

Scripture **from** Scratch

A popular guide to understanding the Bible

An oral recitation of the whole text of Mark's Gospel by British actor Alec McCowan (*St. Mark's Gospel*, New York: Arthur Cantor Productions, 1990) opened up the message of the Gospel for me in a way that none of my previous study had done.

Unaided by any stage props the actor captures the spirit of this dramatic narrative in a highly engaging manner. Tone of voice, changes of pace, facial expressions, movement—all the ploys of the actor's craft are utilized in order to bring the text to life.

Mark becomes a Gospel of great power and suspense as it draws us into its story and forces us to take sides. The Gospel was originally written for just this

kind of oral performance for Christ-

ian communities in Rome, or possibly even in Palestine.

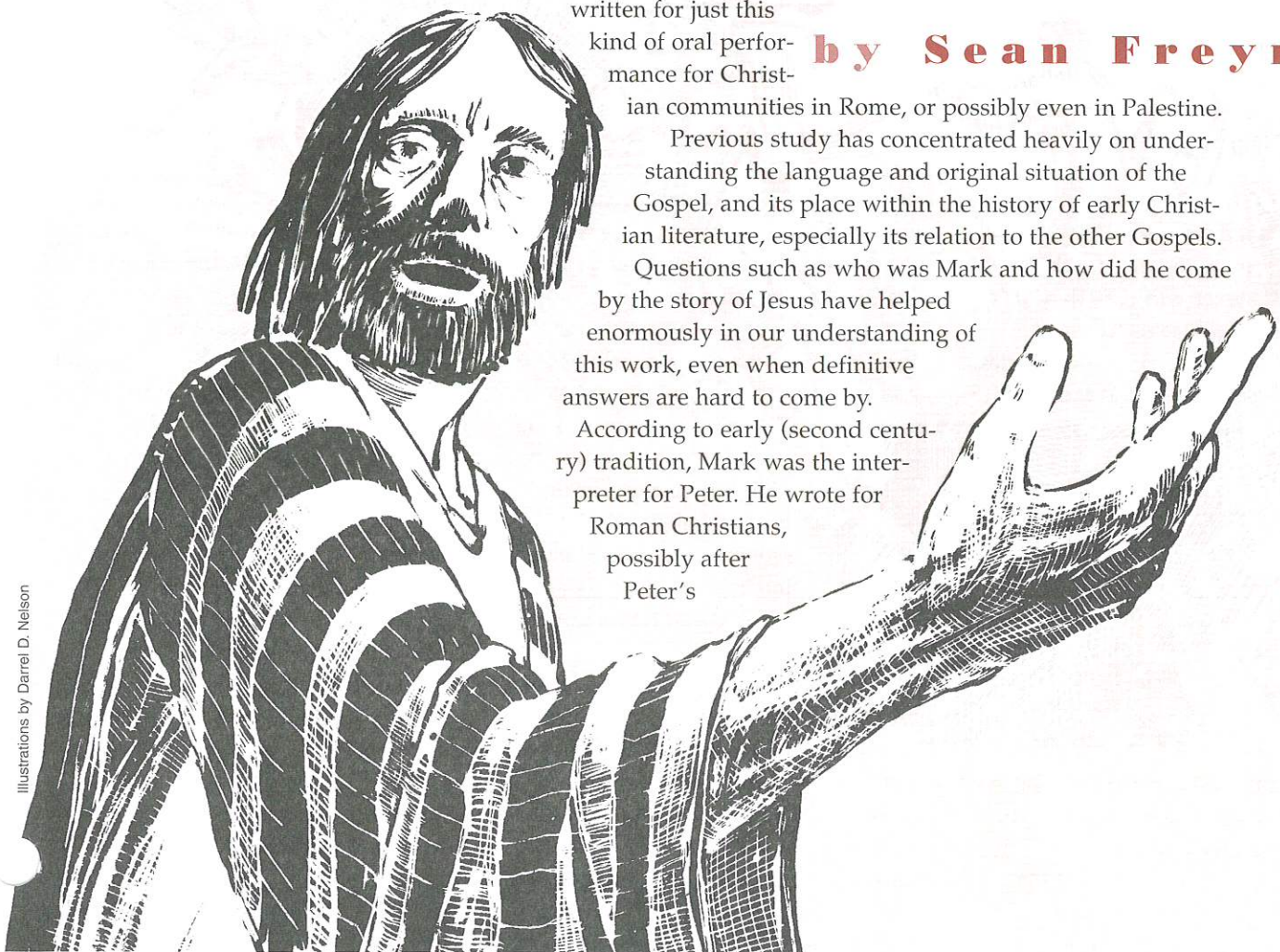
Previous study has concentrated heavily on understanding the language and original situation of the Gospel, and its place within the history of early Christian literature, especially its relation to the other Gospels.

Questions such as who was Mark and how did he come by the story of Jesus have helped enormously in our understanding of this work, even when definitive answers are hard to come by.

According to early (second century) tradition, Mark was the interpreter for Peter. He wrote for Roman Christians, possibly after Peter's

MARK'S URGENT MESSAGE

by Sean Freyne



Illustrations by Darrel D. Nelson

death, which is traditionally related to Nero's persecution of the Roman Christians in the year 64 C.E. Modern scholars have found much that is plausible in this picture.

Others have linked the Gospel with the situation in Palestine on the eve of or during the first Jewish revolt against Rome in 66-70 C.E., especially in light of the statements in Mark 13.

Yet, when all the historical study is done, there is a danger that the Gospel remains remote from us, belonging to first, but not twenty-first century hearers and readers.

I found McCowan's performance so memorable because it was difficult to remain detached. Exposed to all of Mark's rhetorical skills, you cannot maintain indifference to the outcome. Many unanswered questions about Jesus and his purpose punctuate the narrative; they cry for full audience participation; inner action is the name of Mark's game, and the invitation is open to all honest readers.

Mystery and Suspense

When we approach Mark, most of us supply a beginning and ending that he never wrote. Both Matthew and Luke introduce us to Jesus through the birth and infancy stories. We are in no doubt about the identity



of the main character from the outset. At the end, too, the suspense as to what happened is removed as each Gospel tells of Jesus rejoining the group of bewildered disciples in an intimate scene of recognition.

Imagine yourself trying to make



Praying With Scripture

- **Mark's Jesus is often misunderstood by those closest to him, and they abandon him in his hour of greatest need. But Jesus never loses trust in his Father. Think of a time when you have been misunderstood and abandoned. How has it led you to a deeper trust in God? Pray to the God who never abandons us.**

sense of Mark's account without such information. Imagine early Christians in Rome or wherever attempting to do likewise. Jesus arrives in Galilee, seemingly unannounced, to begin his ministry, and at the end we are left to ponder whether or not the disciples returned to Galilee as instructed by the angelic messenger at the tomb, and if so, where and how did they encounter Jesus? Do we share the women's fear? Would we return? Why Galilee?

This scarcity of information is deliberate. Mark wants us to be attentive readers from the start. Clever dramatist/teacher that he is, he invites us to form our own impressions as the plot develops and write the ending accordingly. How often one comes away from a good theatrical performance trying to tease out the intricacies of the plot and discern the intended message.

The aura of mystery hangs over Mark's whole story. Repeatedly the main character, Jesus, calls for silence about a successful healing when popular evangelism might appear to dictate broadcasting the success. It seems impossible to imagine how the crowd's enthusiasm could be contained (1:44; 3:12; 5:42).

When Peter, the leader of the specially chosen group of followers, confesses that Jesus is the Christ, he is told to be silent (8:30). Shortly afterward, what might appear to be a perfectly good idea—the suggestion of making three tents on the mountaintop for Jesus, Moses and Elijah—is dismissed by the author as a case of Peter being so

frightened that he did not know what to say (9:5-6). Little wonder that the attentive reader is also confused.

Whatever his real purpose, the Markan Jesus is no rabble rouser or aspirant to cheap popularity. "And next morning [after a most 'successful' visit to Capernaum] a great while before day he arose and went to a lonely place and there he prayed" (Mark 1:35). After feeding the multitude in a lonely place he "compelled the disciples to get into the boat while he dismissed the crowd," only to rejoin the disciples on the sea when they were experiencing great difficulties with the waves (Mark 6:45-52). "He was going through Galilee and he did not want anyone to know it" (Mark 9:30). We might be forgiven for thinking that Jesus is a loner even in the midst of thronging crowds and fussy but uncomprehending disciples.

Sometimes this mood of secrecy and mystery passes over into a more sinister mood. Demons scream at him, declaring his name—"the Holy One of God" or "Son of the Most High"—in what appears to be a battle of wits, knowing his name ought to mean controlling his power (1:24-25; 3:11; 5:7). But in the end they are silenced. In a particularly spectacular and blood-curdling story a possessed man whom nobody could control ends up sitting at the feet of Jesus "in his right mind" (5:15).

On another occasion a young boy who is possessed falls down at the approach of Jesus "in convulsions" so that they said, "He is dead" (9:14-29). Jesus, however, takes him by the hand and raises him up. In one of the many

little resurrection stories that dot the account, Jesus achieves another victory over evil, an anticipated foretaste of the great and ultimate victory that Mark and his faithful readers expected soon (Mark 13:20, 24-27).

Jesus on the Move

Unlike the other Gospels, Luke in particular, Mark does not often present us with a picture of Jesus at prayer. His Jesus is a busy person, always on the move. The times he does choose to pray are therefore highly significant. They occur when Jesus is disappointed by the performance or reactions of his close associates.

After a successful day of ministry at Capernaum, Jesus departs early to pray alone, and the disciples go in search of him, anxious to confirm their newfound status in the village as friends of the healer. But Jesus refuses to go back in that capacity (1:35-38).

Again after the first feeding miracle, Jesus needs to separate the disciples from the crowd if they are to experience any real progress in understanding. Once again Jesus departs to a lonely place to pray (Mark 6:46).

Finally in the garden, when the chosen four disciples fall asleep and cannot watch with him, he goes away and prays to the Father in the hour of agony (Mark 14:35). The Markan Jesus models the prayer of abandonment—trust in God when human resources, especially the understanding of friends, fail.

Supporting Roles

The specially chosen disciples make a fascinating study. The pairs of brothers—Simon and Andrew, James and John—are an impressive start (1:16-20).

Mark shows a flair for comic irony in the picture of these latter two abandoning their father and the hired servants—thus suggesting an affluent domestic situation—and subsequently wanting seats of honor in the kingdom (10:35-40). In another scene they resent spending money on a hungry crowd (6:36-37), even though “they had left all to follow” and had received instructions to bring no provisions for their journey, relying instead on the generosity of others (6:8-9).

The disciples invariably meet with Jesus privately “in a house” (4:19-12; 7:17) or “on the way” (8:27; 9:30, 33; 10:32), almost always to receive further instructions or to have the mystery that appears as a riddle explained. Yet their progress is slow.

They seem incapable of getting beneath the surface of things. For example, they recall the external details of the feeding miracles—so reminiscent of the God of Israel feeding his people in their exodus from Egypt (Mark 8:14-21; Exodus 16:9-18)—but do not comprehend the true meaning of the event and the identity of the one who has performed the deed.

Like the deaf-mute and the blind man, they seem in desperate need of having their ears truly unblocked and their eyes truly opened in order that



they might speak plainly and see clearly (7:31-37; 8:2-26; cf. 8:18).

To add to this bleak performance, despite the special coaching in Galilee, we are told that when the forces of evil closed in to arrest Jesus in Jerusalem, “they all left him and fled” (Mark 14:50), even though they had been forewarned three times, with ever-increasing explicitness, of what lay ahead in the holy city. That is the last we hear of the male disciples as a group, though Peter makes a brief, if inglorious, entry at the trial (14:66-72).

We are surprised to hear that women have also been part of his permanent retinue, since there was no explicit mention of them through the narrative. Yet at the end, they stand at a distance as Jesus dies on the cross—the two Marys and Salome (15:40-41). The same three faithful ones go to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus when the Sabbath was over, only to have their strange encounter with a “young man dressed in white, seated at the right side” (16:1-8), a subtle suggestion that all is not over and that story time goes beyond plot time.

Other individuals from the fringes of the story also seem to outperform the chosen disciples. Two in particular stand out. The blind Bar-Timaeus, sitting by the roadside at Jericho, has his sight restored and opts to follow Jesus “on the way” despite having been given his freedom “to go his way” (10:46-52). And then there is the centurion, the most unlikely candidate to grasp the full meaning of Jesus’ person, who “seeing that thus he breathed his last, said, ‘Truly this man was Son of God!’” (Mark 15:39).



Living the Scriptures

- **Read Mark 9:14-29. Some thought that the boy was dead, but Jesus took him by the hand and helped him to his feet. Look for an opportunity to bring someone back to life by a kind word, a smile, a helping hand.**

In Mark's eyes insiders and outsiders can easily interchange roles. There are no certainties—the God of Mark's Jesus is a God of surprises.

Getting Into the Act

So what is it all about, I hear you ask, as you click the button and put away the McCowan video. At the surface level Mark's story is straightforward. The Galilean prophet manifests a face of God different than the one that Jerusalem and the Temple establishment represented. This God is not boxed in but is in the everyday events of people's lives, overcoming the evil of the world as it impinges on and dehumanizes them.

Inevitably, those at the center react negatively to this threat from the margins. Their justice appears to be done and the threat is averted. Then God's last word is spoken, not by the acknowledging centurion, but by the young man dressed in white: "He is risen, he is not here; go tell his disciples and Peter: 'He goes before you to Galilee; there you will see him as he told you'" (Mark 16:7).

Or is this really the last word Mark wants spoken? That depends on you and me! The story of the disciples—male and female—as well as the various individuals who come to recognize



the truth about Jesus is the subtext of the real plot that Mark intends.

The journey to which the Markan Jesus summons us is not to Jerusalem or to Galilee, but to our true selves, where we begin "to think the thoughts of God, not the thoughts of men" (8:33). Only then can we begin to acknowledge God's real presence in the world of pain, suffering and oppression that so often appears to have the last word. Only then can we recognize the suffering God in the fate of Jesus. And only then can we be empowered to continue with him the journey of faith. This journey summons us from the security of Jerusalem's narrow but safe horizons to the open-ended world of Galilee.

Even then the choice is ours. We can be distracted by the Markan crowd, so impressed with power, but so lacking in real appreciation. We can seek

preferment with the male disciples and be absent at the crucial moment. We can join Bar-Timaeus in the freedom of Jesus' way. We can be faithful to the end, if fearful, like the women disciples. We can even seek to silence Jesus like the demons....

Mark provides us with many angles of vision; he invites us to enter the drama from several points of view, and choose for ourselves the best perspective on the mystery that is the kingdom of God in the world. ■

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Talking About Scripture

- **Why do you think that Jesus did not want to focus attention on himself?**
- **Discuss the relationship of Jesus with his disciples and with his would-be followers like Bar Timaeus (10:46-52) and the possessed man (5:1-20).**



Reading About Scripture

- **Anderson, J. Capel, and S. Moore, eds. *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992.**
- **Freyne, Sean. *Galilee, Jesus and the Gospels: Literary Approaches and Historical Investigations*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1988.**
- **Rhoads, David, and Donald Mitchie. *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982.**