



JESUS' URGENT MESSAGE FOR TODAY

The Kingdom of God in Mark's Gospel

ELLIOTT C. MALONEY

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ELLIOTT C. MALONEY, O.S.B.

*Dedicated to four great scholars of Brazil:
Carlos Mesters, Johan Konings, Gilberto Gorgulho, and Ana Flora Anderson.
Their insights, along with their holiness and dedication, have opened up for
all the meaning of the Gospel of Mark and its urgent plea for today's world.*

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A few years ago I acted on a whim that changed my scholarly outlook and, to tell the truth, my whole life. Back in 1993, when some of the members of our Benedictine foundation in Brazil came here to Saint Vincent Archabbey to study, I became very interested in their country. The stories they told about home spoke of their deep faith and profound grasp of the meaning of the Bible for our Christian life today. I got it into my head to study their language, Portuguese, and to visit their priory in Vinhedo, a small city in Brazil near São Paulo. My abbot was delighted with the prospect and asked that I use the summer of 1994 to meet with the religious leaders who had gathered around the priory and its retreat center and work with them on the basics of modern Catholic critical interpretation of the Bible.

Giving those lectures and conducting the community retreat in Portuguese at the priory gave me a real workout over some seven weeks that summer (winter in Brazil), but I had a truly great experience. I was overwhelmed by the goodness of the Brazilian people and I knew I had to return some day. Little did I know that this scholar and seminary professor of some twenty years would return as a student!

The opportunity came when I took my sabbatical semester in Vinhedo in the spring of 1997. I wanted a change of venue from our busy scholastic scene and the seclusion and tranquility to write, of all things, some memories of growing up as a Catholic boy in the 1950s in Pittsburgh. My abbot gave me a task to do to earn my keep at the Vinhedo Priory, and that was to instruct the novices (the young men preparing to take monastic vows) in a critical appreciation of the Gospels. This I gladly did, since I had written my doctoral dissertation on the language of the Gospel of Mark and had been teaching the Synoptic Gospels for years. As I started to prepare my lessons, I remembered some of the awful gaffes I had made before in the language of

Brazil in my lectures of 1994 and so I thought it would be wise to read up on the subject of Gospel introduction in Portuguese, to get the technical language more properly in hand. Following the advice of our Fr. Leo Rothrauff at the priory, I selected some books on the Gospels by the Brazilian scholars Carlos Mesters and Gilberto Gorgulho, two well-known exegetes and teachers. I was astounded with what I read! These small books were the best Bible commentary I had read in years. As the awareness came over me that their kind of understanding of the context of the Gospels was far superior to anything I knew, I realized that I had to learn more about this exciting way of reading the Gospels. But by then my time on sabbatical had run out.

Upon my return to the States, I started planning to go back to Brazil right after the end of school the next spring to visit with some of the wonderful Bible scholars and to buy all the books I could. After procuring the necessary funding, I arranged to make a visit to Mexico City after the Brazil trip, since I had some great friends there as well. Upon my arrival in São Paulo I was lucky enough to meet and spend the day with Frey Gilberto Gorgulho and Dr. Ana Flora Anderson at the Dominican seminary there. I then made what turned out to be a pilgrimage to a small town called Angra dos Reis, near Rio de Janeiro, where I spent a wonderful day with Frey Carlos Mesters, whose ideas on New Testament eschatology took my breath away. The final scholarly interview took place on a two-day visit with the delightful P. Johan Konings at the Jesuit seminary in Belo Horizonte, just north of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. Their library was particularly good, and the Jesuits made me feel quite at home. I returned to São Paulo, scoured the religious bookstores, and left Brazil with a suitcase full of books and periodicals. I ended this study trip in Mexico City, where I was not so lucky. By then the spring term had already ended and other duties took up the time of most of these busy scripture scholars. I was able, however, to use the excellent library of the diocesan seminary of Mexico City and to visit two other seminaries and a monastery in that part of the world, and so I was able to pick up some very good commentaries in the Spanish language.

As I read this material during the following school year, I discovered more authors and periodicals and made a decision to spend part of the next summer with the vast holdings of the library of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. Ah, the things one will do for scholarship! I had studied in Rome in the early 1970s and had taken a sabbatical semester there in 1990. I was delighted to return to visit the Eternal City and its excellent biblical library. On my return to the States later that summer, I shared my new discoveries with my seminar colleagues at the Catholic Biblical Association annual meeting. My ideas were well received and I experienced some good give-and-take in particular about the eschatological thrust of the Gospel of Mark. Later that year I was invited to participate in a panel on the Gospel of Mark at the

annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. Strong criticism, mixed with positive and interested response, greeted me at that convention in November 1999.

Having read all about this remarkable way of reading the biblical text, I knew it was time to actually read the Bible with the people in Latin America. With a very generous grant once again from the Brooks Institution, I set out in the summer of 2000 on a seven-week study trip to Mexico, Venezuela, and Brazil. On this memorable excursion I was able to visit seminaries, monasteries, and Bible study institutes; I met with several wonderful Bible study groups, with the Bible teachers themselves, group leaders, base communities, married couples, pastors, monks, and seminarians, and I even visited the leader of a community on possessed land.

In all of these refreshing encounters, I realized that I was actually experiencing the cultural differences that social science interpreters have been maintaining as absolutely necessary for a correct understanding of the ancient texts. The next logical step was to read up on the topic, and so I worked with my students here at Saint Vincent Seminary in several M.A. seminars on this approach to the Synoptic Gospels. Finally, it dawned on me that it would be an excellent idea to combine the theoretical knowledge of social science interpretation with the actual experience of reading the Bible with my Latin American friends in a discussion of a subject that mystifies so many, the eschatology of early Christianity. The result of this saga, then, is this book.

I want to thank my Benedictine community here at Saint Vincent Archabbey for the generous support I have received in this endeavor over the past five years, indeed, for all they have given me in the thirty-five years of my monastic life. Hearty thanks to the Brooks Institution for their generous funding of my 1998 and 2000 study tours in Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela, where I was able to meet so many wonderful people who taught me so much. Without the help of these open and generous folks of Latin America I doubt that I would ever have come to the understanding that allowed me to write this book. To my students at Saint Vincent Seminary, whose excellent work especially in recent M.A. seminars has greatly expanded my ability to express this new approach, I owe a great debt for their insights as well as for their patience. I am also very grateful to my students at Saint Vincent College and to the many Christian believers who participate with me in adult Bible studies. Their feedback, as well as their great enthusiasm for the Sacred Scriptures, has made my study an easy and pleasant task.

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INTRODUCTION

Christian believers often ask how God communicates to us the next steps in the eternal plan for the salvation of the world. How will the churches recognize the reforms needed to make ever more present God's will in our modern, complicated, and broken world? One very important means we have is to search the Sacred Scriptures over and over again and to listen for God's ongoing revelation. Not only do new questions call forth new solutions, but new ways of reading and rereading the ancient texts bring forth new insights for modern problems. One very meaningful development in NT study and interpretation presents some very powerful new possibilities for understanding Jesus' message in the Gospels. This is the realization that we need to read the text with a better comprehension of the ancient culture in which it was produced.

One part of the Gospel message, a teaching that has been largely neglected for many years, holds the promise of a truly renewed vigor for Christian leadership in our troubled world. This is the obscure and often poorly understood area of eschatology, or the Gospel's teaching on the future of the Kingdom of God that was the center of Jesus' teaching.

A couple of years ago, when everyone was excited about all the possible dangers and difficulties of the approach of the year 2000, there was a distinct rise in queries about the New Testament's teachings on Judgment Day and the Second Coming of Christ. Did Jesus really preach that the world was coming to an end? What are we supposed to believe about the millennium and other images in the Book of Revelation? What do the Gospels have to say about the "end of the world"? Does the theme of eschatological theology in the New Testament have any relevance for modern Christians? These are some of the questions that still puzzle us today, even though the turn of the millennium was to some disappointingly undramatic and is by now mostly forgotten.

THE PROBLEM

Most Americans are not quite sure what the concept "eschatology" means. A quick look at Webster's Dictionary tells us that the word derives from the Greek adjective for "last" (*eschatos*), and that its meaning is "the study or science dealing with the ultimate destiny or purpose of humankind and the world." In terms of the Bible, eschatology refers to the ultimate destiny or purpose of humanity in God's eternal will and includes a description of what God has in mind for the rest of time. Throughout the Bible, eschatological thinking varies from time to time and among different prophetic figures. The best-known type is apocalyptic eschatology, a theology in which God's final act of salvation will be a sudden revelation (*apocalypsis* in Greek) of power that will utterly destroy evil and reward the good.

In spite of a vague awareness of these terms, most Americans are quite puzzled by the apocalyptic texts of the New Testament. A variety of historical and other factors are responsible for our present state of forgetfulness, but it is clear that the once-central eschatological thinking of the early Church receives little consideration in our modern day-to-day lives. A few think that they threaten a fiery end of the world, but most take them to speak of some nebulous destructive action of God in a far-off future, if they even think about it at all.

Biblical scholars have often added to the anesthetization of the New Testament's great ethical demands by a kind of demythologization of apocalyptic literature that misses its point. Many think that the earliest Christians expected an imminent return of Jesus from heaven to bestow final judgment and salvation along the lines of a violent Jewish apocalypticism. These early believers were wrong, the theory goes, and the "delay" of the Parousia combined with a spirituality of individual perfection in the ever more westernized Church to lessen apocalyptic fervor and almost completely curtail its literary expression.¹ Thus many think that the only proper understanding for today of NT apocalyptic texts is as some kind of individualized moral response. They would interpret such texts as Jesus' Eschatological Discourse in the Gospel of Mark (chap. 13) as emphasizing only the salvific *kairos*, or "opportune time," of the *present* moment for the individual believer. The New Testament has, in this thinking, little or nothing to say about the future of the Church, much less about the destiny of the entire world.

In addition to this diminishment of biblical teaching, there is now a great debate raging among scholars about the eschatological teaching of the historical Jesus himself. On the one hand, many claim that Jesus never used apocalyptic language, since most of what they consider to be his authentic teaching is oriented to present living. A good number of North American scholars who study the "historical Jesus" hold this view. They feel that the

early Christians, imbued with a Jewish apocalyptic perspective, were responsible for the creation of most of the eschatological sayings of Jesus. The problem with this position is that the earliest Christians clearly believed that during his earthly ministry Jesus himself predicted that he would come again, in his *parousia* as the heavenly Son of Man. As we shall see, many words and deeds of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark constitute a lively apocalyptic tradition intertwined with his most central teaching, the Kingdom of God, which nearly all scholars attribute to Jesus himself. Not only that, but the New Testament shows that a powerful apocalyptic expectation colored much of the early Church's moral teaching and ecclesiology. Could the followers of Jesus have so misinterpreted his teaching?

In contrast to this position, the majority of scholars claim that Jesus *was* an apocalyptic preacher, but many of them maintain that he was simply mistaken. This position is obviously very difficult for most Christians to accept, and it has serious consequences for today's understanding of the gospel. All this confusion in the study of NT eschatology has brought about an impasse in the scholarly pursuit of this most fruitful biblical teaching. The unfortunate result of these assumptions for the greater Church is the anesthetization of an important force in NT ethical teaching and the confirmation of a rugged individualism in personal piety that is simply unbiblical. Worst of all, the eschatological challenge to the present state of the world goes unheard.

The dilemma, we propose, results from the presuppositions of scholars on both sides of the debate. They misunderstand eschatology, and especially apocalyptic eschatological texts, because they are locked into a "hermeneutical circle" of their own modern, Nordic, First World presuppositions. These include 1) a literal approach to biblical symbolism that overlooks its metaphorical meaning—and thus misses its point; 2) a quantitative, future-oriented concept of time that misunderstands the force of apocalyptic with regard to the present; and 3) an individualism that regards biblical texts as creating a myth of personal security and well-being while not addressing the despair of a world that still languishes in dehumanized conditions.

THE BEGINNINGS OF A SOLUTION

It is not the intention of this book to resolve the Jesus Debate on eschatology, but with our study of Marcan eschatology in its ancient setting we hope to recapture some of the original Christian striving to cooperate with God's plan for the world. To do this, we shall examine the Gospel of Mark, specifically to discern the Evangelist's understanding of Christian discipleship as directed to the salvation of the whole world. This is Christianity's eschatological goal according to Mark: the fulfillment of God's plan in the arrival of the Kingdom announced by Jesus.

The first part of a solution to the debate on NT eschatology will come about with the admission by exegetes (academic Bible scholars) that they need to broaden their understanding of the ancient world. They are already doing this by listening to scholars from outside the traditional academic study of the Bible, men and women who can shed much light on the culture and thinking of the ancient world in which the Bible was produced. The social sciences, especially historical sociology and cultural anthropology, are now examining in great detail the lives and history of the common people of old. Equally important, however, are those Bible scholars who work in non-First World countries where they can experience the type of culture presupposed in the Bible in the everyday lives of the people they live with.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

A recent renaissance in the scholarly study of ancient Palestine in the first century has greatly expanded our understanding of the context in which Jesus lived and carried out his ministry. The reasons for this new viewpoint are two. First, recent scholars have gone outside the traditional focuses on biblical texts to seek from various social science perspectives a more refined understanding of just what society as a whole was like back then. Previously, most historical study had been limited to the major writings and the durable artifacts of antiquity, things produced by and for an elite section of the population who controlled their society and had little to do with the common people. Examining only these materials produced a rather one-sided picture of antiquity that tended to obscure some of the most important realities one needs to understand what was really going on in the ancient Mediterranean world.

The Social Location of Scholarship

There is no doubt that the perspective of the common man and woman of antiquity and a familiarity with the ordinary events of their lives were lacking in the presentation of the New Testament until fairly recently. Such a lacuna in perception was probably a factor of the social "location" of the most influential interpreters of the New Testament. Over the twenty Christian centuries, the most widely preached and read explanations of the sacred texts have been done by Christian *churchmen*. As such, these gifted communicators were mainly concerned with the relationship of the Bible to church doctrine, to the Christian belief system and its moral code. They read the biblical text with a kind of spiritualizing selectivity that was not much concerned with the practical social conditions behind the words and activities recorded in the ancient texts. In other words, their focus was trying to find out what the Bible revealed about how to live a Christian life in an idealized and fairly static medieval

Christian society. Gone was the powerful social upheaval that the first Christians caused. The stories of their lives and struggles were spiritualized, and political and economic factors were no longer taken into consideration. Finally, the powerful leaders of the Church who interpreted the Bible for the illiterate masses were basically unaware of their own limitations and their pre-suppositions about society. They remained relatively insulated in their social situation as members of the cultural elite of their day.²

Recent Approaches to Biblical Interpretation

The second step in this new perspective is the work of modern biblical scholars who are often from very different social standing than their predecessors. In the nineteenth and especially the twentieth centuries Bible study was broadened by a circle of scholars that went beyond the narrow confines of church leadership. Gradually, the prevailing opinions on most questions about the Bible were constructed by the leading *academic* writers. But these scholars were limited, too. They were mainly white, Euro-American, middle-class males, most of whom had not yet come to an understanding of how their own “social location” and their Nordic individualism helped to bias their understanding of biblical texts. In fact, they believed their opinions to be rather objective, since they were employing a rather “scientific” approach to the Bible.

Happily, this situation too has been left behind. The prominence in the latter decades of the twentieth century of a good number of highly trained women scholars, along with the broadening input of the social sciences, has opened up the field of Bible study to many new ideas and perspectives. In fact, it has even allowed an incipient awareness of the value of the different perspectives of Latin American and other “Two-Thirds World” exegetes. With their different sensitivities, these scholars have been able to perceive many factors operative in texts of the ancient world that the “mainline” scholars simply missed. We now have a much more realistic picture of the society in which Jesus lived and taught, and one that leads to some new conclusions about his life and ministry. Their insights and challenges for all Christians about NT eschatology and the present state of the world should no longer go unheard. The practical focus of Jesus’ rejection of the formal religious system of the Jerusalem Temple, his teaching on justice, and his great vision for the future come more fully to light only when we read the Scriptures with a fuller awareness. The cultural understanding of first-century Mediterranean people, so similar to that in Latin America today, is a necessary ingredient for the veracity of any modern interpretation of the Bible.

No generation can say the ultimate word on the interpretation of any biblical text, but we have certainly come a long way in understanding the background and original intention of the writers of Scripture. There has been a reawakening of interest in Jesus’ teaching on the future, and it has

become the focus of many Latin American publications and Bible study groups. Through their insights and challenges we should be able to hear the message of Jesus speak loud and clear to the needs of our present world.

The Latin American Advantage

Over the past few decades Latin American exegetes have presented a more biblical understanding than have the majority of North Atlantic scholars in the three cultural areas mentioned above: symbolic thought, the perception of time, and the solidarity of humankind. Their insights can be too readily dismissed as “liberation theology,” a generalization based on a caricature of some early efforts of Latin American theologians. In this book, however, we hope to show how the culture from which their recent study and publication have sprung is much closer than ours to that of Jesus and the early Church. Anyone who has traveled to Latin America has too many anecdotes about the difference in time perception there (“¡Mañana!”), and anyone who has been “taken” by a street vendor there understands that many Latinos have a rather different conception of social obligations and the rights and duties of individuals. These cultural differences of Latin Americans are actually quite a bit closer to the “Circum-Mediterranean” culture of the first-century Christians who lived in the Middle East, Greece, and Italy, those who started the church and wrote its constitutive documents.

Because of these similarities we have much to learn about the intentions of the original authors of the Gospels from Latin American Christians, who exhibit a remarkable consistency of thought whether it be in the scores of books and articles of trained exegetes I have read, or among the teachers and participants of the many Bible studies, conferences, and classes that I have attended in Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela. These believers have a natural intuition that apocalyptic, with its symbolic mode of expression, is about people of every age and is focused on the potential for a just and peaceful life for all good people everywhere. They clearly perceive the duties of Christians in preaching the gospel to bring about a better life for all who would share in God's saving plan. The poor and marginalized of the world might not always be aware of all the literary nuances in a given text, but I have experienced again and again that their critical consciousness is powerful in evaluating both present society and an ancient text. In fact, their perspective has been called “the new hermeneutical key . . . that opens up or unveils the deeper meaning of many Biblical texts.”³ When they discuss a biblical story, they know they are discussing their own lives, and biblical history “becomes a symbol or a mirror of the present situation as the people experience it in their community.”⁴

Their perception of the exploitation of the commoner in ancient Israel by the priestly aristocracy, along with their commitment to all members of