the phrase, "The Gospel According to Isaiah," as the title of his recent treatment of Mark 1.2-3.⁶ A comparison of these two texts—Mark and Isaiah—uncovers at least the following common threads: announcements of the good news of God's reign, healing for the lame and those unable to speak, the conversion of the Gentiles, the "way of the Lord," suffering on behalf of others, repeated injunctions to "Listen!" and "Look!," provision of bread, critique of religious leaders, cosmic conflict, redemption, forgiveness of sins, and the use of blindness and deafness as metaphors for the people's failure to perceive and understand the ways of God. It is this latter theme that the present study explores, in the hope of shedding some light on one of the most vexing problems in Markan studies—the evangelist's attitude toward the Twelve, particularly as it is manifested in the ending of the gospel.

¹ A. C. Sundberg, Jr., "On Testimonies," *NovT* 3 (1959) 268-81.

² That is, there are a total of three places in Mark where italic type in Nestle-Aland²⁶ reproduces phrases from Daniel.

³ M. A. Beavis, *Mark's Audience* (JSNTSup 33; Sheffield, JSOT, 1989), 110.

⁴ Sundberg had insisted that simple counting of references was not adequate. "A direct, book to book comparison would be of little value because of the inherent probability that longer books would be more frequently quoted than shorter books. By correcting the OT books to a common length the figures are made comparative" ("On Testimonies," 274, n.1). The validity of this claim however, would seem to rest on the presupposition that the selection of quotations was random, a presupposition Sundberg did not acknowledge.

⁵ In the list he prepared for Bible Society translators, Bratcher treats Mark 9.48 / Isaiah 66.24 as an allusion rather than a quote and adds two other passages that he regards as allusions to Isaiah (1.11 / Isaiah 42.1; 12.1 / Isaiah 5.1-2) (R. G. Bratcher, ed., *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament* [Rev. ed.: London: UBS, 1967], 11-16). In his study of the influence of Isaiah on the first eight chapters of Mark, Richard Schneck adds ten allusions to that total (R. Schneck, SJ., *Isaiah in the Gospel of Mark, I-VIII* [BIBAL Dissertation Series 1; Vallejo, CA: BIBAL Press, 1994]). The evangelist names "Moses" four times and quotes Exodus five times, Deuteronomy four times, Leviticus three times, Genesis three times, and Numbers once. "David" is named once and the Psalms furnish seven direct quotations.

⁶ Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (Louisville: WJKP, 1992), 12-47.

Some scholars have argued that the Twelve are rejected by the evangelist for their failure to understand Jesus and their cowardly abandonment of him in Gethsemane. On this reading, the final failure of the women to deliver the message of the resurrection either 1) vitiates the claims of the Jerusalem leadership,⁷ 2) counters the theology of opponents in the Markan community,⁸ or 3) seals the failure of the Twelve by contrast with the faithful, anonymous individuals who represent the good soil of Mark 4.⁹ On the other hand, some scholars are persuaded that the portrayal of the Twelve is mixed; they are “fallible followers,” and therefore followers with whom the audience can identify and from whose final restoration (predicted, but not narrated) the audience can derive hope when their own courage fails.¹⁰ In other words, this argument suggests that the disciples do not deserve complete condemnation; after all, they do leave everything to follow Jesus and if they are cowardly and dimwitted, at least they are not malevolent like the full-fledged opponents of Jesus.

No one denies that the Markan portrait of the disciples is unflattering. They begin to miss the point of Jesus’ ministry as early as 1.36, where “Simon and those with him” pursue Jesus to his place of solitary prayer and criticize his priorities. Why is he out here

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praying when there are sick people lined up in Capernaum waiting to be healed? In chapter 3, Jesus appoints the Twelve “in order that they might be with him and in order that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to expel the demons” (3.14-15), but although they have the authority to do so, they do not always succeed in casting out the demons (9.18). As for “being with him,” at the time when Jesus most needs their prayerful presence (14.32-34), they first sleep (14.37, 40, 41) and finally flee (14.50), except for Peter, who stays around just long enough to deny that he ever heard of Jesus (14.71).

Although “those around him with the Twelve” have been “given the mystery of the Reign of God,” they consistently fail to understand Jesus’ teaching (4.13), his miracles

⁷ J. Schreiber, “Die christologie des Markus-evangeliums,” *ZTK* 58 (1961) 175-83; J. B. Tyson, “The Blindness of the Disciples in Mark,” *JBL* 80 (1961) 261-68.

⁸ T. J. Weeden, *Mark-Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971); W. H. Kelber, *The Kingdom in Mark: A New Place and a New Time* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974).

⁹ Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

¹⁰ Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, “Fallible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark,” *Semeia* 28 (1983) 29-48; R. Tannehill, “The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role,” *JR* 57 (1977) 386-405.

(6.52), and his predicted passion (8.31-33; 9.32; 10.35-45). They are cowardly (4.40; 14.50, 66-72), inhospitable to children (10.13), self-serving (9.33; 10.35-37), and jealous (9.38; 10.41).

Jesus teaches that those who want to be his followers must take up their crosses; the disciples instead take to their heels in Gethsemane. Jesus demands that his followers deny themselves and save their lives by losing them for his sake (8.34-37); Peter saves his life by denying Jesus. Because the Twelve prove to be ashamed of Jesus and his words, they are among those of whom the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in judgment (8.38). As Mary Ann Tolbert has observed, Peter the Rock is surely rocky ground; when tribulation and persecution threaten, his rootless resolve withers away.¹¹

Finally the audience learns that the disciples, like those who plot Jesus’ murder, have hearts that are hardened (6.52; 8.17; 3.5-6). They look but don’t see and hear but don’t understand (4.12; 8.18).

And yet... the Markan Jesus, whom the evangelist takes great pains to portray as a reliable predictor of events, predicts that he will lead his disciples to Galilee after the resurrection (14.28), that his disciples will bear Spirit-inspired testimony before their persecutors (13.9-11), and that James and John will eventually have the courage to give up their lives for the sake of Jesus and the gospel (10.39).

The claim that the evangelist completely rejects the Twelve is false, not because the disciples *deserve* a second chance; rather, it is false because the Markan Jesus is *never* wrong. If he predicts

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the disciples’ reunion with him in Galilee and their subsequent bold witness and martyrdom, that is what the audience expects. If the salvation of the rich, though impossible for humans, is possible for God (10.27), then neither the denial and cowardice of the male disciples nor the fearful silence of the female disciples is powerful enough to overcome the efficacy of Jesus’ prophetic word.

But the promised rehabilitation of the disciples is certainly a bold stroke on the part of the evangelist. In order to maintain the credibility of Jesus’ predictions of future faithfulness, the Gospel writer has to undermine the credibility of Jesus’ solemn warnings about the consequences of self-preservation and of being ashamed of him and his words. What about all those unquenchable fires and voracious worms that are to be avoided even at

¹¹ Tolbert, *Sowing*, 154-56, 298.

the cost of self-mutilation (9.43-48)? The debate over the fate of the disciples arises out of a genuine contradiction in the text: the Markan Jesus, a reliable speaker, specifies norms of behavior and consequences for violating the norms, the disciples violate all the norms, and at the end of the story they are called to resume following Jesus without suffering any of the consequences and without any reported evidence of their repentance or of their having reformed and demonstrated their faithfulness. What kind of a story is this? I propose that this is an Isaian story, or so the author of Mark thought.

It is, then, the hypothesis of this paper that the author of Mark understood the "good news of Jesus Christ" to be a message that stood in continuity with the message of Isaiah—a continuity that the author made explicit by using his reading of Isaiah to make sense of the narrative and sayings materials he was attempting to assemble into a coherent whole for the first time since Jesus' death and resurrection.

Before reconstructing a sketch of Mark's reading of Isaiah, I should come clean with my presuppositions. They are two.

First, it is likely that the author of Mark read Isaiah as a literary and theological unity. The evidence of 1QIsa^a establishes that the book of Isaiah was in its present form no later than the late second century B.C.¹² It is unlikely, therefore, that the author of Mark fragmented Isaiah into various compositions from diverse periods as we do.

Second, it is likely that the author of Mark read Isaiah in Greek and anticipated that his audience's knowledge of Isaiah was based

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primarily on a Greek translation. Although there is no consensus on the question of the language or languages in which the author of Mark read Isaiah, two claims can be made with some confidence. 1) Since he wrote in Greek, he also read Greek. We can thus be certain of his ability to use the LXX. In fact, studies have shown almost certain dependence on the LXX at some points. We can not have a similar level of certainty about his ability to read Hebrew or Aramaic despite occasional similarities between the wording of his quotations and the MT or the Targumim.¹³ 2) The departures from the LXX in Mar-

¹² F. J. Gonçalves, "Isaiah Scroll, The," *ABD* 3.471.

¹³ See Schneck, *Isaiah in Mark*, for detailed arguments about which text the evangelist was following in various quotations and allusions. But this construal really does require that we imagine the evangelist as a scholar working in a study surrounded by a library of books in various languages, as Burton Mack suggests. This picture simply is not plausible, in my opinion. Such a procedure might have been used for a

kan quotations of scripture can be accounted for without positing the evangelist's knowledge of Hebrew or Aramaic texts of Isaiah. Since the translators of the LXX and the Targumim felt free to make alterations in the wording of the text for theological reasons, it is likely that the author of Mark would have had few compunctions about making his own alterations. In fact, we have hard evidence of Markan alteration of scripture in the treatment of Zechariah 13.7 in Mark 14.27b.

Therefore, I am assuming that the evangelist was reading Isaiah as a literary unity in a Greek translation. It was from his reading of Isaiah that he learned to use the ideas of blindness, deafness, and hardness of heart as metaphors for a fatal incomprehension of God's will and God's ways.

The theme appears first in Isaiah 6.9-10, an announcement of judgment. As C. A. Evans has observed, "the judgment began with the very message itself, for the message was to act as a catalyst in promoting obduracy, and so guarantee the certainty of judgment."¹⁴ Because they fail to hear, see, and understand, and because their hearts are far from God, God's people experience judgment (42.19-25; 29.13), and their blindness itself is their judgment (59.9-10). This is ironic, because they had regarded themselves as insightful and their idolatrous neighbors as blind and foolish-hearted (44.9-20). But through the prophet God promises a time of restoration when blind eyes will see and deaf ears will hear again (29.18; 32.3; 35.5). The same God who led the blind and deaf out of bondage in Egypt (43.8) will do a new thing (43.18-19). God will lead blind Israel by a road they do not know and turn their darkness into light (42.16), so that their own restoration will enable them to open the eyes of the blind and idolatrous nations (42.6-7, 18) and give light to the whole world (49.6; 60.1-3).

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It is important to note that for Isaiah, Israel's blindness is culpable *even though* it is God's purpose effected by the prophet's message.¹⁵ Similarly, clear sight and attentive

scholarly work like Luke-Acts, but not a popular novelistic narrative like Mark.

¹⁴ C. A. Evans, *To See and Not Perceive: Isaiah 6.9-10 in Early Jewish and Christian Interpretation* (JSOTSup 64; Sheffield: JSOT, 1989), 24.

¹⁵ This is true for the LXX as much as for the MT. Evans mistakes the differences in wording in LXX Isaiah 6.9-10 as compared with the MT for an attempt to soften the obduracy motif (*To See and Not Perceive*, 62-63). On the contrary, the LXX preserves God's agency by the use of the divine passive *epachunthe* (6.10). Furthermore, in LXX Isaiah 63.17 the people remonstrate with God, asking, "Why did you lead us astray, Lord, from your way [and] harden our hearts that we might not reverence you?" The LXX does not shrink from attributing the hardening to God's agency.

hearing are not meritorious *prerequisites* for the restoration of God's people, but rather the *result* of God's gracious action. In fact, LXX Isaiah declares that it is precisely the spiritually blind and deaf who are the ones God delivers from bondage, while they are still unable either to hear or to see. This astonishing reversal, announced in 42.16, is reinforced by the LXX translator's interpretation of the relationship of 43.8 to what precedes it and to what follows it. This claim requires a brief explanation at this point.

Isaiah 43 begins with two "fear not" oracles addressed not to the king, as in 7.4-9 and 37.6-7, but to the community, as in 10.24-27; 41.8-13, 14-16; 44.1-5.¹⁶ The first of these, 43.1-4, is a promise of redemption and divine protection. The second, which begins at 43.5, is a promise of return from exile and reconstitution as the people of God.

Many Old Testament commentators consider that the "fear not" oracle concludes with 43.7, and that 43.8 begins a legal dispute scene in which Israel is called upon to bear witness before the nations to the supreme sovereignty of Yahweh. This reading is possible because of the *inclusio* that frames 43.1-7 with "create," "form," and "call" (43.1, 7) and because of the change of vocabulary in 43.8. Whereas the oracle employs the verbs "bring" (43.5, 6) and "give" (43.6), 43.8 begins with the imperative of a different verb, "bring forth," which may signal the beginning of a new unit with the command to lead out a witness who is to bear testimony. However, the form-critical units in this part of Isaiah are notoriously difficult to distinguish,¹⁷ and R. J. Clifford takes 43.8 with what precedes, rather than with what follows, treating 42.10-43.8 as "a single celebration."¹⁸

More importantly for our purposes, the translators of the LXX seem to have regarded 43.5-8 as a unit, using the root verb *agō* (lead, bring) throughout the passage to provide a sense of unity. Thus, in 43.5 the LXX reads *axo* (I will bring) where the MT has the Hebrew verb "bring." In 43.6, the LXX keeps the same root (*age*, bring) where the MT has a different verb, "give up." In the same verse the LXX repeats *age* where the MT returns to the Hebrew for "bring." Finally, in 43.8, the LXX continues its string of first

person aorists from 43.7 ("I prepared," "I formed," "I made") with *exēgagon*, "I led out," echoing 42.16 in a clear reference to the new Exodus from Babylon. This change of speaker from the implied second person of the Hebrew imperative "Bring forth!" to the first person of the Greek indicative "I led out" links 43.8 with 43.7 and significantly affects the interpretation of the passage.

Apparently, the translators of the LXX took the passage to mean that those who would be brought from the east and gathered from the west, those whom the north was commanded to bring and the south forbidden to retain, the sons to be brought from afar and the daughters from the ends of the earth, those called by God's name whom God prepared, formed and made were precisely the people with blind eyes and deaf ears whom God delivered from bondage in Egypt and would again deliver from bondage in Babylon. So in the LXX, the reference to the blind and the deaf is not primarily a description of Adonai's witnesses in the legal contest of 43.9-13, but a description of those Adonai delivers from exile and restores as God's people. Of course, there is no proof that this was the translators' intent; nevertheless, this reading is at least the result of their work.

So Isaiah's blindness/deafness motif may be summarized as follows: Israel had always regarded the idolatrous Gentile outsiders as blind and stupid of heart because they could not see the foolishness of worshiping the work of their own hands. In this, God agrees with them. What they fail to realize, however, is that they, the putative insiders, are blind, deaf, and hard of heart and that the message of God's prophet was intended to confirm them in their obduracy. God's ultimate purpose, however, is restoration. God will lead God's blind and deaf people out of exile and use them to bring sight to the Gentiles.

Turning to the Gospel of Mark, we find virtually the same story. God's spokesperson appears on the scene, announced by a quotation from Isaiah that promises a new Exodus. At first, there appear to be two clear responses to Jesus' message. Some people follow (1.16-20; 2.14) and are found to be insiders in the company of Jesus (2.15; 3.14, 32-35), while the religious leaders accuse Jesus of blasphemy in their hearts (2.6-7) and manifest hardness of heart (3.5). Early on, they move to the outside (*exelthontes*, 3.6) and plot Jesus' death. Even Jesus' relatives find themselves on the outside

(3.31) because they fail to understand the source of his miraculous power.

¹⁶ E. W. Conrad, *Reading Isaiah* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 34-37.

¹⁷ L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah* (AB 20; Garden City: Doubleday, 1968), xxxi.

¹⁸ Richard J. Clifford, "Second Isaiah," *ABD* 3.491.

In Mark 4 the audience learns that “those around [Jesus] with the Twelve” have “been given the mystery of the Reign of God,” by contrast with “those outside” to whom “everything comes in parables.” Just as Isaiah had said, the purpose of the speech of God’s messenger is that those who look may not see and those who listen may not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven before God’s purpose of judgment is complete.

At this point, however, the lines between the insiders and the outsiders become confused, as the audience learns that the insiders who had been given the mystery of the reign of God failed to see the point (*ouk oidate*) of the parable that should have been revelatory for them. They hear the parables, but don’t see the point, and they see the miraculous feeding of the 5,000, but don’t understand, because, like Jesus’ would-be murderers, “their hearts were hardened” (6.52).

Criticism shifts back to the obvious outsiders in 7.1-23, where the audience learns that the religious leaders are among those about whom Isaiah had said, “their hearts are far from [God]” (7.6-7). They can’t understand that things that enter people from the outside do not defile; rather people are made unclean by things on the inside that emerge from the heart (7.14-23).

But in 8.14-21, Jesus’ condemnation of the religious leaders (8.11-13) is followed by the revelation that the disciples not only have hardened hearts that fail to perceive or understand (8.17), but also that they, like the outsiders described in 4.12, have eyes that don’t see and ears that don’t hear (8.18).

Jesus heals physical blindness and deafness (7.31-37; 8.22-26; 10.46-52), but by the end of the Gospel the audience has no reason to expect that the disciples have made any progress beyond the half-sight of Peter’s “confession” (8.29) of a Messiah whose suffering and death are unthinkable (8.31-33). To the end the disciples remain blind to Jesus’ true identity and deaf to his message.

But the evangelist had learned from his reading of Isaiah that the blind and deaf would be led out (43.8) despite their obduracy— not because they have done the best they could, not because others were more stubborn and malevolent than they, not because they have repented and become an enlightened people, but because they are and always have been the people called by God’s name. And so

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the author of Mark ends his story on the same note: the Markan Jesus goes ahead of (*proagō*, 16.7) the still blind and faithless disciples, even (*kai*, 16.7) the rock-headed

Peter, to the place where he and they will finally see, just as Isaiah and Jesus had promised.

In conclusion, it is my claim that the end of the Gospel of Mark cannot be read as a polemic against the Twelve, but must instead be read as an announcement of the scandalous graciousness of the God whom the evangelist believed was self-revealed in Jesus. This was the same God who had a long-standing habit of hardening and then healing God’s obstinate people, not because they deserved it, or were committed, faithful people, but because God was committed to covenant relationship with them.

Nor can Mark be read as anti-Jewish polemic; on the contrary, the evangelist took a theme that Isaiah developed to explain Israel’s blindness and used it to explain the apostasy of Christians under threat of persecution.¹⁹ Yes, the Gospel of Mark excoriates most of the Jewish leaders; so do the Scrolls of the Jewish apocalyptic sectarians. Yes, the Gospel of Mark interprets the destruction of the Temple as God’s judgment; so does Josephus, the principal first-century *apologist* for Judaism.

The Gospel of Mark should be understood as the narrative basis for the formation of the self-understanding of a group of Christians who found the story of their founder puzzling but compelling and who needed to know how to regard those who found the way of the cross impossible to follow without stumbling. For them, Mark’s reading of Isaiah’s reading of the ways of the Lord was truly good news.

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¹⁹ The allegorical interpretation of the sower parable in Mark 4 makes it clear that the real problem is not the failure of Israel to convert, but the failure of Christians to stand firm.