

Sewanee Theological Review 50:1 (Christmas 2006)

Imitating Mark's Jesus: Imagination, Scripture, and Inclusion in Biblical Ethics Today

RICHARD A. BURRIDGE

It is sometimes suggested that the current arguments in the Episcopal Church of the United States of America, along with their exported versions in the wider Anglican Communion, are a debate between those who want to be "biblical" or "scriptural" and those who want to be "inclusive" or "accepting." The traditional or conservative group believe that being biblical requires us to resist contemporary mores, even to the extent of excluding others from Christian ministry or church membership. On the other hand, those who want to include certain "challenging" people or groups within the church are accused of giving in to today's liberal culture, resulting in an "anything goes" morality—what Richard Hays castigates as "a cover for all manner of vapid self-indulgence."¹ Such a bald contrast is a caricature, of course, but the tendencies are clear in some of Christopher Bryan's attempts to balance the two.² The concern to be both imaginative and inclusive in his use of Scripture has characterized much of Bryan's work,³ and therefore I hope this study of being "biblical" and "inclusive" might be a suitable topic for this collection in his honor.

Regrettably, such a dichotomy is not new. Those who wanted to uphold slavery prior to the American Civil War, which did so much damage to The University of the South (as Christopher Bryan himself once showed me on

¹ Richard B. Hays, "Why love and liberation are not sufficient," in his *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 200-203.

² See Christopher Bryan, "Thoughts on the Present Crisis in the Anglican Communion: March 23, 2004," *STR* 47:3 (Pentecost 2004): 243-51; see also Christopher FitzSimons Allison's "A Response to Christopher Bryan's 'Thoughts on the Present Crisis in the Anglican Communion'" and Christopher Bryan's reply in *STR* 48:3 (Pentecost 2005): 351-63.

³ See, for example, his "Unscientific Postscripts" on "outsiders" and "insiders" in Christopher Bryan, *A Preface to Romans: Notes on the Epistle in Its Literary and Cultural Setting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 234-37.

a visit to Sewanee), were quite clear that their arguments were also biblical, while their opponents' attempt to be inclusive was seen as giving in to contemporary ideas.⁴ Similarly, the apartheid regime in South Africa was defended by the church as being "in the light of Scripture,"⁵ while those who argued for an inclusive society, even church leaders like Archbishop Tutu, were accused of being Communists rather than Christians.⁶ The claim of the pro-apartheid thinking in the newspaper *Beeld* to be "biblical" or "scriptural," however, was considered by Willem Vorster to be "without argumentation or substance"; this approach treated the Bible as a "coat-hanger" onto which any view was hung—but the Bible is "just not that kind of book." Vorster suggested that the use of terms like "biblical" was just a useful way of raising the "noise level" and claiming authority for one's own point of view; accordingly, he argued for an end to such "biblical" claims.⁷

These eerie echoes of our current debates should give us pause for thought before accepting the easy caricature of "biblical" versus "inclusive." Is it clear that to be biblical leads to an exclusive attitude, or might current so-called scriptural positions be seen as unbiblical in the years ahead as we now consider slavery and apartheid to be? Is a commitment to inclusivity within the Christian community really a "liberal" attitude adopted from contemporary mores, or might it be compared by future Christians to the movements to end slavery in the nineteenth century and the South African regime in the twentieth?

When Christopher Bryan spent a sabbatical year 1989-1990 at the University of Exeter in the southwest of England working on Mark,⁸ I was finishing my doctoral research on the genre of the gospels.⁹ We were borrowing the same books from the library and discovered a shared interest in literary genre. I argued

⁴ See, for example, Iveson L. Brookes, *A Defence of the South Against the Reproaches and Incroachments of the North: In Which Slavery is Shown to be an Institution of God Intended to Form the Basis of the Best Social State and the Only Safeguard to the Permanence of a Republican Government* (Hamburg, S.C.: Republican Office, 1850).

⁵ Dutch Reformed Church, *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture* (Cape Town: Dutch Reformed Church, 1976).

⁶ See Desmond Tutu's defense of himself against such charges in 1982 before the Eloff Commission's investigation into the South African Council of Churches, in his collection, *The Rainbow People of God*, ed. John Allen (London: Bantam, 1995), 53-78.

⁷ See D. J. Smit, "The Ethics on Interpretation—and South Africa," *Scriptura* 33 (1990): 34.

⁸ Subsequently published as Christopher Bryan, *A Preface to Mark: Notes on the Gospel in Its Literary and Cultural Settings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁹ Subsequently published as Richard A. Burrige, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, SNTSMS 70 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); now in a revised and updated edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

that the gospels are a form of Greco-Roman biography and therefore need to be interpreted in the light of other ancient "Lives," and Chris Bryan built upon this argument in his interpretation of Mark as a Hellenistic "Life."¹⁰ Therefore this article takes our shared interest in Mark's gospel to see what light its genre might shed on the current argument about the use of Scripture to formulate a "biblical" ethic for today.

Those who promote a biblical ethic naturally turn to the gospels and Paul's letters for ethical texts to support their view. The difficulty is that neither Jesus nor Paul are primarily ethical teachers, and Paul's epistles are not ethical treatises, although they do contain some ethical material. Similarly, although the gospels do have moral teaching, they also are not ethical documents either. Mark was the first gospel to be written—or at least the earliest example to survive. If Q was a written document, it seems to have been more in the genre of "sayings"-literature, a collection without a coherent narrative. Speculation about the genre of other possible sources or documents remains hypothetical. It seems to have been Mark's contribution to bring together Jesus's sayings and stories about his life, ministry, and death into a coherent biographical narrative. Despite all Jesus's ethical teaching and material, however, some scholars consider that Mark "contains relatively little moral teaching" or refer to what J. L. Houlden calls his "paucity of ethical material."¹¹ As Frank J. Matera puts it, "On first appearance, the Gospel according to Mark, the oldest of the four Gospels, is an unlikely source for moral or ethical instruction."¹²

Such observations take us straight back to the issue of genre: the lack of material is noted if one looks for specific ethical sayings or teachings in the manner of a document like Q or in the way its material is preserved in the blocks of Jesus's moral teaching in Matthew, such as the Sermon on the Mount. If we look at Mark's wider narrative, however, then much more emerges: "Sermons and explicit moral instructions are not the only ways to communicate moral teaching. Moral and ethical traditions can also be transmitted through narrative."¹³ Furthermore, Mark's combination of Jesus's deeds and words is not just

¹⁰Burridge, *What are the Gospels?* (2004), 185-212, 247-51; Bryan, *A Preface to Mark*, 9-15, 22-64.

¹¹J. Ian H. McDonald, *The Crucible of Christian Morality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 108; J. L. Houlden, *Ethics and the New Testament* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Eng.: Penguin, 1973), 41-42.

¹²Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Ethics: The Legacies of Jesus and Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 13.

¹³Matera, *New Testament Ethics*, 13; see the same point also in Joseph Loessl, S.J., "The Ethical Dimension of Mk. 10.17-22," *Hekima Review* (Nairobi) 6 (1991): 57-82, esp. 57-59, and Hays, *The Moral Vision*, 73-75.

narrative, but a form of ancient biography that played a crucial role in ethical development in the ancient world. Ben Witherington begins his socio-rhetorical commentary on Mark with an introductory section on the biographical genre of Mark as a key hermeneutical tool for its interpretation.¹⁴

We should therefore expect Mark and the other evangelists to include some coverage of Jesus's ethical teaching as part of their account of his life and ministry, and also that some of their own moral views might be evident as they give their particular portrait of Jesus. Most importantly, biography is a narrative genre, and stories were a major method of imparting moral teaching in the ancient world.¹⁵ Therefore, we should not just examine ethical material or key verses from the gospels on their own. Rather, we need to see how the biographical narratives of Jesus's life and teaching develop. As Hays puts it, "The ethical significance of each Gospel must be discerned from the shape of the story as a whole."¹⁶ Therefore, we must first begin with Mark's overall portrait of Jesus, and look at his wider narrative for what it reveals about his ethical understanding, before going on to discuss the relationship of ethics to eschatology, the issues of the Law and the love command, and the main specific ethical teaching. Finally, we shall explore how Mark's gospel helps us to follow and imitate Jesus within the Christian community today.

Mark's Christological Portrait

Christopher Tuckett recognizes that to say that "the person of Jesus is absolutely central for Mark" is to run the risk of sounding "bland, even trite," but argues nonetheless that "the question of who Jesus is provides the central focus of Mark's narrative."¹⁷ Traditionally, christological studies concentrate on the titles used to describe Jesus in the New Testament, such as "Christ," "Son of God," "lord," and so forth.¹⁸ David Rhoads and Donald Michie's stress on

¹⁴ Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 1-9, drawing upon my previous work—see especially footnote 18 on page 6.

¹⁵ Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 189-92; see also Pieter J. J. Botha, "Mark's Story of Jesus and the Search for Virtue," in *The Rhetorical Analysis of Scripture*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 156-84, esp. 156-64.

¹⁶ Hays, *The Moral Vision*, 74.

¹⁷ Christopher M. Tuckett, *Christology and the New Testament: Jesus and His Earliest Followers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 109.

¹⁸ See, for example, Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1959); James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into*

reading the narrative of Mark pioneered a literary approach to Mark's characterization of Jesus in the round, rather than through titles, while similarly Jack Dean Kingsbury looked at matters such as plot and conflict.¹⁹ Although such narrative approaches are important for any story, it is all the more so for biographical accounts like the gospels. It is thus not surprising that more recent christological debate has moved from a focus on titles to stories.²⁰

The key question posed by Jesus comes at the center of the gospel: "Who do people say that I am?" (Mark 8:29). Indeed, Mark told his audience the answer in his opening verse: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). However, while the readers may know about Jesus's identity from the start, Mark gradually unfolds his narrative portrait, with the characters in the story coming to understand him only slowly, if at all.²¹

The Opening Movement

Mark's gospel is a bit like a symphony in three movements. The first half of the gospel is a fast-paced narrative, as Jesus moves around Galilee and the northern territories healing, teaching, and fighting against evil at a rapid pace—there are eleven examples of "and immediately" in Mark 1 alone! Although the unclean spirits know who he is, "Jesus of Nazareth . . . the Holy One of God," the people are simply amazed, "What is this?" (Mark 1:23-27). Mark recounts no less than seventeen miracles, proportionally more than in any other gospel, and most occur in this first section.

Mark also characterizes Jesus as a teacher (1:14, 21-22, 39; 4:1-2; 6:6, 34). Jesus is called διδάσκαλος both by his disciples (4:38) and by those seeking his help (5:35; 9:17), while Peter (9:5; 11:21) and Judas (14:45) use the original "rabbi." Yet Mark records surprisingly little actual teaching, only four parables:

the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation (London: SCM, 1980; 2nd ed., 1989); Norman Perrin, "The Christology of Mark: A Study in Methodology," *Journal of Religion* 51 (1971): 173-87; a slightly revised version is reprinted in *The Interpretation of Mark*, ed. William Telford (London: SPCK, 1985), 95-108.

¹⁹ David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 101-116; Jack Dean Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); and Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark: Jesus, Authorities, Disciples* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989).

²⁰ Richard A. Burridge, "From Titles to Stories: A Narrative Approach to the Dynamic Christologies of the New Testament," in *The Person of Christ*, ed. Murray Rae and Stephen R. Holmes (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 37-60; see also how Tuckett argues for titles within a narrative approach in Christology and the New Testament (109-110, 116).

²¹ See Richard A. Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading*, rev. ed. (London: SPCK; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 35-65, for a fuller account of Mark's portrait of Jesus.

the sower (4:1-20), the seed growing secretly (4:26-29, unique to Mark), the mustard seed (4:30-32), and the tenants of the vineyard (12:1-12). The rare direct teaching comes in response to questions from the religious leaders (2:15-28; 3:23-30; and 7:1-23). This contrasts with the large amounts of Jesus's teaching preserved in Matthew and Luke, taken from Q.

Furthermore, this teacher is not understood by his hearers (4:9-13): his family think he is "out of his mind," while the religious leaders believe him possessed by Beelzebul (3:19b-35). Even his disciples sink into deeper incomprehension as Jesus gets exasperated with them (4:13; 4:40; 6:52; 7:18; 8:4, 17-18, 21). That the early church leaders should be so stupid has caused no little difficulty: Matthew and Luke both "improve" their picture of the disciples. Theodore J. Weeden has argued that they represent other church leaders who are opponents of Mark's group.²² From the point of view of genre, such a theory is a wrong answer to the wrong question; their apparent stupidity does not tell us anything about the disciples themselves. In a biographical narrative, everything is to be interpreted as portraying something about the main character—in this case, that Jesus is hard to understand, tough to follow, and we should not be surprised if we do not get it right straight away. After all, look at the disciples!²³

The Middle Section—Who Is This?

The answers emerge in the more contemplative, slower second movement, marked out by the healing of two different blind men, 8:22–10:52. The first man, at Bethsaida, does not see clearly and requires a second treatment (8:22-26). Both Matthew and Luke omit this story with its implication that Jesus does not get it right immediately, but for Mark it serves as a precursor to the central scene about Jesus's identity at Caesarea Philippi (8:27-38). In response to Jesus's inquiry, "Who do people say that I am?" Peter thinks he can see clearly—"You are the Christ"—only to be told that his vision is blurred by Satan when he rebukes Jesus for predicting his own death (8:27-33). Being the Christ leads inexorably to the cross in the three passion predictions (8:31-32; 9:31-32; 10:33-34), and anyone who wants to follow Jesus must follow a similar path of self-denial (8:34-38; 9:42-50; 10:23-31). Only after James and John learn that their ambitions will simply lead to sharing Jesus's death, rather than to good seats in heaven (10:35-45), do we have blind Bartimaeus, who "immediately regained his sight and followed him on the way" (10:46-52).

²²Theodore J. Weeden Sr., "The Heresy That Necessitated Mark's Gospel," *Zeitschrift für neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 59 (1968): 145-58; Theodore J. Weeden Sr., *Mark: Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

²³See, further, BurrIDGE, *What are the Gospels?* (2004), 289-90.

Thus the quieter, reflective second movement concludes with a mixture of representations of Jesus as the Christ who will go to Jerusalem, not to fight the Romans but to die, as the one whom demons recognize as "Son of God" but who calls himself "Son of Man," as the miracle worker who instructs those that he helps to tell no one, and as the healer who will suffer himself. Rather than explaining these contrasting descriptions as deriving from different Markan sources, a narrative approach to Mark marvels at the creative tension and complexity in his Christology as Jesus finally comes to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem and the Final Climax

The final section is a steady march as the expectant hero comes to the capital but finds that it is not bearing fruit. The story of Jesus cursing the fig tree can be interpreted as a fit of pique, damning a shrub that was not even in season. Closer attention to Mark's narrative composition, however, reveals yet more of his Christology. Mark 11 is a "triple sandwich" as the entry into Jerusalem is balanced by the dispute about authority, both questioning Jesus's identity (11:1-11, 27-33). The fig tree's lack of fruit and its subsequent withering form the next layer (11:12-14, 20-25), while the incident in the Temple, "the house of prayer for all nations," lies at the heart of the chapter and of Mark's Christology (11:15-19). For those still unclear, the parable of the tenants of the vineyard who are destroyed for refusing their rent follows (12:1-12). Both fig tree and vines are symbols of Israel, and Mark's narrative suggests that, in Jesus, God has come looking for fruit, to which his people should respond, in season or not, "to render to God the things that are God's" (12:13-17). The love of God and neighbor is the greatest commandment, "more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices" in the Temple (12:28-34). Those who seek "the best seats . . . and places of honor" receive condemnation, while the widow who gives her all is commended (12:38-44).²⁴ The Markan apocalypse prophesying the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem follows: the attentive reader must "keep awake" (13:1-37).

All the narrative threads about Jesus's identity build to a climax in the account of his arrest, passion, and death. Now Jesus is passive, "handed over" from Judas to the religious leaders, then to Pilate, and finally to the soldiers (14:10, 11, 18, 21, 41, 42, 44; 15:1, 10, 15). The various titles come together in the high priest's direct question: "Are you the Christ?" (picking up 1:1 and 8:29), "the Son of the Blessed One?" (implying the title "Son of God" used by

²⁴For a review of how this story has been read in various contexts, see Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "The Poor Widow in Mark and Her Poor Rich Readers," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53 (1991): 589-604; reprinted in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 111-27.

the demons and by the heavenly voice in 1:11 and 9:7). Jesus's answer, "I am," echoes the divine name of Exodus 3:14 but immediately returns to his self-designating "Son of Man." The high priest's tearing his clothes emphasizes how stupendous a claim has been made (14:61-63). The kingly language of the crowd's welcome (11:10) is reinforced by Jesus's anointing, although again he refers to his coming death and burial (14:3-9). It recurs as Pilate asks Jesus if he is "king of the Jews" and calls him so before the crowd (15:9, 12); mocked as king by soldiers and priests alike (15:16-20, 32), Jesus is executed beneath this ascription on the cross (15:26). Yet the king dies all alone, in unrelieved darkness and desolation, still misunderstood by those who hear his final cry of abandonment even by God (15:33-37). But at this moment, when the Temple veil is "torn" like the heavens at his baptism (σχιζω, 15:38, cf. 1:10), a human being finally recognizes him as "Son of God," but it is the Roman centurion, not one of his own people (15:39). Mark's sublime christological achievement brings his account of Jesus's identity to a climax at such a dark, God-forsaken place as crucifixion. Wayne Meeks concludes that what is unique here is "this imperious and subversive assault on moral sensibilities."²⁵

Mark's biographical portrait reveals a much richer Christology than any mere title. His narrative of the Christ who will suffer and die for others is not just a deeply theological statement; it is packed with ethical implications. Jesus's preaching is more like a prophet seeking a response than like an ethical teacher imparting moral maxims. This explains why Mark calls Jesus "teacher" so often, yet includes so little actual teaching of Jesus in his account. Instead, Mark has grasped Jesus's life and message at a very profound level with his careful construction about God in Jesus looking for a response from his people. The challenging aspect for the reader is that the response being sought is one of taking up the cross and following the same path of self-denial through darkness and desolation, even to the point of being forsaken by God. There may indeed be "relatively little moral teaching" in Mark, but such a gospel's narrative could never be described as containing a "paucity of ethical material." The whole of Mark's Christology is "ethical material," uncomfortable though it may be.²⁶

Mark's Eschatological Setting

As the earliest gospel, Mark reflects the emphasis of Jesus's preaching and teaching on the kingdom and may be seen as an *interim eschatological ethic in suffering* as the rule of God is breaking into the here and now. It begins with the

²⁵ Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality*, 199.

²⁶ For more on Mark's Christology and ethics, see Hays, *The Moral Vision*, 75-80; Ernest Best, *Mark: The Gospel as Story* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), 79-82; Matera, *New Testament Christology*, 5-26.

brief announcement of "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1). After his baptism by John and temptation, and after John's arrest, Jesus comes proclaiming the good news of God: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near" (1:14-15). Matera argues that "although the phrase 'kingdom of God' occurs only fourteen times in Mark's Gospel, it underlies everything that Jesus says and does"; in fact, the kingdom or rule of God makes up "Mark's moral universe."²⁷

The "nearness" of the kingdom is a constant theme, through Jesus's teaching and preaching, but also through his mighty acts, healings, and exorcisms. In this most eschatological gospel, the expectation of the imminent end is never very far away. In the Jerusalem section, the commercial activity of the Temple, as barren as the fig tree, and the lack of people's response leads to Jesus's prophecy of both the destruction of Jerusalem and the final cataclysm in the so-called Markan apocalypse of chapter 13.²⁸

If Mark's gospel was composed in the 60s, then this eschatology makes good sense against the background of Nero's persecution of Christians at Rome (where Mark is traditionally associated with Peter's preaching)²⁹ and the Jewish revolt and war in Palestine (increasingly seen by many scholars as Mark's context).³⁰ Jack T. Sanders suggests provocatively that Mark's "imminent eschatology is so much the basis of his outlook" that he has little or nothing to say to us about ethics today.³¹ In contrast, Wolfgang Schrage thinks that traces of a delayed parousia means that "the Markan community cannot be understood as an apocalyptic sect with a sectarian ethics."³² Against such an eschatological background, it is not surprising that Mark does not contain systematic blocks

²⁷ Matera, *New Testament Ethics*, 18.

²⁸ For a robust defense that this material is authentically Markan and reflects the historical Jesus, see Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Beginning of the Gospel: Probing of Mark in Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 73-91.

²⁹ See, for example, Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8.26*, Word Biblical Commentary 34A (Dallas: Word, 1989), xxix-xxxii; Best, *Mark: The Gospel as Story*, 21-36; and Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 20-31.

³⁰ Howard C. Kee, *Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark's Gospel* (London: SCM, 1977), esp. 100-105 and 176-77; Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (New York: Orbis, 1988), 39-87; for further discussion, see Petr Pokorný, "Das Markusevangelium: Literarische und theologische Einleitung mit Forschungsbericht," in ANRW 2.25.3, 1969-2035, especially 2019-22; Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (London: A&C Black, 1991), 5-8.

³¹ Jack T. Sanders, *Ethics in the New Testament: Change and Development* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 31-33.

³² Wolfgang Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 139.

of ethical teaching material in the manner of Matthew's gospel. This lack does not mean that he has no ethical concern: in fact, his interim eschatological ethic is more about the command to "keep alert . . . watch . . . keep awake" (13:33-37), waiting for the Jesus who suffered and died to return to collect his people's final response. Such an ethic is a call to endure suffering for the sake of the Gospel through the persecutions of Jewish and Roman authorities alike (13:9-13). Like the Book of Revelation, it has meant most to those who are also suffering, both to black slaves and to African-American civil rights leaders of the 1960s and 1970s.³³

The Law and Love in Mark

In his massive treatment of Jesus's attitude toward the Law in the gospels, William Loader observes that "Mark's Jesus is beyond being a teacher of the Law. He exercises an authority which enables him both to affirm it in parts and to supersede it."³⁴ Clearly Mark's account reflects his understanding and that of his audience. As Matera points out, in Mark's gospel, "the word for law (*nomos*) does not even occur" and his audience "seems to have been composed of Gentiles who had little understanding of the Mosaic law and did not practice its many ritual prescriptions" (see 7:3-4).³⁵ A brief journey through the key incidents in this gospel will show how accurate these observations are.

Many key pericopes occur in situations of conflict. The first comes in the battle with sickness and evil, where Jesus touches the leper; normally, this would have made Jesus unclean himself until evening, but, instead, his power makes the leper clean as he heals him "immediately." Notably, he does not tell the leper to sacrifice first and then he will be clean, but he does still tell him to go to the priest and make the offering after he has been healed (1:39-45). Loader thinks this leaves "the impression that Jesus upholds Torah," but Ched Myers argues that the instruction is so that he can "confront an ideological system."³⁶

This cleansing is followed by a sequence of stories of conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities:³⁷ in the healing of the paralytic, Jesus first proclaims that his sins are forgiven, thus claiming authority to act on behalf of

³³See Brian K. Blount, *Then the Whisper Put on Flesh: New Testament Ethics in an African American Context* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 50-63.

³⁴William Loader, *Jesus' Attitude towards the Law: A Study of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 123.

³⁵Matera, *New Testament Ethics*, 26.

³⁶Loader, *Jesus' Attitude towards the Law*, 25; Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 153.

³⁷See Joanna Dewey, "The Literary Structure of the Controversy Stories in Mark 2:1-3:6," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92 (1973): 394-401; reprinted in Telford, *The Interpretation of Mark*, 109-118.

God, which causes offense to the scribes (2:1-12). This leads into the call of a tax collector, Levi, and accusations from the scribes about Jesus eating with sinners; he replies that he has come "to call not the righteous but sinners" (2:13-17). A similar point is made in the debate about fasting with his claim to be "the bridegroom," with the dark hint that the day will come when he is "taken away from them" (2:18-20). That something new is happening here is reinforced by the image of the difficulty of putting a new patch on old cloth or new wine in old wineskins (2:21-22). The protest by the Pharisees about Jesus's disciples plucking grain on the sabbath leads to the pronouncement, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath," with its associated claim that "the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath" (2:23-28). The final conflict arises over the healing of the man with the withered hand on the sabbath, which leads to the Pharisees plotting with the Herodians "how to destroy him" (3:1-6). In this collection, Myers once again sees a challenge to the system, even "civil disobedience," while Loader suggests that Mark sees Jesus "as one who, in coming with eschatological authority, effectively replaces the authority of the Torah as the absolute court of appeal."³⁸

These issues then recur in the debate about keeping the traditions regarding hand-washing and the practice of corban, setting aside resources as an offering to God, which had the advantage of making them unavailable for support of one's parents. This discussion leads to the pronouncement that it is not external things that defile, but what goes on in the heart (7:1-23). Once again, although Jesus is in conflict with the religious authorities and is accused of not keeping the traditions, Mark represents him as appealing to the real meaning of the Law of Moses, to honor father and mother: indeed, these human traditions are "making void the word of God" (7:13). So far, therefore, Jesus cannot be said to be attacking the Law; the problem comes with the apparent setting aside of all purity legislation as "he declared all foods clean" (7:19). McDonald says that "his own strength of holiness overwhelmed the impurity with which he came into contact," suggesting a link back to Jesus's cleansing of the leper rather than being contaminated by his impurity.³⁹ Matera notes that this section comes between the two miraculous feedings, one in Jewish and one in gentile territory (6:30-44; 8:1-10); the coming of the kingdom means that both may now share table fellowship.⁴⁰ Thus all the boundary markers that separate people—sickness, avoiding sinners, fasting, sabbath observance, vows, food laws—are all radicalized by Jesus in Mark's presentation through an appeal to the deeper meaning of the Law.

³⁸ Loader, *Jesus' Attitude towards the Law*, 38; Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 161.

³⁹ McDonald, *Crucible of Christian Morality*, 111.

⁴⁰ Matera, *New Testament Ethics*, 28.

Something similar happens in the collection of material in chapter 10.⁴¹ First, the traditional Mosaic provision for divorce (Deut. 24:1) is set aside, again by an appeal to the original Word of God in "the beginning of creation" (10:1-12). Furthermore, the rich man who wants "to inherit eternal life" and who claims to have kept all the commandments from his youth is told to sell his possessions to gain "treasure in heaven" and to follow Jesus (10:17-22).⁴² Sandwiched between these two is the story about Jesus and the children, warning that "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (10:13-16). To reinforce this point, James and John's request for the best seats in the kingdom receives only the promise of suffering and death, overturning the human desire for lording it over others with the command to be the "slave of all" (10:32-44). The ultimate authority for this ethic is the person of Jesus himself, who "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (10:45). Once again, Loader concludes that "Jesus is pictured both as Torah faithful and as one who interprets Torah on the basis of these fundamentals," who can even use "such principles to argue against a Torah provision."⁴³

In the final section in Jerusalem, the debates continue between Jesus and the religious leaders about his authority to interpret the Law in general and, specifically, about paying taxes and the resurrection (11:27-33, 12:13-27). This tension reaches a climax with a scribe asking Jesus about the greatest commandment. Given that many interpreters considered that there were some 613 commands in the Law (365 negative and 248 positive), it is a fair question, which also features in rabbinic anecdotes. Victor Furnish argues that Jesus's specific combination of Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 to produce the answer of the love of God and neighbor is not found anywhere else.⁴⁴ However, Furnish considers that Mark's application, "This is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifice" (10:33), means that the command to love is lost in the argument about ritual worship.⁴⁵ Not many other scholars are persuaded: Allen Verhey says this conclusion "seems to miss the point."⁴⁶ Mark's version of the debate about the love command forms the climax of his

⁴¹ For a full discussion of Mark 10, see Dan O. Via, *The Ethics of Mark's Gospel—in the Middle of Time* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 67-195.

⁴² See further, Loessl, "The Ethical Dimension of Mk. 10.17-22."

⁴³ Loader, *Jesus' Attitude towards the Law*, 95.

⁴⁴ Victor Paul Furnish, *The Love Command in the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 62.

⁴⁵ Furnish, *The Love Command*, 29, 71, 74.

⁴⁶ Allen Verhey, *The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 79; see also Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, 143.

account of Jesus as the one who rightly interprets the Law precisely because of his commitment to the love of God, which seeks loving self-giving in response. As Loader concludes, "For Mark, then, Jesus is the absolute authority under God. . . . What remains is love for God."⁴⁷

Ethical Issues in Mark

Our treatment of Christology, eschatology, and the Law and love has outlined an interim general ethic, but not much specific teaching material. Nonetheless, some key human moral experiences do appear in Mark's narrative. In each case they are radicalized under the prevailing preaching of the kingdom of God, whose sovereignty grows quietly from small beginnings, yet must take priority to become "the greatest of all" (Mark 4:26-32).

Family Values

In 3:19b-35 we have another triple structure: Jesus "goes home" (εἰς οἶκον) where his family and friends (οἱ παρ' αὐτοῦ) want "to restrain him" because he is "out of his mind" (3:19-21). The focus then turns to opposition from the religious leaders, who think he is possessed by Beelzebul (3:22). For Jesus, however, the central clash is with Satan himself (3:23-27). Then the narrative returns to the authorities' attack on him (3:28-30), followed by Jesus's refusal to see his mother and brothers since "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (3:31-35). This careful, chiasmic balancing of family, authorities, cosmic conflict, authorities, and back to family shows how the opposition from his family and the authorities are only aspects of the central battle with Satan.

The story contains an explicit rejection by Jesus of his natural family, replacing it with those who respond to the kingdom of God. This is uncomfortable for those who think that Christian ethics trumpets "family values." Even Matthew and Luke were discomforted, as they dismantle the 1-2-3-2-1 sandwich, linking the Beelzebul controversy with other material elsewhere (Matt. 12:22-45; Luke 11:14-32) and omitting Jesus's being "out of his mind"; Matthew still includes the comment about his family, but Luke moves it away from the conflict with evil (Matt. 12:46-50; Luke 8:19-21). Here, "Mark did not evade the breaking of family ties. In 3:31ff, he relativized the traditional understanding of the family, although it is replaced by incorporation into the new community (3:35)."⁴⁸ For Myers, Jesus's attack is not just on "the highest authorities in the land" but is a repudiation of "kinship . . . the axis of the social

⁴⁷ Loader, *Jesus' Attitude towards the Law*, 134-35.

⁴⁸ Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, 141-42.

world in antiquity"; instead "the fundamental unit of 'resocialization' into the kingdom will be the new family, the community of the disciples."⁴⁹

Later, Jesus promises Peter that those who have left "house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the gospel" will receive a hundredfold reward of a new family in the kingdom (10:28-31). Furthermore, to the Sadducees' question about the much-married wife, Jesus answers that "when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage" (12:18-27). Here, too, the eschatological perspective makes a significant difference!

Marriage, Divorce, and Children

"Family values" continues in Mark's largest collection of ethical material, chapter 10, where we have "a kind of *Haustafel*" or instructions dealing with marriage and divorce, children, possessions, and power: "But it is not a code. Jesus and his words neither rely on the law nor create a new *Halakah*."⁵⁰ Instead, Jesus refers to God's intention at creation and his kingdom (10:6, 14-15).⁵¹

The debate about marriage and divorce was as lively then as now: according to Deuteronomy 24:1, a certificate of divorce could be issued if the husband found "some indecency" (RSV) or "something objectionable" (NRSV) in his wife. The RSV reflects the conservative Rabbi Shammai who interpreted this provision as unchastity, not just adultery. However, the NRSV follows the more liberal Hillel's "if she has merely ruined his dinner" or if he found someone else more attractive (*mishnah Gittin* 9:10). Jesus goes beyond even Shammai, referring back to "one flesh" in "the beginning": "therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Mark 10:9; see Gen. 2:24). Interpreted as a "new law," such a total ban on divorce has been difficult since the time of Matthew, who inserts a Shammai-type provision with his *μη ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ*, "except for unchastity" (Matt. 19:9). Significantly, for Mark, the kingdom presupposes an inclusive community where women have the same rights and protection as men (10:11-12). Myers notes that such equality is both "a critique of patriarchy" and "directly contradicted Jewish law."⁵² Mark continues with Jesus's rebuke of the disciples for preventing children being blessed by him in order to teach them that the kingdom should be received "as a little child" (10:13-16). As Schrage notes, children themselves "are members of the community."⁵³ Thus, once the kingdom takes priority, "in the light of God's kingly rule, Jesus makes extraordinary

⁴⁹ Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 164-68.

⁵⁰ Verhey, *The Great Reversal*, 80.

⁵¹ See, further, Via, *The Ethics of Mark's Gospel*, 101-133.

⁵² Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 264-66.

⁵³ Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, 141.

demands upon disciples: They must not divorce their spouses; they must welcome children. . . . They must be willing to sacrifice all their possessions for the sake of the kingdom."⁵⁴

Money and Possessions

Mark's collection of ethical issues in the kingdom moves on to the area of money and possessions (10:17-31).⁵⁵ An individual addresses Jesus as "good teacher"; we are not told that he is rich, or "young" (Matt. 19:22), or a ruler (Luke 18:18). Jesus, the "teacher," again deflects attention back to God alone as the one who is good. Jesus quotes the commandments against murder, adultery, stealing, and false witness, ending with the command to honor parents. In response to the man's zealous reply that he has kept these "since my youth," he invites him to sell everything and become a follower. This is also the only place where Mark tells us Jesus loved someone. Unfortunately, the response of the man is not to love Jesus back and follow him, but to go away grieving. Joseph Loessl says that "this love-relationship is not a violent force or a rigid principle. It is a gentle invitation and can be bluntly rejected"; this "personal Christological dimension" is essential to understanding the ethics of Jesus.⁵⁶ Only then, as the man departs, does Mark tell us that he had "many possessions" (10:22).

Jesus and his disciples then discuss how hard it is for the rich to enter heaven. Again, attention is redirected to God, because this ethic is impossible for human beings, but everything is possible for God (10:23-27). Peter's protestations about the sacrifices that they have made receive the eschatological promise of multiple rewards to Jesus's followers (10:28-30).

Power, Leadership, and the State

Finally, we come to the question of power and leadership in the church and world, prefaced by the third passion prediction, the most explicit, of Jesus's coming suffering (10:32-34). James and John's response is to request the seats of honor in heaven. When the others realize this, "they began to be angry with James and John," though one suspects this was at the attempt to outflank them rather than any "righteous anger" at such an un-gospel-like request! Again, Mark portrays the disciples as being slow to grasp what it means to live in the kingdom. The early church's embarrassment at its leaders' behavior is shown as Luke omits this story, while Matthew has their mother make the request (Matt. 20:20-23)! Their reward is to share Jesus's cup and baptism, his suffering and

⁵⁴ Matera, *New Testament Ethics*, 29.

⁵⁵ See, further, Via, *The Ethics of Mark's Gospel*, 134-55.

⁵⁶ Loessl, "The Ethical Dimension of Mk. 10.17-22," 76-77.

death, because this is what leadership in the kingdom means (Mark 10:35-41). The rulers of the gentiles might like “to lord it over them . . . but it is not so among you.”⁵⁷ Those in the kingdom are to follow Jesus, who “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (10:42-45)—what Dan O. Via calls “the ethics of servanthood.”⁵⁸

After Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem, with the material on the fig tree and the vineyard, which represents Israel’s not responding to God’s arrival, comes the Jewish authorities’ question about paying the poll-tax to Caesar (12:13-17). Once again, Jesus is flattered with the title, “teacher,” but the key ethical issue concerns obedience to the state. Jesus’s request for a denarius immediately exposes their hypocrisy: as a Law-obedient Jew, he did not have a coin with its graven image of Tiberius and its “blasphemous ascription of divinity to the Roman Caesar,”⁵⁹ violating the first three commandments, but they do not have any trouble producing one. Jesus’s reply, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s,” is sometimes explained by those whom Myers terms “bourgeois exegetes” as legitimating a sacred-secular divide for two parallel spheres of sovereignty.⁶⁰ Rather, for a patriotic Jew nothing really belongs to Caesar, since everything belongs to God. This points us back to Mark’s central ethical theme of the kingdom.

The “paucity of ethical material” in Mark is countered by the ethical implications of Mark’s portrait of Jesus throughout. The breaking-in of the kingdom relativizes everything, even the Law, with the all-demanding love of God. However, this study of Mark’s ethical teaching demonstrates that he does handle many key moral experiences—the family, marriage and divorce, children, money and possessions, leadership, taxes, and the state—and consistently reexamines them in the light of the sovereignty of God. Far from having no ethics, Mark’s gospel makes a total demand upon those who would follow the way of Jesus.

Following and Imitating Jesus

Christopher Bryan and I have both argued strongly for the biographical genre of the gospels as the key to their interpretation. Consequently, we cannot simply look for ethical teaching (in the manner of the Sermon on the Mount) and abstract it from the narrative; rather, the whole narrative itself becomes

⁵⁷ See, further, Alberto de Mingo Kaminouchi, *‘But It Is Not So Among You’: Echoes of Power in Mark 10.32-45*, JSNTSS 249 (London: T&T Clark, 2003).

⁵⁸ Via, *The Ethics of Mark’s Gospel*, 156-68.

⁵⁹ Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, Word Biblical Commentary 34B (Nashville: Nelson, 2001), 247; see also, Hooker, *The Gospel According to St Mark*, 280-81.

⁶⁰ Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 312.

charged with ethical import, as our analysis has shown. Furthermore, ancient "Lives" were a combination of words and deeds, teachings that included an account of the subject's activity. Consequently, we have to take Jesus's *deeds* as seriously as his *words*—or even more so. Thus, while Mark calls him "teacher," he actually relates more of Jesus's actions than of his teachings. In addition, the moral imitation of the subject was an important purpose of ancient biography. Thus Philo and Lucian want their readers to know what kind of person their subject was: τοιοῦτος μὲν ὁ βίος, Philo, *Moses*, 2.292; ὁποῖος ἐκεῖνος ἀνὴρ ἐγένετο, Lucian, *Demonax*, 67. Plutarch wants people to imitate his subjects' virtues and avoid their vices (*Pericles* 1, *Aem. Paul.* 1). Similarly, Xenophon's picture of Agesilaus is an example, παράδειγμα, for others to follow to become better people, ἀνδραγαθίαν ἀσκεῖν (*Ages.*, 10.2).⁶¹ Therefore, having looked at Mark's account of Jesus and his ethics, we need to see what he says about following and imitating his central character.

Following in Discipleship

Practically everyone agrees that the key thrust of Mark's gospel is following Jesus in an ethic of discipleship.⁶² It begins at the opening of the gospel with the beginning of Jesus's ministry: "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the gospel'" (Mark 1:14-15). The kingdom of God is to be foundational for everything in this gospel, and the opening proclamation is immediately followed by the call of the first disciples (1:16-20). As Loessl puts it, "The basis is the call to follow Jesus as a response to his love."⁶³ After the collection of stories about the conflict with the religious leaders (2:1-3:11) and before the triple sandwich about Jesus's family and the Beelzebul controversy (3:19b-35), Mark places the appointment of the twelve apostles from among the wider group of disciples (3:13-19): these are the inner group who are called to follow and to share Jesus's conflict, as well as his ministry, despite their own struggle to understand what is going on.

⁶¹ See Burridge, *What are the Gospels?* (2004), 145-48 and 180-83, for further discussion.

⁶² See, for example, Ernest Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, JSNTSS 4 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), and Ernest Best, *Disciples and Discipleship: Studies in the Gospel According to Mark* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986); Morna D. Hooker, *The Message of Mark* (London: Epworth, 1983), 105-21; Larry W. Hurtado, "Following Jesus in the Gospel of Mark—And Beyond," in *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 9-29; Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, 138-43; Hays, *The Moral Vision*, 80-85; Rhoads and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 122-29; Kee, *Community of the New Age*, 87-97; Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, 89-117.

⁶³ Loessl, "The Ethical Dimension of Mk. 10.17-22," 74.

The real nature of discipleship is further clarified at Caesarea Philippi where Peter finally gets something right in recognizing Jesus as Messiah, only to be rebuked when he protests against Jesus's prediction of his suffering and death (8:27-32). Peter and the disciples have to learn that discipleship is costly: if Jesus is going to Jerusalem to suffer and die, then anyone who wants to follow him must "deny themselves and take up their cross and follow [him]" (8:34).⁶⁴ This message is clarified by the sequence of three passion predictions, becoming more detailed to make the point (8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34).⁶⁵ Hays concludes, "The way of the cross is simply the obedience to the will of God, and discipleship requires following that way regardless of cost or consequences."⁶⁶

Given the centrality of discipleship for Mark, it is not surprising that the failure of the disciples to understand and follow should have caused so much scholarly debate. Weeden's theory that they stand for Mark's opponents, already noted above, does not deal with the positive material about the disciples. Therefore what Telford calls the more "pastoral or pedagogic explanation" of Robert C. Tannehill and Ernest Best is more likely,⁶⁷ namely, that Mark's purpose is to encourage his suffering readers to identify with the disciples. Our argument about gospel genre makes a distinct contribution here because in a biographical narrative every motif reflects on the character of the subject. Consequently, the disciples' failure to grasp everything immediately adds to Mark's portrayal of Jesus as hard to follow and contributes further pastoral encouragement to struggling would-be disciples in his audience.

Crucially, despite their failures and struggles, the disciples do keep following, even all the way to Jerusalem. Despite Peter's protests about the passion prediction, and despite James and John's request for the best seats with Jesus, they are invited to witness the transfiguration as well as to pray with Jesus in Gethsemane (9:2-8; 14:33). Peter may eventually deny Jesus at the fireside, but that is because he has kept his promise to follow Jesus even into the high priest's courtyard when others fled (14:29, 50, 54, 66-72). Thus, as Best concludes, "the

⁶⁴ For a feminist reading of this verse, which denies that it encourages any form of acceptance of victimization, see Joanna Dewey, "'Let Them Renounce Themselves and Take Up Their Cross': A Feminist Reading of Mark 8:34 in Mark's Social and Narrative World," in Levine, *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, 23-36.

⁶⁵ Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, 103-111.

⁶⁶ Hays, *Moral Vision*, 84-85.

⁶⁷ W. R. Telford, *The Theology of the Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 127-37, specifically 131; see Robert C. Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role," *Journal of Religion* 57 (1977): 386-405, reprinted in Telford, *The Interpretation of Mark*, 134-57; E. R. Best, "The Role of the Disciples in Mark," *New Testament Studies* 23 (1976-1977): 377-401, reprinted in Best, *Disciples and Discipleship*, 98-130; see, also, Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, 89-117.

role of the disciples in the gospel is then to be examples to the community. Not examples by which their own worth or failure is shown, but examples through whom teaching is given to the community and the love and power of God made known."⁶⁸

A Mixed Group

Jesus's disciples may struggle to follow, but follow they do—and what a mixed bunch they are. Some of their names are redolent of the great Maccabean leaders, James and John and Matthew (3:13-19), while others have Greek names like Andrew and Philip. Simon "the Cananaean" is a transliteration of the Aramaic *qan'ānā'*, meaning "the Zealot" (see Luke 6:15), a freedom fighter (or terrorist?), who must have sat uneasily alongside tax collectors like Levi (2:14). "Ischariot" might also mean a *sicarius* or dagger-carrier.⁶⁹ Given Jesus's habit of "eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners," it is not surprising he is criticized for the company he kept. In Mark, he replies, "those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (2:13-17). We have noted how Mark presupposes equal rights and responsibilities for women among his audience and the place of children within the kingdom of God (10:11-12, 14). Howard C. Kee deduces from the setting aside of ritual Jewish separateness in 7:1-30 that "Mark's community . . . was open across social, economic, sexual, and ethnic barriers."⁷⁰ Loader takes this further: "Inclusiveness has become a hermeneutical criterion. . . . One can even extend a Markan perspective on scripture from inclusion of gentiles to inclusion of many others, excluded on grounds of their social status (slaves), gender, race, age, sexual orientation or disability."⁷¹ Those who are called to follow Jesus may find others who are responding similarly rather different from themselves, but they have to learn to accept others as they have been accepted.

Imitating Jesus

Finally, if Mark is about "following Jesus" and his gospel was aimed at an open and inclusive community, this conclusion about the gospel's character leads naturally to the imitation of Jesus. Best concludes, "This does not imply that for

⁶⁸ Best, "The Role of the Disciples in Mark," in Best, *Disciples and Discipleship*, 130.

⁶⁹ Guelich, *Mark 1-8*, 26, 162-63; NRSV translates *sicarii* as "assassins" in Acts 21:38. For a discussion of Ischariot and *sicarius*, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1414-15. For a full account of the *sicarii*, see John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 117-23.

⁷⁰ Kee, *Community of the New Age*, 97.

⁷¹ Loader, *Jesus' Attitude towards the Law*, 136.

Mark to be a disciple simply means to imitate Christ. Jesus took up his cross, denied himself, served others; the disciple is summoned to do all these."⁷² Given that ancient biography was about deeds as much as words, and action more than teaching, this thrust should not be surprising. Here we have a good example of how a text's genre indicates its intention. The gospel's use for moral imitation has been communicated even to scholars not using our biographical hypothesis: so Matera has a whole section titled "Jesus a model for moral behaviour," while Hays describes him as a "the singular pattern for faithfulness."⁷³ Therefore, Morna Hooker is right to sum this all up: "Commentators frequently shy away from suggestions that discipleship is seen in terms of the imitation of Christ in the New Testament, but there is no doubt that Mark sees it in these terms."⁷⁴ Our argument from the biographical approach to the gospels and to ethics means that commentators need "shy away" no longer! For Mark's central ethical theme is that one is to follow Jesus as a disciple along the way of the cross, and this conclusion fits in very well with the mimetic purpose of ancient biographical narratives. The readers of this text are not called just to follow Jesus but to imitate him in his words and deeds, life and death—and to do so alongside others who also respond in an inclusive community.

Conclusion

We began this brief study of Mark's ethics by noting how some commentators consider that this gospel has "relatively little moral teaching" or a "paucity of ethical material." This characterization results from the basic genre mistake committed by so many who read the gospels, looking for an ethical treatise like the Sermon on the Mount or at least a collection of pithy ethical sayings. Once we approach these texts as biographical narratives, a wealth of ethical possibilities starts to emerge. Our study of Mark's Christology and eschatology has demonstrated the importance of his narrative of Jesus's own life of service and self-sacrifice in proclaiming, and eventually dying for, the sovereign rule of God. As Matera sums it up, "The ethics of Jesus in Mark's Gospel are necessarily bound up with the story of Jesus. To know that story is to be shaped by a new ethical vision whose horizon is none other than the in-breaking kingdom of God."⁷⁵ Furthermore, if the gospel was written in the dark days of the 60s, it is no wonder that its call to endure suffering while expecting the final cataclysm imminently has continued to speak in particular to generations of readers suffering persecution and tribulations.

⁷² Best, *Following Jesus*, 248.

⁷³ Matera, *New Testament Ethics*, 31-34; Hays, *Moral Vision*, 84.

⁷⁴ Hooker, *The Message of Mark*, 110-11.

⁷⁵ Matera, *New Testament Ethics*, 35.

This vision of the kingdom also dominated Mark's account of how Jesus handles the Law, both strengthening some of its demands (for example, over divorce) or setting aside others (such as over the food purity laws); in all cases, this is the effect of making the double love command the center of his teaching. Contrary to expectations, consideration of the actual ethical teaching material in Mark revealed that many key human moral experiences—the family, marriage, divorce and children, money and possessions, power, leadership, and the state—all appear and are treated according to the same principles of love and the sovereign rule of God. Lastly, Mark's central theme of discipleship, coupled with his portrait of the disciples struggling to believe and understand, means that following Jesus inevitably entails imitating his deeds and words within an open and inclusive community.

Finally, therefore, this analysis means that the current debate with which we started between being "biblical" and "inclusive" is a false dichotomy. A proper biblical ethic entails taking seriously the biographical genre of Mark, as well as the other gospels, in looking at their overall christological portraits. In depicting Jesus as a rigorous ethical teacher who nonetheless called highly disparate people from varying backgrounds to follow him together in an inclusive community, Mark has given us an important indicator for how our contemporary moral debates, especially over sexuality, should be handled. I believe that this understanding of Jesus preaching the kingdom of God with its ethics, within the context of an open and inclusive community, is not confined to Mark alone, but is true of the other gospels, of the writings of Paul, and the rest of the New Testament.⁷⁶ To accept one another as Christ has accepted us is not something derived from contemporary culture, but is a deeply biblical principle (see Rom. 15:1-7). Mark's biographical portrait of Jesus's words and deeds, teachings and actions, gives us a guide for how we are to follow and imitate him today. To do so will require truly biblical imagination as we seek to be faithful to Scripture together in our life of faith.

⁷⁶ See, further, Richard A. Burrige, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming 2007). Much of this article is edited from this book's chapter on Mark.

Contributors

ELLEN BRADSHAW AITKEN is Associate Professor of Early Christian History and Literature in the Faculty of Religious Studies at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec.

DONALD S. ARMENTROUT is Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, Professor of Church History and Historical Theology, and Quintard Professor of Dogmatic Theology at The School of Theology of The University of the South in Sewanee.

CATHARINE SAVAGE BROSMAN is Professor Emerita of French at Tulane University and Honorary Research Professor at the University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom. She has written or edited numerous books on twentieth-century French literature, in addition to five volumes of poetry and two volumes of prose. Her poems appear in *The Sewanee Review*, *Critical Quarterly*, *The Anglican Theological Review*, and many others. Louisiana State University Press will be publishing her newest collection of verse, *Range of Light*, in 2007.

RICHARD A. BURRIDGE is Dean of King's College London, where he also teaches New Testament. He was previously Lazenby Chaplain at the University of Exeter (1987-1994).

WILLIAM J. DANAHER JR. is Associate Professor of Moral Theology and Christian Ethics in the John Henry Hobart Chair at The General Theological Seminary in New York City, and formerly Associate Professor of Theology and Christian Ethics at The School of Theology of The University of the South in Sewanee.

JAMES DUNKLY is Librarian of The School of Theology Library in duPont Library, Lecturer in New Testament at The School of Theology of The University of the South in Sewanee and Book Review Editor of *Sewanee Theological Review*.

O. C. EDWARDS JR. chairs the Editorial Advisory Board of *Sewanee Theological Review*. After thirty years of seminary teaching and administration, he has retired to Weaverville, North Carolina.

REGINALD H. FULLER is Priest-in-Residence at Emmanuel Episcopal Church at Brook Hill in Richmond, Virginia, and a retired Professor of New Testament at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria.