

Mark 1:12-15

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Christ in the Wilderness | Moretto da Brescia (Alessandro Bonvicino)
Italian ca. 1515–20 | Metropolitan Museum of Art | PD-US

The Brevity of Mark

The Gospel of Mark is noted for its brevity and perhaps no better example exists than the narrative of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. Compare these two verses with the more descriptive versions in Matthew or Luke. Was Mark not aware of the details? Did Mark have other narrative intentions for making these two verses a divide between the prologue (1:1-11) and the beginning of the Galilean ministry (1:16 and following)? The scholars have a plethora of possibilities, but as a reader I am struck by the transition from the “Baptism of Jesus” (all of three verses): “*It happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’*” (Mark 1:9-11)

And then the next verse: “*At once the Spirit drove him out into the desert*” (v.12) Jesus’ “exile” into the wilderness seems to a direct consequence of the action of the Spirit descending upon him - the same Spirit that demands Jesus move more deeply to the wilderness, geographically and into the human condition.

The Wilderness

The motif of the wilderness dominated the prologue beginning with the voice of one crying out in the desert (v.3) that introduced John the Baptist whose arrest is simply noted in v.14 – yet the connection

to the Hebrew prophets has been set. In accordance with that prophetic tradition, Jesus appears in the wilderness of Judea, drawn by the ministry of the Baptist.

Our gospel text lies between the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus' Galilean ministry. Its opening scene finds Jesus in the wilderness. There are also a number of Old Testament scriptures which provide the context to this very short Markan passage: "*in the desert for forty days.*" There are a group of scholars that prefer the more narrow reference to the expression "forty days" rather than the broader numerological reference to "forty." They argue that Jesus stays in the wilderness for forty days, a fixed time of symbolic significance. The reference to the forty days recalls Moses' stay on Mount Sinai and Elijah's wandering through the wilderness to Mount Horeb – both times of personal testing. In their case the time of the forty days concentrates into one crucial period the innermost quality of their mission. Moses and Elijah are men of the wilderness, both prior to this period as well as after it. So too with Jesus – the 40 days is the wilderness experience and serves to mark the milieu of Jesus' earthly ministry. And of course, others would argue that the more foundational texts are those that describe the testing of Israel via the 40 years of the Exodus. There are merits to both arguments.

In the end we simply have that the Spirit leads Jesus into the desert. Tempted and tested there by Satan for forty days, as the people of Israel were tested before him, Jesus is protected by God via angels. The text simply states that Jesus withstood the test and is ready for his service to God and humanity. With John's arrest (v. 14), Jesus' work begins. Mark's "*gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*" began at v.1. Now the "*gospel of God*" begins, as Jesus' first words are heard: "*This is the time of fulfillment*" (v. 15).

Reading Mark

When we read this account in Mark, it is natural to insert the familiar details of the wilderness temptation from Matthew and Luke. Those are accounts that are filled with details of fasting, the appearance of Satan, more robust descriptions of the details of the encounter. Those details naturally lend themselves to placing more emphasis on an extended period of time in the desert. Some commentators find it of interest that Matthew and Luke do not mention the presence of the "*wild beasts.*"

From early Christian times, interpreters have seen Mark's mention of the wild beasts as an echo of the fall of Adam and Eve.

"*He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him*" is often taken as: "out there in the wilderness it wasn't just Satan who posed dangers, but also the wild beasts." But the text simply says that he was among them. After the fall, Adam was indeed threatened by the wild beasts, but Jesus is the anti-Adam – Jesus can move among them. The enmity between humans and wild animals, which was a consequence of Adam's fall, does not apply to Jesus. Jesus' presence points to a reversal of the Adamic order of things, giving way to the new order of the Kingdom.

The allusions to the Adam story demonstrates what would have been the case for humanity if Adam had not sinned. Add in the reference to Israel's wilderness experience, the net effect is a passing reference to a wilderness transformed in the new exodus of Jesus. A wilderness transformed into paradise was part of the hope for salvation depicted in Isaiah (Isa 11:6–9; 32:14–20; 65:25). In this understanding, Jesus is a new Moses.

Unlike the Matthean and Lukan versions of the wilderness time, which emphasizes the conflict between Jesus and Satan, Mark's tradition uses the reference to the animals and ministering angels to highlight the specific characteristics of the new exodus with a new Adam and a new Moses.

Commentary

¹² *At once the Spirit drove him out into the desert,* ¹³ *and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him.*

The account of the baptism moves immediately into Jesus' test in the wilderness (*eremos*) as seen in the phrase "*At once.*" Jesus' expulsion into the desert is connected to his baptism; it is the same Spirit who descended upon Jesus at his baptism who now forces him to enter more deeply into the wilderness. In Mark, the Spirit is "casting out" or "throwing out" (*ekballo*) Jesus into the wilderness. (Matthew and Luke are a bit less graphic with the Spirit "leading" [*anago & ago*] Jesus.) In the wilderness Jesus is to be tested (*peirazo*) by Satan (Mk) or the Devil (Mt & Lk).

In comparison with other gospel writers, Mark appears to have preserved no more than a hint of the tradition. It is essential to view the account in Mark's perspective. These brief verses describe what it means for Jesus to heed the Spirit's call to the wilderness; the several details are subservient to this description. The evangelist seizes upon the fact that the Lord, who was announced and baptized in the wilderness, continues there for forty days. Even though God has declared Jesus as the beloved Son, the mission is only beginning for the One who is like us in all things except sin. As we are tested, so too is Jesus: the Spirit does not allow him to abandon the wilderness after his baptism.

As PHEME PERKINS [537] notes:

"Unlike Matthew and Luke (Matt 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13), Mark does not explain how Satan tested Jesus in the wilderness. The stories of Israel in the wilderness and of Adam and Eve in the garden provide examples of what it means to be tested and fail. One frequent element in these stories is the lack of confidence in the Word of the Lord. Even though they have been delivered from Pharaoh's army, the Israelites think that God might leave them to die in the wilderness (Exod 16:2–3). Even though they can see God's presence on Mt. Sinai in thunder, cloud, and trumpet blast (Exod 19:16–20; 24:15–18), the people think that Moses has perished and persuade Aaron to make them a calf idol (Exod 32:1–6). Jesus, on the other hand, remains faithful to God. In return, the wild animals are peaceful, and angels provide nurture for him."

Temptation. All the gospel accounts use the word *peirazo*. Translators have to decide if the word means "to test" or "to tempt". It has both meanings. In a "test" the tester is not trying to fail people, but to determine what they know or to let the one being tested discover what they truly know. In a "temptation" the tempter is hoping for failure.

The word is often used in the LXX of God testing people:

- God tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son (Gen 22:1).
- When God rained bread from heaven, God asked that they gather only enough for that day. "In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not" (Ex 16:4).
- A purpose of God's testing is given in Dt 13:3b: "for the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you indeed love the LORD your God with all your heart and soul"

A closely related word, *ekpeirazo*, is used in Dt 8:2: "Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness (*eremos* – same word in temptation stories), in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments."

Temptation is the predictable fact of remaining in the wilderness. This pattern is frequently associated with the wilderness tradition in both the OT and NT. The fact that Jesus is tempted by Satan, who attempts to frustrate the work of God, serves to emphasize the radical character of the issue. Jesus'

residence in the wilderness, inevitably results in a clash with the adversary of God. In this connection the cosmic language of Mk. 1:9–12 is important; it indicates that what happens on the plane of human decision in terms of John’s call and Jesus’ response is an aspect of the struggle between God and Satan.

Satan. “Satan” comes from the Hebrew verb *STN* meaning “to be hostile, to oppose”. The noun means “adversary,” who usually is an earthling in the OT, but in 1 Chr 21:1; Job 1 & 2; Zech 3:1, 2 it refers to a heavenly being and is transliterated “Satan”.

In the LXX (*the Greek translation of the OT*), the Hebrew *satan* was always translated by the Greek *diabolos* (“the slanderer, the devil”), a word that doesn’t occur in Mark.

“Satan” occurs in 5 verses in Mark.

- Satan tests Jesus in the wilderness (1:13)
- Jesus asks, “How can Satan drive out Satan?” (3:23)
- And answers: “If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come.” (3:26)
- In the explanation of the parable of the sower, Satan comes takes away the word that has been sown on the path (4:15)
- Jesus rebukes Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (8:33)

Starting with the last occurrence, “Satan” seems to be anyone whose mind is not set on divine things – who seeks to stand in the way of Jesus (or us?) fulfilling God’s purpose in our lives. “Satan” knows enough not to be divided against himself – which may mean that Satan is clear about his purpose and role in the universe, which is to seek to take away the Word of God, which is easily done with people who are too “hard-hearted” for the Word to take root. If God’s Word is not well rooted in our lives, then we can’t know God’s purpose for us. Thus it will be easy for Satan or other people to steer us away from that purpose.

“It is significant that Mark does not report the victory of Jesus over Satan, nor the end of the temptation (*In contrast to Mt. 4:11; Lk. 4:13*). It is the evangelist’s distinctive understanding that Jesus did not win the decisive victory during the forty days nor did he cease to be tempted. Jesus is thrust into the wilderness in order to be confronted with Satan and temptation. It is this confrontation which is itself important, since it is sustained throughout Jesus’ ministry. This explains why Mark does not say anything about the content of the temptation: his whole Gospel constitutes the explanation of the manner in which Jesus was tempted.” [Lane, 61]

Wild Beasts. A detail recorded only by Mark is that Jesus was with the wild beasts in the wilderness. “Wild beasts” *therion* occurs only here in all of the gospels. In ancient Greek, *therion* especially referred to animals that were hunted. It is unique in Mark’s account of the testing. It is a word that refers to any wild animal or beast. It is used in Acts 28:4-5 for the viper who bites Paul. It is used in Revelation to refer to the “beast” who is worshiped rather than God.

Since 1:12–13 is usually understood as a report of Jesus’ triumph over Satan the reference to the wild beasts has been interpreted as an element in the paradise motif. Jesus in the midst of the wild beasts signifies the victory of the New Adam over Satan and temptation so that paradise is restored in which man is at peace with the animals. But as soon as it is recognized that the dominant motif of the prologue is the wilderness, Mark’s distinctive reference to the wild beasts becomes obfuscated.

In the OT blessing is associated with inhabited and cultivated land; the wilderness is the place of the

course. In the wilderness there is neither seed nor fruit, water nor growth. Man cannot live there. Only frightening and unwanted kinds of animals dwell there. Significantly, when the wilderness is transformed into a paradise no ravenous beast will be in it (Isa. 35:9; Ezek. 34:23–28). Mark's reference to the wild beasts in v.13 serves to stress the character of the wilderness. Jesus confronts the horror, the loneliness and the danger with which the wilderness is fraught when he meets the wild beasts. Their affinity in this context is not with paradise, but with the realm of Satan. [Lane, 61]

Angels. Both the Greek (*aggelos*) and Hebrew (*mal'ak*) words translated “angel” have the basic meaning “messenger.” Just as earthly rulers needed messengers to carry messages to others before there was the post office and faxes and e-mail, so it was thought that God needed heavenly messengers to carry the divine word to earth. This word occurs five times in Mark.

- Quoting Malachi 3:1, it is the messenger who goes ahead of you, preparing your way (1:2).
- They will be part of the entourage when the Son of Man comes in his Father's glory (8:38) and then they will gather the elect (13:27); but they do not know when that time will be (13:32).
- The risen dead will be like angels (12:25).

The eschatological emphasis on angels could indicate that Jesus with the wild beast is a picture of the peaceful kingdom that is coming. However, it would more likely present a contrast between “wild beasts” and “angels”. The wild beasts are those who would “devour” Jesus. Angels are those who “serve” or “minister” (*diakoneo*) him. Perhaps it is not too important to try and define “angels,” except as those who serve – a key thought in Mark's sense of discipleship

And how do these angels serve? The motif of the angel who guides and helps Israel through the wilderness is prominent in many of the narratives of the first exodus (Ex. 14:19; 23:20 [cited in Mk. 1:2], 23; 32:34; 33:2). The closest parallel to the Marcan account, however, is provided by 1 Kings 19:5–7 where an angel supplies nourishment for Elijah in the barren wilderness. Mark's reference to a plurality of angels indicates that Jesus is sustained by the servants of God. There is no indication in Mark that the service of the angels is withdrawn nor that it serves to mark the termination of the temptation. This is an appropriate description, for the Marcan account of the ministry of Jesus is dominated by his confrontation with demonic forces and the sustaining of temptation. Jesus' obedience to God is affirmed and sustained *in the desert*, the precise place where Israel's rebellion had brought death and alienation, in order that the new Israel of God may be constituted. [Lane, 62]

Entrance into Galilee

¹⁴ After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: ¹⁵ “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.”

Most scholars hold that it is significant that Jesus does not enter upon his own distinctive ministry until after John has been arrested. They suggest that the wording of v.14 is such that Jesus is restrained by God from his ministry of proclamation until the Baptist is removed from the scene. His arrest indicates that the time has come for Jesus to act. Jesus enters into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God.

What is meant by “the gospel of God” is defined by the summary of Jesus' proclamation in 1:15; each element clarifies God's decisive action in sending forth his Son at this particular moment in history. The emphasis upon the fullness of time grounds Jesus' proclamation in the history of revelation and redemption. It focuses attention upon the God who acts, whose past election and redemption of Israel provided the pledge of his activity in the future. Jesus declares that the critical moment has come: God begins to act in a new and decisive way, bringing his promise of ultimate redemption to the point of fulfillment. By sovereign decision God makes this point in time the critical one in which all the moments of promise and fulfillment in the past find their significance in one awesome moment. In

comparison with John's preaching, the distinctive note sounded by Jesus is the emphasis upon fulfillment. Its exact nuance is clarified by the phrase which follows.

What Jesus meant when he affirmed that the kingdom of God had drawn near is nowhere explicitly defined. The emphasis upon the "kingdom," however, links his proclamation to the self-revelation of God in the OT and stresses the continuity between the new and older revelation. In announcing "*the kingdom of God*," the accent falls upon God's initiative and action. The kingdom of God is a distinctive component of redemptive history. It belongs to the God who comes and invades history in order to secure man's redemption. The emphasis falls upon God who *is* doing something and who will do something that radically affects men in their alienation and rebellion against himself.

The kingdom may be proclaimed as near, if God's decisive action in its realization has already begun. John's ministry was centered upon the urgent demand for repentance because God was about to act decisively in bringing among the people "the Coming One." Jesus then proclaims that the kingdom has drawn near, and while his proclamation is veiled, Mark clearly understands that it is Jesus' own appearance which is the decisive event in the redemptive plan of God. The coming of the kingdom remains in the future, but it is certain precisely because God has begun to bring it to pass in the coming of his Son. The announcement that the consummation is at hand affirms that the decisive events in its approach are under way. The Anointed One is already present among the covenant people, and through him the royal act of God in redeeming his people has begun. The kingdom has drawn near, *spatially* in the person of Jesus who embodied the kingdom in a veiled way, *and temporally* because it is the only event which takes place prior to the end. In the person of Jesus men are confronted by the kingdom of God in its nearness. A faithful response to the proclamation of the gospel is imperative.

The summons to "repent and believe in the gospel" is not new, but a fresh reiteration of the word addressed to men through the prophets. But the note of urgency in the summons to repent is sharpened, for now the nature of the gospel is clearer than ever before. The brief parable of the fig tree preserved by Mark in 13:28 echoes Jesus' proclamation that the kingdom *has come near* and clarifies why the nearness of the kingdom imposes radical demands upon men: "When the branch becomes tender and the leaves are about to sprout, you know that the summer *has come near*"; i.e., the summer is *the next thing* that comes. Jesus' action in confronting Satan, sin, disease and death, and subduing nature is the sign that the end stands as the next act of God in man's future. Provision has been made for men to repent, but there is no time for delay. Only through repentance can a man participate with joy in the kingdom when it does break forth. Jesus accordingly calls men to radical decisions. In Jesus men are confronted by the word and act of God; he himself is the crucial term by which belief and unbelief come to fruition. Jesus proclaims the kingdom not to give content but to convey a summons. He stands as God's final word of address to man in man's last hour. *Either* a man submits to the summons of God *or* he chooses this world and its riches and honor. The either/or character of this decision is of immense importance and permits no postponement. That is what repentance is all about. Jesus himself, though veiled in the midst of men, becomes the crucial term by which men enter the kingdom of God, or exclude themselves from it. What he does is the work of God.

Notes

Mark 1:12 *drove*. This is strong language. The Spirit compelled Jesus to go to the wilderness, where he encountered Satan; the encounter was not accidental.

Mark 1:13 *Satan*. He is the great "adversary," as his name indicates. Satan does not play a major role in Mark, although demonic conflict does. After this scene, he is mentioned only in the dispute over the source of Jesus' healing power (3:23, 26), in the parable of the seed (4:15), and in the rebuke to Peter

about Jesus suffering (8:33). Pheme Perkins [586] notes the brevity of Mark’s reference to Satan. While some scholars conclude/presume that Jesus is locked in conflict with Satan throughout the narrative. Perkins notes that Satan rarely appears in the rest of the Gospel as the agent of temptation. And conjectures that Mark probably intends readers to assume that Jesus had already broken Satan’s power before his ministry began.

forty days. It is hard to establish whether this number is symbolic: The Israelite nation wandered for forty years (Num 14:34), and Elijah’s fast (1 Kgs 19:8) and Moses’s time on Mount Sinai (Exod 34:28) both lasted forty days.

among the wild animals. Once again, it is unclear if this detail is symbolic. In Judaism, wild animals were associated with threat or evil; their subjection could represent the defeat of evil and the arrival of the new era (Isa 13:21–22; Ezek 34:5, 8). Alternatively, wild animals at peace picture an idyllic state could be part of a paradise motif (Isa 11:6)

angels. Angels also provided sustenance for Elijah (1 Kgs 19:1–8) and, traditionally, for Adam and Eve (*b. Sanhedrin* 59b; cf. *Apocalypse of Moses* 29:1–6). This divine care also hints that the new era of restored creation was present in Jesus.

Mark 1:14 gospel. The Gr. word *euangelion* repeated in 1:15, forms an *inclusio* with 1:1 and concludes the introduction.

Mark 1:15 the time of fulfillment: The conceptual connection forms another *inclusio* between the beginning and the end of the introduction. ‘The time is fulfillment’ indicates that the threshold of the great future has been reached, that the door has been opened, and the prerequisites for the realization of the divine work of consummation are present, so that now the concluding drama can start. Owing to this, Jesus’ initial proclamation of the nearness of the kingdom seems to speak of a more advanced point of time than that of John who had not yet mentioned the beginning of fulfillment.” Cf. H. Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia, 1962), p. 48: “

Mark 1:15 the kingdom of God: It is not possible to give an adequate exposition of the kingdom of God (*basileia*) within the limits of a simple commentary such as this. The primary meaning of the Aramaic term likely used by Jesus is not properly “kingdom” but “sovereign authority” or “reigning.” Whenever the biblical texts speak of God becoming king the *Targumim* speak of God’s exercise of sovereign authority, and render the Hebrew verb by an Aramaic noun – for example:

Ex. 15:18 “The Lord <i>shall reign</i> forever and ever.”	Targ. Onkelos “The <i>sovereignty</i> of the Lord endures forever and ever.”
Isa. 40:10 “Behold, the Lord will come as a mighty man, and his arm <i>will rule</i> for him.”	Targum “The <i>sovereignty</i> of your God will be revealed.”

Particularly this second example illustrates the interpretation of the Targum: for the Lord to come as a mighty one and for his arm to rule for him signifies the revelation of God’s sovereignty through a saving action. This indicates well the *dynamic* character in the concept of the kingdom: God is he who comes and exercises his sovereign authority in the redemption of men.

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