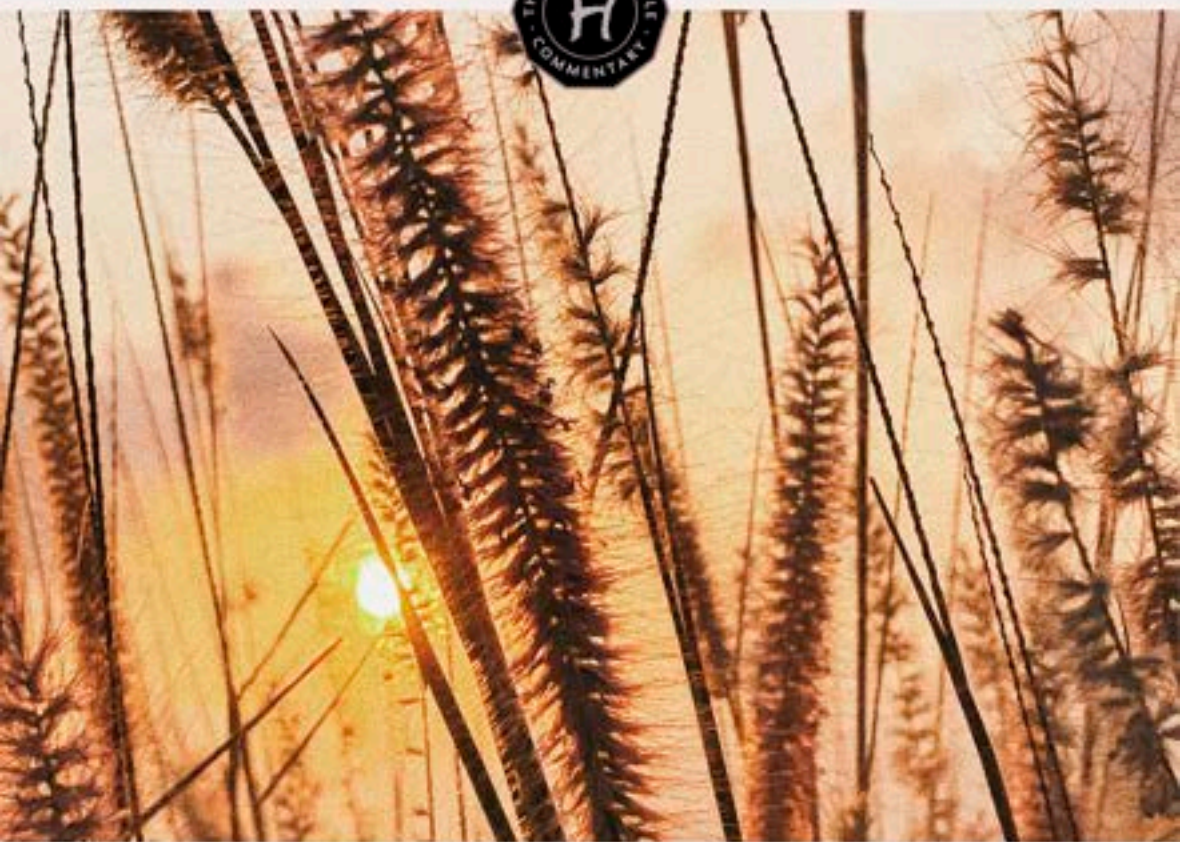


# MARK

The Hodder Bible Commentary



CHRISTOPHER K.W. MOORE

Series Editor Lee Gatiss

*The Hodder Bible Commentary*

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Edited by Lee Gatiss

# MARK

CHRISTOPHER K. W. MOORE

  
HODDER &  
STOUGHTON

The Hodder Bible Commentary  
Series Editor: Lee Gatiss

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## Series Preface

*The unfolding of your words gives light*  
(Psalm 119:130)

The Hodder Bible Commentary aims to proclaim afresh in our generation the unchanging and unerring word of God, for the glory of God and the good of his people. This fifty-volume commentary on the whole Bible seeks to provide the contemporary church with fresh and readable expositions of Scripture which are doctrinally sensitive and globally aware, accessible for all adult readers but particularly useful to those who preach, teach and lead Bible studies in churches and small groups.

Building on the success of Hodder's NIV Proclamation Bible, we have assembled as contributors a remarkable team of men and women from around the world. Alongside a diverse panel of trusted Consultant Editors, they have a tremendous variety of denominational backgrounds and ministries. Each has great experience in unfolding the gospel of Jesus Christ and all are united in our aim of faithfully expounding the Bible in a way that takes account of the original text, biblical theology, the history of interpretation and the needs of the contemporary global church.

These volumes are serious expositions – not overly technical, scholarly works of reference but not simply sermons either. As well as carefully unpacking what the Bible says, they are sensitive to how it has been used in doctrinal discussions over the centuries and in our own day, though not dominated by such concerns at the expense of the text's own agenda. They also try to speak not only into a white, middle-class, Western context (for example), as some might, but to be aware of ways in which other cultures hear and need to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

As you tuck into his word, with the help of this book, may the glorious Father 'give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better' (Ephesians 1:17).

Lee Gatiss, Series Editor

# Introduction

## *Mark: the Gospel and the author*

### **The Gospel according to Mark**

The titles of the Gospels are strangely formed. In the ancient world, the custom for naming books was to first name the author and then give the title: Mark's Gospel. In the Gospels, we have a construction that is virtually unique: the Gospel *according* to Mark.

This may sound obscure, but it makes an important point. This is not *Mark's* Gospel, but rather Mark's telling of *the* gospel. There may be four Gospels, but they are simply four tellings of the same gospel. The core is the same, but the authors have different aims and so may look at the same incident from a different angle. Each Gospel complements the others. The oddness of the phrasing of the title makes this clear: this is *the* gospel, according to Mark.<sup>1</sup> As Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130–200) comments, 'the Word . . . gave us the fourfold Gospel, which is held together by the one Spirit'.<sup>2</sup> This 'holding together' should encourage us to confidently look for harmony between the Gospels, and not simply assume that apparent contradictions have no solution.

In the mid-second century, Justin Martyr (c. 100–c. 165) captured this nuance by referring to the Gospels as memoirs: 'The Apostles

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<sup>1</sup> For an interesting discussion of this, see Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1985), chapter 3.

<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.11.8. Translation from Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against the Heresies: Book 3*, trans. Matthew C. Steenberg (New York: The Newman Press, 2012), 56.

in their memoirs, which are called Gospels. . .<sup>3</sup> This implies that the core of Mark's writing, as well as the writings of the other Gospel authors, is their experience of Jesus himself: his life, teaching, death and resurrection. This is *the* gospel, and this is why Christianity can have multiple Gospels from different authors that speak of a single message, rather than a single holy book from a single author. Their authority does not come from the authors themselves, but from both the subject of the work and the fact that the authors are, to use a phrase from 2 Peter, 'carried along by the Holy Spirit' (2 Peter 1:21).

Much has been written about the inspiration of Scripture, and the extent of that inspiration, but for now it must be acknowledged that any doctrine of inspiration derives directly from the doctrine of God. If God is all-holy, all-loving, all-powerful and all-true, would he rely upon an unreliable method to reveal himself to us? Certainly the earliest church was in no doubt, and at the end of the first century Clement of Rome wrote, 'You have studied the Holy Scriptures, which are true and inspired by the Holy Spirit. You know that nothing contrary to justice or truth has been written in them.'<sup>4</sup>

This is not to suggest some sort of automatic writing, or that the authors themselves did not have a hand in composing the works that bear their names, but it is to suggest that they did so under the influence of God. The phrase from 2 Peter is a happy one: 'carried along'. The traveller on a boat makes all sorts of decisions and carries out all sorts of actions, but in the end the destination is set by the captain.

## The 'gospel'

'Good news' (in Greek, *euangelion*) is a term that was used in the wider Greek culture to announce some happening to be celebrated or

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<sup>3</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 66. Translation taken from Justin Martyr, *The First Apology, the Second Apology, Dialogue With Trypho, Exhortation to the Greeks, Discourse to the Greeks, the Monarchy; or the Rule of God*, trans. Thomas B. Falls (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1948), 106. He also uses the term frequently in the *Dialogue*.

<sup>4</sup> Clement of Rome (*d. c.* 100), *First Letter*, 45. Translation from *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh, Francis Grimm and Joseph Marique (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1947), 44.

## INTRODUCTION

some historical event that was to be acclaimed. However, that should not mislead us into thinking that in the Jewish world *euangelion* was simply a joyful proclamation. There was something deeper in mind.

In Isaiah 40:9–11 (LXX)<sup>5</sup> the word describes the coming of the LORD in power and speaks of him tending ‘his flock like a shepherd’. In Isaiah 52:7–10 the word is used in the context of the LORD returning to Mount Zion, and the watchmen ‘will see it with their own eyes’ (reminiscent of Palm Sunday). There is more than just a Jewish response in mind: ‘all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God’. Further on, in Isaiah 61:1–2, we discover that this good news is to be delivered by one on whom the Spirit rests, an event we encounter at Jesus’s baptism. The good news is, though, double-edged: it is both the ‘year of the LORD’s favour’ and the ‘day of vengeance of our God’ (Isaiah 61:2). God is both merciful and judge.

In all of this it is important to note that the good news is not simply the message Jesus preached, but the entirety of his life, death, resurrection and ascension. The very name of Jesus speaks of this good news, being translated as ‘the LORD saves’ or ‘the LORD is salvation’,<sup>6</sup> and our entire hope is founded solely upon that life. Our salvation rests not upon what *we* might do but on what Jesus *has done*. His actions within the historical context of ancient Israel are as much the gospel as his teaching, and the gospel is not fully preached if we simply draw moral lessons from Jesus’s words. The full gospel encompasses our reconciliation to God by means of the sacrifice of Christ. All of the Old Testament sacrificial system led up to that one moment: the once-and-for-all sacrifice of the cross whereby sins are eternally forgiven.

### Mark the author

From very early days there has been a tradition that Mark was closely connected to Peter, working as his interpreter, and that his Gospel

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<sup>5</sup> The Septuagint (LXX) is a translation of the Old Testament into Greek made some two hundred years before Christ.

<sup>6</sup> See also Matthew 1:21, ‘you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins’. The name is the Greek form of the Hebrew ‘Joshua’, and so brings to mind the leader who finally brought the wandering Hebrews into the Promised Land.

## MARK

was drawn from Peter's teaching. Irenaeus (c. 130–c. 200) stated that Peter and Paul evangelised Rome, founding the church in that great city. After their departure (a word which more plausibly should be translated as death) 'Mark, Peter's disciple and translator, handed down to us in writing what was preached by Peter'.<sup>7</sup>

In his historical writings, Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–c. 340) quoted Papias, who himself was a hearer of the apostle John. Papias was recorded as saying that 'the elder' used to say:

When Mark became Peter's interpreter, he wrote down accurately, although not in order, all that he remembered of what was said or done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord nor followed Him, but later, as I have said, he did [hear] Peter, who made his teaching fit his needs without, as it were, making any arrangement of the Lord's oracles, so that Mark made no mistake in thus writing some things down as he remembered them. For to one thing he gave careful attention, to omit nothing of what he heard and to falsify nothing in this.<sup>8</sup>

The New Testament itself gives us some evidence of this relationship between Mark and Peter. Peter made mention of 'my son Mark' (1 Peter 5:13), and after his escape from prison, he made his way to the house of Mary the mother of Mark (Acts 12:12).<sup>9</sup> He was clearly close to the family and it is most likely that, as tradition asserts, this Mark is the author of our Gospel.

Given all this, we might accept that the material in Mark's Gospel finds its origin in the preaching of Peter, such that we have Peter's account of Jesus's words, ordered for the purposes of teaching. In fact, the Gospel itself has the flavour of a storyteller or preacher. It is urgent, driven on by the repeated use of 'and', 'immediately' and 'at that time'. It makes much use of the historical present tense, putting

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<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies*, 3.1. Translation from Steenberg (ed.), *Against the Heresies Book 3*, 30.

<sup>8</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39. Translation from Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History, Books 1–5*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1953), 206.

<sup>9</sup> From this passage we discover, too, that Mark was also known as John.

the past into the present. Since it was designed as an oral text, which would have been read aloud, it would have conveyed the urgency of an eyewitness to the hearer. Even today, there is much benefit in finding a quiet corner and reading the whole Gospel aloud.

The oral flavour of the Gospel can also be seen in the techniques Mark used to hold the attention of the hearer. Alongside the urgency of the language, he made frequent use of a ‘sandwich’ technique, whereby one story is placed between the two halves of another story. One example of this is the cursing of the fig tree (Mark 11:12–26): the tree is cursed, the Temple is cleared and the fig tree is withered. The two accounts help interpret each other: the fig tree is a symbol of the Temple. The sandwich might also contain a flashback, such as the retelling of John the Baptist’s execution being placed between the Twelve being sent out and their return (Mark 6:7–30).

We also find paradoxes throughout the Gospel which help grab the attention of the hearer: for example, the demons recognise Jesus, but the religious authorities do not. The good teacher (Mark 10:17) is sent to the cross where the Gentile centurion recognises the one condemned by the authorities as none other than the Son of God (Mark 15:39).

This Gospel is a good listen.

## **Who was Mark?**

The Mark of Acts 12:12 is identified as ‘John, also called Mark’, and this same Mark a little later set off with his cousin Barnabas and Paul for the first of his missionary journeys (see Colossians 4:10). For some reason he left them in Pamphylia, which caused some friction between Paul and Barnabas, who was keen that Mark rejoin them (Acts 15:36–40). In the end Paul took Silas with him to Syria and Cilicia, and Barnabas took Mark to Cyprus. There was a reconciliation. Paul later asked for Mark to be sent to him in Rome ‘because he is helpful to me in my ministry’ (2 Timothy 4:11), and he was with Paul in Rome by the time the apostle wrote to the Colossians (Colossians 4:10) and Philemon (Philemon 24).

There is an early and widespread tradition that it was in Rome that Mark composed his Gospel, alongside Peter, probably before

the apostle died.<sup>10</sup> After that, Mark went on to the North African city of Alexandria and served as the first bishop of that metropolis, a tradition proudly held by the Coptic Church to this day.<sup>11</sup> Rather less celebrated is the fact that he was nicknamed ‘stump-fingered’.<sup>12</sup>

This leaves us with the question of when the Gospel was compiled. Given the link with Peter (whose death is normally dated to AD 64 or 65), and the probable age of Mark himself, a date in the 60s seems most probable, with a likelihood that it was composed in the early part of that decade.<sup>13</sup>

### Matthew, Mark and Luke

This leads us to consider the precise relationship between the first three Gospels, a question much debated over the past century or more. Any reader of these three Gospels will notice a strong similarity, but also some distinct differences. How do we explain this?

The issue is the order in which the Gospels were written. Was Mark written first, and then expanded by Matthew and Luke for their own contexts? Or is Mark a distillation of Matthew and Luke? If that is the case, then why would Mark omit the birth of Jesus and the resurrection appearances?<sup>14</sup> The issues are complex, but the most likely solution is that Mark was written first in the early 60s, with Matthew being an expansion for a Jewish audience and Luke for a Gentile one. Too much can be made of the significance of this question, and it is vital to let the Gospel of Mark stand on its own. Let Mark be Mark, and not simply part of the synoptic puzzle.

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<sup>10</sup> See the discussions in R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 36–41; Hengel, *Studies*, chapter 1. They draw on the writings of early writers such as Papias, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origin, Eusebius and other early sources.

<sup>11</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2.16.1 and 2.24.1.

<sup>12</sup> Hippolytus (c. 170–c. 236), *The Refutation of All Heresies*, 7.30.

<sup>13</sup> It is notable that the apocalyptic material of chapter 13 makes no reference to either the First Jewish Revolt which began in AD 66 or the fall of the Temple in AD 70.

<sup>14</sup> W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison Jr, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Volume 1* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 1998), 109.

# I

## The Prologue

MARK 1:1–15

### 1. *The beginning and the herald* • Mark 1:1–8

The beginnings, or Prologues, of the Gospels set up all that follows. They introduce us to key people and key themes, and also place the text in the context of the Scriptures as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

We are given the privileged role of an insider, and as we go through the remainder of the Gospel, *we* know who Jesus really is: he is ‘the Messiah, the Son of God’. We can read with an understanding that escaped nearly all those with whom Jesus came into contact. We can join the dots. We can read with faith.

Mark’s Prologue is made up of the first fifteen verses of chapter one, a section that begins, ‘The beginning of the *good news* . . .’ and then finishes with, ‘Repent and believe the *good news*’ (my emphasis). As we will see, Mark is keen on the literary device known as an *inclusio*, a way of marking a section of text by repeating a phrase or theme at the beginning and at the end. Everything between the repeats is meant to fit together, and so this device is sometimes known as ‘sandwiching’. The ‘bread’ and the ‘filling’ go together and interpret each other.

The bread of this particular sandwich is ‘the good news’, sometimes translated as ‘gospel’. The filling is the prophetic message of verse 2, which begins to be fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus’s baptism with its accompanying voice from heaven. This section, then, is the introduction to all that follows in the Gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Struthers Malborn, ‘Ending at the Beginning: A Response’, *Semeia* 52 (1991), 177–81. This approach is also seen in wider classical literature. Peter Phillips, *The Prologue of the Fourth Gospel: A Sequential Reading* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2006), 42.

*John the Baptist prepares the way*

**1** The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah,<sup>a</sup> the Son of God,<sup>b</sup> <sup>2</sup>as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

‘I will send my messenger  
ahead of you,

who will prepare your way’<sup>c</sup> –

<sup>3</sup> ‘a voice of one calling in the  
wilderness,

“Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.”<sup>d</sup>

<sup>4</sup>And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went

out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the River Jordan. <sup>6</sup>John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt round his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>And this was his message: ‘After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup>I baptise you with<sup>e</sup> water, but he will baptise you with<sup>e</sup> the Holy Spirit.’

<sup>a</sup> <sup>1</sup> Or *Jesus Christ. Messiah* (Hebrew) and *Christ* (Greek) both mean *Anointed One*.

<sup>b</sup> <sup>1</sup> Some manuscripts do not have *the Son of God*.

<sup>c</sup> <sup>2</sup> Mal. 3:1

<sup>d</sup> <sup>3</sup> Isaiah 40:3

<sup>e</sup> <sup>8</sup> Or *in*

## The Old Testament foundation (1:1–3)

Straight away, Mark puts Jesus at the forefront of his Gospel. Christ is the heart of all that follows and is the good news that is to be proclaimed. The church has often been tempted to offer some other thing to the world – prosperity, self-fulfilment, morality, good works, wholeness – but none of these is the gospel. A gospel without the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is mere morality. A Christless church is no church at all.

This Jesus is then presented to us as both Messiah and Son of God, and here we discover that we are dealing with no mere teacher: we have a figure who is both divine and human. Yet once more we find the church tempted to offer something less – a teacher, a moralist, an example – a Jesus who is all too human, who simply had a presence of the divine within him. A godless saviour who has no power to save. B. B. Warfield (1851–1921) is surely correct when

## THE PROLOGUE

he states, ‘The doctrine of the Incarnation is the hinge on which the Christian system turns. No Two Natures, no Incarnation; no Incarnation, no Christianity in any distinctive sense.’<sup>2</sup>

Having established who Jesus is, Mark then places him into the history of redemption. Jesus is no Plan B, but the fulfilment of God’s plan of redemption which springs from Genesis 3:15.<sup>3</sup>

The quote from Isaiah is, in fact, a compound one, with the first two lines coming from Malachi 3. A puzzling question arises: why did Mark announce a quote from Isaiah and then begin by citing words from Malachi? While some might suggest that Mark made a mistake, this is a rather simplistic response. Given that the quotation from Isaiah, which speaks of the way of the LORD, is the main focus of the hybrid quote, and given the importance of Isaiah for Mark’s Gospel as a whole, it is more likely that Mark was referring to that prophecy. The quotation from Malachi simply served to introduce us to the one who heralded the fulfilments of Isaiah’s prophecy, and so was secondary in importance. It was Isaiah who was in focus here.

This introduction from Malachi prepares us for the forerunner, the messenger who would announce this return of the LORD.<sup>4</sup> Later, in the penultimate verse of the Old Testament – Malachi 4:5 – this messenger was identified: ‘See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you

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<sup>2</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, ‘The “Two Natures” and Recent Christological Speculation: I. The Christology of the New Testament Writings’, *The American Journal of Theology* 15, no. 3 (1911), 337.

<sup>3</sup> ‘And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel’ (the words of God to the serpent). This verse was, from early times, seen as a prophecy of Christ. See, for example, the fifth century Jacob of Serug who imagined Mary as saying: ‘the babe who is in me will crush the head of the great serpent; by Him Adam having been expelled is restored to his heritage’. *Homilies*, 679. Translation from Jacob of Serug, *On the Mother of God*, trans. Mary Hansbury (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 82.

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that Elijah’s return is to herald the day of the LORD and *not* the Messiah. In the literature that survives from this era, there is no linking of the return of Elijah with the coming of a Messiah. For a discussion of this, see Morris M. Faierstein, ‘Why Do the Scribes Say That Elijah Must Come First’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100, no. 1 (1981); Dale C. Allison, ‘Elijah Must Come First’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103, no. 2 (1984); Joseph A. Fitzmyer, ‘More About Elijah Coming First’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, no. 2 (1985). The imagery of Elijah, then, points to something greater than a mere Messiah: the coming of the LORD himself.

before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes,' and it is in this context that, a few verses on, Mark introduced us to John the Baptist. That John is equated to Elijah was hinted at in Mark 9:13 and made explicit in Matthew 11:14 where Jesus declared, 'if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come' (see also Luke 7:27).

Malachi's prophecy echoed Exodus 23:20, and the prophet reapplied this promise to the community who had returned from the Exile.<sup>5</sup> He promised not only a re-entry to the Promised Land but also a return of the LORD to the Temple, something we will see fulfilled in Mark 11.<sup>6</sup>

So much for the messenger; what of the message? Here Mark turned to Isaiah 40:3:

a voice of one calling in the wilderness,  
'Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.'

This was a direct engagement with Isaiah: the hoped-for return of the LORD was about to begin. Centuries had elapsed, and patience is often required in the providence of God. We all too readily come up with swift and easy solutions when God has richer purposes in mind. The old Scottish hymn writer put it well:

Smooth let it be or rough,  
it will be still the best;  
winding or straight, it leads  
right onward to thy rest.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> In Greek and Hebrew, the word translated 'angel' can also be translated 'messenger'.

<sup>6</sup> In Exodus we read, 'See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared. Pay attention to him and listen to what he says. Do not rebel against him; he will not forgive your rebellion, since my Name is in him' (Exodus 23:20-2). This is echoed in Malachi, which reads, "'I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,'" says the LORD Almighty' (Malachi 3:1).

<sup>7</sup> Horatius Bonar (1808-89), 'Thy Way, Not Mine, O Lord'.