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The Playwright as Theologian: Peter Shaffer's <i>Amadeus</i> <i>Colin Gunton</i>	1
What is Changed in Virtue of Christ? <i>Anthony Baxter</i>	5
Ambiguity in the Marcan Narrative <i>Francis Watson</i>	11
Pentecostal, Charismatic or What's in a Name? <i>Graham Baldwin</i>	17
Theology in Anthropological Perspective? <i>Christoph Schwobel</i>	21
BOOK REVIEWS	26
FACULTY NEWS Insert	

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## AMBIGUITY IN THE MARCAN NARRATIVE

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The Gospel of Mark used to be considered the most simple and straightforward of all the Gospels. The old view assigned it no independent significance at all: Mark was regarded as the abbreviator of Matthew who unaccountably missed out some of the most important sections – for example, the nativity stories and the Sermon on the Mount – and marred Matthew’s plain but correct Greek style by his own clumsiness. The importance of Mark was first recognized with the discovery that it was actually the earliest of the gospels and the main source for both Matthew and Luke. At first, it was thought that this made Mark a source of the greatest importance for the so-called “quest of the historical Jesus”. It was held that Mark gave us a straightforward historical account not only of individual incidents in the ministry of Jesus, but above all of the chronology of the ministry. Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi was seen as the great turning-point for Jesus. However he had thought of himself before, he now saw himself as a spiritual Messiah, quite different from the military Messiah of Jewish expectation, dedicated to achieving a spiritual salvation for his people by his death. Psychological explanations were produced to explain the gradual growth of this conviction in Jesus’ mind.<sup>1</sup> But before long, this approach too had to be abandoned as it was recognized that Mark’s chronology was his own work and not a plain account of the historical facts. The way was now open for seeing Mark as a work of theological originality and creativity.<sup>2</sup>

But old views die hard. It is still common to hear people contrasting the simplicity and straightforwardness of Mark with the theological profundity of John. In fact, a case could well be made out for precisely the opposite view: that John is simple and Mark profound. John lacks the sense of paradox which we find in Mark. In John, the disciples recognize Jesus as the Christ right from the beginning and without any difficulty. In Mark, when Peter at last appears to have resolved the mystery of Jesus’ identity, he is almost immediately addressed in words of extraordinary harshness: “Get behind me, Satan!” In John, Jesus’ divinity is unambiguously proved by miracles which are sometimes far more spectacular than anything recorded in Mark. For example, when news comes that Lazarus is ill, Jesus deliberately refrains from going to heal him; he allows time for him to die, be buried and begin to decompose, so that the miracle may be all the more stupendous and convincing when it eventually takes place. But in Mark, on the one occasion when someone is raised from the dead, Jesus denies that she was dead at all (“The child is not dead but sleeping”), and commands that the miracle should be concealed in the strictest secrecy. In John, Jesus is so exalted above suffering that his death is his own act: “I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No-one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.” Instead of the agonized prayer in Gethsemane described by Mark, the Johannine Jesus’ prayer in Jn. 17 is characterized by serene otherworldliness.<sup>3</sup> If one regards the presence of unanswered questions, enigmas and paradoxes as signs of profundity, then Mark is indeed theologically profound.

It is characteristic of modern gospel criticism that the more the evangelists’ theological creativity and originality are stressed, the harder it becomes to relate their narratives to “the historical Jesus”. On this view, the evangelists and the communities in which the gospel traditions were formulated have projected their own beliefs back onto the figure of Jesus; the Gospels therefore contain a mixture of genuine historical reminiscence and subsequent theological reflection, in such a way that it is often hard to say where one ends and the other begins. While various theoretical objections might be raised against this approach,<sup>4</sup> in practice it does make sense of many of the puzzling features of the Gospels; for that reason, it is most unlikely to be overturned. But the theological consequences of accepting it are considerable: it means that we have only a partial and doubtful access to the historical Jesus, and that the figure we encounter in the gospel narratives is to a considerable extent the product of early Christian reflection. The dilemma this poses is obvious: what is the use of even “theologically profound” reflections if the resulting picture has little or no basis in historical reality? It is not surprising that in the face of this dilemma, some theologians take refuge either in a historical conservatism or in a dialectical concept of history which finds true testimony about Jesus even in material which on one level is legendary.

An alternative solution is to set aside historical questions about the relationship of Mark’s narrative both to the historical Jesus and to the evangelist’s own theological purposes. Such questions are indeed important and often illuminating; but what one must resist is the idea that literary texts can legitimately be interpreted *only* from the historical point of view, since one of the reasons why they are worth studying at all is their continuing capacity to shed light on situations very different from those in which they were originally conceived. For this reason, a prominent strand in modern biblical hermeneutics (influenced by tendencies in literary criticism) stresses the comparative independence of both text and reader from the historical circumstances from which the text derives.<sup>5</sup> The present study attempts to work out some of the implications of this approach for the interpretation of the Gospel of Mark.

### I. AMBIGUITY AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE MARCAN NARRATIVE

The theological profundity of Mark is seen primarily in its acceptance of paradox. Mark’s thought is dialectical: that is, it holds together opposing elements in tension, without attempting any easy resolution. The fundamental tension is between power and weakness – or, to put it another way, between revelation and secrecy. This polarity is expressed in the division of the gospel into two halves by Jesus’ dialogue with Peter at Caesarea Philippi. The first half culminates in Peter’s ecstatic confession, “You are the Christ!” Here at last is the solution to the riddle which Jesus’ power has posed for the disciples: “Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?” Before Peter’s confession, the disciples have failed to understand – a failure which leads to a vehement protest from Jesus himself: “Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened?” (8.17). At Caesarea Philippi, the breakthrough at last seems to occur: Jesus’ works of power identify him as the Christ. Yet despite

this apparent breakthrough, the disciples are immediately plunged into still deeper incomprehension by Jesus' announcement of his coming sufferings. Having encountered his power, and at last seemingly understood it, the disciples are mystified by the expression of the most abject weakness: "The Son of man must suffer . . ." (8.31). The journey southwards to Jerusalem which begins shortly afterwards, and the repeated passion predictions, give the whole second half of the gospel a quite different atmosphere to that of the first. Even before Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, the shadow cast by his predestined suffering and humiliation there is all-pervasive. The two halves of the gospel thus express a tension between power and weakness, and the dialogue at Caesarea Philippi is the hinge linking the two. In that passage, the two elements are juxtaposed with extraordinary harshness. According to Mark, the christological paradox is that Jesus whose power identifies him as the Christ is at the same time the Son of man whose destiny is to suffer. This is an early and profound expression of what later became the classical "two natures" christology. Mark is not trying to *replace* a christology of power with a christology of suffering, as some have argued.<sup>6</sup> His thought is genuinely dialectical: power and weakness must somehow be held together.

The tension between power and weakness is not only expressed in the *juxtaposition* of the two halves of the gospel; it is also present within *each* of them individually. In the first half, the Son of God whose power is manifested in his miracles is also misunderstood and rejected; his destiny of suffering is already secretly present. In the second half, the Son of man who is bound for the cross is still the powerful Son of God. Although power is the dominant element in the first half and weakness in the second, weakness is also present in the first half and power is also present in the second.

In the first half of the gospel, power is obviously dominant. Jesus casts out demons, heals the sick, raises the dead. So boundless is his power that even inanimate nature is subject to him: he stills the storm, multiplies the loaves, walks on the water. Everywhere he goes, he is accompanied by great crowds who hear his teaching gladly and respond with amazement to his miracles. Yet even here, the roots of the later rejection, suffering and humiliation are already present. Jesus' actions are not unambiguous manifestations of divine power; they are open to misunderstanding. His claim to be able to forgive sins is regarded as blasphemous. His eating with tax-collectors and sinners, his refusal to fast, and his failure to observe the Sabbath are seen as arbitrary and high-handed transgressions of the law. Even his own family agree with the scribes from Jerusalem that he is possessed by an evil spirit. So Jesus' power is indeed manifested – but not in such an unambiguous way that misunderstanding and rejection are impossible. Jesus' parable of the sower and its interpretation in ch. 4 is understood by the evangelist as a response to the opposition which has arisen in ch. 2 and 3. As Jesus has begun to encounter misunderstanding and rejection as well as acceptance, so the sower knows that much of his labour will be wasted. Indeed, Jesus repeatedly suggests that it is divinely ordained that his identity, his work and his teaching should be kept secret. This indicates that the misunderstanding which he provokes is not solely the result of

culpable hardness of heart. If misunderstanding is divinely ordained, then it is of the essence of his mission that it should be ambiguous.<sup>7</sup> On one occasion, the Pharisees ask him to clarify the situation by performing an unambiguous sign from heaven. But he refuses with the words: "Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation" (8.12). Jesus will not reveal his identity once and for all; he must remain an enigma and a paradox.

And so, although power and revelation dominate the first half of the gospel, there is an undercurrent of weakness, hiddenness and misunderstanding which paves the way for the stress on suffering in the second half. Conversely, the power of Jesus is not entirely absent from the second half, even though this is no longer the dominant element. As he begins his journey to Jerusalem, Jesus is transfigured by the divine glory. He still performs miracles – though not as frequently as before. The humiliation of the cross is mitigated by the fact that Jesus knows in advance exactly what is going to happen to him. He therefore submits actively to it in obedience to the divine will, rather than being surprised by events which are totally unexpected. In all his humiliations, his dignity is maintained, yet without his essential humanity being denied. Above all, in the brief and enigmatic narrative which concludes the gospel, he leaves his tomb empty. Although in the second half of the gospel the emphasis lies on suffering and weakness, the power which had previously been emphasized is not entirely absent. The tension between power and weakness is thus expressed in the juxtaposition of the two halves of the gospel, and also within each half individually. This dialectic must be seen as the key to Mark's whole presentation of Jesus.

A closer examination of the crucial Caesarea Philippi dialogue will make the issue clearer:

And Jesus went on with his disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others one of the prophets". And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ". And he charged them to tell no-one about him. And he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter, and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God but of men". (8.27-33)

If it is often said that the key to this passage is the contrast between the Jewish idea of the Messiah as a military conqueror and the Christian conception of a spiritual Messiah.<sup>8</sup> But this interpretation is surely misleading: the early Christians would never have applied the term "Messiah" or "Christ" to Jesus if it was used in a military sense in normal usage. Although military connotations are sometimes present, they are subordinate to the essential meaning of the term in both Jewish and Christian usage: *the Messiah is the bringer of the new age*. This idea derives from the world-view of Jewish apocalyptic.

God's world and God's people have fallen prey to hostile, anti-divine powers – sin, death, Satan, the demons, Gentile oppressors. But God will shortly act in power to rid his creation of these evils, and to establish his own reign of peace and justice. While he is sometimes said to act directly, elsewhere he acts through an angelic or human agent who is endowed with divine power. In one popular strand of this belief, the title “Messiah” was used of the human agent who was expected to bring in the new age.

Against this background, the full significance of Peter's confession becomes clear: it is a leap of faith which goes beyond the evidence. Jesus has indeed successfully manifested his power against sin, sickness, death and the devil. But he has done so only in individual cases; in general, the reign of sin and death remains intact. For this reason, Jesus is not generally recognized as the Messiah, since his work does not display the universality expected of the Messiah; he is identified with John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets, figures of relative but not absolute importance. What Peter expresses is not simply a conclusion from what has preceded, but a hope for the future: that Jesus will now begin to exercise his power in order to inaugurate the glorious new age in all its fulness. He must now act not simply to free individuals from the power of Satan, but to remove the entire dominion of Satan from the face of the earth. In this way, the secrecy, misunderstanding and rejection which have so far characterized Jesus' ministry will be removed. There is no room for any ambiguity in the bringer of the new age.

Jesus immediately undermines this new-found faith in himself by announcing that he must suffer and die at the hands of his enemies. For Peter, this is a contradiction: the Messiah cannot be conquered by the powers of the old age, since it is *his* function to conquer *them*. In Pauline language, the proclamation of “Christ crucified” – a crucified Messiah – is “folly”, madness. Peter therefore “rebukes” Jesus – an extraordinary term to use in the context of a disciple's relationship with his master, which emphasizes the exceptional gravity of the situation. Despite Jesus' vehement response, the disciples refuse to give up their faith in him as the bringer of the new age. They hope that he will manifest himself as such in Jerusalem, and on the way there they therefore discuss which of them is to take precedence. James and John specifically ask Jesus, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (10.37). The indignation of the other disciples shows that they too share this ambition. Jesus' repeated announcements of his forthcoming sufferings fall on deaf ears: “And they did not understand the saying” (9.32). When in Jerusalem it becomes clear that Jesus really is about to suffer and be killed, the disciples all abandon him; Peter denies him three times. Judas loses faith in him as the bringer of the new age just as the other disciples do; the only difference between him and them is that he alone seeks *revenge* against Jesus for the disappointment of his hopes. All without exception have failed to understand the great christological paradox which Mark sets before us: that the bringer of the new age must succumb to the powers of the old.<sup>9</sup>

## II. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DIALECTIC

The structure of Mark's narrative is thus dominated by a reinterpretation of the apocalyptic theme of the new

age and its agent, the Messiah. The emphasis is shifted from the future to the present world: the Messiah has already come, the new age has already been manifested – and yet this has occurred in and despite the apparent victory of the old age. The old apocalyptic hopes are transformed in an unheard-of way.

What is the significance of this transformation, which has determined even the structure of the Gospel of Mark? It no doubt possessed particular sociological and theological relevance to the situation of the community for which the evangelist was writing, and it is perhaps possible to determine what that situation might have been.<sup>10</sup> But we cannot simply consign Mark's narrative to a particular historical locus in the first century and leave it there. Literature of all types has been preserved through the centuries above all because of its continuing power to communicate, and canonical literature is no exception. To understand Mark *only* in its first century context is implicitly to deny this power to communicate; the text is treated as a lifeless object, and the interpreter's task is completed when this object has been assigned to its appropriate place in the museum of literary relics from the past. But a literary text is not only an object; it may also become a subject with a life of its own, addressing the reader and illuminating significant aspects of one's existence. The nature of this illumination will obviously depend on the nature of the text. In the case of the Gospel of Mark, the text concerns religious issues, in the broadest sense, and one would therefore expect it to shed light on religious aspects of human existence.

But how does a literary text illuminate aspects of one's existence? How does it possess a continuing power to communicate even in circumstances which, historically considered, are alien to it? The answer cannot be that it compels the reader to adopt precisely the worldview of its author. Texts expressing unfamiliar and, to us, untenable world-views do not necessarily lack the power to communicate: we do not believe in the Homeric gods, but we still read Homer. Literary texts have the power to communicate when what they express evokes an echo or resonance in us. We bring to the text a mind which is not a *tabula rasa* but a repository of the most diverse experience and insight. Only if the text can shed light on this experience and insight of ours will it succeed in reaching us. “Ultimately, no one can extract from things, books included, more than he already knows. What one has no access to through experience one has no ear for” (Nietzsche).<sup>11</sup> Or, as the Gospel of Mark more succinctly expresses it, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear”.

The relevance of all this for the interpretation of Mark is that it frees us from the historical-critical obsessions with the author's purpose and with the historical reliability of the story he relates. The evangelist no doubt believed that the events he describes really took place and that they form the prelude to the imminent return of the Son of man with the clouds to bring the present world-order to an end, and if so, it was his purpose in writing to communicate these beliefs to others. But the text's power to communicate does not depend on whether one finds such beliefs convincing. A text has a life of its own independent of its author's purpose, and the author cannot compel his readers to read it in a particular way. He is not

absolute; both text and readers have their own relative autonomy.<sup>12</sup>

We may therefore return to the text of Mark and enquire whether his fundamental dialectic of power and weakness does have the ability to illumine aspects of our own experience. The new age is manifested in the midst of the old: can this view, springing from a conceptuality which is perhaps alien to us, still have anything to say? The question can be answered only obliquely, by examining individual instances of the dialectic in more detail.

1. In Mk.10.37, James and John say to Jesus: "Grant us to sit one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory". This is a request for power and authority over others, and in it something universally human comes to expression: the desire for status and for recognition by others, through which one's underlying self-doubt is allayed. Here, this universal desire for recognition takes the form of apocalyptic fantasy. Apocalyptic expresses the desire of the lowly and oppressed for the power and glory which are at present denied them. Because it is impossible for this dream to be fulfilled within the existing world-order, a miraculous transformation is hoped for in which the great and the powerful will be humbled and the lowly exalted. Since the disciples have now recognized Jesus as the Christ, the bringer of the new age, they expect him to accomplish this miraculous transformation for their benefit.

Jesus exposes this desire for dominance as essentially pagan: "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them" (10.42). The disciples hope that in the new age they will be akin to Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar or Augustus in the old. They share the presupposition that power over others is a goal worth striving for, and they see their discipleship as a means of attaining that goal. Apocalyptic fantasies about power rivaling and exceeding that of the Gentiles were common in the early church. For example, in Rev. 2.26-7 the heavenly Christ promises the Christians of Thyatira:

He who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations, and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces.

But that is to share the pagan idea that power is good and that absolute power is the absolute good. Jesus opposes this idea:

It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. (Mk. 10.43-4).

The new age is paradoxically present, and this means that it is present in a totally unexpected way which overturns the assumptions of the old age.

The disciplines have in effect taken the pagan rulers ("Those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles") as their model. Jesus replaces this model with himself:

The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (10.45)

The quest for power exemplified by Alexander or Caesar is replaced by the ideal of solidarity exemplified by Jesus. A new image is set up of what it is to be human. Jesus takes the place of the conquerors and the emperors, and he is the new standard of judgment by which the worth of human life is to be assessed. The old idols are destroyed by the one who as truly human is truly God: according to Mk. 10.45, that is the true meaning of the story of Jesus. The new image represents the renunciation of a quest for power which in fact alienates one from other people, and the acceptance of a solidarity which springs from a shared humanity. Traditional apocalyptic merely re-establishes the old idol in a new form; on this view, the new age is not new at all but the apotheosis of the old. Only the claim that the new age is present in the midst of the old genuinely overthrows the old.

2. Mark's narrative tells how the bringer of the new age succumbs to rejection, suffering and death. The disciples had believed that Jesus as the Christ would inaugurate an age in which God would wipe away every tear and suffering and death would be no more (cf. Rev. 21.4). But to their bewilderment, Jesus repeatedly announces that he himself is shortly to experience precisely the tears and suffering and death which he was supposed to bring to an end; for God has ordained that the Christ should be defeated by the powers of the old age. As the narrative unfolds, Jesus' prophecies about his suffering are inexorably fulfilled. The account of his sufferings, from his arrest to the act of crucifixion itself, is restrained, objective and dignified. In this part of the narrative, nothing is said about his inward reactions to these external events, and one might conclude from this that he behaved throughout with the exemplary piety expected of the martyr, calmly trusting in God. But at two points, the narrator's restraint is thrown to the winds: in Gethsemane and in the cry of desolation on the cross. In these passages, we have the New Testament's profoundest expression of the humanity of Jesus. He suffers not just the physical pain of beating, scourging and crucifixion, but the inward pain of loneliness and fear of death in Gethsemane, and of God-forsakenness on the cross: "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death" – "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour?" – "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Christian piety, both ancient and modern, has tended to find these passages offensive and distasteful.<sup>13</sup> The martyrs are supposed to go to their deaths with joy and confidence, glad of the privilege of suffering for God's sake. If they experience hard struggles overcoming the natural human shrinking from death, that is seen as symptomatic of our perverse tendency to cling to this transient world instead of eagerly reaching out for the glories of the world to come. But by the time their death occurs, all such weakness has been set aside; they die quietly and joyfully trusting in God. In comparison with such piety, Mark's account of the suffering and death of Jesus seems quite inadequate. Jesus himself shrinks back from suffering: "Remove this cup from me". His own words to Simon Peter, "The flesh is weak", seem also to apply to himself. Worse still, Jesus dies not with an expression of pious confidence on his lips, but with a cry

of despair. Luke and John already felt this difficulty, and replaced the offending saying with other sayings which seemed to satisfy the requirements of piety better. But Mark's account is utterly stark and comfortless, and we should not allow its impact to be blunted by the modifications of it in other gospels.

One common solution to the problem is to remove Jesus' sufferings from the sphere of normal human suffering; he suffered so intensely in Gethsemane and at Golgotha because he was anticipating and then experiencing the divine punishment of sin in order to secure the world's redemption.<sup>14</sup> Quite apart from its other difficulties, such a view would make it impossible for the text to shed any light on our own experience. In any case, the text does not portray Jesus' sufferings as *sui generis*. James and John are told that they too will have to drink the cup which Jesus anticipated in Gethsemane and experienced at Golgotha: "The cup that I drink you will drink" (10.39). The disciples must share his suffering: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (8.34). The disciples must understand Jesus' suffering in the light of their own, and their own suffering in the light of Jesus'. And since the readers of the narrative are intended to identify with the disciples, this is true also of them.<sup>15</sup> The story of Jesus' suffering must shed light on their experience and understanding of suffering.

But what is the essential nature of this suffering? Christian contemplation of the Passion has often dwelt on Jesus' physical pain and his unjust treatment at the hands of his fellow human beings.<sup>16</sup> But Mark does not emphasize either aspect, and presents the crucifixion primarily as a theological problem. It is in the last resort *God's* will that Jesus is rejected and crucified; Caiaphas, the Sanhedrin and Pilate are the unwitting agents of the divine purpose. "The Son of man *must* suffer", and "must" refers not to an inner-historical necessity but to the compulsion of the divine predestination. This is stressed in the sayings in Gethsemane and on the cross: it is *God* who compels Jesus to drink the cup, to endure the experience of God-forsakenness. We might therefore say that this suffering consists above all in the destruction of the view previously held of the nature of God and of reality. Reality had once been accepted with child-like trust as the work of a loving heavenly Father who upholds it with his constant care. The cross starkly contradicts any such belief: the dark side of reality is here manifested, in such a way that the old, naive view is shattered. The God who was once gladly addressed as "Abba" has incomprehensibly turned away and hidden his face. In a moment of both bewilderment and insight, the reality of God-forsakenness as a characteristic of the world is recognized. No resolution to the problem is offered: only the question, "Why . . . ?", and the equally eloquent though wordless "loud cry" with which Jesus dies.

In what sense is this story of the crucified Jesus still the story of the Christ, the bringer of the new age? One answer would be to see "the new age" precisely in the new insight into the nature of the present world: the recognition of "God-forsakenness" as an inescapable aspect of reality, the refusal to comfort oneself or others with any of the expedients which piety has devised in

order to evade this recognition. The new age is manifested in the abandonment of the illusions of the old. Here, the story of Jesus makes the same point as the older story of Job: the world does not point unambiguously to a rational and loving providential care, and we must honestly accept this fact.

3. The early Christians' recognition of this aspect of reality was qualified by their triumphant proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus. In Bach's *Mass in B Minor*, the joyful D major of the trumpets and strings at the words "Et resurrexit" immediately dispels the dark mystery of suffering, death and burial; and this admirably recreates the mood of much of the New Testament. But in Mark's resurrection narrative, triumph and joy are absent and are replaced by terror, confusion and doubt. The evangelist does not allow the resurrection to resolve the dialectic he has been elaborating – that is, the paradoxical presence of the new age in the midst of the old. On the contrary, even in the case of the resurrection the paradox is maintained.

A brief narrative, a mere eight verses long, tells of the events of Easter morning.<sup>17</sup> The women arrive at the tomb "early on the first day of the week" in order to perform the rituals omitted at the time of Jesus' burial. They are thrown into confusion by a young man in white, whom they suddenly encounter inside the darkness of the tomb. He tells them that Jesus is risen and that the disciples are to meet him in Galilee; their own task is to pass on this message to the disciples. However, instead of rejoicing and proclaiming the good news, they flee from the tomb in terror and tell no-one what has occurred.

The evangelist offers no proof that the young man's message was true. He does not tell us whether the promise of a meeting in Galilee was fulfilled; indeed, since the women failed to pass on the message to the disciples, it is hard to see how it could have been. In the other Gospels, the risen Jesus appears and the mystery of the emptiness of the tomb is immediately resolved; but in Mark, the enigma remains. The fact that a "young man" is mentioned is another problem. Matthew and Luke replace him with angels – beings whose glorious, shining countenances make them unambiguous messengers of God whose proclamation of the resurrection is self-evidently true. But Mark's young man in white is a more ambiguous figure. Is he God's messenger? Or is he perhaps deceiving the women? The narrative of course assumes that the former possibility is the true one; but it offers no grounds for excluding the latter. No attempt is made to deter the unsympathetic reader from drawing the conclusion that the tomb is empty because grave robbers have been at work; perhaps the young man was one of them. John shows his awareness of this glaring problem by insisting that the grave clothes, with their valuable contents of precious spices, were left behind; this makes it certain (even before the first appearance of the risen Jesus) that Mary Magdalene's initial conclusion, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him", cannot be correct.<sup>18</sup> But John's narrative merely shows up more clearly the strangeness of Mark's: the reader is left in suspense, with nothing more than the bare word of an unknown young man to confirm the belief that Jesus has risen. If it is true (as it may well be) that the story of the discovery of the empty tomb developed as an apologetic legend to con-

firm the message of resurrection,<sup>19</sup> Mark has transformed it. Instead of attempting to “prove” the resurrection, Mark’s narrative leaves it with a question-mark against it. It is a riddle to which he refuses to provide the answer.

There may be any number of historical reasons which would explain why this narrative is as it is; but rather than speculating about them, it is more important to try to hear what the narrative as it stands is saying. For the early Christians, the resurrection was the preliminary but triumphant manifestation of the new age. Its imminent arrival was guaranteed by the sure knowledge of Jesus’ resurrection: the one who had ascended to heaven in a cloud would shortly descend in a cloud to bring the old order to an end, to raise the dead, to judge the world, and to bestow eternal life on his elect. Only this train of events can dispel the ambiguities and the darkness of the present world, symbolized by the crucifixion; only the new age can justify the fundamental goodness of God’s creation, as it is at last freed from the evil powers to which it has fallen prey. The proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection therefore concerns nothing less than the justification of reality, the vindication of God’s goodness.

Mark likewise assumes that this is the significance of Jesus’ resurrection; he too shares the apocalyptic framework of early Christianity. Yet by leaving the message of the resurrection with a question-mark against it, he once again draws attention to the ambiguity of the presence of the new age in the midst of the old. There is in his resurrection narrative no triumphant, certain knowledge which already participates in the joys of the age to come in anticipation of the final victory. The ultimate justification of reality is not something about which we may attain certain knowledge, since we see always through a glass darkly. It is something to be hoped for – the age-old hope, expressed in countless ways in different religious traditions, that despite everything, human existence does in the end make sense. No grounds are offered for this hope; it remains vulnerable, suspended in mid-air like the young man’s doubtful testimony to the resurrection.

1. Writing in 1907, W. Sanday said of this theory that it is “in its main outlines familiar to all of us, as it is substantially that which has for some time with slight differences in detail been generally accepted”, (*The Life of Christ in Recent Research*, Oxford 1907), p. 55.
2. For a survey of modern Marcan research, see W.R. Telford (ed.), *The Interpretation of Mark*, London 1985, pp. 1–41.
3. This presentation of John as “simplifying” theological issues is, of course, deliberately one-sided. R. Bultmann has interpreted John as an expression of a paradoxical christology with affinities with Kierkegaard (*The Gospel of John*, English translation Oxford 1971). However, as E. Käsemann has pointed out, Bultmann is only able to maintain this view with the help of an elaborate and very doubtful source criticism. Käsemann writes: “I am unable to see the incognito of the Revealer as being maintained in a Gospel which begins with the wedding at Cana, sees the Passion narrative as arising directly out of the raising of Lazarus and reaches its culmination in the shout of victory from the Cross” (*New Testament Questions of Today*, London 1965, pp. 16–17; see also Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus*, ET Philadelphia 1968).
4. See for example, C. E. Gunton, *Yesterday and Today. Studies of Continuities in Christology*, London 1983, pp. 56 ff, who argues that modern New Testament scholarship has been misled by the empiricist tendency to separate “facts” from “meaning”: purely immanent, neutral facts are separated from interpretation which involves the imposition of subjective projections of meaning (pp. 61–2). But meaning should be conceived as *inherent* in the facts, and the thought of the early Christians would then take the form of “discernment” rather than “imposition” (p. 62).

5. Thus Hans Frei writes: “Especially in narrative, novelistic, or history-like form, where meaning is most nearly inseparable from the words . . . , there is neither need for nor use in looking for meaning in a more profound stratum underneath the structure (a separable “subject matter”) or in a separable author’s “intention”, or in a combination of such behind-the-scenes projections” (*The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, New Haven and London 1974, p. 281). While Frei’s apparent desire to exclude traditional historical questions altogether is unjustified, his assertion of the legitimacy of an alternative approach remains valuable.
6. Notably T.J. Weeden, in *Mark: Traditions in Conflict*, Philadelphia 1971.
7. The original historical and social setting of this view is discussed in my article, “The Social Function of Mark’s Secrecy Theme”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 24 (1985), pp. 44–69. For a variety of more traditional approaches to Mark’s “messianic secret”, see C.M. Tuckett (ed.), *The Messianic Secret*, London 1983.
8. Thus Vincent Taylor understands the command to secrecy as “a counsel of prudence in view of the political repercussions of such a confession”. To proclaim Jesus publicly as the Messiah would be to arouse a revolutionary movement among the people, which would be a disastrous misunderstanding of Jesus’ profoundly personal understanding of the title (*The Gospel according to St. Mark*, London 1952, p. 377).
9. “The Messiah who is supposed to bring the new eon is defeated by the powers of the old eon. The defeat of the Messiah on the Cross is the most radical transformation of the symbol of the Messiah . . . A defeated Messiah is not a Messiah at all. Christianity acknowledges the paradox – and accepts it” (P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology* 2, London 1957, p. 111).
10. See H.C. Kee, *Community of the New Age*, London 1977.
11. *Ecce Homo*, ET London 1979, p. 70. Nietzsche is, typically, discussing the conditions for understanding *his own* books.
12. It should be noted that the modern discussion of the theological significance of “narrative” is not all motivated by the desire to interpret narrative texts in comparative isolation from their hypothetical circumstances of origin. Some scholars strongly emphasize the significance of narrative for both individual and communal identity, and belief in the basic historicity of the narrative may well remain important on such a view (see George W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology*, London 1984). This approach has affinities with Brevard Childs’ “canonical criticism”, which lays a similar stress on the church as the locus of the interpretation of Scripture. There is perhaps a danger here of forgetting that the Gospels (for example) are part of the literary and religious heritage not just of “the church” but of the whole western world.
13. Because of his view of Jesus’ continuous God-consciousness, Schleiermacher asserts that the Gethsemane story is not literally true and that on the cross Jesus had in mind the whole of Ps. 22 (*Life of Jesus*, ET Philadelphia 1975, pp. 396, 423). A more characteristically twentieth century view distinguishes between what Jesus *felt* and what was actually the case: Taylor approvingly cites the comment of T.R. Glover, “I have sometimes thought there never was an utterance that reveals more amazingly the distance between feeling and fact” (*St. Mark*, p. 594).
14. This exegesis, deriving from the Reformation, is reaffirmed by C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St. Mark*, Cambridge 1959, pp. 433, 458–9.
15. On the identification of the readers with the disciples, see R.C. Tannehill, “The Disciples in Mark: the Function of a Narrative Role”, in *The Interpretation of Mark*, pp. 134–157.
16. A typical example of this is George Herbert’s poem, “The Sacrifice”, which is based on the medieval liturgical tradition of Christ’s complaints to his people (*The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. C.A. Patrides, London 1974, pp. 48–56). Christ reproaches his disciples and all who are responsible for his death for the sufferings and humiliations he undergoes; each stanza ends with the words, “Was ever grief like mine?” But nothing is said about the main problem posed by the passion narratives: that it is above all *God* who wills the death of Jesus.
17. Modern scholars are increasingly agreed that Mk. 16.8 was the original ending of the gospel, and that the earlier view that the gospel is incomplete is to be rejected. See W.R. Telford (ed.), *The Interpretation of Mark*, p. 26, and the literature cited there.
18. R.H. Fuller states that “the apologetic and legendary character” of this motif is “obvious” (*The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, London 1980, p. 135).
19. R. Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, ET Oxford 1963, p. 287; J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology, Vol. 1*, ET London 1971, pp. 304.