

# Mark: A Gospel of Empowerment

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## Introduction

In a curious and passionate reading of Mark's gospel it appears that this gospel is a dynamic piece of literature produced by a pragmatic (realistic) and energetic writer who has infused plenty of curiosity, creativity, enthusiasm and power in his description of Jesus, which indeed have fascinated innumerable researchers for further investigation. The present topic, 'Mark: A gospel of Empowerment', has emerged from such a quest to understand the mind of the author of the gospel in regard to his special interest in the empowerment of the poor and the oppressed class.

Many interesting writings have been produced on the Gospel of Mark, but it was the most neglected of all until the era of the modern criticisms. In the past it was generally considered as no more than an abstract of Matthew. The modern criticism has proved that Mark's gospel is the key factor of the Synoptic problem and tradition. The argument of the Markan priority presupposes, and it is almost universally accepted, that this gospel was the earliest written canonical gospel which served as one of the sources of Matthew and Luke.<sup>1</sup>

Despite being one of the rudimentary documents among the synoptic traditions, Mark is very special. Part of its characteristics in delineating the entire story of Jesus in an aptitude and style is depicting Jesus as the one who appeared in awesome power and performed powerful deeds, who imbued empowerment and transformation in the lives of many who were weak, sick and demoralized. In this paper our purpose is to bring out some of those attributive suggestions apparent in the gospel, which may help us, who are doing mission from the underside, in our struggles, achievements and failures.

## Characteristics of Mark

It is always interesting to a reader of Mark to have a fresh look into his characteristics in order to understand the purpose and impact of the gospel. Mark is an amazing storyteller. His narrative strategy gives special emphasis on surprising and powerful stories knit together in a single narration. Mark's presentation is very short, lucid and attractive to his readers.<sup>2</sup> Some of his unique characteristics are:

- (a) His language and use of terminology are based on the real world and people's life situation.
- (b) He gives the readers very minute details of each single pericope making it more instructive, unique and interesting than the other gospels. For example, during the storm *Jesus was in the stern, asleep on the cushion* (Mk. 4:38).
- (c) Mark uses a style of narrating his story spontaneously and uninterruptedly. It will certainly be an amusing experience for anyone who reads the entire gospel

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Raymond E. Brown eds., *The Jerome Biblical Commentary Vol. II* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1987), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Dipankar Haldar, *New Testament Revisited* (Raghabpur: Raghabpur Seva Niketan, 2008), 63.

as a single story uninterruptedly from the beginning till the end. His small narratives and pericopes are meticulously interwoven with frequent use of adverbs and conjunctions. For example, he used *immediately* at least 34 times according to the Revised Standard Version or New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. He begins almost all the small pericopes with *And then* or *And again* and so on. Thus the author gives a continued account of a single large story.

- (d) He has surprise for readers in every narration. He frequently used adjectives like *astounded, astonished, terrified, amazed, perplexed, wondered*, etc. at the climax of almost each pericope. Mark preferred using adjectives like *great, large, whole, all, everyone*, etc., probably as a strategy of an interesting storyteller.

The above mentioned characteristics direct and help us to understand the urgency and determination of Mark in presenting Jesus as a powerful man of action. Mark wanted to present Jesus as a man of ceaseless activities, which have the element of empowerment<sup>3</sup> and which delineate Jesus' powerful acts to lift up and empower the lowly, downtrodden and marginalized people around him.

### Markan Style

<i>Characters</i>	<i>Setting</i>	<i>Plot</i>	<i>Hero</i>
Real	Familiar	Surprise	Full of Action

### Mark Presents Jesus as a Man of Power

Mark is unique in presenting Jesus as a very strong and powerful man from God to speak and do powerful words and deeds which were acknowledged and responded with awe and wonder by his audience. David Rhoads and Donald Michie vividly pointed out that,

In Mark's story – Jesus is empowered by the spirit and is given much more authority... Jesus is so powerful as to be frightening even to his disciples. And his feats of authority against all non-human powers that oppress people become more awesome as the story unfolds: from exorcising a demon, to cleansing a leper by touch, to healing by word alone, to commanding wind and sea, to healing those who touch his clothes, to raising the dead, to providing bread for thousands in a desert – and the astonishment of the other characters guides the reader to respond similarly.<sup>4</sup>

Here we take note of a few scriptural evidences to see how his audience responded to his words and deeds of power. When Jesus came to his hometown he began to preach, and whoever heard him were astounded and said (Mk 6:2), "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!" King Herod commented in great astonishment (Mk 6:14), "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." The display of power was involved in his conflict with the evil spirits, as they were always destructive. John the Baptist prophesied that the one to come after him would be more

<sup>3</sup> Henry Barclay Swete, *The Gospel According to Mark* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1993), 54-60.

<sup>4</sup> Davis Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark As Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 105.

powerful, because he would be armed by the power of the Holy Spirit and with the Spirit of God. Jesus was more powerful than the demons who recognized him as the Son of God and were afraid of him.

## **Mark's Presentation of Jesus as the Messiah**

Mark has a special plan in presenting Jesus the Messiah to the public in two stages. The first stage is the stage of surprise, during which the readers are amazed at Jesus' greatness and power, but they do not yet understand who he really is.

### **Stage of Surprise**

During this stage Mark does not reveal Jesus as the Messiah.<sup>5</sup> For example:

- i) "They (people) were astounded at his teaching." [Mk 1:22]
- ii) "They were all amazed and kept on asking, 'What is this? A new teaching with authority!'" [Mk 1:27]
- iii) They were all amazed and glorified God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'" [Mk 2:12]
- iv) They were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?'" [Mk 4:41]
- v) "... and everyone was amazed." [Mk 5:20]
- vi) "... at this they were overcome with amazement." [Mk 4:42]
- vii) "They were astounded beyond measure." [Mk 7:37]

### **Stage of Messianic Secret**

In this stage, according to Mark's presentation, the Messiah is revealed to some who are repeatedly asked not to tell it to anyone. But the more they are asked to keep it a secret the more they proclaim it to everyone.<sup>6</sup> For example:

- i) "See that you say nothing to anyone." [Mk 1:44]
- ii) "He sternly ordered them not to make him known." [Mk 3:12]
- iii) "Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one, but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it." [Mk 7:36]
- iv) "Do not go back (tell anyone) into the village." [Mk 8:26]

In this process Mark wants his readers to know and acknowledge the power of the Messiah slowly, steadily and amazingly, though there was an urgency of keeping the messianic secrecy. He favors people's discovery and acknowledgement of the Messiah spontaneously and zealously.

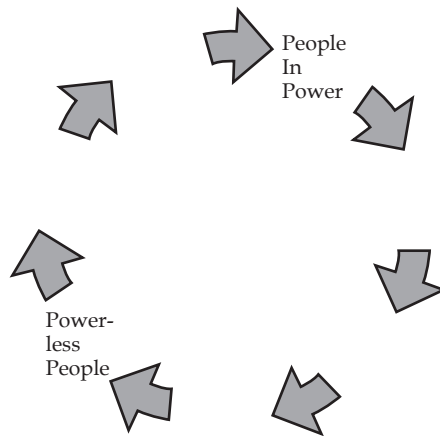
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<sup>5</sup> J.N.M. Wijngaards, *Background to the Gospels* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1993), 39.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 41.

## Mark's Special Concern for the Powerless People

Notwithstanding his outstanding role as a remarkable storyteller, Mark also has a special concern and plan for presenting Jesus as a revolutionary, who worked fearlessly for revolution and change among the powerless people in his society. He saw and presented Jesus as a protagonist against the Pharisees and the so-called power structure of the Temple. In Mark's eye Jesus worked for the empowerment of the downtrodden, outcast and women. Mark describes Jesus as having concern for equal distribution of power among all classes of people. He stresses servanthood, ministerial work and discipleship. He emphasizes the fact that women received legitimacy in following Jesus and in serving and ministering to him and along with him.<sup>7</sup> The ideology of Mark's strategy can be depicted in the following sketch:



In Mark, powerless people are lifted up and given due respect and power in dealings with Jesus, and the so-called power structure gets no importance and becomes demoralized.

## Some Examples of Empowerment in Mark

Some examples of empowerment in Jesus' dealings with people are in the following categories: (i) Physical Empowerment; (ii) Social Empowerment; (iii) Spiritual Empowerment; (iv) Women's Empowerment.

**Physical Empowerment:** In Mk 3:1-16 Jesus' healing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, in spite of the threat of people to accuse him, is an example of many of his physical healing and empowerment stories in which he deliberately wanted to heal and empower the physically challenged people, because he wanted to show to the accusers that doing good and saving life on the Sabbath is more important than only keeping the Sabbath. Mark does not forget to depict the angry face of a powerful Jesus toward his accusers because of their hardness of heart (v. 5). We can also study other examples like hemorrhages healed (Mk 5: 25-34); Jairus' dead daughter made alive (Mk 5:35-42); a deaf can hear (Mk 7:31-37); and a blind can see (Mk 10:46-52). It may seem that Mark has very meaningfully

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<sup>7</sup> P.S. Minear, *Saint Mark* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 54-65

set these stories to emphasize Jesus' all-round healing and empowerment in the human body.

**Social Empowerment:** Mark presents Jesus as the immediate source of life, health, strength and hope for the dead, sick, weak and lost. Hence, in Mark we find Jesus having special sympathy for the oppressed and weaker section of society. In Mk 1:40-52, Jesus' cleansing a man with leprosy is an example of many of his efforts in his ministry which brought social awareness and transformation among people. The person was not only made clean; he was also asked to show himself to the priests to testify to them and give some offerings as Moses commanded. The act of beginning to give offerings by such an outcast person may be seen as a mark of uplift in his social status. We can also study some examples, like Jesus' eating with the sinners and tax-collectors (Mk 2:16-17); Jesus' welcoming the little children (Mk 10:13-16); and Jesus' condemning the rich (Mk 10:17-27). These are some of the instances where we find Jesus had indeed empowered the outcast, the children and the poor.

**Spiritual Empowerment:** In Mk 2:27, Jesus' pronouncement, "The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath" is a strong revolutionary statement in the context of spiritual dryness resulting from the strict observance of the law and not considering the need of the hour. Other instances of spiritual empowerment for our reckoning are: Jesus' statement, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister and mother" (Mk 3:31-35); Jesus' healing a Gerasene demoniac while two thousand swine were destroyed (Mk 5:1-13), and Jesus' healing a boy with evil spirit (Mk 9:14-29).

**Women's Empowerment:** In Mk 1:29-34, Jesus' healing Simon Peter's mother-in-law can be cited as an example of how a woman is empowered in the presence of Jesus, physically, socially and spiritually. When she was in bed with fever, Jesus came and *took her by the hand and lifted her up*. Mark continues to report emphatically that the *fever left her and she began to serve them*. A man taking a sick woman by his hand and lifting her up and the same woman rising from her sick bed and immediately serving the guests at table is, indeed, a revolutionary act done by Jesus in that context.<sup>8</sup> Mark has a special interest in mentioning that the *power* had gone forth from Jesus to the woman who had been suffering from hemorrhage and was healed as she touched his garment (Mk 5:30). Mark has shown clearly how women could be his followers and useful instruments in his ministry. Here he reports that some women, who were standing at a distance and looking at everything that had happened during Jesus' crucifixion, *used to follow him and provided for him*. These women were from Galilee, a Gentile territory which was called an unclean land. It is also reported that *they came up with him to Jerusalem*, which is a holy land. Here we find a dramatic ascending of some women from Galilee, following the footsteps of Jesus through their service and reaching up to Jerusalem, which certainly is a commendable empowerment of women in their inexorable march from Galilee to Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup> They were so much empowered that they could fearlessly go for anointing the body of Jesus very early in the morning and find his tomb empty and at last find the risen Lord, before any of the men could do. We can also mention the examples of Jesus' appreciation of a widow's offering

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<sup>8</sup> Notes from a dialogue on Mark's Gospel with Ched Myers, author of *Binding the Strong Man*, arranged by SATHRI at Bangalore, 3 March, 1995.

<sup>9</sup> David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark As Story...*, 68-70.

(Mk 12:41-44), anointing of Jesus' feet by Mary of Bethany and Jesus' acknowledgement of it as an act worth proclaiming in the whole world (Mk 14:3-9).

## **Mark Presents Jesus a Revolutionary**

Mark presents Jesus as a revolutionary. The Gospel of Mark portrays Jesus as a very strong and powerful man of action. In this gospel Jesus is not afraid of the so-called powerful people of society. Rather, he de-legitimizes and demoralizes them at the spot. Let us examine the narrative of the man with a withered hand in Mk 3:1-6. As Jesus entered the synagogue, he found there a man with a withered hand. We do not know whether he asked Jesus to heal him, but Mark tells us that Jesus asked that man to come forward to him. Mark also captivates our attention by informing us that the synagogue authorities were waiting to see whether Jesus heals him on the Sabbath so that they could accuse him because healing on the Sabbath in a public place was not acceptable according to the law. At this crucial juncture the strategy of Mark's Jesus is to ask a vital question to the opponent based on the law to demoralize them. Hence, the question comes, 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?' Mark loves to specially inform us that *they were silent*. Silence may mean being defeated, dumbfounded or showing hardness of heart. Mark here presents Jesus as an angry man, as he reports, 'he looked around at them with anger.' At this the Pharisees conspired to kill him, which was a known fact to Jesus who was not afraid of it.<sup>10</sup>

In Mark Jesus does not have encouraging words for the wealthy. Rather he says, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God' (Mk 10:23).

## **Peter's Influence on Mark**

We can remind ourselves of Papias' statement, which was preserved by Eusebius: "Mark indeed, since he was the interpreter of Peter, wrote accurately, but not in order, the things either said by or done by the Lord as much as he remembered. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterwards, as I have said (heard and followed) Peter who fitted his discourses to the needs (of his hearers).<sup>11</sup> The principal source of Mark's gospel is the preaching and teaching of Peter whose sermon at Caesarea in Acts 10:34-43 is a summary of it. This was supplemented by oral tradition and also Mark's own reminiscences and documentary like 'Ur-Markus,' etc.<sup>12</sup> Peter has a prominent place not only throughout the Gospel of Mark, but also in the life and style of Mark. There are probable similarities between Peter and Mark with regard to their preference and use of words, emotions, ideas, etc.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have made an effort to see how Mark's gospel is knit together with Jesus' words and deeds, which must have empowered the community around him and the readers physically, spiritually, socially and psychologically. In today's contexts in our

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<sup>10</sup> John Hargreaves, *A Guide to St. Mark's Gospel* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1988), 50-53.

<sup>11</sup> Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Leicester: Apollos, 1990), 83.

<sup>12</sup> D. Guthrie and J.A.Motyer eds., *New Bible Commentary* (Secunderabad: OM India, 1993), 851.

own countries we still have power structures which continue to oppress the marginalized, downtrodden and outcast. Christian missionaries and believers are being persecuted by religious fanatics. The churches are burnt and people are being reconverted by force. The poor and tribal Christians' lives are at stake. In such contexts can we not expect to see transformations in the lives of all those who are physically, spiritually, socially and psychologically oppressed? Can we not expect the intervention of the same revolutionary Lord who transformed people's lives, including those of the oppressors? Aren't there also some revolutionaries among us who make attempts to fight for justice and peace? Let this study help us, who are doing mission from the underside, in our mission struggles, achievements and failures. May all who suffer oppressions of any kind be empowered by our Lord Jesus Christ to carry on the task that he began – to eradicate all sorts of oppressions from our societies so that the Kingdom of God is established on this earth.

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