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# The Timing of Mark's Gospel

TIMOTHY J. GEDDERT

## Getting Started (What this article is not about)

Most who read the title of this article would imagine I am about to discuss the date of composition of the Gospel of Mark. That is not my agenda, though that is a fascinating question in its own right. It is fascinating because the best clues we have come in an enigmatic chapter that is all about timing, and yet counsels us to shift our focus away from timing.

Mark chapter thirteen is a long speech in response to the disciples' question, "When will these things happen and what is the sign that they are all about to take place?" The disciples want to know about timing, and about the clues that will help them create a reliable calendar for the future. Jesus responds, not by answering their question, but by shifting their focus away from timing to faithful discipleship. When he finally gets around to answering their question, "When?" his answer is, "What do you mean, when? How am I supposed to know when?" Well, actually he says it like this: "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:4,32).

This enigmatic chapter seems to say, "Timing? Don't ask! You can't know!" And yet, ironically, this chapter yields interesting clues as to the timing of the Markan composition. But, as I say, this article is not about that.

## Preoccupation with "Time"

This article is actually about the "pacing" of Mark's narrative. Before we focus directly on that, observe the extraordinary importance Mark seems to place on time references:

The first word of the Gospel is "*archē* (beginning; 1:1), though (as we shall see) it is not quite clear *what* is the beginning of *what*!

Jesus' own first words are, "The time has come" (1:14).

References to particular days of the week (especially Sabbath) are abundant.

Sequences of events are carefully marked and often these serve subtle theological purposes. For example, the fact that "*Elijah must come first*" (9:11,12) serves not only to highlight John the Baptist's role as forerunner of Jesus, but helps set up Mark's "relay race" approach to Gospel proclamation. After John is "handed over," Jesus' ministry begins (1:14). After Jesus is "handed over," the first eye-witnesses proclaim the Gospel (14:9,10). After Jesus' first followers are "handed over," the Gospel is preached to all nations (13:9,10).

Often the point of the text emerges only when time references are carefully observed. Here are two brief examples:

- "That evening after sunset" (1:32) – Ah yes, the Sabbath has ended. Pious villagers of Capernaum can now be about the business to which Jesus has been attending already on the Sabbath, in violation of their Sabbath laws!
- "About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake" (6:48) – So why exactly did Jesus wait all night, if he knew already in the evening that his disciples were struggling at sea? And, by the way, having come, why did he intend to walk past them? And why he did not then follow through on his intentions? (cf. 6:49-51)

Often days are carefully counted off – "after three days" (8:2); "after six days" (9:2); "two days away" (14:1) – though often the purpose

for these is revealed only gradually as we watch patterns emerge in Mark's narrative, or see how and why he is alluding to Old Testament precedents.

Mark makes lots of fascinating references to "time," but as already indicated, my real interest in this paper is with the pacing of Mark's Gospel.

### **Time to Focus**

Mark's first word "beginning" and Jesus' first words "the time has come" announce an ambiguous new start, with lots of hints (but only hints) of where it will all lead. Then come almost eight chapters of fast-paced narrative punctuated with the Greek word "*eutheōs*" ("immediately"). Following immediately are just over two chapters that slow the pace down to walking speed, as Jesus teaches his disciples "*on the way*." These chapters are followed by several that chronicle the day-by-day activities of Jesus' final week. And then the pace slows even further, as Mark clocks off each three hour time block from sunset Thursday evening all the way through to the onset of Sabbath at sundown Friday evening. Mark's final short chapter brings the entire narrative to a standstill. After the Sabbath rest, Mark leads the reader along with a few faithful disciples to the tomb where Jesus had lain. When all the characters run from the scene, the narrative simply stops. The reader is left standing there, asking, "What next?" And Mark's Gospel seems to whisper, "That is up to you. *The time has come!* I've done my part. The rest is up to you!"

The preceding long paragraph represents an extended thesis statement for this article. In what follows, I want to document what I have claimed above, and point out some of the fascinating implications of what Mark does with "time" in his Gospel.

### **It All Begins Here (1:1-15)**

Mark's Gospel was once judged to have been written by an inept author, too clumsy to realize when the text failed to communicate clearly. Gradually

scholars have discovered it was they, not Mark, who were failing to dig deeply into the content. The Gospel of Mark is in fact a subtle narrative with lots of deliberately polyvalent expressions, designed, it seems, to draw the reader/hearer into active listening, even if clear and simple claims are not usually provided.

At all begins with the first word “beginning.” “The beginning of the Gospel” could of course be interpreted as saying no more than, “OK, let’s get started!” But Mark obviously means more – far more! Reading verse one in the light of the next two verses suggests that Mark might be saying: “It all began when the prophets of old announced in advance that a messenger would prepare the way for God to come.” Reading it in the light of the five verses after that suggests Mark might be saying: “It all began with the ministry of John, the forerunner (just as the prophets had said it would).” Reading it in the light of verses 9-13, it seems to say: “It all began with Jesus’ baptism, commissioning and temptation.” Reading it in the light of the two following verses, it seems to say: “It all began when Jesus announced the arrival of God’s kingdom.” And reading it in the light of the first recorded incident of Jesus’ ministry, it seems to say, “It all began when Jesus first recruited followers to join him as people of the kingdom.” So of all these options, which did Mark intend to reference?

Or does Mark mean something else altogether? Perhaps for Mark *the whole narrative* to follow is “the beginning of the Good News.” Mark writes a narrative so that the Christians in his day will know “how it all began” – so that they, in their turn, can continue that Gospel narrative through their own responses.

I do not think Mark means *one* of these things; I think he means *all of them*. God is a God of new beginnings. And the advent of Jesus, in all its parts and with all its implications, represents the greatest new beginning since Genesis opened with the words, “In the beginning!”

Mark 1:14 provides us with the same open-ended announcement of newness. “The time has been fulfilled!” It is a verb in the perfect tense and in the passive voice. Since grammatical conventions are “Greek” to most people these days, and since “Greek grammar” is especially “Greek,” here’s what that

means. The passive is a subtle hint, but only a hint, that “God did it!” God was at work in history, setting the stage for this time of fulfillment. And the perfect tense, almost untranslatable into English, says all of the following: “Something happened in the past; that something has implications for the present; and now I am focusing not so much on what got us here, but where we stand today!” No English verb tense can do justice to all that!

And all of the above does not even broach the topic of what Jesus meant by “time” (“*kairos*”). It’s not so much about calendars and clocks as it is about purposes and destinies: “We stand on the threshold of the new thing God has planned; and it starts today!” And Jesus next line, “the Kingdom of God has drawn near,” leaves us with a whole new set of challenging questions: What is the Kingdom of God? How near has it drawn? Near in time or space? Again Mark uses the perfect tense: “Something has happened and that changes everything!”

It all begins now – even though God has been working on this project since the creation of the earth. What project? Well, keep reading, Mark hints. If you will change your life’s direction (“Repent!”) and follow Jesus with conviction and courage (“Believe!”), you too will experience this new thing, this “Good News of Jesus.”

That is how Mark’s Gospel begins – full of announcements, only they all seem to say more than any one interpretation of them can capture. Having broadcast his announcement of “new beginnings,” Mark narrates how that looks in the lives of four fishermen and then countless others after them.

### **A Fast-Paced Narrative That Gives us Pause! (1:16 – 8:26)**

Mark 1:16 opens a breath-taking series of events in the ministry of Jesus. Before the chapter is over, Jesus will have called four disciples to follow, taught and cast out demons in a synagogue, healed specific individuals like Peter’s mother-in-law and an unnamed leper, carried on a broad healing ministry, spent time alone in prayer and challenged his disciples to re-think their priorities.

This is a fast-paced set of diverse episodes, usually linked together with little more than the Greek adverb “*eutheōs*” (immediately). Occasionally Mark substitutes the alternative, *euthus*. It's the first word used in conveying the disciples' response to Jesus' summons to follow: “*Immediately* they left their nets and followed” (1:18). And it's the first word in Mark's narrative of Jesus' Galilean ministry: “Having come to Capernaum, *immediately* on the Sabbath he went to the synagogue and began to teach.” Mark's use of *eutheōs* is so pervasive that English translators are at a loss what to do with the redundancy. Sometimes they vary the translation from “immediately” to “without delay” (1:20) or to “as soon as” (1:29; 4:15,29; 6:54) or to “at once” (1:12,43; 4:16; 5:30; 6:25) or to “quickly” (4:5; 4:17) or to “at this” (7:35), or more often than any of these, they just omit it (1:10, 21,28,30,31; 2:2,12; 3:6; 5:2,36; 8:10).

The statistics are impressive. This adverb appears less than 100 times in the entire New Testament (actually on average about once every three chapters). Almost half of these are in the first half of Mark's Gospel, where Mark uses it an average of five times per *chapter*. It's breath-taking! But what does it mean? Earlier commentators mistook that redundancy for evidence that we are dealing here with a rather unskilled author, one whose vocabulary was too small to avoid impossible redundancy . . . or as evidence that Mark is running a slide-show at three times the appropriate speed, perhaps hoping nobody looks too closely at the details! But that was when scholars still thought they were more clever and subtle than Mark.

It now appears as though Mark is choosing this, among other methods, to tie together narrative elements that on the surface seem disparate, but that he intends to use as part of a larger teaching pattern. One example must suffice here.

In 8:10, Jesus has just fed 4000 people with seven loaves and a few fish. Mark reports, “*Immediately* he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha.” A few verses later Jesus converses with his disciples about this and the previous feeding miracle, but not before inserting a short narrative in which the Pharisees ask for a sign and are refused. The

incident seems to intrude into an otherwise coherent context, until we realize its crucial role, providing the reader with hints as to the main point of this whole section of Mark.

Having left the sign-seeking Pharisees, Jesus again gets into the boat with his disciples, and the reader wonders what he is up to this time. The last time Jesus miraculously fed a crowd (6:30-44), the narrator made very clear that Jesus did *not* leave with his disciples in the boat, and then, when he saw they were in trouble, did *not* immediately come to their rescue, indeed when walking on the lake, did *not* intend to rescue them at all. These separations and delays were essential for the lesson that Jesus was aiming (unsuccessfully it turns out) to teach his disciples on that occasion.

Mark is at pains to point out how obtuse the disciples are to all that is going on. They have completely misunderstood the implications of Jesus' miracle-working power. They apparently believe that Jesus' miracles are available on demand. If we are hungry, no problem, Jesus can multiply bread for us. If we are in danger, no problem, Jesus will rush to our rescue. Last time already, Mark explicitly told his readers the disciples were simply not getting it. "They were completely amazed; for they had not understood about the loaves" (6:51,52).

Now Mark will show his readers that Jesus does not always abandon his original intentions when the disciples fail to understand. Last time he wanted to "pass by them" to assure them he knew and cared, even while they battled the waves. This time he will refuse to do the miracle they want, for their need is far greater than they realize. They think they are just short on bread; he knows their eyes and ears are far more in need of help than their mouths and stomachs.

Perhaps my reader is asking, "Where are you finding all that in the narrative?" My response: "between the lines!" But that is where Mark is inviting us to look. He first narrates the second feeding miracle. With a strategic "*eutheōs*" he ties the next incident to it. The disciples dare not become like Pharisees, demanding "signs" but not being willing to change their lives (8:11,12). So Jesus warns the disciples against that kind of "yeast" (8:15). The occasion? It seems the disciples were craving a picnic on the lake and blaming each other



for forgetting the picnic basket (8:14-16). Jesus' warning against sign-seeking preempts the obvious: They are about to ask Jesus to multiply their one little loaf and all will be well! Jesus makes it clear: Miracles are not available on demand, neither to satisfy our craving for the spectacular (the Pharisees' desire), nor to turn life into a picnic (the disciples' desire). And Mark weaves disparate elements together to make the point. We could sketch the text like this. (The reversing pattern is technically called a chiasm.)

- A • Jesus Miraculously Feeds a Crowd (8:1-10)
- B • Jesus Refuses to Give a Sign (8:11-13)
- B' • Jesus Warns Against Sign-Seeking (8:14-15)
- A' • Jesus Calls His Followers to Understand the Feeding Miracles (8:16-21)

But the text is very specific about the exact nature of the disciples' problems are. A short quiz reveals that they have perfect memories (8:18-20); so obviously the problem is with their ability to understand. "Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?" (8:18). It seems as if both Jesus and Mark are just being critical, until the perceptive reader notices that all this is just part of an even more elaborate textual pattern. The challenge to the disciples to see and hear is matched by a promise. Jesus can open deaf ears! Jesus can open blind eyes! And so Mark builds a framework around his already carefully structured teaching patterns. The larger pattern looks like this:

- A • Jesus Heals Deaf Ears (7:31-37)
- B • Jesus Miraculously Feeds a Crowd (8:1-10)
- C • Jesus Refuses to Give a Sign (8:11-13)
- C' • Jesus Warns Against Sign-Seeking (8:14-15)
- B' • Jesus Calls His Followers to Understand the Feeding Miracles (8:16-21)
- A' • Jesus Heals Blind Eyes (8:22-26)

As I have written elsewhere:<sup>1</sup>

Jesus literally “surrounds” his struggling disciples with hints that he can heal deaf ears and blind eyes. In fact, the good news is made even more specific by the nature of the miracle that closes this section. Jesus can even give a second touch to those who can see, but without understanding, like the man who could see people as trees; like the disciples who had the facts of the feeding miracles perfectly memorized, but had failed to understand the significance; like Peter who, in the very next text, correctly identifies Jesus as the Messiah (8:29) and then immediately reveals that he doesn’t know what that really means (8:32).

Of course not all of the above is encoded in an otherwise innocent use of the adverb “*eutheōs*.” But a strong case can be made that Mark’s technique of tying together disparate elements into a structured teaching unit (signaled, among other ways, through the use of “*eutheōs*”) has the cumulative effect of saying: Yes, indeed, Jesus was hastening to do the works of the Kingdom. But don’t forget to pause and ask, “What might I be missing here?”

And then it occurs to the reader that Jesus has already summarized his whole Galilean proclamation with the words, “The Kingdom of God has drawn near.” And that Mark has now finished narrating the entire Galilean ministry and has never once referred explicitly to the Kingdom, neither as narrator, nor in the recorded speeches of Jesus, the only exception being in one puzzling parable chapter where we are told that the Kingdom is coming *secretly* (see 4:11,26,30). So has the Kingdom drawn near or not? Is it the main theme of Jesus’ teaching or is it not? Perhaps not only the disciples are rubbing their eyes, sticking their fingers in their ears and asking, “What are we missing?”

It is hard to keep up with Jesus’ (and Mark’s) pace through the first half of the Gospel. And it is just as hard to pause and reflect deeply enough to catch all that is embedded below the surface and between the lines. But then, I suppose, that is what the already/not yet Kingdom of God is like. It comes cascading

over us, but without eyes and ears to discern its coming, we just might miss it altogether.

### **Half Time: Where Have we Come and Where are we Going? (8:27-30)**

At the middle of Mark's Gospel is a "hinge transition" that closes off the first large block of material and introduces the second. It is the two-stage healing of a blind man in Mark 8:27-30. Unique in all the Gospels, this is the only time Jesus seems to botch his first attempt. A blind man is made to see, but not to understand. People look like trees! It takes another touch before the man can see clearly. Whatever we make of the historical Jesus' purposes in the two-stage event, Mark makes very effective use of it as the transitional unit that closes off Jesus' Galilean ministry and introduces the journey to Jerusalem.

Just as the man sees all things, but nothing clearly, so the disciples have observed all that Jesus has done, but understood nothing clearly. They can recite all the numbers – crowd sizes, supplies used, baskets full of leftovers – but they have not understood. They are still half blind!

But there is more at stake than merely understanding the deeper meaning of the miracles. Their bigger problem is that they do not understand who Jesus is. Along the way, they found themselves asking, "Who then is this?" (4:41). Now they are given an opportunity to take a stand.

In the incident that opens the next section of Mark we hear first their report on how others identify Jesus and then, in the mouth of Peter, their own assessment. "Jesus is the Christ." The reader is tempted to say, "Good for you! You got it!" until they hear Jesus immediately commanding silence, and soon after rebuking Peter for getting it all wrong. He does not get the vocabulary wrong ("Yes, Jesus really is the Christ"), he just gets the meaning all wrong ("Yes, Peter, despite your objections, Jesus really will suffer and die!"). Peter receives the harshest possible rebuke for his failure to truly recognize Jesus and his destiny (8:33). Peter and the others are just like the blind man. Jesus has begun to open their eyes. The data is being collected, but it is not yet understood. They

still see “men as trees walking,” or in their case, “the Messiah as an invincible warrior” (10:52).

Jesus will now lead them on a journey to Jerusalem and to his destiny there. It will not be the disciples who model insight and faithfulness. It will be another healed blind man, as he “immediately (*eutheōs*) receives his sight, and follows Jesus ‘on the road’” (10:52).

### **Discipleship Teaching on the Journey – en tē hodō (Mark 8:27 – 10:52)**

The final three words of the preceding sentence already hinted at Mark’s code words for this journey section – on the road/way (Greek: *en tē hodō*). We are told in 8:27 that Jesus and his disciples traveled to Caesarea Philippi (the northern end of what will become a sustained journey all the way south to Jerusalem). The journey begins in a city dedicated to the earthly emperor. It will end in the city where Jesus is crowned (though mostly in irony) as “King of the Jews.”

Mark’s narrative of this journey begins and ends with exactly the same phrase, “*en tē hodō*” (“on the way”). It is “on the way” that Jesus asks, “Who do people say I am?” (8:27). And it is “on the way” that healed Bartimaeus follows Jesus as he heads for the cross (10:52). If we had only those two occurrences of the expression, we might chock it up as a coincidence and think, “OK, Mark opened and closed the journey section with an identical phrase. He probably didn’t notice!” On closer inspection, however, we discover that it keeps recurring on this journey. It is “on the way” that Jesus explicitly teaches about the coming Passion (10:32); it is also “on the way” that the disciples argue about who will be the greatest (9:33,34). Other things are recorded as happening on the way (and occasionally beside it).

It seems Mark has changed the pace of his Gospel. No longer is Jesus going *immediately* from place to place. (*Eutheōs* occurs rarely in the second half of Mark.) Jesus has now begun a measured journey. Of course this is more than a literal journey. It symbolizes discipleship. After all, the disciples had been recruited to follow behind Jesus. He now shows them where the journey is

leading. And he teaches them “on the way” how to prioritize “divine thoughts” rather than “human thoughts” (see 8:33). A careful look at the structure of this journey section reveals the following as the macro picture:

- A • The Healing of a Blind Man (8:22-26) . . . “Hinge Transition”
- B • Confession of Jesus as the Christ (8:27-30)
- C • Discipleship Teaching “on the Way” (8:31 – 10:45)
- B’ • Confession of Jesus as the Christ (10:46-48)
- A’ • The Healing of a Blind Man (10:49-52)

But there is much more detail to this when the large middle section is examined more closely. Mark has punctuated the journey with a thrice-repeated pattern of three elements, and then he interspersed a series of incidents designed to teach faithful discipleship in relation to a host of important topics. The larger pattern looks like this:

### **Outline of the discipleship journey teaching section (8:31 – 10:45)**

#### **FIRST UNIT**

1. Jesus’ First Passion-Resurrection Prediction (8:31)
2. The Mutual Rebuke by Peter and Jesus (8:32-33)
3. Jesus Teaches About the Nature of Discipleship (8:34—9:1)
  - \* The Transfiguration (9:2-8)
  - \* The Coming of Elijah (9:9-13)
  - \* Casting Out an Unclean Spirit (9:14-29)

#### **SECOND UNIT**

1. Jesus’ Second Passion-Resurrection Prediction (9:30-31)
2. The Disciples Misunderstand and Argue About Greatness (9:32-34)
3. Jesus Teaches About True Greatness (9:35-37)
  - \* An Unknown “Exorcist” (9:38-40)
  - \* Sayings About Water, Fire, and Salt (9:41-50)

- \* Marriage and Divorce (10:1-12)
- \* Jesus Blesses Children (10:13-16)
- \* The Rich Man (10:17-22)
- \* Rich People and the Kingdom (10:23-27)
- \* Gaining True Riches (10:28-31)

### **THIRD UNIT**

1. Jesus' Third Passion-Resurrection Prediction (10:32-34)
2. The Misguided Request of James and John (10:35-40)
3. Jesus Teaches About Authority and Service (10:41-45)

The triple pattern includes first a passion-resurrection prediction, then clear evidence that the disciples just do not get it and are thus on a completely different wavelength than Jesus, and then positive discipleship teaching, showing the disciples the true nature of this journey we call discipleship.

Limited space prevents a careful look at the implications of all this. Suffice it to say:

Mark has very carefully structured his narrative so that meaning clues are found not only within textual units but between them, in the patterns they create, in the cross-referencing they invite, and in the themes they develop.

Mark has used this section of his Gospel to develop the themes of Christology (who is Jesus), the Passion (Jesus must die and rise again), and Discipleship (our calling is to follow Jesus faithfully on the road through the cross to glory).

The pace of Mark's Gospel has been deliberately slowed from a fast-paced multi-faceted ministry, with incidents tied together through

“*eutheōs*”, to a sustained and measured narrative of a journey, where everything happens “on the way” (*en tē hodō*).

And then we arrive at Jerusalem, and everything changes once more!

### **Faithfulness Day by Day (Mark 11:1 – 14:16)**

Space limitations require me to keep this section very short. Most of the major lessons in this section revolve around Jesus' accusation of the religious leaders, “You have made [the temple] a ‘den of robbers’” (11:17). We see it in Jesus' aggressive action of “cleansing” the temple. We see it both in his clever silence (11:33) and his subtle speech (12:1-12), as he defends his authority while stripping the Jerusalem establishment of theirs. We see it in a whole variety of ways in which the leaders demonstrate their unfaithfulness to God.

The problem is not only that the leaders permitted merchandizing in the temple (and probably robbed pilgrims by overpricing because of their monopoly on certified unblemished sacrificial animals). They had truly turned the temple into a robber's den. A “den of robbers” is not so much where robbers commit their crimes. It is the place they run to for refuge and immunity after robbing everywhere else. That is precisely what Jesus accuses his religious opponents of doing.

They not only rob Jewish pilgrims by excessive profit-taking (11:15-17) but in doing so rob the Gentiles of their place of prayer (11:17b). They rob God of love (12:28-34), of honor (12:38-40), indeed of all that rightfully belongs to God, their lives (12:17) and the fruit of their labor (11:13; 12:1-8). They even rob widows of their houses (12:40), robbing the very ones who offer to God all that they have (12:44).

Alongside Jesus' judgments on the evildoers around him, he provides positive discipleship teaching for those who have been following – well, at least they have been physically following; their true faithfulness to Jesus is being tested at every turn, and often found wanting.

In the midst of it all, Jesus gives glimpses of what a true fellowship of believers ought to be like. It is a community that trusts together, prays together,

forgives generously, and bears fruit for God's Kingdom (see esp. 11:20-25; 12:29-33).

The framework for all this is what we have come to call "Easter Week." But it turns out that the very concept of an "Easter Week" depends on Mark's strategies for pacing his Gospel. The journey to Jerusalem is over. Now Jesus begins his daily activities in Jerusalem. It starts with the so-called "Triumphal Entry" on the Sunday before Easter. But we would have no way of knowing that this event happened on a Sunday if Mark had not ticked off every day in this last week of Jesus' earthly life.

He does not begin with time references, but he will supply enough information later that we can peg down the day of Jesus' protest ride into the city. We're simply told that Jesus performed the prophetic action of riding into Jerusalem on a donkey (11:1-10), thus signaling that the time of peaceful victory had come (Zech. 9:9,10). But then the time references begin. We are informed "on the next day" (11:12) Jesus cleared out the temple changers. Then we are told, "when evening came he left the city" (11:19). Then "in the morning" (11:20) he and his disciples conversed about the fig tree he had "cursed" the day before. At this point Mark drops just enough hints that we can discern in this tree a symbolic reference to the "all leaves – no fruit" religious establishment in Jerusalem that was robbing God at every turn.

The day that began with conversation about the cursed tree is filled with numerous conflict situations at the temple and ends with a long discourse about "End Time Faithfulness," delivered by Jesus as he leaves the city later in the day (13:1). But which days are being counted off in the preceding chapters would remain a mystery if Mark had not opened the next chapter with the next time reference: "Now the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away" (14:1). As Jews counted days, it must now be Wednesday (the two days being Wednesday and Thursday; the Passover meal on Thursday evening counts as already being Friday). That makes it possible to date the events of the entire week, backwards and forwards: Triumphal Entry (Sunday); Clearing out the Temple (Monday); Controversy and Teaching (Tuesday); Din-



ner at Levi's House (Wednesday); Preparations for the Passover (Thursday); the Meal itself (Friday; i.e. after sundown on Thursday).

We could go on with references to what happens Friday, Saturday and Sunday, but that belongs to the next sections where Mark again changes the pace . . . counting off, not only individual days, but every three-hour block of time, from the start of the Passover meal until Jesus' burial.

Why does Mark do this? Surely the whole pacing of the Gospel is not one grand coincidence, with Mark never noticing that he was dropping just enough clues to reconstruct all this. But if it is intentional, then it is for a purpose. Space forbids detailed discussion of potential purposes, but I will mention one. I suspect one of Mark's goals is to provide the equivalent of what Luke emphasizes with Jesus' statement: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). In Mark's Gospel, Jesus models and teaches daily *discipleship* all the way through the Passion Week. This becomes even more evident as we examine Mark's narrative about how the week ends.

The purpose for Mark's intricate time references in the next block of material seems transparent (though not without being subtle!), but only after the pattern is discovered (or pointed out). It is a pattern that slowly reveals itself as we examine the material from 14:17 through to the end of the crucifixion narrative.

### **Keep Watch! (Mark 14:17 – 15:46)**

I have written in detail about the "Four Watches" elsewhere, so with the publisher's permission, I draw heavily on that material here.<sup>2</sup>

Mark tells the story of Jesus' last night before his crucifixion in dramatic form, indeed presenting four distinct scenes, each contrasting faithful Jesus with those around him who are not faithful.

The curtain opens first to a scene in an upper room (14:17-26). Here we see a contrast between Judas, who would sell his innocent Lord for mere money, and Jesus, who gives his own life-blood to buy back the guilty. Scene two takes place in a garden on the Mount of Olives (14:27-52). Here the contrast is

between disciples who sleep and their master who watches and prays. As a result, he is ready for “the hour;” they, by contrast, strike with the sword and flee into the night. Scene three takes place at the high priest’s home where two people are on trial (14:53-72). Jesus stands before the Jewish High Court and is willing to lose his life (to save it; cf. 8:35), making the confession that leads to his death sentence. Simultaneously in the courtyard below, Peter is on trial before a servant girl. Desperately trying to save his life, he risks losing it by denying his Lord. In contrast to his courageous, truth-speaking Lord, Peter is a coward who lies through his teeth. Scene four takes place before Pilate (15:1-15). Here Jesus stands in contrast both to rejecters and to would-be followers. The whole religious establishment of Israel rejects the King of the Jews in order to preserve the status quo. By contrast, Jesus willingly goes the way of the cross to institute something new. Though it costs him everything, Jesus continues on the road to the cross; those who had been called to follow on that road have long since abandoned him.

These scenes present a profound composite picture of what discipleship really means: self-giving service on behalf of others (scene one), prayer and trust in times of testing (scene two), faithful confession whatever the cost (scene three), and nonconformity to this world’s systems in obedience to the Father (scene four). They combine to demonstrate to all others to live up to their calling: Judas, the three closest disciples, Peter—indeed, all who should have followed, but in the end abandon or reject Jesus. And they combine to say that though every person may fail, Jesus is faithful. Only he gives his life unreservedly for others (scene one); only he submits totally to God’s will and casts his life fully into God’s hands (scene two); only he lives by the truth he had preached – that those who save their lives will lose them and those who lose their lives will save them (scene three). Only he fulfills the call of God to walk the full journey to the cross, accomplishing God’s will (scene four). Those around Jesus act in self-interest, sleep in the crisis, strike out in terror, flee into the night, deny their Lord, and abandon him in his final suffering.

Now all that is quite transparent in Mark's text. But not until Markan interpreters started to realize how subtly Mark had built intricate patterns into his text, did anyone realize how significant the time references were in the texts. If we look closely, we discover that each of the four scenes covers a three-hour time period.

Two of the time indicators are easy to find, though they stand out more clearly in the original language than they do in English. Two of them are more subtle.

The first scene opens with the first time indicator "*in the evening*" (14:17). The term in Greek is *opsia*. It is a technical term used to denote the first watch of the night as observed by the Roman occupational troops. It covers the time period from 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm. The fourth scene also opens with a time indicator "very early" (15:1). The term in Greek is *prōi*, denoting the last watch of the night. It covers the time period from 3:00 am to 6:00 am.

What about scenes two and three? The time indicators there may not be quite as obvious, but they are there. In Gethsemane, Jesus leaves his disciples three times to pray for one hour (see 14:37,41). The time period would thus be from 9:00 pm to midnight. When he is finished, he announces, "The hour has come." It is the midnight hour, not only on earthly clocks, but also on God's eschatological timetable. "The Hour" was a technical Jewish term for the time of the Lord's activity.

"The midnight hour" was especially significant. At that very hour, long ago in Egypt, God's angel came down to deliver the Israelites. Each year as Passover was celebrated, God's people looked back to that act of deliverance and forward to the one God had promised. Indeed, many Jews believed it would be at midnight during one of the Passover celebrations that God's Messiah would come to deliver Israel again. On this particular Passover celebration, something does happen at midnight. Throughout Jerusalem, disappointed celebrants are making their way home with a resigned, "Maybe next year." But in Gethsemane, Jesus makes the great announcement – "The Hour has come!" The time of waiting has ended. God's deliverer has come, not to kill God's enemies, but to die for them. It is the midnight hour (*mesonuktion* in Greek) ... and, inci-

dentally, the technical term for the second of the scheduled “watches” of the Roman night.

That is three of the four night watches: “evening” in the upper room; “midnight” in Gethsemane; and (skipping one) “early” at Pilate’s hall. But is there also a time marker for the scene we missed, that third watch where Jesus and Peter are on trial? There is indeed. Perhaps modern urbanites overlook it; rural people probably do not. I live near enough to the edge of town that I sometimes hear a rooster crow in the early morning. So did Peter! It woke him up to what he had done and started him on the road towards repentance. What Mark’s first readers would have known was that the term “cock-crow” (*alektorophōnia* in Greek), was more than the name of a sound; it was the name of the third watch of the night.

The time indicators are all there, subtle to be sure, but embedded in the text either by direct reference or by allusion. And none are without symbolic significance. Truly it was “evening” (a time when things turned dark indeed) as Jesus faced betrayal by one of his own followers. It was “midnight” (the hour of God’s intervention and deliverance) as Jesus became the Passover lamb who would die for the people. It was “cock-crow” (a wake-up call) as Peter realized he had denied his Lord. And it was “early/at dawn” (the dawn of something new) when Jesus picked up his cross to face his destiny.

Why does all this matter? Well, beyond just providing an effective structure for telling the story and teaching discipleship, Mark drops just enough hints that what he is really doing is teaching all would-be followers, till the End of the Age, what it means to stick with Jesus faithfully and thus be ready for the return of the Son of Man.

How does Mark make this point? By ending his long chapter on “End Time Discipleship” with a parable that calls everyone to be faithful: “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back, in the *evening*, or at *midnight*, or when the *rooster crows*, or at *dawn*” (13:35).

Mark is writing to a persecuted community, calling them to be faithful to their Lord. They must not betray their Lord as Judas did (scene one – in the

*evening*). They must not sleep or strike out or flee in the crisis as the disciples did (scene two – at *midnight*). They must not, out of fear, deny their Lord as Peter did (scene three – *when the rooster crowed*). And they must not hide in the religious establishment like the religious leaders did, nor abandon their master in the end like the disciples (scene four – at *dawn*).

On the contrary, they must follow Jesus in a life of self-denial (scene one), prayer and trust in God (scene two), courageous confession before the world (scene three) and nonconformity even at the cost of their lives (scene four). If they will be faithful disciples, they will be ready for the return of their master, in whichever watch of the night he might appear. All that, amazingly, is encoded in the text by means of time references, four three-hour blocks of time that define the night during which Passover was fulfilled!

Without taking time to explore the significance of the next four “watches,” we should at least notice how Mark clocks them off in his text.

After Jesus is condemned by Pilate “very early” (15:1; remember that names the fourth watch of the night, from 3:00 – 6:00 am), we learn that “it was the third hour when they crucified him” (15:25). That means that the time from sunrise through 9:00 am was filled with soldiers’ mockery and the procession to the cross. In this “watch” Jesus takes the place of the guilty (Barabbas) and Simon carries Jesus’ cross. These are symbols and interpretations of both the substitutionary death of Jesus and the cost of discipleship.

The next time reference indicates that “at the sixth hour (i.e. noon) darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour (i.e. 3:00 pm)” (15:33). Thus Mark reveals that the triple mockery of passersby, religious leaders and fellow victims filled the period from 9:00 am till noon, darkness from noon till 3:00 pm, and finally Jesus’ final heart-rending (and temple curtain rending) cry and his death between 3:00 and 6:00 pm.

Mark even makes it clear that “as evening approached” (15:42), preparations were made for Jesus’ burial so that Jesus completed his earthly life and mission just before Sabbath began at sundown.

Why all these time references? Because each represents a “watch” and Jesus has repeatedly told his disciples, “Keep watch!” (e.g. 13:33,35,37; 14:34,37,38). Mark has slowed his narrative down from “*eutheōs*” (immediately!), through the measured journey (“on the way”), through day-by-day discipleship teaching, now down to three hour blocks of dramatic fulfillment and detailed instruction in word and deed, so that Jesus’ followers know what it means to be faithful as they “watch” for the Son of Man’s return. It remains only to see how Mark ends his narrative.

### **Standstill and a New Beginning (16:1-8)**

Readers who are not yet aware that Mark’s Gospel originally ended at 16:8 are encouraged to explore that issue in study bibles or commentaries. Mark 16:8, as puzzling as it may seem, is now widely recognized as the way Mark intended to complete his narrative – no resurrection appearances recounted, just the great announcement that Jesus has risen (16:6), and the report that Jesus’ followers failed to spread the word: “They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.”

This is obviously not the end of the story! But it is where Mark’s *narrative* stops. Mark knows that Jesus’ disciples did finally return to faithfulness and spread the good news. He even alludes to these future events at various points in his narrative. But not here. Here he reports only their first reaction to the message of the resurrection. They were afraid to tell the story and simply ran away. In one garden, it was the men who ran away (14:50). In this one, it is the women (16:1,8).

Jesus called disciples so that they could “be with him” and then “go tell” (3:14). His first followers failed on both counts. But both the women and the men are told that if they go back to Galilee, back to where it all started, and where they can start over again, they will meet the resurrected Jesus, and he will lead them once more (see 14:28; 16:7).

But now we must notice how Mark has “paced” the narrative. This time Jesus is not leading. The women come expecting to find him at the tomb, but

he has already left. And the very last verse of Mark's narrative tells us that the women left too! So who is left standing at the empty tomb? Just the messenger from heaven – and the readers! We have been taken along on this journey. We have moved back and forth in and around Galilee as Jesus taught and delivered, healed and rescued, confronted and commissioned. We have followed Jesus “on the way” from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem. We have observed Jesus teaching day-by-day in Jerusalem through symbolic action and challenging words. We have experienced the four watches of the night and the daytime watches as well, as Mark led us through the Passion. And now we are standing still at the tomb. Everyone is gone, except a messenger saying to us, as he said to others, “He has risen,” “Go and tell,” “Meet Jesus again in Galilee” . . . in other words: This is a new beginning – “the beginning of the Gospel!” “The time has come! The Kingdom of God has drawn near.” And so just as Mark brings his Gospel to a standstill, he sends us back to the beginning and it all starts over again! Jesus has completed his leg of the relay race and passed the baton to his followers. Mark has completed his leg of the race and passed the baton to his readers. It is Mark's way of saying to the reader, “The Time has come!” It's your turn to pick up the baton!

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Double Take*. (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 2007), 67.

<sup>2</sup> *Double Take*, 87-93.