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The cross from a distance

ATONEMENT IN MARK'S GOSPEL

Peter G. Bolt



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Series preface

New Studies in Biblical Theology is a series of monographs that address key issues in the discipline of biblical theology. Contributions to the series focus on one or more of three areas: 1. the nature and status of biblical theology, including its relations with other disciplines (e.g. historical theology, exegesis, systematic theology, historical criticism, narrative theology); 2. the articulation and exposition of the structure of thought of a particular biblical writer or corpus; and 3. the delineation of a biblical theme across all or part of the biblical corpora.

Above all, these monographs are creative attempts to help thinking Christians understand their Bibles better. The series aims simultaneously to instruct and to edify, to interact with the current literature, and to point the way ahead. In God's universe, mind and heart should not be divorced: in this series we will try not to separate what God has joined together. While the notes interact with the best of the scholarly literature, the text is uncluttered with untransliterated Greek and Hebrew, and tries to avoid too much technical jargon. The volumes are written within the framework of confessional evangelicalism, but there is always an attempt at thoughtful engagement with the sweep of the relevant literature.

At a time when many theologians are tempted to depreciate the role of the cross in the canonical Gospels, or at very least to interpret it in highly restricted ways, the sheer barbarity of the cross can still capture the public imagination, as the recent film by Mel Gibson shows – a film that opens by quietly quoting part of Isaiah 53. But the best use of Mel Gibson's work will take place when, as a result of watching his film, viewers turn to Scripture to find out for themselves what the primary sources actually say. And here, in this study of the Gospel of Mark, Dr Peter Bolt is an enormously engaging and informed guide. Section after section of the Gospel comes into sharper focus, as more and more of Mark is read in the light of the movement and direction of its thought. Interwoven with the exegesis

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is a great deal of useful interaction with a wide range of well-chosen literature, and incisive meditation on what this cross-saturated text says to us today. Dr Bolt combines careful reading and profound theological synthesis, all of it shaped to issue a clarion call to eschew idolatry and abandon mere 'religion'. The result is a book that will stimulate and edify any serious Christian reader, and will doubtless become the grist for countless sermons on the Gospel of Mark.

D. A. Carson
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Author's preface

The contents of this book were originally delivered as the 2003 Moore College Annual Lectures at Moore Theological College, Sydney. I am grateful to the acting Principal, Mr Michael Hill, for the invitation to deliver these lectures and for the provision of one term's study leave for their preparation, and to Dr John Woodhouse for his encouragement of me in these plans, which were laid out before he arrived as Principal. I also appreciate the fact that my colleagues on the faculty covered for me in various ways during my extraordinary study leave.

The book has profited from interaction with those who originally attended the lectures. I am also grateful for several generations of Moore College fourth-year students in 'The Atonement in Bible and History' course, who engaged with me in discussion of Mark's views of the atonement. It has been my great privilege to share this class with my colleague Robert Doyle, from whom I have learnt much in regard to God's gracious work of atonement. I am immensely grateful to my two research assistants, Matthew Olliffe and Geoffrey Lin, whose willing work on my behalf made my preparation much easier. Thanks must also go to Don Carson for his perceptive suggestions and quiet encouragements in my preparation of the manuscript for publication.

The strange world of the first century continues to fascinate. A world that would crucify any human being is barbaric, let alone one that would crucify the Son of God. Even though these events seem so far away, this is still our world.

The good news of Jesus Christ is even more fascinating. Our destruction of the Son of God should have driven us further away from God. Instead, in that very event, God came close to us! This is our salvation.

I trust that these explorations into Mark's account of that great event will help others to stand in wonder before the God who has come close to us in the cross of Jesus Christ, and to live in hope of the better things to come.

Peter G. Bolt



Abbreviations

AG	<i>Anthologia Graeca</i> ; W. H. Paton, <i>The Greek Anthology 5</i> , Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1918, reprinted 1979
AV/KJV	The Authorized (King James) version of the Bible, 1611
BAGD	W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich & F. W. Danker, <i>A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , 2nd edn, Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1979
CD	K. Barth, <i>Church Dogmatics</i> , 4 vols., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956–75
CIL	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum</i> , 17 vols., Berlin: de Gruyter, 1863–
Danby	H. Danby (ed.), <i>The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes</i> , Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958
DK	H. Diels & W. Kranz (eds.), <i>Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker</i> . Zurich: Weidmann, 1985
ESV	The English Standard Version of the Bible, 2001
EVV	English versions
fr.	fragment(s)
IG	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae</i> , 47 vols., Berlin: de Gruyter, 1815–
LSJ	H. G. Liddell, R. Scott & H. S. Jones, <i>Greek–English Lexicon</i> , Oxford: Clarendon, 9th edn, 1968
LXX	The Septuagint (Greek version of the Old Testament)
MM	J. H. Moulton and H. Milligan, <i>The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament, Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources</i> , London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1930
MSS	manuscripts

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MT	Masoretic Text
NASB	The New American Standard Bible, 1960–95
NEB	The New English Bible, 1961–70
<i>NewDocs</i>	<i>New Documents Illustrating Early Church History</i> , ed. G. H. R. Horsley, 9 vols., North Ryde, NSW: Macquarie University, 1981–
NIV	The New International Version of the Bible, 1973–84
NRSV	The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, 1989–95
<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologia cursus completus . . . Series graecae</i> , 166 vols., Paris: Petit-Montrouge, 1857–83
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia cursus completus . . . Series prima [latina]</i> , 221 vols., Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1844–65
Q	<i>Quelle</i> (German), a presumed ‘sayings’ source of the synoptic Gospels
RSV	The Revised Standard Version of the Bible, 1952–71
RV	The Revised Version of the Bible, 1881
<i>SVF</i>	H. von Arnim, <i>Stoicorum veterum fragmenta</i> , 3 vols., Leipzig: Teubner, 1903–5
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, 10 vols., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–
TLG	Thesaurus Linguae Graecae database, University of California, Irvine; < http://ptolemy.tlg.uci.edu/~tlg >

Introduction

At nine o'clock in the morning on 3 April in the year now known as AD 33,¹ a Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, was put to death on a Roman cross. That event changed the world. Why?

There were many who proclaimed Jesus' death to the world. Mark was one of them. This series of lectures will explore what Mark has to say about the cross of Jesus Christ.

Why address the topic?

There are several reasons why this is an important topic to address.

The exegetical reason

First, there is simply the exegetical issue. The importance of the cross of Christ to the Gospels, and especially to Mark's Gospel,² has often been noticed. Because they devote so much narrative space to the cross, they have been called 'passion narratives with extended introductions'.³ This is certainly true of Mark. Of sixteen chapters, three are dedicated to the passion narrative (18%), but six more deal with Jesus' journey to the cross (which takes it up to 56%). Even before we get to that journey, the cross of Christ casts its shadow over the early stages of Mark's story.⁴ If the cross has such prominence in Mark, it is worth asking *why* it is so important. What is the significance of Jesus' death to this Gospel that Mark released upon the world so long ago?

¹ The two most likely dates for Jesus' crucifixion are 7 April AD 30 or 3 April AD 33. For the arguments for AD 33, see A. D. Doyle 1941; Maier 1968; Hoehner 1977: chs. 4, 5.

² E.g. the passion is the climax of the Gospel (E. A. Russell 1985: 207); the Gospel is the story of Jesus' death (R. E. Brown 1986: 21); it is 'the Gospel of the cross' (Grassi 2000: ix); the crucifixion is its 'central, focal point' (E. A. Russell 1985: 218).

³ Kähler 1964: 80 n. 11.

⁴ Grassi 2000: 9–12, 16; R. E. Brown 1986: 21; Culpepper 1978: 584; J. B. Green & Baker 2000: 38.

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The polemical reason

Secondly, there is the polemical issue. In the past, one of the marks of Protestantism in general, and of evangelical Protestantism in particular, has been a focus on the cross of Christ. In this tradition, Jesus' death has been understood in a forensic context, as the great event in which the Son of God gave his life as a substitute for us, so that he bore the wrath of God, the due penalty for our sin, instead of us. This view of Christ's work on the cross, often described as the penal substitutionary view of the atonement, has long been criticized by those outside the evangelical tradition. More recently, it has also begun to be criticized by some within evangelicalism.⁵ Even though I shall not often explicitly address the details of this debate, it should be kept in mind as we examine Mark's teaching on the atonement. What contribution can Mark make to this important discussion? The question should not be: Can we squeeze Mark's view of the atonement into a predetermined theory derived from our dogmatics? but rather: Does the theory find any support from Mark? We also need to be open to the fact that our study of Mark may force us to improve our dogmatic formulations. We may, in the end, agree that penal substitutionary atonement is supported by Mark, and at the same time agree that this dogmatic formulation needs to be constantly enriched with the complexity of the biblical data.⁶

The practical reason

Then there is the practical reason. When we seek to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others, what should we say?

Evangelicalism has had a high commitment to evangelism. In the context of evangelistic ministry, it is easy for ministers of the gospel to develop their own favourite ways of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. These can tend towards stereotypical phraseology, and the explanation of Jesus' death can be given in a fairly abstract fashion. Some of the images and illustrations that have been developed within evangelicalism have rightly been criticized for their serious inadequacies – if not heresies! – even though they have had a pride of place in gospel presentations for many years. Once gospel ministers have

⁵ See e.g. J. B. Green & Baker 2000. For a brief overview of the discussion on the atonement within evangelicalism, see Boyd & Eddy 2002: ch. 8. Although Hickinbotham (1944) defends penal substitutionary atonement in Mark's story, he does so from a fairly 'dogmatic' (rather than exegetical) angle.

⁶ This seems also to be N. T. Wright's plea; see 1998: 297.

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developed their own favourite way of presenting the good news, these methods can become like a straight-jacket to gospel preaching. As a friend once said to me, 'I find it hard to say what I want to say from the Gospels.' Should it not be the other way around? If the Gospels are our foundational documents, themselves written to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, then we need to hear what they have to say, and to modify our own presentation of the gospel in line with these original sources. Our presentation of the gospel can only be richer for the experience. How can Mark's teaching on the cross correct and inform our own preaching of the gospel to the contemporary world?

Approach and method

The approach: story, history, theology

It will be my contention in this book that the *details of Mark's story* of the cross should inform our understanding of the meaning of Jesus' death. The Gospel of Mark operates in three arenas, each of which must be taken seriously. It is at one and the same time narrative, history and theology. First, it is a narrative – in fact, a very well-told story, using all the devices of a good storyteller to convey the message of the cross in a holistic, emotion-filled way. But secondly, through that narrative, we gain access to the historical event of Jesus' crucifixion. This most important historical event can be dated: it took place at 9 o'clock in the morning on 3 April in the year now known as AD 33.⁷ The Gospel of Mark tells us many of the historical details of that event. And, thirdly, because God reveals himself in this event through this story, I shall be arguing that it is the very historical details, as reported by Mark's narrative, that display the theological significance of Jesus' death,⁸ that is, the ongoing significance of Jesus' death for all time.

The method

To understand Mark's view of the atonement, I shall adopt the following method.

The cross in Mark's story. Each chapter will attempt to expose what a particular section of Mark's story says about the cross. We

⁷ For details see n. 1 above (p. 13).

⁸ Cf. R. E. Brown 1986: 18: 'Not biography but theology dominated the choice of events to be narrated, and the OT was the theological source-book of the time.'

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shall gradually progress through the Gospel of Mark, enabling us to build up a fairly comprehensive understanding of the death of Jesus.

The informing theology (Old Testament). Because Mark invites readers to understand the story of Jesus in the light of the Old Testament, we shall be paying particular attention to any Old Testament teaching that seems to inform Mark's presentation. Time and again we shall find that the Old Testament provides the theological framework that illuminates and enriches the details of Mark's presentation.

The readers then. Mark's Gospel is a persuasive document. The story of the crucified Christ was evidently written to make an impact upon its readers. As we engage with Mark's message of the cross, we shall therefore, on several occasions, take a brief glance at the first-century Greco-Roman world that Mark sought to persuade.⁹ How would Mark's story of the cross have been heard back then?

The readers now. And finally, as we glance at Mark's message to his early readers, we shall find ourselves looking at our own world too. Mark is a narrative of the historical events surrounding Jesus Christ. But, in the end, these are theological events, because they are God's events. Mark's story therefore still communicates to contemporary audiences. As a narrative, Mark draws us into his story of Jesus. As he does so, we are brought into contact with the historical events in which God has made himself known for all time. Mark's narrative will be explained in the belief that this ancient text still speaks to contemporary readers.¹⁰

⁹ Scholars have long debated whether the Gospels were designed for a Christian or a non-Christian audience. In my view, the Gospels arose in the context of the early Christian mission in order to support the work of this mission; see Bolt 1998a; cf. Bornkamm's (1960: 17) view that the Gospels 'grow out of the proclamation and are in its service', a view endorsed by D. W. B. Robinson (n.d.). Because of the importance of the message about Jesus, any human being is a potential 'audience' for these documents. The story of Jesus was worth the telling, and the ultimate aim in committing the gospel to written, narrative form was to see the world converted to Christ (i.e. an evangelistic purpose). This would take place, however, through anchoring the churches in the events of the gospel (i.e. a proximate goal: nurturing of the Christians), thus enlisting and encouraging them in Christ's mission.

¹⁰ Cf. Grassi 2000: ix: 'All the actual biblical texts should be read slowly and reflectively since they have a power of their own. The ancient method for reading the Bible is to involve yourself so deeply that you feel yourself as part of the story. This means that *you are actually there*. This is not a piece of pious fiction but based on the way the text was written. It was designed as a living drama in which the audience is there as part of the action.'

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The cross at a distance: God up close

At the climax of Mark's Gospel, Jesus hung on the cross, absolutely alone, deserted by God and people. But at that lonely hour, the narrative introduces some characters who have not appeared previously. In Mark 15:40 we read that a group of women were watching the crucifixion 'from a distance' (*apo makrothen*). In a sense, these women can be our point of reference. They are given a stance towards the cross that we ourselves share.

The cross is at a distance. It is an event that occurred long ago, in a world and culture that, in many ways, seem so foreign to our own. But, if we understand this cross correctly, we discover that it is there, in that distant cross, that we see God up close.

Chapter One

The cross and the abolition of religion

The bridegroom in Mark's story of the cross

The cross enters the story

The first overt reference to the cross in Mark is Jesus' parable about the bridegroom who will be taken away (2:19–20).¹ For sure, at this stage in the narrative, this saying may have been rather 'enigmatic' to Mark's readers (Hagner 1998: 100), but it nevertheless points ahead to the climax of the Gospel, when Jesus is crucified.² So that we can understand the contribution this parable makes to Mark's story of the cross, it is important to set it within its narrative context.

Mark's narrative movements

A careful reading of Mark's Gospel reveals that, after a most important prologue, which sets the stage for the story to follow (1:1–13), the narrative has five main movements:

¹ 'Apart from a possible reference in Mk 2.20, there is no saying of Jesus in the first half of the Gospel relevant to his death': Grayston 1990: 164. Some have disputed the identification of this saying as a prophecy of the passion: Lane 1974: 111, with Cremer 1965: 5, 126. For Marshall (1989: 90, cf. 232), the accusation of blasphemy in 2:7 means that 'for the first time in the story the death of Jesus comes faintly into view'. This may be so, but the death of Jesus is several steps removed from the surface of the narrative. The death of John (1:14) certainly foreshadows the cross (as pointed out by many; e.g. R. E. Brown 1986: 21), but this is by type rather than by explicit reference.

² Cf., among others, E. A. Russell 1985: 208–209, 214; and Dewey (1995: 148), who places this unit at the centre of a series of conflict stories arranged in a concentric structure around this unit, which she describes as dealing with fasting and crucifixion. 'Thus, Mark employed the controversy stories theologically to place Jesus' life in the context of his death, and he used them in his narrative construction to show how Jesus' death historically was to come about.' Dewey 1980 provides a full-length treatment. (Grayston [1990: 170] charges her with oversimplifying a complicated discussion.)

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1:1–13	Prologue: The beginning of the gospel
1:14 – 4:34	The kingdom is near
4:35 – 8:26	Jesus cares for the perishing
8:27 – 10:52	Entering the coming kingdom
11 – 13	The clash of kingdoms
14 – 16	The coming of the kingdom

In this chapter we shall examine the bridegroom parable, which is part of Mark's first main movement (1:14 – 4:34). We shall also look at Mark's second major movement (4:35 – 8:26), which tells the story of Jesus dealing with the perishing and, as a related theme, portrays the appropriate response to his actions, namely faith. But before turning to the parable, we shall briefly review the story so far.

The story so far

Mark's prologue opens with the arrival of John the Baptist, in fulfilment of Isaiah 40:3, who prepared the way for the long-awaited forgiveness of sins (1:2–5; Isa. 40:1–2).³ When Jesus is baptized by John (1:9–11), the voice from heaven declares him to be the Christ, the Son of God of Psalm 2:7, and the servant of Isaiah 42:1. Once he is marked out as the suffering servant, according to the prophecy of Isaiah, his path is clear. He is to go to his death in order to bring about the forgiveness of sins and the new deal for Israel, which would flow out even to the nations of the world.⁴ The story then focuses upon Jesus' authority, which is eventually revealed to be the authority of the Son of Man to forgive sins in the land (of Israel) (2:10). Because he has this authority to forgive, the second subsection (2:13 – 3:6) shows Jesus calling sinners. This is the immediate context for Jesus' parable about the bridegroom who is present and then taken away.

The bridegroom present and taken away

In the second subsection, Jesus finds himself in conflict with the religious leaders of the land.

The Christ and cosmic conflict

By this stage of the story, he has already engaged in a cosmic conflict

³ For an analysis of forgiveness in Mark, see Bolt 1998b.

⁴ It has been a matter of some dispute whether and to what extent Jesus fulfils the servant prophecies. See, for example, the important work by Hooker (1959) and, more recently, the discussion in Bellinger & Farmer 1998. For my own part, see Bolt 1991b.

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with Satan and the unclean spirits (1:13; 1:21–28; 1:34, 39). This will continue into the third subsection (3:11–12), but the story has already shown that this demonic conflict also has its human counterpart. Jesus has already been in conflict with the religious authorities (1:22, 27, 44; 2:6–7, 10).

In the third subsection, this conflict will come to a head in the great debate between Jesus and the scribes from Jerusalem (3:22–30). This scene aligns the opposition of the religious leaders with the opposition of Satan. This cosmic conflict forms the backdrop to the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities that will eventually take him to the cross. The parable of the bridegroom is one of four scenes that contribute to this rising conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities.

Eating with sinners (2:13–17)

In the first scene, Jesus calls Levi, the tax collector (2:13–17), as he had previously called four brothers (1:16–20). This results in a joyful feast with other sinners, who are glad that forgiveness of sins is now available (vv. 15–16). It irks the religious people that Jesus is feasting with sinners (v. 16), but he tells them he is exactly where he ought to be. The doctor is among the sick,⁵ for he has ‘not come to call the righteous, but sinners’ (2:17). The long-awaited forgiveness of sins promised by the prophets (e.g. Isa. 40:1–2; Jer. 31:31–34; Zech. 13:1), and anticipated by John’s baptism, has now arrived. Jesus, the Son of Man, is authorized to bring forgiveness to the land. He therefore mingles with the sinners. This brings him into direct conflict with the religious, who think they are already righteous. At this point in the story, Jesus tells the parable of the bridegroom who will be taken away.

The bridegroom taken away (2:18–22)

Introduction: the question about fasting

Mark introduces the parable by anchoring it in a specific event: ‘Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting’ (v. 18a). This gave rise

⁵ See e.g. the saying of Pausanias, son of Pleistoanax (Plutarch, *Apophthegmata Laconica* 230F), when asked why he went into exile from Sparta: ‘Physicians are wont to spend their time, not among the healthy, but where the sick are’. Dio Chrysostom, *Orationes* 8.5, justified the presence of the wise among the fools with the saying: ‘The good physician should go and offer his services where the sick are most numerous.’ In the later words of Basil the Great, he is the physician who stoops to our sickness ‘breathing its foul breath, that he may heal the sick’; *Letter 8: To the Caesareans*.

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to a question put to Jesus: 'Why are John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fasting, but your disciples are not?'⁶

At its core, fasting was associated with mourning (1 Sam. 31:13; 2 Sam. 1:12; Esth. 4:3; cf. Judith 8:6; 1 Macc. 1:25–28).⁷ If you were bereaved, you grieved, and in your grief you refrained from eating any food. You fasted because of the deep sorrow raised by the death of someone you loved. By extension, fasting was also associated with mourning over sinfulness. A person could be so grieved at their sin that they fasted (e.g. 1 Sam. 7:6; 1 Kgs 21:27; and perhaps 2 Sam. 12:16–23). But it should not be forgotten that behind this fasting associated with the grieving over sin lay the basic meaning of fasting in association with mourning.⁸

Now, it is difficult to say what kind of fast was actually going on in this story.⁹ Whatever the reason for the particular fast, what is Jesus'

⁶ Despite the generalizing tendency of some translations (e.g. AV/KJV, RSV, NASB, NRSV, ESV: '... do ... do not ...'), the simple present (NEB, NIV: '... are ... are not ...') should be used here, since v. 18a clearly shows that a specific fast is under discussion.

⁷ Fasting associated with mourning was a widespread custom in the ancient world. See Guthrie 1962.

⁸ Note that Matthew's parallel (9:15) uses *penthein*.

⁹ The text itself does not identify the reason for the fast occupying the Pharisees and the disciples of John. (The text implies that both groups were involved in the same fast. This would exclude the suggestion that John's disciples were mourning his death. See Rawlinson 1931: 31; V. Taylor 1966: 209; Cranfield 1977: 108f.) By the first century AD, the Jews were so famous for their fasting practices that Caesar Augustus, who was renowned for being a light eater, once boasted that on a particularly lean day he had fasted even more than a Jew on the Sabbath (Suetonius, 2 [*Divis Augustus*].76.2). Fasting was a particular feature of the piety of certain groups within Judaism, such as the Qumran community and the Pharisees. It was the custom of the Pharisees to fast twice a week (Luke 18:12; cf. *Ta'anit* 12a and *Didache* 8.1). Since they expected Jesus' disciples to be fasting, however, and since John's disciples were already fasting, presumably this was not a Pharisaic fast, but it was a fast in which the ordinary Israelite could also be expected to be engaged. Does that narrow it down any further?

Beginning in the post-exilic period, Judaism had developed set fasts at particular times of the year. Esther refers to the fast associated with Purim (Esth. 9:31; cf. 4:3, 16), and Zechariah mentions four regular fasts (8:19; cf. 7:3, 5). If these fasts were still in operation in the first century, this incident could, of course, be associated with any of them.

But it is also worth noting that fasting was associated with the annual Day of Atonement. It is often claimed that this was the only fast actually *prescribed* by the law (e.g. Lane 1974: 108; Anderson & Culbertson 1986: 314), but, in fact, fasting *per se* was not prescribed at all. Instead, the law required the Day of Atonement to be a 'day of affliction', a term that has a much broader scope than simply fasting (see Milgrom 2000: 20–23). The law urged 'affliction of soul' (Lev. 23:27, 29; cf. Lev. 16) which the LXX takes as being humble of soul (*tapainōsete tas psychas*). This may have included fasting – and in later Jewish practice it almost certainly did – but to be precise, the law did not specifically require fasting. Lane (1974: 109) notes that *t'nyl* occurs only once in the Hebrew Bible (Ezra 9:5; cf. 8:21), 'but had become a technical term for fasting by the time of the codification of the rabbinic material'. Instead, the law required an

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justification for this perceived breach of piety? Jesus replies in a series of metaphors and parables: the parables of the bridegroom (vv. 19–20), the patch (v. 21) and the new wine (v. 22).

The bridegroom is here! Time for joy

The emotional power of the parable of the bridegroom comes through playing with the opposite emotions associated with weddings and funerals, with joy and with mourning.

The presence of the bridegroom. The call for fasting is a call for mourning, but Jesus wants his hearers to recognize that this is a time for joy.¹⁰ Jesus pictures himself as a bridegroom in the midst of wedding celebrations. This time of great joy exempts his disciples from the present fast.

The image is found in reverse on occasions when a wedding feast was turned to sorrow. 1 Maccabees (9:37–42) describes an actual event in which Jonathan and Simon avenged the murder of John by attacking a wedding: ‘the wedding was turned into mourning and the voice of their musicians into a funeral dirge’ (v. 41, NRSV).¹¹ The tragedy of this dramatic contrast was also used metaphorically to describe the Jews’ loss of everything in the Babylonian exile. Several times Jeremiah pictured the coming exile in terms of the voice of the bridegroom and bride being heard no more (Jer. 7:34; 16:9; 25:10).¹² The prophet Joel also used this image to speak of the prospect of the coming judgment day (Joel 2:15–16).

appropriate recognition of the Israelites’ humble station before God. It could be argued that even simply being involved in the Day of Atonement was a humbling experience, for it reminded participants that they had sinned and there was nothing they could do about their sin, except receive God’s provision in this day of sacrifice.

So was this a Day of Atonement fast? Perhaps not, if the surrounding stories indicate near contemporaneous events, for the readiness of the grain for harvesting in 2:23–28 would indicate that this was spring (so Lightfoot 1950b: 10), or early summer (France 2002: 144), whereas the Day of Atonement was in autumn. If it was, however, then this makes this unit even more relevant to our discussion of the cross. Presumably it would be a most remarkable thing indeed not to be engaged in the rituals associated with the Day of Atonement. Small wonder that this was questioned! If the law did not specifically require fasting, Jesus was not strictly in breach of the law, but, nevertheless, he had evidently offended some Jewish religious sensibilities and some would have considered him in breach of the tradition, which, for them, amounted to the same thing. Note, too, that the Day of Atonement began the sabbatical year and the year of jubilee.

¹⁰ This is also the import of the Q saying, Matt. 11:16–19 = Luke 7:31–35. For Matthew, see Schnackenburg 2002: 106–107.

¹¹ The book of Tobit describes a similar event (Tobit 3:5–14).

¹² Cf. Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.301, where Jesus, son of Ananias, cries out against the temple in words reminiscent of Jeremiah: ‘A voice against Jerusalem and the sanctuary; a voice against the bridegroom and bride; a voice against all the people.’

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Those calling upon Jesus and his friends to fast are moving in the wrong direction, for, in fact, the coming of Jesus is more like a funeral that is turned into a wedding banquet. Jeremiah and Isaiah spoke of the salvation beyond exile in terms of the voice of the bride and bridegroom returning to Israel once again (Jer. 33:11). Isaiah pictured formerly desolate Jerusalem being adorned as a bride (Isa. 61:10 – 62:5). In an earlier portion of his prophecy, Isaiah also looked forward to a great time of feasting at the end of the ages, when God would do away with death and mourning and tears and spread out a banquet for his people (Isa. 25:6–8). This is a picture of future resurrection life (cf. 26:19), for God promised that on this day he would remove the shroud of death that covers the nations and swallow up death for ever.¹³ Mourning will be abolished, for resurrection life will have come!

Jesus and his disciples do not participate in the ritual of mourning, for the bridegroom has come. This is not a time for fasting, because the cause of humanity's mourning is about to be removed for ever. It is a time for great joy.

The bridegroom taken away. But a period for mourning will also come. In verse 20, Jesus looks ahead to the time when the bridegroom will be taken away. *Then* his disciples will fast. Jesus is not saying that one day his disciples will practise the ritual of fasting. He is using the rite to speak of the reality with which fasting was associated, namely mourning. There will come a time when the bridegroom is taken away and then his disciples will mourn – not in ritual, but in reality. In this saying, Jesus is alluding to the cross.¹⁴ He has been commissioned as the servant of the Lord. The parable may even contain a subtle allusion to the servant's role, for the word used for 'taken away' occurs twice in the Greek (Septuagint) version of the final

¹³ This has long been a disputed point. Scholars are divided over whether these chapters (esp. 25:8; 26:19) speak of individual resurrection, or metaphorically of national resurrection and new beginning. For a discussion of the issues, see e.g. Motyer 1993: 209–210; B. Doyle 2000: 315–320. Prejudice against the view that Isaiah's apocalypse is a reference to individual resurrection has often arisen from the opinion that resurrection belief arose late in Israel's history, under Persian influence. Indeed, even some who find resurrection in Isaiah's apocalypse propose for this reason that it is a late addition to the book. If, however, resurrection belief was *not* due to Persian influence, but was adequately grounded in Israel's own conceptions of God (see Bremmer 2002; Kaiser & Lohse 1981: 91; Petterson 2000: 9–11), then an allusion to resurrection in Isa. 24 – 27 does not seem so foreign after all.

¹⁴ 'This section contains the first hint of the Passion on the lips of Jesus in Mark. What has happened to the forerunner will be repeated in the case of him who comes after him. When that happens, the disciples will have good reason to fast and mourn.' Cranfield 1977: 111.

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servant song (Isa. 53:8).¹⁵ Although his presence is now a moment of great joy, at some time in the future the disciples will mourn,¹⁶ as he endures the horrendous death that God has in store for the servant of the Lord.¹⁷

The arrival of the last days

In his parable of the bridegroom (2:19–20), Jesus' language evokes Old Testament passages about the last days: 'days are coming' (*eleusontai de hēmerai*);¹⁸ 'and then' (*kai tote*); 'in that day' (*en ekeinēi tēi hēmerai*).¹⁹ Jesus had begun his ministry with the announcement, 'The times are fulfilled; the kingdom of God has drawn near' (1:15). One era has drawn to an end; another is about to dawn (cf. 10:30). In the midst of these last days, the bridegroom will be taken away.

Jesus reinforces this expectation with two more parables that make the same point. *The parable of the patch* (v. 21)²⁰ is a warning not to try to absorb Jesus into Judaism, or even into what John the Baptist was doing. The Old Testament law and John the Baptist pointed towards Jesus in all his newness. To expect him to conform to the practices of first-century Jewish piety is as inappropriate and foolish as sticking a patch of unshrunk cloth on to an old garment. He has not come to patch up this old system. This human religion is simply a part of a fallen world that God is about to roll up like a garment and throw away (cf. Ps. 102:26–28 = Heb. 1:10–12; Hag. 2:6; Heb. 12:26; Jeremiah 1963: 118). *The parable of new wine* (v. 22) makes a similar point. The joy of harvest-time was a common prophetic symbol of the

¹⁵ There are marked differences between the Greek and Hebrew versions of Isaiah 53, perhaps especially in vv. 8–11; see Sapp 1998. Both Hebrew and Greek, however, depict the servant as being 'taken away'.

¹⁶ When Matthew's apocalyptic discourse is read in a similar way as I propose for Mark's in ch. 3 below, Zech. 12:10 is applied to the crucifixion; cf. Matt. 24:30. This 'mourning' is also demonstrated in Luke 23:27–31; Acts 2:37.

¹⁷ If the fast was for the Day of Atonement (see n. 9 above, p. 21), then this would suggest that the time of the disciples' future mourning would be their Day of Atonement mourning. This would be a hint that the death of Jesus was a (?the) Day of Atonement.

¹⁸ Instead of the future tense, the LXX uses the present, but it nevertheless refers to the future: 1 Sam. 2:31; 2 Kgs 20:17; Isa. 39:6; Jer. 7:32; 9:24 (EVV 9:25); 16:14; 19:6; 23:5, 7; 37:3 (MT 30:3); 38:27 (MT 31:27); 38:31 (MT 31:31); 31:12 (MT 48:12); 30:18 (MT 49:2); 28:52 (MT 51:52). See also MT Jer. 33:14; 51:47; and Amos 4:2; 8:11; 9:13.

¹⁹ *En ekeinēi tēi hēmerai*: e.g. Dan. 12:1; Zech. 12:8–9; 14:6; *kai tote* evokes the kind of 'eschatological timetable' in Mark 13:26–27.

²⁰ The rabbis had a similar saying, so it may not have been entirely new for Jesus' hearers: cf. Mishnah, R. Joshua, 'For old cases an old decision, for new cases a new'; *Yadaim* 4.3; see Danby: 73.

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new age,²¹ and so too was the image of new wine (*oinos neos*).²² God's salvation beyond judgment was pictured in terms of Israel once again enjoying the fruit of the land, including the blessings of wine (Hos. 2:22). A statement in Amos (9:13–14, esv)²³ begins with exactly the same words as in Jesus' parable:

'Behold, the days are coming,' declares the LORD,
'when the plowman shall overtake the reaper
and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed;
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
and all the hills shall flow with it.
I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine.'

When this new wine begins to drip from the hills as the new age was dawning, it is complete foolishness to expect it to be contained by the old wineskins. Both parables 'bear on the newness of that which has come into the world with Jesus',²⁴ and point out the folly of trying to

²¹ Jeremias 1963: 118–119. He notes that harvest also includes the last judgment, with which the new age begins (Joel 3:13). 'New wine' can also be utilized as a judgment image (Isa. 49:26). 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness on them has light shined. You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil' (Isa. 9:2–3). Looking forward to the restoration of the fortunes of Zion, Psalm 126 enlists the harvest image: 'Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him' (Ps. 126:5–6).

²² Although the exact expression used by Mark is rare, the LXX has many references to 'new wine' using a variety of terms. The LXX usually translates *tirōs* 'new wine' (38 times in the MT), simply using *oinos*, although occasionally in conjunction with *aparchē*. It translates *āsīs*, 'sweet wine' as *oinos neos* (Isa. 49:26), or *glykasmos*, 'sweetness' (Joel 4:18 [LXX]; Amos 9:13; cf. Acts 2:13, *gleukos*, 'new wine'). Apart from John 2:11, the texts assembled by Jeremias (1963: 118), allegedly showing wine as a symbol of salvation (i.e. Gen. 9:20; 49:11–12; Num. 13:23–24) are questionable.

²³ Jesus probably alluded to this passage in John 4:36.

²⁴ Cranfield (1977: 113) is uncertain, however, as to the exact original application. Was it a defence of the disciples against those who wanted to confine them by continuing pious practices? He refers to the incompatibility of John's disciples' use of these practices with the recognition of the new situation; the fact that the kingdom of God cannot be confined within Judaism, for the coming of the new must mean the dissolution of the old; the need for new birth, and the fact that it cannot be received without the miracle of the new creation (Hilary of Poitiers: '*Atque ideo et Pharisaeos et discipulos Johannis nova non accepturos esse nisi novi fierent*': 'For this reason, neither the Pharisees nor the disciples of John were about to accept new things unless they were made new [themselves].')

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accommodate the old and the new together. 'The ministry of Jesus is not to be regarded as an attempt to reform Judaism; it brings something entirely new, which cannot be accommodated to the traditional system' (Dodd 1961: 88). Jesus has not come to join a system whose rules and regulations could speak only of sinfulness, uncleanness, sickness, mourning, decay and death. 'It is clear that the opposition between life and death is fundamental to the whole ritual law . . . Death is the great evil, and everything suggesting it, from corpses to bloody discharge to skin disease, makes people unclean and therefore unfit to worship God' (Wenham 1995: 77). Jesus has not come to be absorbed by this religion of tears. He is the bridegroom, bringing the great time of last days' feasting when the shroud of death is finally cast away once and for all.

Let the new wine flow! Let the eschatological salvation flow out from Israel to the nations and issue in a whole new creation!

The sabbath as gift (2:23–28)

This new creation is also hinted at in the third story (2:23–28), when Jesus again finds himself in trouble with the religious over allowing his disciples to pluck grain on the sabbath day. Jesus told them: 'The sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the sabbath' (vv. 27–28). He reminds them that the sabbath was gift. God gave it for the benefit of human beings. The weekly sabbath was meant to be a foretaste of the great sabbath at the end of time.²⁵ Their religious rules had made them slaves to a calendar, and obscured the glorious vision of the kingdom of God, towards which their weekly rest should have pointed them. Jesus was now announcing that this kingdom had drawn near (1:15).

Jesus has already made the enormous claim that the divine prerogative to forgive sins has been given to him (2:10), but now he makes another enormous claim about himself. As the Son of Man he is Lord of the sabbath; that is, he is the one who will preside over that

²⁵ Shead 2002: 19: 'The institution of the Sabbath day had an eschatological edge from the first.' Barth comments that, despite the fact that Israel did not see it this way, the weekly sabbath 'is the immutable sign, set up in and with the creation of time, of the particular time of God to which all other times move' (*CD* III.2: 458; cf. III.1: 218–219, 228; III.4: 47–57, esp. 56–57). When Jesus healed on the sabbath, 'He did so deliberately and gladly because His own coming meant that the seventh and last day, the great day of Yahweh, had dawned, and healing was the specific Word of God that He had come to accomplish on this day'; *CD* IV.2: 226. In doing so, Jesus therefore fulfils the role for which humanity was created; Dumbrell 1994: 195.

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great sabbath rest at the end of time (Shead 2002), entered through the resurrection from the dead. The one who will be the great Son of Man is already in their midst, and they accuse him of breaking the sabbath day, which, in the end, points towards him and his coming kingdom.

Life and death on the sabbath (3:1–6)

The fourth and final story (3:1–6) brings this cycle of conflict to a head. In this scene, we watch the Lord of the sabbath acting consistently with the sabbath. On the day that was made for humanity, he cures a man with a withered hand. Before he does so, he asks the religious: ‘Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?’ (v. 4, ESV). But they make no reply. Jesus’ question reveals his perspective on his miracles: Jesus does good; he brings life where there is death. By doing so, he points towards the future, towards eternal life in the kingdom of God.

But when he cures this man, in response to this marvellous gift of life the religious leaders immediately join forces with the politicians to plan how to destroy him (3:6). From this point on, the shadow of Jesus’ cross falls across the narrative. This deliberate plot to kill him stands in the background of everything that happens from now on. On the sabbath that is made for human beings, his opponents seek to kill him for breaking their rules. Jesus brought life to a world under the shadow of death,²⁶ and, because of this, he will be put to death – by the representatives of religion.

What is it that provokes such conflict? There is an integral link between this conflict with religion and the coming of the bridegroom. He brings something entirely new; something that cannot be squeezed into the old wineskins; something that cannot patch up the old, failed system. And when the bridegroom is taken away, the time for ‘religion’ will come to an end.

Jesus and the abolition of religion

Religion exposed

Although it will be the cross that will ultimately do away with religion, Jesus is in conflict with religion from beginning to end. He critiques religious abuses (7:1–23); he warns against a corrupt

²⁶ Cf. Moltmann’s (1974: 60) insight into the evils of religion: ‘Jesus was also rejected by inhuman persons because of his love for those whom they had dehumanized.’

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leadership that had brought Israel to ruin (e.g. Isa. 3:14; Mic. 7:1–4), and exposes the hard heart that is at the core of Israel and Israel's leadership (3:5; 7:1–23; 10:1–5).²⁷ It is not an explicit part of Mark's story to show Jesus' attitude to Greco-Roman religion,²⁸ but if he was so clearly disturbed at the abuses within the religion of Israel, it does not require much imagination to guess at his attitude towards the abuses associated with the idolatrous practices that existed outside Israel (cf. Acts 17:16). By demonstrating Jesus' critique of the religion of Israel, how much more does Mark portray his critique of non-Israelite religion.

But Jesus does more than simply expose the abuses of first-century Judaism. Jesus is not just a reformer of a basically good system that is in need of repair. He is the Messiah, and his arrival spells an entirely new stage in God's plans and purposes for the world. The bridegroom has come, bringing something radically new

²⁷ Mark exposes religion as having multiple faults. It had teaching that lacked authority (1:22–28). It had allowed the *daimonic* into its core (1:21–28). Mark shows that the Jewish religion had rules that excluded people from their own homes in the interest of cleanliness (1:40–45), and rituals that could pronounce that people had become clean, but could not do anything to make them so (1:44). It grumbled over potential blasphemy (2:7) while committing the greatest blasphemy of all time, the destruction of the Messiah. It fostered a judgmental spirit, in which rules were placed above relationships. It displayed an inability to offer real help in the face of human suffering. When somebody died, religion could provide the professional mourners and the rules to ensure that the corpse did not pollute, but could do nothing about the problem of death itself and the grief under which it forces human beings to live. Obsessed with status and position, the religious leaders could miss the miracles in their midst (6:1–6) while demanding miracles more in keeping with their own desires (8:11–13). They nullify the Word of God in order to keep the human traditions (7:1–13), and have the appearance of being scrupulous about the things of God, but in reality have hearts that are rotten to the core (7:14–23). The religious miss the coming of the Messiah, while the condemned Gentiles rejoice that he is in their midst (7:24–30; 8:31–37). They argue about divorce, ignoring the fact that the very presence of the divorce provisions in their law testify to the problem of their hard hearts (10:1–12). They teach that eternal life is achieved by what a person does, and yet cover over the human reality that none of us can do enough (10:17–31). Their obsession with importance and status leads them to exclude the sick and the young. They allow God's house to become a den of robbers, and demand payment for services, even if this is the ruin of the poor widow, whom they were meant to protect. They plot to kill the Messiah on the sabbath (3:6), and later pay his 'friend' to betray him, and collaborate with the national enemies, the Gentiles. They use deception and politics to destroy him. They occupy the Messiah's seat, and yet refuse to give it up when he arrives. They destroy him, and then gloat over the demise of their enemy. See also Marshall 1989: 180–182, for a list of the evils of Jesus' opponents.

²⁸ This is not to say that the Gospel itself does not offer a critique – which, I would argue, it most surely does. Mark's story severely undermines the assumptions of the Roman imperial cult, for example, even utilizing some of its associated language to this end. See further Bolt 2003.

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that could not simply be squeezed into the old wineskins. The age of fulfilment has arrived, which means that the ‘good things’ of which the old covenant was just a shadow have finally come (cf. Heb. 10:1). He fulfils the law in order for the law to be surpassed and the shadow to be left behind. It could never ultimately deal with the problems of this world. The old religion had failed – as indeed, in God’s plan, it was destined to do.

Religion abolished

The shadow had been an elaborate teaching aid, which always pointed towards life. It was, however, impossible for sinful human beings to fulfil the old covenant in order to find that promised life (Acts 15:10; Gal. 3:10–14; Rom. 7). As a consequence, the system that was revealed by God to bring Israel life manifested death instead (Rom. 7:8–10; 2 Cor. 3:6–7). Even though it was the Gentiles who were ‘far off’ (Eph. 2:13, 17) and the Jews were ‘the people near to God’ (cf. Ps. 148:14), God’s revelation to Israel ultimately had the effect of showing them that sinful human beings could not come close to the holy God.

And so the radical newness brought by Jesus spells the end of Judaism – not just first-century Judaism, with its various abuses, but the Old Testament system of life set down by God’s own law. The coming of the bridegroom abolished even God’s own religion.²⁹ The religion of the Old Testament was an elaborate system that effectively taught that God kept his distance from sinners. Even though Israel rejoiced at the presence of God among them, that presence was paradoxically, at one and the same time, a reminder of God’s distance.³⁰ The coming of Jesus abolishes this distance, and so, in another of God’s great paradoxes, the Messiah’s fulfilment of the law (cf. Matt. 5:17–18)³¹ means that Old Testament religion is superseded.

²⁹ Cf. ‘The passages at Mark 10:45 and 14:22ff. illustrate the stress in Mark on the positive significance of the death of Jesus. This is more closely connected with the idea of mercy and self-sacrifice, the creation of a new rather than the rejection, condemnation, and destruction of the old Israel. The latter idea is necessarily involved, but it is as a consequence of the former’; Yates 1963: 233.

³⁰ For example, notice how the Shekinah, perhaps the supreme token of God’s presence with Israel, also demonstrated that God dwelt in both ‘unapproachable light’ (1 Tim. 6:16; cf. Exod. 13:21–22; 24:15–17) and in deep darkness (Exod. 14:20; 1 Kgs 8:12, cf. vv. 10–11). Whatever image is used, it taught the distance of the present God.

³¹ These two verses must be read together. Jesus did not come to abolish without fulfilment. Instead, he came to fulfil every jot and tittle. By the end of the Gospel, this will be done and the new era for the world will have dawned.

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This will become clear at the end of the story when Jesus casts out the money-changers and merchants from the temple (11:15–19).³² This is not a ‘cleansing’ of the temple, as if some more legitimate purpose for it will rise from the ashes. This is a signal of the end of the old system. At his trial, the false witnesses will speak words of truth, even if they do not know it (14:58), for Jesus’ death will do away with ‘the temple made with hands’, and another temple ‘not made with hands’ will arise in its place. At the moment of Jesus’ death, the veil of the temple will be torn from top to bottom (15:37–38), a dramatic demonstration that the old Jewish religion is abolished when the bridegroom was taken away.

That is why the appropriate response to Jesus is not more religion, nor is it the construction of a new religion. The proper response to Jesus is something completely non-religious. With the coming of the bridegroom, along with the abolition of religion, comes *faith*.³³ But before turning to faith, I shall glance at ‘religionless Christianity’.

The abolition of religion and ‘religionless Christianity’

After being used by Karl Barth, the phrase ‘the abolition of religion’ sparked several twentieth-century theologians, in their own diverse ways, to promote what they called ‘religionless Christianity’.³⁴ Perhaps the one who created the biggest storm in the 1960s was John Robinson, in his book *Honest to God* (J. A. T. Robinson 1963), which drew upon the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Paul Tillich. In recent times, ‘religionless Christianity’ has been actively promoted, to the great joy of the media, by Bishop John Spong.³⁵

When Barth used the phrase, he wished to show that human religion was swept away before God’s revelation, for God’s revelation

³² The action in the temple was the immediate cause of Jesus’ opponents’ seeking to arrest him (11:18); see Lightfoot 1950d: 61.

³³ This touches upon huge issues concerning the nature of the relationship between old and new covenants that cannot be fully discussed here. Even though faith does make an appearance in the Old Testament, most notably with Abraham (Rom. 4), and the ‘heroes of faith’ of Hebrews 11, Paul could still speak of the climactic arrival of faith in the world (Gal. 3:23), and it is in this sense I am speaking here.

³⁴ For discussion, see Morris 1964. Morris refers to Tillich, Bonhoeffer, John A. T. Robinson and Alex Vidler. Neither Tillich nor Robinson defined religion. For Bonhoeffer, it was individualistic, metaphysical, one department of life; God is *deus ex machina*; Morris 1964: 9–10.

³⁵ Spong is consciously continuing the project of John Robinson’s *Honest to God*. See Spong 1983: 28–29; 1998: xvii–xv, xviii, 131, 213, 237 n. 6; (ed.) 1999: ch. 10; 2001: x–xiii, xvii, xviii, xx, 214, 247 n. 2.

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is met only by faith.³⁶ For the advocates of ‘religionless Christianity’, however, it meant that human religion was to be swept away before ordinary life. This ‘religionless Christianity’ does not call for repentance,³⁷ for it tends to endorse individuals in whatever state of life they are already in, and so requires no change at all. Not surprisingly, ‘religionless Christianity’ finds no place for the atoning death of Christ.³⁸

This is not the ‘abolition of religion’ that we find in Mark’s presentation. The coming of the bridegroom brings a new vision of all of life. Jesus began his ministry with a call to repent and believe, in the light of the declaration that the time is up for this world and the kingdom of God is near (1:15). This was a call to see the world in a radically different way. Jesus urged his followers to cease looking at the world from a human point of view and to begin to see it from God’s point of view (8:33). He invited them to leave the ordinary security structures of human life and to follow him through the cross to the kingdom.

This leads to radical changes of life in all its aspects. Faith is reliance upon God alone for security in this world, not upon the security structures of secular life, and not upon the security offered by religion – not even those provided by God himself before the new wine began to flow.³⁹ The coming of the bridegroom does not abolish religion and confirm ordinary human life in the position it happens to be in already. When the bridegroom appears, human beings are invited into something entirely new. Not a new religion, but a new vision of *life* has been revealed. The only response to this new vision is faith. Far from having no need for the atoning death of Christ, it is

³⁶ Barth, *CD* I.2: 280–361. It is misguided to blunt the edge of Barth’s critique by ‘contextualizing’ his views by comparison with reactions to Nazi immanentism, as does Richmond (1963: 38), cited with approval by Morris (1964: 67–68). Barth’s comments, once again, raise the question of the Old Testament depiction of faith as a response to God’s revelation, but, for our purposes here, this question does not need to be addressed. The theological discussion at issue addresses religion in its most basic sense, of what human beings do with respect to God.

³⁷ Morris 1964: 73–74, 88–91. Morris uses the term ‘penitence’ instead of ‘repentance’.

³⁸ Morris 1964: 71: ‘If Christianity is to be “religionless” then what place is there for an atoning act? As Bonhoeffer states the case men are not asked to repent and seek their salvation in what God has done for them in Christ. They are simply to rise to their full secular stature.’ See, for example, Spong’s sustained attack on the atonement in his writings, e.g. 1998: 84, 88–89, 92–94; (ed.) 1999: 236–237; 2001: 2 (‘not just naïve, but eminently rejectable’), 10–11, 120–125.

³⁹ Phil. 3 shows that Paul systematically rejected the old security structures of Old Testament religion (not just of first-century Judaism) when he discovered Christ.

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exactly when the bridegroom is taken away that religion is abolished and the need for faith is established.

After the coming of Jesus provokes conflict with religion in the first narrative movement, Mark's second main movement (4:35 – 8:26) will show Jesus acting to establish faith.

Jesus and the establishment of faith

We shall gain an overview of Mark's second main section by examining its first scene – the 'storm at sea' (4:35–41). This scene functions to structure the reading of the entire section that follows. Therefore, even though 4:35 – 8:26 makes no explicit reference to the cross, it provides an important part of the framework in which the cross can be understood and its benefits grasped.

The structuring role of 'the storm at sea'

This scene contains three questions. When the storm whips up, the frightened disciples wake the sleeping Jesus with the words, 'Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing?'⁴⁰ We can label this 'the existential question', for their very existence was in jeopardy. Jesus deals with the storm, and then asks his disciples what we can call 'the faith question': 'Why are you afraid? Do you not have faith yet?'⁴¹ This fills them with even more fear, and, in their panic, they ask each other 'the Christological question': 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?' (4:38–41).

The trouble with questions is that, once heard, they do not leave the hearers alone. They are asked of anyone who hears them, whether their subject is properly their business or not. Questions in a narrative are therefore extremely important for the reader of the narrative as well as for the original hearers. As we read this account, the disciples' questions become our questions. Once these questions are asked, we too want to hear the answers. And since these questions are asked within the narrative, we, the readers, expect to find the answers as the narrative continues. In this way, these questions structure our reading experience, for, as we read on into the next section of Mark's story, we are looking for the answers to these three questions.

⁴⁰ Although some English translations particularize the situation with the phrase 'that we are drowning', the verb is more general (*apollymetha*) and should be rendered so.

⁴¹ The use of *oupō* 'not yet', shows that the issue is not simply that they lack faith, but that Jesus expects them to have faith some time in the future. This question therefore opens a 'gap' that the story will seek to fill by showing how the disciples came to faith.

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At this point we should underline what we have already noted, namely, that there are *three* questions here, not just two. The importance of the Christological question and the faith question for the subsequent narrative has often been noticed.⁴² Unfortunately, the importance of the existential question for the subsequent narrative is usually overlooked.⁴³ But the three questions are interrelated. If the disciples truly knew who Jesus was, and had faith in him, they would not have been in fear of their lives. The kind of faith Jesus desires is faith in him – properly understood – even in the face of death. So these are the questions that we shall take with us as we read on in the story. These three questions will structure our reading experience, guiding us as we keep moving towards the climax of the story in the cross.⁴⁴ For convenience we can deal with them one at a time, and we shall deal with them in reverse.

The Christological question

The Christological question has, of course, already been on the agenda from the beginning (cf. 1:1). Practically every scene in the Gospel contributes to Mark's presentation of Jesus. Characters within the story are asked to form an opinion of him, and this is also on the agenda for the reader. As well as being part of the very fabric of the narrative, however, on several occasions the Christological question rises to the surface by being asked explicitly within the story. As explained before, this means that the reader cannot help but be confronted with this question as well.

Perhaps the most famous example comes from the next narrative movement, Mark's third and central section, where Jesus will take his own opinion poll and receive answers similar to those in 6:14–16: “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah” (8:27b–29, NRSV).

The Christological question continues to be on Mark's agenda (cf. 11:27–33; 12:1–12) until the climactic scene portraying the cross. When the Gentile centurion provides his own answer, which agrees exactly with Mark's point of view – ‘Truly this man was the Son of

⁴² Marshall (1989: 213–214) is representative in his insistence that 4:35–41 has two themes, Christology and faith.

⁴³ I have explored this more fully in Bolt 2003.

⁴⁴ For reading as an ‘experience’, see Iser 1972.

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God!’ (15:39, ESV; cf. 1:1) – the Christological question is finally answered.

The faith question

The faith question travels hand in hand with the Christological question throughout Mark’s narrative. Once again, this is a question that is raised implicitly by practically every scene,⁴⁵ but from time to time it is also raised explicitly.

The vocabulary of faith

Mark makes extensive use of the vocabulary relating to believing and faith,⁴⁶ and also utilizes many related metaphors and images. People within the story – and, through them, the readers – are called upon to ‘see’, to ‘hear’, to ‘understand’, to ‘leave’, to ‘come after’, to ‘follow’. These are all part of Mark’s rich theme of faith.⁴⁷ In addition, those of Jesus’ miracle stories that depict him giving the gift of sight or hearing, or those in which the response is to follow him, have a direct contribution to this theme.

Faith and the disciples

The need for faith is raised, in particular, with respect to the disciples. In the storm at sea, Jesus asks them, ‘Do you *not yet* (*oupō*) have faith?’, implying that he expects that they will move towards that position as time goes on. Mark’s second main section keeps returning to this question. These men, who are privileged to watch Jesus from close quarters, seem to take so long to realize whom they are following. Jesus is amazed that, just like the people of Nazareth (6:1–6) and even the Pharisees (7:18), the disciples do not seem to see, or to understand, or to believe. The two feeding miracles (6:30–42; 8:1–10) seem to be performed as a teaching aid purely for their benefit, and yet their unbelief and hardness of heart continue (cf. 6:45–52). In the last of the three sea-crossings, Jesus forces them to reflect upon the two feedings, and he expresses utter amazement that

⁴⁵ ‘There is limited abstract reflection or even direct teaching on faith in the gospel; Mark’s theological perspective is implicit in the way he tells his story – both the single overall story about Jesus, and the component episodes or stories which make up the larger narrative’; Marshall 1989: 226.

⁴⁶ The fact that ‘believing’ is also a significant theme in the spurious longer ending of Mark (*pisteuō*: 16:13, 14, 16, 17; *apistia*, 16:14) indicates that its writer has recognized this major theme in Mark. The Freer logion also sets Jesus’ ministry against the backdrop of ‘this age of lawlessness and unbelief’.

⁴⁷ For discussion of this theme, see in particular Marshall 1989.

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they still do not see, or hear, or understand; that is, they still have no faith (8:14–21).

Since faith has been discussed using the metaphor of sight, the cure of the blind man at the end of the section holds out some hope (8:22–26). If Jesus can open the eyes of the physically blind, perhaps he will be able to open the eyes of the disciples, so that they can truly see the one they are following.

Despite their obtuseness, however, the disciples do not present an entirely bleak picture. Some of their other features demonstrate what faith looks like in reality. In a controversy with his opponents, Jesus will later say that, just as the coin bearing Caesar's image belongs to Caesar, so too, human beings, who bear the image of God, belong to him and owe him their whole lives (12:17; cf. 12:29–33; R. H. Smith 1973: 331 n. 14, 332). As Mark's story unfolds, we find that the disciples have given their whole lives to following Jesus. They have left their homes and professions to follow him (1:16–20; 2:13–17). Later on, Peter will say that they have left everything (10:28). This is exactly what Jesus has asked of them, and what he will ask of others as the story proceeds (8:34–38; 10:21; 10:49). Jesus calls them to reject all the things that bring security and identity to normal human life, so that they may find their security and identity in following him wherever he may lead.⁴⁸ In so far as they have heeded this call,⁴⁹ they demonstrate the life of faith.

Faith and the opponents

By contrast, Jesus' opponents provide the negative picture of unbelief. By quoting Isaiah 6:9–10 in his explanation why he teaches in parables (4:10–12), Jesus indicates that nothing has really changed about Israel since Isaiah's day. They see but do not perceive, they hear but do not understand; that is, they are still afflicted with unbelief. Jesus' ministry through parables has the same role as Isaiah's ministry, namely hardening Israel further, so that God's purposes of judgment might be fulfilled. But, at the same time, there will be a holy seed, a remnant, raised up from among Israel, who hear, and see, and understand. Hearing the word with acceptance,

⁴⁸ 'Conversion is marked by the spontaneous forsaking of all existing forms of security, and faith consists in embarking on a lifelong relationship of believing trust in Jesus involving material dependence, reliance on him for eschatological salvation, and a submission to a process of learning and personal transformation'; Marshall 1989: 139.

⁴⁹ Disciples 'detach themselves from family ties and traditions, the main source of identity for first century Palestinians' (Marshall 1989: 137, referring to Kee 1977: 153f. and Lohfink 1985: 39, 44). For family ties in Mark, see now Barton 1994.

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this remnant will be the seed that enters the coming harvest of the kingdom of God.

But this remnant of believers will be raised up against the backdrop of the general unbelief of Israel. The people of Nazareth provide an example of the unbelief of Israel. Well aware of Jesus' mighty works, they nevertheless fail to believe, because he is just too familiar to them (6:1–6). After the transfiguration, Jesus will describe the Israelite crowd as an unbelieving generation (*apistos*, 9:19). In this same scene, one Israelite, a father troubled by his spirit-afflicted son, emerges from the crowd as someone who recognizes his problem and wants help to overcome it. He cries out, 'If you can do anything, help us, after having compassion on us.' Jesus replies, 'If you can? All things are possible to the one who believes.' And the father responds, 'I do believe. Help me in my unbelief' (9:22–24).

But it is the leaders of Israel, both religious and political, who provide the major paradigm of Israel's unbelief (Marshall 1989: ch. 6). They are the ones who are set in opposition to Jesus from the beginning. They question his actions (2:16; 2:18; 2:24; 3:2), accuse him of blasphemy (2:7; 14:64), and align him with Beelzeboul, the prince of the underworld (3:22). They question his authority (cf. 1:22; 2:7; 11:28), because they refused to believe that John the Baptist was sent from heaven as his forerunner (11:29–33).

Jesus indicts them for many things, but his parable of the tenants best summarizes their overall problem (12:1–12). The parable canvasses the history of the unbelief of Israel (R. H. Smith 1973: 331), but is particularly targeted at Israel's leadership. Jesus is simply reissuing the parable from Isaiah 5, and, as in Isaiah's assessment, the vineyard of Israel is in ruins because of the leadership, who have devoured it (Isa. 3:14). Even though they have been placed in their position to care for God's people, they want the vineyard themselves, and do not wish to give God his dues. Even when he sends his final messenger, his own beloved son (12:6), they decide to kill him so that the inheritance can be theirs.

On this occasion, the religious leaders immediately recognize that Jesus is speaking against them (12:12), and so they set about to fulfil his words! They long ago joined forces with the politicians in plotting to destroy him (3:6), and now they actively seek a way of doing so (11:18; 12:12; 14:2), set traps for him to fall into (3:2; 11:18; 12:13–34), and eventually pay one of his closest companions to betray him by stealth (14:1–2, 10–11). They use false witnesses at his trial, find him guilty of the charge of blasphemy, but hand him over to the hated

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Romans on a more political charge designed to get him killed (15:2). Even when he is dying, they show their basic inhumanity by standing at the foot of the cross gloating over their victory and pouring their mockery upon the head of their dying victim (15:31–32). They call upon him to come down from the cross, for then they would see and believe (15:32). But, by this stage in the story, we know that they will never see, and their destruction of the king of the Jews is the ultimate act of unbelief.

The opponents provide a foil for the disciples' journey towards faith. Throughout the story, the disciples are torn between two leaders. They are definitely following Jesus, but they also share the unbelief of Israel. In the storm at sea, Jesus asks why they do not yet have faith (4:40). In the second sea-crossing, they still do not believe, suffering from the same hard heart as the leadership (6:52; cf. 3:5). In a controversy with the Pharisees, Jesus reveals that, as in Isaiah's day, Israel's heart is far from God (7:1–23), and then, when the disciples fail to understand, he asks them, 'Then are you also lacking in understanding?' (*houtōs kai hymeis asynetoi este?*, 7:18; note the *kai*); that is, 'Are you just like the rest of Israel and its leadership?' By the final sea-crossing they have made little progress (8:14–21). Jesus warns them that the leaders, both the Pharisees and Herod, are like leaven. The disciples should not follow these leaders, who are like Ezekiel's evil shepherds who only plunder the flock (cf. Ezek. 34–36). Rather, the disciples should throw in their lot with the 'good shepherd' who feeds them with the food that will bring them to the kingdom harvest, the future resurrection from the dead.

Faith and the suppliants

Throughout Mark's story a range of characters appear in the story, encounter Jesus, and then disappear again.⁵⁰ These minor characters have been described as foils for the disciples,⁵¹ because they often exhibit the faith towards which the disciples are journeying. If the opponents show us what is *not* commended, the minor characters show us what *is* commended. From among these minor characters, a group of thirteen can be separated out and labelled 'the suppliants'.⁵² Mark pays greater attention to these 'suppliants', giving each of them a whole scene when their story is told. These are the ones who come to

⁵⁰ See Marshall 1989: ch. 4; Williams 1994; Bolt 2003.

⁵¹ Rhoads, Dewey & Michie 1999: 133; Marshall 1989: 77.

⁵² For a sustained treatment of the role of the suppliants in Mark's narrative, see Bolt 2003.

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Jesus with a need for healing or exorcism, which Jesus meets. These are the ones who exhibit faith and are often explicitly commended for their faith. When Jesus saw the faith of those who carried the paralytic, he declared his sins forgiven (2:5). The bleeding woman and Bartimaeus are both told, 'Your faith has saved you' (5:34; 10:52).⁵³ The father of the boy cries out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!' (9:24, NRSV), and Jesus deals with his problem.

This group of thirteen suppliants shows us a slice of life in the first-century world: a man with an unclean spirit (1:21–28); a woman with a fever (1:29–31); a leper in his uncleanness (1:40–45); a paralytic (2:1–10); a man with a withered hand (3:1–6); a man with a legion of demons who lives among the tombs (5:1–20); a synagogue official, Jairus, whose twelve-year-old daughter is dying (5:21–23) and then dead (5:35–43); a woman who had been bleeding for as long as the girl had been alive (5:24–34); a Greek woman whose daughter was troubled with a demon (7:24–30); a deaf man with stumbling speech (7:31–37); a blind man who lived in Bethsaida (8:22–26); a father and son, severely afflicted by a spirit that had troubled the boy since childhood and had often tried to kill him (9:14–29); another blind man, by the name of Bartimaeus (10:46–52). Despite their variety, together they illustrate a world in great need, a world under the shadow of death. They also show that the Jewish religion was completely unable to help them in their need. In fact, it probably even made their situation worse by excluding them as unclean and so making God seem even further away. By coming to Jesus, this group shows the reader that faith means turning to Jesus Christ in the midst of real physical needs in this world under the shadow of death, and being prepared to follow him into the kingdom.⁵⁴

This is perhaps best illustrated by the story of Jairus. His daughter is at the point of death when he first asks Jesus to come home and help her (5:23). Jesus is delayed by the interchange with the bleeding woman. Just as Jesus was telling the woman that she was saved by her faith, a group come from Jairus' house and tell him that his daughter has died, so there is no point troubling Jesus any more (5:34–35). By this time, Jesus had a reputation as a healer; but what can he do now that the girl is dead?

⁵³ The noun also occurs at 11:22 in the phrase *pistis theou*, which should be rendered 'the faithfulness of God'. See my discussion of this verse in ch. 3 below, pp. 88–89.

⁵⁴ 'Given the unbelief of the world, suffering is a necessary prelude to glory. Faith, however, is itself already a victory, seizing ahead of time in the midst of darkness the outstretched but veiled hand of the Father, refusing to be swerved from the path of trust and service'; R. H. Smith 1973: 338.

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Jesus has an important lesson in store for the synagogue leader. Overhearing the conversation, Jesus says to Jairus: 'Keep on only believing' (*monon pisteue*, 5:36). This is the only place in the New Testament where we get the good Reformed expression *sola fide*, or at least its Greek equivalent: '*monon pisteue*', 'only believe'. Even in the face of death, Jairus must continue to believe. Demonstrating his amazing power, Jesus raised the girl from her deathbed and sent her back into ordinary life.

Jairus is named only at the beginning of this account (5:22). The rest of the time he is referred to by his position as 'the synagogue ruler' (5:22, 35, 36, 38), as well as once by his relation to the girl (he was her father, 5:40). Despite his position, the Jewish religion could provide absolutely no help for this father who had lost his beloved child. He sought out the Galilean preacher who was being opposed by the officials of Judaism. In his despair, he was called upon only to have faith, even in the face of death. He discovered that Jesus was by no means impotent, even when faced with humanity's last and greatest enemy. Jesus could even defeat death.

Faith and the reader

Jesus' initial announcement of the nearness of the kingdom is accompanied by a call to 'repent and believe in the gospel' (1:15, NRSV). This is addressed generally to all his hearers, and, because of its position in the narrative, is assumed to underpin his entire ministry. Because of its generality and its prime position, it is also addressed to the reader of Mark at the beginning of and so throughout the Gospel. Through his story of Jesus, Mark is moving his readers towards faith, even under the shadow of death. He does this by presenting an interlocking network of relationships between the characters, in which each character group contributes to the promotion of faith in the reader. 'Mark's gospel is more than a string of isolated units; it is one unified narrative in which the individual pericopae are no longer experienced by the reader or hearer as separate tales but as cumulative scenes in a single coherent story' (Marshall 1989: 227). By being engaged in the complexities of this story, the readers are moved towards faith in Jesus Christ. In the story, Jesus is presented entirely positively and he draws the readers towards faith in him. The disciples move towards faith, and sweep up the reader in this journey. The unbelief of the opponents repels the readers, thus strengthening the commendation of faith (Bolt 1993: 43–49).

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The suppliants – those thirteen characters who come to Jesus for healing or exorcism – have a particularly important role in connecting the story with the readers.⁵⁵ They are the readers' entry point into the narrative. They are portrayed sympathetically, as real human beings in need. As such, they are a slice of life in the real world. First-century readers would know of such people; they knew this kind of world. The readers are drawn into the story by being aligned with these characters, see Jesus act on their behalf, and recognize that the proper attitude towards Jesus is faith. Thus, through the dynamics of the narrative, the readers are moved to put their faith in Jesus as well. As in the story of Jairus, this is also faith in Jesus, even in the face of death; for these readers are situated in a particular life setting that is evoked by the disciples' existential question.

The 'existential' question

Faith and fear

In the middle of the storm, the disciples cry out for their lives, and Jesus says that this shows that they do not yet have faith. In Mark, faith is the opposite of fear. Those without faith, whether disciples (4:40–41; 9:32; 10:32) or others (5:15; 6:20; 11:18; 11:32; 12:12), are regularly said to be afraid.⁵⁶ By contrast, those who are afraid are urged to have faith (5:36).⁵⁷ The mention of emotion in a narrative, especially perhaps such a primal emotion as fear, immediately draws the reader into the story. Even if we have never been caught in a storm at sea, we have all been afraid. The disciples' fearful question easily becomes our own. But we should notice that the disciples' fear was very specific, namely the fear of death (cf. 4:38).

The fear of death

Once again, their fearful question easily becomes our question. The fear of death is a basic human fear that underlies all other fears. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that it is this fear that holds us in slavery

⁵⁵ I have explored these narrative dynamics at length in Bolt 2003 or, more briefly, in 1993: 43–49.

⁵⁶ We can also note the fear of the 'arch-unbelievers' of the story, Jesus' opponents: 11:32; 12:12; cf. 14:1–2 and 15:10.

⁵⁷ The situation is more complex in the case of the bleeding woman and the women at the empty tomb. Were they afraid because they did not have faith at that stage? Or, given the association with the notion of 'trembling' (5:33: *hē de gynē phobētheisa kai tremousa*; 16:8: *eichen gar autas tromos kai ekstasis: kai ouden ouden eipan: ephobounto gar*), are they caught up with a 'holy awe' that is a product of their faith? Marshall (1989: 107) denies that this is the case.

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all our lives (Heb. 2:14–15). Thinkers ancient and modern have recognized this to be so. Even though we now live in a society that has worked hard at suppressing any conversation about this most basic of all fears, this was not the case in the ancient world, where death was an obvious, everyday reality. The fear of death constantly occupied the lives of the general populace. Writing to his friend Lucilius at some time between AD 63 and 65, the Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca said, ‘Most men ebb and flow in wretchedness between the fear of death and the hardships of life’ (*Epistle* 4.6).⁵⁸

Because of this basic concern, philosophers also realized that it was one of their major tasks to try to help people to live under the shadow of death. Socrates said that a philosopher had no business speaking about anything else (Plato, *Phaedo* 64A). Thoughtful people realized that the fear of death was not a peripheral concern in life, but that it actually ate away at all aspects of life, and led to all kinds of other evils. To deal with the fear of death was to deal with all the problems of life.

The fear of death and the problems of life

Lucretius (c. 99–c. 55 BC), who expounded the philosophy of Epicurus with the aim of dispelling the fear of the gods and the fear of death,⁵⁹ is one famous example of someone who linked the fear of death to the problems of life. As Jung would say of many modern anxieties,⁶⁰ Lucretius evaluated the worries of Roman aristocrats as ‘the symptoms of a “sickness” whose primary cause is an unrecognized fear of death’.⁶¹

The fear of death and the quest for security

The fear of death is the most basic of all fears. It introduces a profound anxiety into human existence. This existential anxiety provokes us to undertake a quest for security. Lucretius echoes what we find in the Scriptures, that human beings seek after greatness,

⁵⁸ About the same time (AD 61), after the initial success of her revolt against the Romans, Boudicca, queen of the Iceni in East Anglia, spoke of their oppression by the Romans, saying that they lived with a hatred of the present and a fear of the future (Dio Cassius 89). See further Bolt: 1998c.

⁵⁹ See Lucretius, *De rerum natura*.

⁶⁰ ‘Jung suggests that a good many of the people who go to psychotherapists in the twentieth century are really suffering from the lack of any strong moral or spiritual conviction; and that older people, especially, are troubled essentially by the fear of death. If people were troubled for similar reasons in the Ancient World, they had no shortage of would-be therapists, especially for the treatment of the fear of death’; Gill 1985: 325, drawing upon Jung 1936: 120ff.

⁶¹ Gill 1985: 322, referring to Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 3.31–116, esp. 105ff.

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status, importance, possessions, friendship, pleasure – all in the vain attempt to bring some security to an existence that is constantly undermined by the grave. The wealthy manage to find some security in this world, even if their wealth will ultimately fail to ransom them from the grave (Ps. 49). The powerless have none. In Mark, the fact that it is the powerless who put their faith in Christ⁶² whereas the rich man goes away disappointed illustrates how difficult it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God (10:17–27).

This quest for security is an issue of faith. We seek a ground on which to stand. We seek some trustworthy foundation for life. Despite the many attempts to find this in the structures of this world, the only real and proper place to stand is on Christ by faith. As Moltmann puts it, ‘Only the crucified Christ can bring the freedom which changes the world because it is no longer afraid of death.’⁶³

Faith in the one who cares for the perishing

Mark especially brings this out in the cycle of miracles that immediately follows the story of the storm at sea. Each of them shows Jesus confronting death. He deals with the man who lives among the tombs (5:1–20), and a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years (5:25–34). Both can be regarded as among the living dead. And then, in the case of Jairus’ daughter, Jesus deals with someone who has actually died (5:21–24, 35–43). In this scene, we come to the heart of the narrative’s concerns. Like the disciples during the storm at sea, Jairus is struggling with the most basic fear of all, the fear below all fears; that is, the fear of death. Even in the face of this fear, Jesus urges him to ‘keep on only believing’ (5:36). When Jesus conquers death by raising Jairus’ daughter to life, the disciples’ troubled question, ‘Who then is this?’ is brought into sharp relief. Fear of death is answered by faith in the one who can raise the dead.

Faith in God with us

In biblical tradition, only one person can ask for such faith. Who is this who can even raise the dead? If the first sea-crossing raises the

⁶² See Marshall 1989; Lee-Pollard 1987.

⁶³ ‘Only when men are reminded of him, however untimely this may be, can they be set free from the power of the facts of the present time, and from the laws and compulsions of history, and be offered a future which will never grow dark again . . . Today the Church and Theology must turn to the crucified Christ in order to show the world the freedom he offers.’ This leads to reform of the church and the society: ‘What does it mean to recall the God who was crucified in a society whose official creed is optimism, and which is knee-deep in blood?’ Moltmann 1974: xvii, xx.

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question of Jesus' identity (4:35ff.), the second (6:47–52) provides the answer in the greatest terms of all. The various miracles in Mark's account, each in its own way, show Jesus doing the deeds of God. This comes to a head when Jesus walks across the sea. In a context that has all the signs of a theophany, Jesus says to his disciples, 'Be courageous; I AM, be not afraid' (*tharseite, egō eimi: mē phobeisthe*, 6:50). Using the same designation for himself as God used to Moses at the burning bush (Exod. 3:14), Jesus encourages his terrified disciples. There is no need for fear, because God himself, the great 'I AM', has come near.

Once we see where the story goes, we can return to our parable and ask: what does it mean for Jesus to speak of himself as a bridegroom in the midst of a wedding? Although the New Testament pictures the Messiah as a bridegroom on several occasions (cf. John 3:29; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:23; Rev. 19:7; 21:2), and the rabbis sometimes used the imagery of a wedding feast to refer to the messianic era (Lane 1974: 110), it is difficult to find an instance of the Messiah's being called the bridegroom either in the Old Testament or in extrabiblical material.⁶⁴ Jesus' use of the image therefore appears to contain an incredibly bold claim. The Old Testament prophets had regularly used the image of a bridegroom for God himself, for YHWH.⁶⁵ So, for example, when Isaiah spoke of the great future time of salvation, he pictured desolate Jerusalem becoming the bride of YHWH (Grayston, 1990: 170), and God as the Bridegroom rejoicing greatly over the bride (cf. Isa. 62:5). This bold claim is reinforced by the remainder of Jesus' saying. The first words in verse 20 invoke an Old Testament stereotypical expression, in which YHWH is always the speaker: 'Days are coming, declares the LORD.'⁶⁶ When Jesus begins, 'Days are coming . . .', his hearers would have automatically completed the sentence for him. Here we have Jesus speaking words that hundreds of years of biblical tradition had placed upon the lips of YHWH. Small wonder that he can demand a person's whole life, or

⁶⁴ Grayston 1990: 170. However, Gundry (1993: 136) points out that Qumran may have thought of the Aaronic Messiah as a bridegroom (see 1QIsa on Isa. 61:10; Brownlee 1956–7: 205) and that John the Baptist (cf. John 3:22–30) may have played a role in the development of this title. See also Ziesler 1972–3.

⁶⁵ Hosea, *passim*; Isa. 50:1; 54:5ff.; 62:4f.; Jer. 2:2, 32f.; 3:1, 14; 31:32; Ezek. 16:8. Does the use of the figure reflect a consciousness that he was Son of God? For the use of the image in the New Testament, see Matt. 22:1–14; 25:1–13; John 3:29; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:22–32; Rev. 19:7, 9; 21:2, 9; 22:17.

⁶⁶ When the expression 'days are coming' is used in the Old Testament, YHWH is always the speaker: 1 Sam. 2:31; 2 Kgs 20:17; Isa. 39:6; Jer. 7:32; 9:24 (EVV 9:25); 16:14; 19:6; 23:5, 7; 30:3; 31:27; 31:31; 33:14; 48:12; 49:2; 51:47; 51:52; Amos 4:2; 8:11; 9:13.

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claim to forgive sins, or claim ownership of the eschatological sabbath, or do things that only God can do. Small wonder he can ask for faith, even in the face of death.

In this parable, Jesus is gently but firmly stating a momentous truth about himself. The bridegroom, God himself, has now arrived among Israel in preparation for that great wedding day at the end of time, promised by the prophets. This makes mourning thoroughly inappropriate at the moment. But there will be a time of mourning in the future, when the bridegroom is taken away.

Jesus, faith and the reader

Through the stories of the various characters interacting with Jesus, the Gospel of Mark promotes faith in its readers. It calls upon readers who live in this world under the shadow of death to put their trust in Jesus – in the same way that it is appropriate to put their trust in the living God.

It could be argued that Mark contains very few passages in which faith is directly linked to the death and resurrection of Jesus. This would, however, involve a failure to read Mark's narrative sensitively. The stories about belief and unbelief are all part of a complex interaction that comes to a climax in the crucifixion. Thus it is true to say that 'Mark indicates that faith placed in the earthly Jesus is structurally the same as faith placed in the crucified and risen Jesus, and within the story it receives in an anticipatory way the saving benefits secured by Jesus' passion and resurrection at the end of the story.'⁶⁷ From the beginning, Jesus is the bridegroom who will be taken away, so faith in him is faith in the one who will die as the servant of the Lord.

Faith is related to the apocalyptic notion of seeing the world from God's point of view (cf. 8:33). The entire Gospel shows Jesus bringing the perspective of the coming kingdom to bear upon all of life. This is especially true at the cross, where Mark contrasts two ways of seeing:

⁶⁷ Marshall (1989: 232), notes that 'with the exception of 15.32, Mark does not explicitly associate faith with the death and resurrection of Jesus. We have found, however, that an implicit relationship is insinuated in those faith stories which contain forward linkages to the fate of Jesus at the end of the story.' He lists as 'forward linkages' to the cross 2:1–12; 5:21–24, 35–43; 9:14–29; 10:46–52. Marshall also draws attention to the 'forward linkage' provided by passages on unbelief. These represent what will happen at the end, and so they also foreshadow the cross: 2:1–12 and 3:1–6 (p. 188); 6:1–6 (pp. 190, 195); 11:27–33 (p. 208).

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the seeing of unbelief, which remains wedded to human notions of rule and power, and the seeing of faith, which perceives in apparent powerlessness the hidden, saving power of God. Faith alone can penetrate the ultimate paradox of the gospel: that the kingly power of God is manifest in the suffering and death of Jesus on the pagan cross, transforming the cross into a power that is infinitely greater than any human power (Marshall 1989: 207–208).

The entire Gospel moves the readers towards a position of faith in the crucified king.⁶⁸ Despite the long-standing approach to sociology that downplays the importance of belief,⁶⁹ sociologist Rodney Stark (1997: 14–15) has demonstrated that belief – and so doctrine – was an ‘essential factor’⁷⁰ in the rise of early Christianity. Early Christianity’s focus on the centrality of belief was a radical departure in the ancient Greco-Roman world (Brooten 1994: 472, 475, 479), where ‘religion’ was about practice and ritual, not belief and behaviour. The corresponding focus upon words, with preaching, teaching and discussion on the one hand, and hearing, teaching and persuasion on the other, which was such a trademark of the early churches, aligned them – as it had, to some extent, aligned Judaism before them⁷¹ – more with a philosophical movement than with traditional religion.⁷²

⁶⁸ For further elaboration of how this is achieved, see Bolt 2003: ch. 8.

⁶⁹ Some historians react badly to discussions about how doctrines shape social factors, because they are ‘too much influenced by out-of-date, and always absurd, Marxist claims that ideas are mere epiphenomena’; others, because they wish to avoid a ‘triumphalism’ in which Christianity succeeds due to having ‘better’ doctrines; Stark 1997: 209. He mentions Adolf von Harnack, L. Michael White and Jaroslav Pelikan as being disparaged for this latter ‘crime’.

⁷⁰ Stark 1997: 4. To give one example, Stark shows how the well-known initial influx of women into the early Christian movement ‘resulted from Christian doctrines prohibiting infanticide and abortion’; p. 95.

⁷¹ Harnack 1904: 14. There were, of course, ample Old Testament antecedents for the focus on Word, preaching and teaching, even if it was so easily buried under human ritual and tradition (cf. Mark 7:1–23). With its temple in Jerusalem and its famous eccentric practices (sabbath, pork avoidance, circumcision and, perhaps, distaste for ‘leprosy’ – see Bolt 2003: 95–97), Judaism was, nevertheless, clearly a religion in Roman eyes – in fact, a *religio licita*.

⁷² Cf. Judge 1980a: 6: ‘The meetings which had first assembled in the wake of Paul’s preaching would hardly have been recognised by their contemporaries as religious societies.’ Cf. Judge 1980b: 209, 212–217; 1960. Perhaps this is one reason why Christianity made such a great impact upon the intellectual classes from the beginning: Ramsay 57; cf. 133–134, 146–147; cf. Judge 1980b: 209, 212–217; 1980a. As a cult movement, sociologically speaking, it is to be expected that the greatest success was among the middle and upper classes; Stark 1997: 45 (summing up the arguments of ch. 2).

THE CROSS FROM A DISTANCE

As part of this movement, Mark's Gospel proclaimed the story of Jesus, the bridegroom who was taken away, after demonstrating that he cared for those who were perishing.⁷³ This ought to have been good news for the Jews. Their long-awaited Messiah had arrived. As we have seen (above, pp. 26, 28–30), the paradox of Old Testament religion was that, at one and the same time, it made God present with the people of Israel, and also preserved his distance. The Old Testament attests to the longing for the day when God, by his Spirit, would be close to each and every one of his people (e.g. Num. 11:29; Jer. 31:31–34; Joel 2:28–29). Mark's Gospel took its place in the Christian mission by declaring that the Messiah had arrived, the one who fulfilled the Scriptures and to whom Old Testament religion ultimately pointed. The bridegroom had come, fulfilling Old Testament religion in order to leave it behind (see e.g. Harnack 1904: 61–62, 64).

The message of Jesus would also be good news for the Greco-Roman world. Rodney Stark suggests that the 'immense popular appeal of the early church' needs to be explained by reference to 'how the message of the New Testament and the social relations it sustained solved acute problems afflicting Greco-Roman cities'. He reconstructs a portrait of these cities as places filled with 'urban disorder, social dislocation, filth, disease, misery, fear, and cultural chaos'. He argues that these circumstances 'gave Christianity the opportunity to exploit fully its immense competitive advantages vis-à-vis paganism and other religious movements of the day as a *solution* to these problems'. Christianity acted as a 'revitalization movement that arose in response to the misery, chaos, fear, and brutality of life in the urban Greco-Roman world' (Stark 1997: 147, 149, 161).

In this world, the prevailing religious systems – whether those of the traditional gods or of the expanding imperial cult – failed to bring any real transformation to the world. For sure, there were the various philosophies that sought to offer answers to the problem of death, but they were unable to demonstrate any real power over human mortality. The mystery religions provided their initiates with some comfort in the face of death, but, once again, the world still struggled under the shadow of death. Many Gentiles found in the Israelite religion some obvious attractions (despite its equally obvious eccentricities) over against paganism, and yet, even with some portions of Judaism (most notably, the Pharisees) holding to a hope

⁷³ In Mark, Jesus' 'overarching opponent is death itself'; Wegener 1995: 78. See also Bolt 2003.

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of resurrection, it is not clear that Gentile proselytes actually shared in these promises for the future.⁷⁴

In the face of death religion had not helped at all – not even God’s religion! In fact, religion could never help human beings living under the shadow of death. Mark’s Gospel proclaims that the coming of the bridegroom has fulfilled, and so abolished, religion. Life is now to be lived by faith in the crucified Christ as the one who opens the door to eternal life.⁷⁵ The Old Testament law could not do this, nor could the pagan gods, who ‘offered no salvation’ and did not ‘provide an escape from mortality’ (Stark 1997: 88). But faith in the one who cared for the perishing transformed individual believers and, in time, the world (Stark 1997: 80, 36).⁷⁶

Within his apocalyptic perspective, Mark portrays the cross as an event that changed the world (A. Y. Collins 1993: 20). The bridegroom has come, bringing the last days. When he was snatched away, religion was abolished and faith established. Faith is a whole new way of seeing the world, which leads to radical change for all of life. Religion at worst (in paganism) is an idol, and at best (in Old Testament religion) keeps God at arm’s length. Religion places God at a distance. But in the moment when the bridegroom was taken away, a new deal came. Religion is abolished and faith established, because, in that cross at such a distance from our present world, God came close.

⁷⁴ Harnack (1904: 15) thinks that this is ‘very doubtful’. Cf. Eph. 2:12.

⁷⁵ Sociologically speaking, this can explain the ‘success’ of early Christianity, even among the upper classes. See Stark 1997: 35–37.

⁷⁶ See the evidence and argument of Stark 1997: ch. 4; 1992. See also Bolt 2003: ch. 8.