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Moyise, Mark's Opening Quotation *IBS* 20 Oct 1998
**IS MARK'S OPENING QUOTATION THE KEY TO HIS
USE OF SCRIPTURE?**¹

Steve Moyise

Though Gundry² takes a minimalist view that Mark's opening quotation only refers to the first eight verses, the recent trend has been more to assign it a critical role in the overall structure of the Gospel. For example, in Jack Kingsbury's narrative Christology, its significance lies in the use of the first person. 'I am sending my messenger' is to be understood as an expression of God's point of view and is therefore completely reliable. This will be reinforced at the baptism ('You are my Son, the Beloved') and transfiguration ('This is my Son, the Beloved'). Whatever misunderstandings might occur in the narrative, the reader is given the essential clue for a proper understanding of Jesus in the opening title and its supporting quotation.³

For those that pursue Mark's use of the OT, its significance has been thought to lie in the fact that it is the only explicitly editorial quotation in the Gospel. Unlike Matthew, who punctuates his narrative with asides like, 'This happened to fulfill what was said in such and such a prophet', all of Mark's other quotations appear on the lips of the characters in the story. This is the only one that is explicitly editorial and is therefore deemed to have special significance.

For Joel Marcus, this significance lies in the fact that though the quotation is composite, it is ascribed to Isaiah the prophet. Isaiah 40.3 is not just cited as a proof-text for the location of John's ministry or to clarify his relationship with Jesus. The gospel *is written in Isaiah*, for just as Isaiah spoke about the proclamation of good news, where the heavens are rent (64.1), the Spirit poured out (61.1) and the Lord God comes with power (40.10), so too does

¹ A paper delivered at the British New Testament Conference, Glasgow 1998.

² R.H.Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Eerdmans, 1993), p.31.

³ J.D.Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark's Gospel* (Fortress, 1983), pp.55-60.

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Mark. At Jesus' baptism, the heavens are rent (1.10), the Spirit is poured out (1.10) and good news is about to be proclaimed (1.14). He says:

John the Baptist and Jesus are set firmly within the context of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology by the citation of Isa. 40:3 in Mark 1:3. Their appearance on the scene fulfills the prophecies of old because it heralds eschatological events, because it is the preparation for and the beginning of the fulfillment of that end so eagerly yearned for since Old Testament times: the triumphant march of the holy warrior, Yahweh, leading his people through the wilderness to their true homeland in a mighty demonstration of saving power.⁴

Rikki Watts agrees with this but also wishes to do justice to the fact that the quotation is composite and includes a reference to Malachi. Mark's aim, he says, is not only to signal the salvation background of Isaiah but also the judgment theme of Malachi:

Mark's opening composite citation is intended to evoke two different but closely related schemata. First, the appeal to Isaiah 40 evinces Israel's great hope of Yahweh's coming to initiate her restorational NE [New Exodus]. Second, the allusion to Malachi not only recalls the delay of this NE but also sounds an ominous note of warning in that the nation must be prepared or else face purging judgement... These twin themes of the fulfilment of the delayed INE [Isaian New Exodus] promise and possible judgement due to lack of preparedness are fused in Mark's opening citation and together seem to establish the basic thematic contours for his presentation of Jesus.⁵

It is beyond the scope of this short article to test this out for the whole Gospel but one of Watts' supporting arguments is that it also

⁴ J. Marcus, *The Way of the Lord. Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark*, (T & T Clark, 1992), p.29.

⁵ R.E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Mohr Siebeck, 1997), p.370.

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provides the key for understanding Mark's use of the OT. It is that which I wish to test out here by looking at the three explicit quotations which aim to give an understanding of Jesus' death. These are the 'rejected stone' of Psalm 118, the 'smitten shepherd' of Zechariah 13 and the 'forsaken sufferer' of Psalm 22.

The Rejected Stone of Psalm 118

A man planted a vineyard... built a watch-tower; then he leased it to tenants... When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted... And so it was with many others... He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others (Mark 12.1-9, slightly abbreviated).

Read without the closing quotation, the parable is a terrible tragedy. It tells of the despicable behaviour of those who should have known better. The vineyard was leased to tenants and the owner had every right to expect a share of the produce. But they beat and killed his servants so that in desperation, the owner sends his beloved son. Why they thought that killing the heir would procure them the property is unclear. Perhaps the owner was near death and there was no one else to inherit. Or perhaps the parable simply loses its realism at this point. Either way, the effect of killing the son is not to procure the vineyard but to bring upon themselves judgment. The owner will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. This is of course good news (*italics*) for those that belong to the 'others' but it is hardly the owner's desired outcome. The initial skirmishes have cost him the lives of his servants and his beloved son. And the denouement has cost the lives of the tenants

Moyise, **Mark's Opening Quotation** IBS 20 Oct 1998 (underscore). It is indeed a sorry tale. But then comes a quotation from the extremely positive Psalm 118:

I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. *The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes.* This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. (Psalm 118.21-24)

The effect of bringing this positive sounding text (italics) into juxtaposition with the parable is to highlight the 'transfer' motif ('give the vineyard to others') and clash with the more negative aspects of the parable, such as the killing of the son and the destruction of the tenants. This creates a dynamic where the new affects the old and the old affects the new. That is, the rejected stone of the parable becomes identified with the murdered son, thus causing a new reading of the psalm. And the tragic parable now ends with the extremely positive statement that '*This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes*'. One would never have guessed from the parable alone that these events were '*the Lord's doing*' or were '*marvellous in our eyes*'.

This can be seen if we compare Mark's account with Luke's. Luke has Jesus quoting the stone saying from Psalm 118.22 but does not include the 'marvellous' saying from the next verse. Instead, he stays with the judgment theme by quoting Isaiah 8.14: 'Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.' Unlike Mark, there is nothing to 'play up' the transfer motif, making it impossible to see the events described in the parable as '*the Lord's doing*' and '*marvellous in our eyes*'. It is also interesting to note that the version of the parable in *Gospel of Thomas* 65 is followed by Psalm 118.22 but not v23.⁶

⁶ Though Ps 118.22 follows the parable in *Gospel of Thomas*, it appears as a separate saying. There is thus a considerable debate as to whether this represents an independent tradition which Mark has integrated into the parable or whether it derives from the synoptic accounts.

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The Smitten Shepherd of Zechariah 13

And Jesus said to them, 'You will all become deserters; for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered." *But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.* Peter said to him, 'Even though all become deserters, I will not.' Jesus said to him, 'Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.' (Mark 14.27-30)

In this instance, the interweaving is more complex. The positive component (italics) is found in Jesus' words, namely the promise of resurrection and a reunion in Galilee. This does not correspond to anything in the quoted words of Zech 13.7. Indeed, the note of divine judgment appears to be heightened by changing the imperative ('Strike the shepherd') into the first person ('I will strike the shepherd'). And it is the negative aspect of the disciples' desertion which is the theme of the passage. So Peter responds to the saying by declaring that even if everyone else deserts, he certainly won't; only to have Jesus make the forecast even more specific; it will happen on this very night, before the cock crows twice.

The peculiar mention of the cock crowing twice, which conforms to the narrative of 14.72, along with the reunion in Galilee, which conforms to 16.7, makes it likely that we are looking at Mark's handiwork here. The desertion theme is straightforward and plays its way through the dialogue. Indeed, what is puzzling about this is that Jesus' positive words about resurrection and reunion seem to be completely ignored. Peter does not ask about resurrection or reunion but denies that he will be a deserter, even if that's true of everyone else. But actually it is a bit more complex than that. Jesus opens with a statement about desertion, which he supports with a quotation that gives the reason for desertion, namely, the striking of the shepherd. It is this that Jesus comments on when he says: *But 'after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee'*. In the dynamics of the story, perhaps Jesus hoped they would pick up on

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this element. But Peter stays with the desertion theme and Jesus then does likewise.⁷

Thus Mark presents us with a stark juxtaposition. The judgment theme from Zechariah 13.7 is placed side by side with Christian tradition concerning the resurrection. It is a technique that I observed in my study of the book of Revelation.⁸ For example, Revelation 1.17-18 reads:

I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever.

The first phrase comes from Isaiah 44.6/48.12 and is to do with the eternity of God. This is juxtaposed with the stark 'I was dead' from Christian tradition. We are not told how '*the first and the last*' could possibly die. Only that he now lives *forever and ever*. Such a juxtaposition is also found in Revelation 5, where John hears that the '*Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered*' (v5) but sees a 'Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered' (v6). The first affirmation is taken from Genesis 49.9-10; the second is from Christian tradition. And as many commentators have argued, this juxtaposition is key to John's understanding of Jesus. I would therefore suggest that in our previous example, the hermeneutic is not about Mark's desire to bring two OT texts together, namely, Isaiah's vineyard parable and Psalm 118. Rather, Psalm 118 has been chosen because it corresponds to Mark's reality that the death of Christ was really a victory and accomplished a marvelous transfer of God's favour. The underlying hermeneutic is that Mark wishes to bring the vineyard story and his Christian reality into juxtaposition, and Psalm 118 serves us a pointer to the latter. This

⁷ This is partly paralleled in the dialogue at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus began to teach them that the '*Son of Man must undergo great suffering*' and 'after three days rise again' (8.31). Peter then rebukes Jesus, though we are not told why. Most commentators assume that it was the mention of suffering. If this is the case, then Peter ignores the positive reference to resurrection and responds only to the negative reference to suffering. Jesus then rebukes him and repeats the warnings about suffering. But it should be noted that he does then go on to speak about 'saving life' and 'losing life'.

⁸ S.Moyise, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation* (JSNTSup 115, Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp.29-31, 127-135.

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is reinforced by our final example, the use of Psalm 22.1 on the lips of Jesus at the moment of death:

The Forsaken Sufferer of Psalm 22

At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah.' And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.' Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, '*Truly this man was God's Son!*' (Mark 15:34-39)

In contrast to the two previous examples, Mark initially allows this quotation from Psalm 22.1 to ring out in its full horror. It is not offset by references to vindication but is immediately followed by misunderstanding; bystanders take *Eloi* to be a call for Elijah, though Matthew's *Eli* is a more convincing misunderstanding of *Elijah*. This lack of a positive reference to offset the dereliction saying is particularly surprising in that the psalm itself could have provided it, moving as it does from dereliction to vindication and praise:

Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it. (Psalm 22.30-31)

Indeed, this is one of the main ways that commentators down the ages have tried to avoid the implication that Jesus had fallen into despair. However, this is not the end of Mark's narrative. Jesus' final words point to despair at the moment of death, but then God acts to vindicate him: The temple curtain is torn in two and a centurion confesses the sonship with which the Gospel began. Raymond Brown comments:

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Jesus is portrayed as profoundly discouraged at the end of his long battle because God, to whose will Jesus committed himself at the beginning of the passion... has not intervened in the struggle and seemingly has left Jesus unsupported. (That this is not true will become apparent the second that Jesus dies, for then God will rend the sanctuary veil and bring a pagan to acknowledge publicly Jesus' divine sonship.)⁹

I have placed the curtain saying in italic and underscore as it is disputed whether it is principally about victory or judgment. William Barclay took it to mean that the way of God is now open to all; that God's presence is no longer hidden but is revealed in the person of Christ.¹⁰ More recently, H.M.Jackson has put forward the novel thesis that it was Jesus final exhalation of breath/spirit that rent the curtain, noting the parallelism with the Spirit's descent on Jesus at the beginning of the story:

Jesus' earthly ministry as Son of God is initiated by the descent into him of God's Spirit, which tears the heavens in its descent, and it is brought to a close by the ascent of that Spirit out of him in his dying breath, which tears the temple curtain at its departure.¹¹

Both of these are interesting suggestions, though having read the 'cleansing of the temple' and the 'cursing of the fig tree' stories in chapter eleven, it is hard to avoid the implication that it is also 'symbolizing the approaching destruction of the Jewish Temple' (Rawlinson). It seems likely, therefore, that it contains both positive and negative elements (hence italics and underscore).

⁹ R.E.Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (Chapman, 1994), Vol 2, p.1049.

¹⁰ W.Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark* (The Saint Andrew Press, 1956), p.384.

¹¹ H.M.Jackson, 'The Death of Jesus in Mark and the Miracle from the Cross', *NTS* 33 (1987), p.27. Gundry (1993, p.970) disputes this, saying that if Mark had meant that, he would surely have said the curtain was torn from bottom to top. But this seems a rather pedantic objection, especially in the light of his own suggestion; that it was the *volume* of Jesus' final cry that tore the curtain and that is what convinced the centurion.

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What of the centurion's confession? Older commentators, noting that the expression lacks the definite article, believed that the centurion probably meant something like, 'Truly this is one of the gods'.¹² But modern commentators focus on Mark's meaning. In particular, the fact that the Gospel begins with the affirmation, 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (also without definite article) makes it clear that Mark sees the centurion's confession as positive. Kingsbury goes further. The important issue is not so much what Mark thinks but what God thinks. And God's 'opinion' is expressed at the baptism and transfiguration: Jesus is God's Son. Thus the centurion's confession is undoubtedly to be taken by the reader as positive and is in juxtaposition with the cry of dereliction from Psalm 22.

In summary then, the three texts that are explicitly quoted to illuminate the meaning of Jesus' death all receive some reinterpretation by being forced to interact with traditions that the author would consider as Christian fact. The imagery of Isaiah's vineyard is juxtaposed with the positive 'it is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes' from Psalm 118; chosen, no doubt, for its aptness in describing Mark's Christian reality. The striking of the shepherd is juxtaposed with tradition concerning the resurrection and a reunion in Galilee, though the surrounding narrative does not pick this up. And the cry of dereliction, though initially ringing out in its full horror, is reinterpreted in the light of the events that follow; the temple curtain is torn in two and a centurion confesses the sonship of Jesus.

Mark 1.1-3

What then of the opening composite quotation? Marcus makes little reference to the Malachi part but takes the ascription as signalling the importance of Isaiah's triumphant 'way' through the

¹² E.H.Plumtree (*The Gospel of St. Mark*, Cassell and Company, 1879) says: 'We must interpret them from the stand-point of the centurion's knowledge, not from that of Christian faith, and to him the words 'a son of God' (without the definite article) would convey the idea of one who was God-like in those elements of character which are most divine - righteousness, and holiness, and love.' (pp.257-8). A.E.J.Rawlinson (*St Mark*, Methuen, 1925) quotes Bacon that they are a 'heathen form of utterance' (p.238).

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wilderness. But he has to acknowledge that in Mark's main 'way' section (8.22-10:52), the burden of Jesus' teaching is not a triumphant march through the wilderness but the path of suffering. However, he does not consider this to be a contradiction of the Isaian theme but a 'radical, cross-centred *adaptation* of it'.¹³ Such an interaction does not silence the Isaian motif for Mark's readers know that the crucifixion was not a defeat. Rather, for those with eyes to see, 'the fearful trek of the befuddled, bedraggled little band of disciples *is* the return of Israel to Zion, and Jesus' suffering and death there *are* the prophesied apocalyptic victory of the divine warrior'.¹⁴ Thus in Mark, 'a commitment to the "old, old story" is retained at the same time that the story itself is transformed by being read in a new way.'¹⁵

At first sight, Watts appears to have advanced on this by pointing out that this technique of juxtaposition is already signalled in the opening quotation. For it is not simply a quotation from Isaiah (as it is in Matthew and Luke) but combines a reference to Malachi. And Watts can show that the Malachi theme is picked up elsewhere in Mark's narrative. For example, there is a discussion in Mark 9.9-13 as to why Elijah must come first. The cleansing of the temple (and cursing of the fig tree) and the rent curtain could plausibly be understood in the light of 'the Lord coming to his temple' (Malachi 3.1). And the rejection of Jesus by the religious leaders could be seen as a sign of their unpreparedness. The conclusion appears to be sound that Mark does indeed use traditions from Isaiah and Malachi.

However, it does not appear to be a satisfactory explanation of Mark's use of the OT. For example, in discussing the parable of the vineyard, Watts notes that 'this sort of juxtaposition is typical of the Markan Jesus' teaching style'¹⁶ but only speaks vaguely of it continuing Malachi's judgment theme. He does not discuss the

¹³ *The Way of the Lord*, p.36.

¹⁴ *Ibid* (emphasis added).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.203.

¹⁶ *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark*, p.345.

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juxtaposition of the negative sounding parable with the positive sounding psalm for Mark's use of the psalms 'is not part of our immediate concern'¹⁷. In fact, Mark's use of the OT here presents problems for his thesis for Mark begins with the imagery of Isaiah 5 and then goes to Psalm 118, not for its judgment theme but its emphasis on vindication. The story does juxtapose themes but they are not specifically the themes of the Isaian New Exodus and Malachi's threatened judgment.

And as for the use of Zechariah 13 and Psalm 22, Watts does not discuss them at all, presumably because they are not part of his immediate concern. This is not automatically a fault. Watts naturally deals with those texts where an Isaian New Exodus or Malachi-like judgment can best be detected. But it surely puts a question mark against his thesis that these twin themes are the key to Mark's use of the OT. Of the three texts where Mark explicitly seeks to give meaning to Jesus' death, Watts only discusses the first and then only to speak vaguely of a Malachi-like judgment. And it is surely difficult to see how the juxtaposition of Zechariah 13.7 with Christian tradition concerning the resurrection is explained by the twin themes of the Isaian New Exodus and Malachi's judgment. One could perhaps develop an argument that Jesus' cry of dereliction is followed by a reference to Elijah or even the rent curtain of the temple. But the clearer juxtaposition is surely between Psalm 22.1 and the events that follow; events that are part of Mark's Christian reality.

This brings me to my main point. The principal juxtaposition in Mark 1.1-3 does not occur in the composite quotation but occurs between Mark's opening title, 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' and the OT words that follow. Marcus is probably correct in saying that Mark thinks the good news of Jesus is written in Isaiah. But it is not *fully* written there. For it to do what Mark wants it to do, it has to be brought into juxtaposition with Mark's understanding of Christian reality. At the

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.344.

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very least, this consists of the cross of Christ, the gathering of disciples who will tread the same path, and the resurrection. Only then does Isaiah speak of the good news that Mark wishes to proclaim. This is signalled in the opening verses of the Gospel by beginning with a statement of Christian reality ('The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God') and juxtaposing it with the testimony of Scripture. The nature of the juxtaposition is not immediately apparent and will unfold as the narrative reaches its climax.

If taken like this, then I would agree that the opening quotation could be seen as the key to Mark's use of the OT. It introduces key themes, notably the Isaian New Exodus and Malachi's judgment through unpreparedness. And it anticipates his technique of using Scripture, where particular OT witnesses (Isaiah, Psalms, Zechariah, Daniel) are juxtaposed with Christian reality (as Mark understands it). I have demonstrated this technique with respect to the three quotations that are explicitly linked with Jesus' death. It is not too difficult to see how it might also apply to the blindness (Isa 6.9-10), hypocrisy (Isa 29.13) and 'house of prayer' (Isa 56.7) sayings in other parts of Mark (4.12; 7.6; 11.17).¹⁸

But if the quotation is taken as Watts takes it, then I would suggest that it is misleading in one very important respect, for the implication appears to be that Mark's main hermeneutical task is to bring two OT themes together. But the evidence presented in this article, along with what I understand to be Marcus' position, is that Mark's main hermeneutical task is to bring OT texts into a

¹⁸ The Achilles heel of this statement, as I have argued elsewhere (*The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation*, pp.109-146), is that in some sense, every quotation appears juxtaposed with its context. The very act of lifting a set of words from one context and transposing it to another involves juxtaposition. As M. Worten and J. Still state, 'every quotation distorts and redefines the "primary" utterance by relocating it within another linguistic and cultural context' (*Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, Manchester University Press, 1990, p.11). The critical question is whether the juxtapositions that I have highlighted in this article are simply the corollary of this or whether they have greater significance. This is a matter of judgment but we can say that it is far more pronounced in Mark than it is in Luke. Thus in the three examples discussed in this article, Luke has reduced the dissonance in both the parable of the vineyard and the words from the cross and omitted the 'smitten shepherd' saying altogether. My judgment is that we are dealing with an important feature of Mark's use of the OT.

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relationship with Christian reality.¹⁹ It is true that the vineyard parable (Isaiah 5) is juxtaposed with Psalm 118 and could therefore give credence to such a theory. But I do not think Mark's problem was how to reconcile texts from Isaiah and the Psalms, as if they were a 'given' that had to be explained. And with the use of Zechariah 13.7 and Psalm 22.1, the issue clearly concerns the relationship between these texts and Mark's understanding of the cross (i.e. it was a victory). The key to Mark's use of the OT certainly involves the juxtaposition of themes but not necessarily (or even primarily) the themes of the Isaian New Exodus and Malachi's judgment. These are important themes in the Gospel (especially the former) but they do not control Mark's use of the OT. As I have indicated, the governing hermeneutic lies elsewhere.

Steve Moyise

¹⁹ 'Mark takes the raw ore of Jewish apocalyptic conceptions and subjects them to a christological neutron bombardment, thereby producing a powerful, disturbing, unpredictable new form of apocalyptic eschatology.' (Marcus, *The Way of the Lord*, p.41).