



# A Servant of Surprise: Juel Interpreted\*

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## THE SENSE OF AN ENDING

When at age sixty-one Donald Harrisville Juel (1942–2003) died in Princeton, New Jersey, he left in his debt thousands of students and colleagues for a lifetime of ministry, education, and exegesis. The exegesis was devoted primarily to the Gospel according to Mark. Juel's earliest work in the field was assisting his seminary professor (and first cousin) Roy Harrisville in a translation of Willi Marxsen's classic monograph, *Der Evangelist Markus* (1956).<sup>1</sup> In later years, Harrisville's hand upon Juel's scholarship was, by his own admission, more guiding than that of Marxsen.<sup>2</sup> Harrisville regarded Mark as a preacher's sermon.<sup>3</sup> In his last book, Juel nodded toward St. Augustine by articulating "a rhetorical approach"

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<sup>1</sup>Willi Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist: Essays on the Redaction History of the Gospel*, trans. James Boyce, Donald Juel, William Poehlmann, with Roy Harrisville (Nashville and New York: Abingdon, 1969); German original, *Der Evangelist Markus: Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Evangeliums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956).

<sup>2</sup>Donald H. Juel, *A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) vii.

<sup>3</sup>Roy A. Harrisville, *The Miracle of Mark: A Study in the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1967).

*Donald H. Juel (1942–2003) was a consummate maestro in his reading of Mark's Gospel. He concentrated relentlessly on what God was up to in the story and was willing to accept the danger and embrace the surprise entailed in such a reading. As Clifton Black notes here, Juel's life, like the Gospel of Mark, did not end where and as it should.*

to the Gospel, one that intended “to teach, to delight, and to move.”<sup>4</sup> In the vivid terms of his longtime Luther Seminary colleague Patrick Keifert, Juel had little interest in playing “mind reader” to the second evangelist and his community.<sup>5</sup> When undertaking historical excavation of what the text had meant, his heart didn’t seem in it.<sup>6</sup> But when conveying the impact of this Gospel’s truth, his sentences sparkle, for Juel was a consummate “maestro.” With bittersweet joy I offer a modest appreciation of Donald Juel’s exegetical musicianship as an interpreter of Mark.

#### RECLAIMING GOD FROM INTERPRETIVE NEGLECT

Juel’s reading of the Second Gospel begins and ends with an unwavering conviction of God’s life and work through the text. The activity of the living God is the point of departure for Juel’s understanding of Mark, for his construal of the evangelist’s own means of interpretation, for his adoption and refinement of modern exegetical method, and for his sense of what ultimately is at stake in scriptural interpretation. Juel much appreciated the famous essay by his Yale *Doktorvater* Nils Dahl on the neglected aspect of New Testament theology—namely, God—and Juel was determined not to perpetuate that neglect.<sup>7</sup> If one does not recognize its theocentricism, one cannot possibly understand Don Juel’s scholarship.

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One can watch this fundamental premise at work in his general comments about exegetical method, the choices interpreters make before they even turn to the text in question. “If what moves us to read the Bible is the possibility not just of meaningfulness but of truthfulness, then we have little choice but to weigh anchor and sail out of the harbor into the deep”—that is, beyond the comfortable shallows of so-called disinterested historical criticism.<sup>8</sup> Even more pointedly: “To whatever extent modern interpretation effectively exorcises God from public imagination, such scholarship is antitheological, in spite of the intentions of particular interpreters.”<sup>9</sup>

This relentless concentration on what God may be up to, as Mark narrates the story of Jesus, is palpable at numerous points in Juel’s commentary (1990). Of

<sup>4</sup>Donald H. Juel, *The Gospel of Mark* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999) 31–32; cf. Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana* 4.27.74.

<sup>5</sup>Patrick Keifert, “Mind Reader and Maestro: Models for Understanding Biblical Interpreters,” *Word & World* 1 (1981) 153–165.

<sup>6</sup>See, for instance, Juel, *A Master of Surprise*, 123–128, and *The Gospel of Mark*, 36–38.

<sup>7</sup>Nils Alstrup Dahl, “The Neglected Factor in New Testament Theology,” in *Jesus the Messiah: The Historical Origin of Christological Doctrine*, ed. Donald H. Juel (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 153–163.

<sup>8</sup>Juel, *A Master of Surprise*, 10.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

Jesus' perennially baffling explanation for speaking in parables (Mark 4:10–12), Juel acknowledges, "There seems no escape from the implication: God has the sovereign right to determine who will and who will not see and hear—and repent. Jesus claims that right as his own."<sup>10</sup> The God to whom Mark's Jesus introduces us is a promising God. Amidst the grim forecast in 13:2–23, "divine necessity is embedded in a promise: the gospel *will* be preached. Persecution will not silence the preachers. The word will be spread. This is not a command but a declaration of what God will make possible."<sup>11</sup>

Yet this God is also dangerous, as one of Juel's students helped him better to appreciate with respect to the temple veil's rending in the passion narrative. Conceding that the evangelist may be obliquely expressing the claim made in Heb 10:19–22, Juel notes that, at Mark 15:38, "The imagery may as well suggest the removal of protection," which the inner curtain concealing the Holy of Holies was meant to provide. "[T]he protection is gone and now God is among us, on the loose."<sup>12</sup>

The heavens, understood as a great cosmic curtain that separates creation from God's presence, are in the process of being torn open...Viewed from another perspective, the image may suggest the protecting barriers are gone and that God, unwilling to be confined to sacred spaces, is on the loose in our own realm. If characters in the story find Jesus' ministry threatening, then they may have good reason.<sup>13</sup>

While Juel had no quarrel with Anselm's doctrine of the atonement,<sup>14</sup> he doubted that such was what Mark was driving at—which is, rather, how the world appears from the vantage point afforded by the cross. In Juel's view, the evangelist seems less interested in soteriology than in epistemology: "What does Jesus' death disclose about us and our world—and about God?"<sup>15</sup> Juel answers his own question:

[Mark] attempts in narrative form a "theology of the cross"—a glimpse of reality that takes as its point of departure the execution of the King of the Jews. If Jesus is the promised Messiah, this is how the world must be—and this is the only way the story can be told!...In the death of the King of the Jews we experience in the most profound way the great surprise God had in store.<sup>16</sup>

Equally profound, however, is the end of Mark's narrative:

Jesus' resurrection has exploded the old standards of reality and appearance, truth and absurdity. Those to whom this is revealed and who understand the

<sup>10</sup>Donald H. Juel, *Mark* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990) 71; see also *ibid.*, 92 (on 6:1–6a).

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>12</sup>Juel, *The Gospel of Mark*, 61.

<sup>13</sup>Juel, *A Master of Surprise*, 35–36, citing Josephus, *Wars* 5.212–214.

<sup>14</sup>See *The Gospel of Mark*, 160–163, wherein Juel draws into conversation *Cur Deus Homo?* (1099) with C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950).

<sup>15</sup>Juel, *Mark*, 217.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 224–225; *A Master of Surprise*, 105. Here, the influence of Dahl's thought on Juel's construction of Markan christology is obvious; see especially Dahl, "The Crucified Messiah," in *Jesus the Messiah*, 27–47.

secret can no longer measure reality and truth by convention, by institutional standards, or even by common sense.<sup>17</sup>

Just there we may understand why so many of Juel's comments on Mark seem almost to have been lifted from anti-Pelagian broadsides. "The yearning to know what God knows is great; the temptation to 'be like God' seems to be inherent in humankind."<sup>18</sup> It is not merely that Juel read Mark through an Augustinian lens, even though he cheerfully acknowledged how Pauline his interpretation of the Second Gospel could be.<sup>19</sup> For Juel, the evangelist (Mark) shared with the apostle (Paul) a comparable theological ecology: God alone is the sovereign source of life, and only God can release humanity from its enslavement. For us, no less than for the rich man in Mark 10:17–22, "Eternal life is obviously not a right but a gift."<sup>20</sup> "Yet believers ought not be naïve about what to expect from a world bound by sin that hung Jesus on a cross."<sup>21</sup> So follows the significance of Jesus' prediction and rebuke of Peter at Caesarea Philippi (8:31, 33):

There must be a clash. The scandal of the cross is not due to slightly flawed scriptural interpretation but to the very nature of things. There must be a confrontation between God and the human race—and we are now told that the encounter will be marked by a cross. Someone must die, even if death will not have the final word....Humans are powerless to break through that barrier; in fact, most are obliged to defend it. For God to reclaim a captive creation there must be a battle. And Jesus will be the casualty.<sup>22</sup>

Jesus is no mere victim. Since his baptism (1:9–11) he has been possessed—by God's Spirit.<sup>23</sup> God will also vindicate him by resurrection. Even at his transfiguration (9:2–8), "He is a heavenly being. He will eventually appear in his 'glory' (8:38; 14:62)....[But t]here can be no final glory, no consummation until after the cross. That is the 'necessity' which dominates Jesus' career."<sup>24</sup>

#### FROM SOLUTION TO PLIGHT

I do not recall Juel's contradicting Marxsen's generally accepted dictum that the second evangelist reasoned backward, from the passion to the beginning of Jesus' story.<sup>25</sup> Typically, however, Juel follows the evangelist's own lead by attending

<sup>17</sup>Donald H. Juel, with James S. Ackerman and Thayer S. Wardshaw, *An Introduction to New Testament Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978) 195.

<sup>18</sup>Juel, *Mark*, 184.

<sup>19</sup>"History's termination marks the birth of a new age. Paul uses the same language in Romans [8:21–33]" (*Mark*, 176; see also *The Gospel of Mark*, 134); "In Mark, however, [Christian] reinterpretation [of Jewish messianism] does not obscure the shock: that the offspring of David should be invested and enthroned on a cross, a victim of those from whom he was expected to deliver Israel, is an offense (1 Cor 1:23)" (*Mark*, 126; see also *The Gospel of Mark*, 155).

<sup>20</sup>Juel, *Mark*, 142. In the original, the first two words of this sentence are set in bold font.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 122–123.

<sup>23</sup>Juel, *A Master of Surprise*, 36.

<sup>24</sup>Juel, *Mark*, 127.

<sup>25</sup>Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist*, 32.

to the Gospel's narrative sequence, which moves from "solution"—the advent of Jesus as agent and incarnation of God's kingdom (1:14–15)—to "plight": various, increasingly dire representations of the human predicament, manifested by humanity's checkered response to Jesus. It is the severity of that plight in Mark that prompts Juel to give full weight to the Gospel's assessment of humanity's hard-heartedness (3:5; 4:10–12; 6:51–52; 8:17–18).

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***"Juel was death on all Jewish stereotyping whose covert objective was (Gentile) Christian triumphalism"***

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For example, Juel had much to say about Israel, its leaders during the time of Jesus, and the Gentiles. To begin with, "Mark is the most careful of the evangelists in distinguishing various groups within the Jewish community. There is no basis for the claim that 'Israel' rejects Jesus."<sup>26</sup> Juel was death on all Jewish stereotyping whose covert objective was (Gentile) Christian triumphalism:

[T]he whole Pharisaic enterprise [is] to sanctify all of life. The tradition of the elders [in Mark 7:3, 5] was not an attempt to bury the commands of God in trivia but to apply the Torah to every facet of life....We do the Pharisees an injustice when we regard them as petty hypocrites. Mark does not portray them as petty. They have a definite view of Jewish identity that differs at points from Jesus', and they ask questions....Judaism cannot be viewed as a decadent religion; it has remained vital throughout the centuries....[Rather, w]hat distinguishes [Judaism and Christianity] is the view of the law and its function. For Judaism..., the relationship with God and the world is mediated by the Torah, understood as a structure that orders all of life in terms of holiness. For Jesus' followers, the relationship with God and the world is mediated by Jesus, whose desire to heal and to save acknowledges no boundaries.<sup>27</sup>

For Juel, that assessment's implications were at least twofold. As regards the evangelist's ecclesiology, which comes to a head in Mark 14:53–65, "The church is characterized as a spiritual temple without hands and is viewed as a replacement of the Jewish temple."<sup>28</sup> Second:

If Gentiles are to be included [among the people of God], it will not be because Jews have been rejected and not given an opportunity to hear the promises of God. Even Paul, whose career was built on the equality of Gentiles within the church, insists that the word of God is "to the Jew first and also to the Greek." [In Mark 7:24–30] Jesus expresses such sentiments without attempting to conceal their offensiveness.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Juel, *Mark*, 121.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 102, 106–107. Note also page 51: "Jesus would have looked more like a Pharisee than a member of any other of the various groups in the story."

<sup>28</sup>Donald H. Juel, *Messiah and Temple: The Trial Narrative in the Gospel of Mark* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977) 57.

<sup>29</sup>Juel, *Mark*, 108. The quotation of Rom 1:16 and allusion to Rom 9–11 again demonstrate the theological congruence that Juel recognized between Mark and Paul.

Within that context—Jesus’ repugnance to both Jews and Gentiles—we are better positioned to understand the evangelist’s multilevel political critique. Here, one must tread cautiously, lest Juel be misclassified as a practitioner of what is now styled as political or ideological approaches to biblical texts. Juel was no unreconstructed liberal: a polemicist, traveling under exegetical guise, for causes whose promotion would assure that the church was “behaving itself.” In reading Mark, Juel was fascinated by what happened when “the gospel of God” and the impact of God’s kingdom (Mark 1:14–15) ran headlong against and exposed this world’s religious and political conventions as sacred cows by which “the will of God” (3:35) was held at bay or conveniently ignored. “Conformity to the crucified involves such matters as social organization and relations.”<sup>30</sup> This theme runs as a scarlet thread throughout Juel’s commentary on Mark:

While [Jesus’ pronouncement of forgiveness in 2:5] may not qualify as blasphemy by any known legal code, the religious leaders certainly understand Jesus’ willingness to make declarations on God’s behalf as the kind of infringement that constitutes a violation of the sacred boundary [constructed by some first-century scribes]. Jesus blasphemes!<sup>31</sup>

The pronouncement [in Mark 3:33–35] is explosive. Jesus threatens the most fundamental of all structures, the family. Blood relations guarantee nothing. What will alone unite, he seems to say, is fidelity to the truth. Those who are troubled by Jesus have good reason to be. He appears as the opponent of structured life—of civilization.... “New skins for new wine.” But at what cost? Who will be able to pay?<sup>32</sup>

What is frightening about Jesus is that he refuses to leave the world as it is. He transgresses the boundaries and rescues those beyond help. He has the power. Such a person cannot be controlled, only followed.<sup>33</sup>

Jesus’ terse explanation [in 7:14–15] undermines the whole enterprise of constructing a system by which the world is structured in terms of pure and impure, clean and unclean.... What should be said is that religious Jews found Jesus a threat to their religion.<sup>34</sup>

Jesus did not promise peaceful coexistence between Rome and those whose primary allegiance is to the Lord God. The Roman government certainly did not understand Jesus to be politically harmless.<sup>35</sup>

[Mark’s] comment [in 15:1–15] ought not obscure the good intentions both

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 149.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 47.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 65.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 81; so also Donald H. Juel, “Plundering Satan’s House: Mark 5:1–20,” *Word & World* 17 (1997) 278–281.

<sup>34</sup>Juel, *Mark*, 106–107. So also 159, on Mark 11:15–19: “The temple is thoroughly corrupt, as was the case once before in the history of Jerusalem [thus, Jeremiah’s sermon in 7:2–11]. Evidence of that corruption will be the refusal of its priestly leaders to accept Jesus.”

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 165.

Jewish and Roman leaders had for taking action against Jesus. He was dangerous.<sup>36</sup>

Jesus was threatening and God's kingdom, dangerous: the constant refrains. "The world is a dangerous place for the elect."<sup>37</sup> Juel does not interpret the kingdom of God in Mark as a mandate for anarchy, of which Roman thinkers and politicians were understandably fearful.<sup>38</sup> "While Jesus' preaching speaks of fidelity to God in a way that threatens the fabric of society, his ultimate goal is not the destruction of human community but the establishment of that community on a firmer foundation....New social units will take the place of the old."<sup>39</sup> Rather, "[t]he argument that the narrative seeks to make, if we may use such language, is that Jesus must transgress the bounds of propriety and tradition for the sake of a higher good....Lines must be crossed, curtains torn, the heavens themselves rent asunder in the course of the career of one whose coming can be characterized as good news."<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, "the world's standards of judgment appear to run headlong into God's ways. Jesus does not measure up."<sup>41</sup>

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*"the world is a dangerous place for the elect"*

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The sauce that gags Jesus' adversaries is equally bitter for his own followers to swallow. Because Juel finds no suggestion that the Twelve in Mark are any less epistemologically fettered than everyone else—save Jesus—he (Juel) cuts the disciples appreciable slack:

If the problem [in Mark 6:52] were one of will, encouragement could perhaps suffice. If the problem is a hardened heart, something more than exhortation will be required....Deliverance can come only from outside....[The disciples'] problem is not simply attributable to sloth or lack of effort. They are unable to see and hear, blocked from understanding by a malady that requires a cure from outside.<sup>42</sup>

If the "disciples' problem is that they are in the grasp of a power from which they must be delivered,"<sup>43</sup> then they are due greater charity from many Markan commentators:<sup>44</sup>

The disciples are not simply foils for readers whose privileged position allows for

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 215; see also 89.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 186; see also Juel, *A Master of Surprise*, 88.

<sup>38</sup>Juel, *Mark*, 137.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 139, 144; see also 133–134.

<sup>40</sup>Juel, *A Master of Surprise*, 41.

<sup>41</sup>Juel, *Mark*, 91.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 100, 115.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 117.

<sup>44</sup>See C. Clifton Black, *The Disciples according to Mark: Markan Redaction in Current Debate* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989).

a certain disdain. It never ceases to amaze me that commentators take a kind of delight in the disciples' failures. There are few readings of the Gospel that elicit any empathy with those whose eyes were very heavy, and fewer still who pick up on the promises of their rehabilitation. While readers cannot identify with the disciples—we are located at a different place from the beginning of the story—something about their plight is instructive.<sup>45</sup>

“Nothing less than an act of deliverance will solve [the disciples'] problem—and the problem of the human race.”<sup>46</sup> And that is precisely what Juel invites his students to discern in the terrified witnesses' faltering silence at the empty tomb (Mark 16:8, the Gospel's true ending):

Yet the world is not the same. The tomb is empty. Jesus is out, beyond death's reach, on the loose....Turning the completion of the story into an act of human will makes the same mistake as turning the parable of the sower into a statement about a task to be achieved: it turns a gift into a demand. There is hope only because Jesus is no longer imprisoned in the tomb—and because God can be trusted to finish what has been begun....We walk by faith and not by sight. We can only trust that God will one day finish the story, as God has promised.<sup>47</sup>

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The heart of Mark's theology, for Juel, may lie in Jesus' promise in 10:27: “With mortals it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible.”<sup>48</sup> If in God alone, altogether apart from human effort, there is good reason for hope, then Mark's Gospel ends at 16:8 on a pitch-perfect note:

In Jesus' ministry, God tears away barriers that afforded protection in the past. God cannot be kept at arm's length. Such a possibility that light dawns even on those who inhabit the realm of darkness is disquieting; it means there is no refuge for the cynical any more than for the naïve....Jesus has promised an encounter with him against which there is no assured defense. God will be put off neither by our failures, or infidelity, nor by our most sophisticated interpretive schemes.<sup>49</sup>

Of our evasive sophistication, Juel has more to say. Before attending to those caveats, however, we need to probe with him more deeply Mark's own interpretive strategy and its bearing on our own.

<sup>45</sup>Juel, *A Master of Surprise*, 87.

<sup>46</sup>Juel, *Mark*, 197–198.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 233, 234, 235.

<sup>48</sup>Juel, *A Master of Surprise*, 63.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 120–121.

## ELLIPTICAL SCRIPTS

Joined at the hip theologically, and consistent with the rest of his approach, were two hermeneutical dimensions that occupied much of Juel's attention: ancient Jewish exegesis and modern literary approaches.

### *Messianic exegesis*

On this topic, Juel wrote the book,<sup>50</sup> or at least a major contribution to scholarship's understanding of early Christianity's appropriation of its Jewish Scripture. Juel is careful to differentiate his view of the subject from that of C. H. Dodd<sup>51</sup> and Barnabas Lindars:<sup>52</sup>

“Proof from prophecy” is not the point of the [scriptural] allusions [in 14:17–25 and elsewhere]. The scriptural references indicate that it was impossible to tell the story of Jesus' last days without using the language of the Scriptures. The events made sense, even from earliest times, only within a scriptural framework. The conviction that Christ died “in accordance with the Scriptures” is basic—more basic perhaps than individual scriptural arguments.<sup>53</sup>

In other words, early Christians like Mark did not plunder Jewish Scripture to prove, to themselves or others, that Jesus was the Christ. Rather, they *began* from the unshakable if stupefying conviction that God had vindicated Jesus as the crucified Messiah, *then* repaired to Scripture for resources that would render their faith intelligible.

The Scriptures were mined for material that could help Jesus' followers understand how it could be that the Christ must suffer and be treated with contempt.... We are offered [in Mark] a biblical framework within which to locate the drama as it unfolds.... The Psalms in particular provided the means by which Jesus' followers made sense of his death.... Jesus' story—particularly the account of his passion and resurrection—could not even be narrated without using the language of the Scriptures.<sup>54</sup>

In particular, Juel believed that Ps 118—far more than Second Isaiah's Servant Songs<sup>55</sup>—offered early Christians their primary script for insight into the career of the rejected, crucified, and risen Christ.<sup>56</sup>

For modern exegetes and theologians who found such interpretive strategies passé, if not reprehensible, Juel offered this riposte:

<sup>50</sup>Donald H. Juel, *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

<sup>51</sup>C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (London: James Nisbet & Company, 1952).

<sup>52</sup>Barnabas Lindars, *New Testament Apologetics* (London: SCM, 1961).

<sup>53</sup>Juel, *Mark*, 192.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 130–131, 121. See also, *ibid.*, 97 (on Mark 6:37), 148 (on 10:35–45), 157–159 (11:11–26), 171 (12:35–37), 181 (13:3–23), 207 (14:62), and 151 (Mark's passion narrative generally).

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 210; see also Juel, “The Image of the Servant-Christ in the New Testament,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 21 (1979) 7–22.

<sup>56</sup>Juel, *Messiah and Temple*, 73; *Mark*, 154.

[Ancient] interpreters viewed the Scriptures as writings, meaning collections of sacred sentences and words, whose meanings were not bound to an immediate historical or literary context....To expect post-Enlightenment arguments from first-century interpreters is a form of imperialism. We must appreciate the scriptural arguments of another age—then find appropriate ways to make them our own for our own time.<sup>57</sup>

Juel's admiration for ancient midrash was honed under the tutelage of Judah Goldin at Yale. What Juel recognized in the works of Erich Auerbach (1892–1957) and Frank Kermode (1919– ) were contemporary strategies for modern readers to appropriate Markan hermeneutics.

*Vision, irony, and disappointment*

Early on, Juel seemed certain that two ways of reading Mark would lead only to dead ends: psychologizing (the default setting of bad preaching) and conventional redaction criticism (the academic option). The former he held in contempt: “Collapsing the story into psychological categories represents a particular preoccupation—and one might say, disease—of our time that offers little promise as an approach to interpretation.”<sup>58</sup> While grateful to historical criticism for its enrichment of the reader's experience of the Gospel and its adjudication of serious exegetical differences,<sup>59</sup> Juel doubted that reconstruction of the Gospel's tradition-history—even if that were possible—could vivify the truth claims vouched by Mark.<sup>60</sup>

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Dissecting Mark's Gospel will not result in a reading of Mark but of something else....As a reader of the Bible, I am not interested principally in the history behind the Gospel, although historical considerations are important[,...or] in the communities behind the Gospels nor the intention of the author....I am principally interested in an engagement with the story—with the “world in front of the text”—which may benefit from the various approaches, but is a distinct enterprise....I can imagine no sound reason for interest in study of the Bible if it does not provide for a more lively engagement with the material....If scholarship does not produce better readers, then it is not only a waste of time but also genuinely harmful, and there are good reasons for churches to regard such scholarship with suspicion.<sup>61</sup>

“[E]arlier European methodological purity” left Juel cold.<sup>62</sup> For him, methods got interesting when Mark's claims upon its modern interpreters—“the interior level of

<sup>57</sup>Juel, *Mark*, 168; *Messianic Exegesis*, 15.

<sup>58</sup>Juel, *Mark*, 37; see also 110, 119.

<sup>59</sup>Juel, *A Master of Surprise*, 6.

<sup>60</sup>Juel, *Messiah and Temple*, 214; see also *A Master of Surprise*, vii.

<sup>61</sup>Juel, *The Gospel of Mark*, 123–124; *A Master of Surprise*, 4–6.

<sup>62</sup>Juel, *A Master of Surprise*, 23.

the story...at which the events he reports are viewed in light of the resurrection and as a fulfillment of Scripture and as visible in the life of the church”<sup>63</sup>—began to bristle with life and life’s questions, in an imaginative manner commensurate with messianic exegesis of the Gospel’s first-century readers.

In that endeavor, Auerbach’s treatment of Mark’s “aesthetic vision”<sup>64</sup> afforded Juel considerable help, which he acknowledged throughout his career.<sup>65</sup> Auerbach fortified Juel’s conviction that the evangelist

did not respect [antiquity’s] aesthetic conventions because they did not permit him to do with his story what he intended....Mark’s goal is to relate the events and persons described to the profound change in the human situation that has come about as a result of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, and correspondingly, to describe this profound historical moment by narrating the story.<sup>66</sup>

Thus, Juel marveled at the perdurable power of Mark 4:10–12 to generate within a modern student the very “hardening” to which the text refers: Said she, through clenched teeth, “I will not believe in a God who hardens!” “Like most readers,” Juel observed, “she was hardened, as Jesus promised. The parable succeeded in keeping her outside.”<sup>67</sup>

Equally dazzling is Mark’s artfulness in creating “insiders” among his readership, by giving them crucial knowledge of which the narrative’s characters were unaware:

“Identifying” with any characters in the story is made difficult when we hear what no one else can and receive explanations unavailable to those in the story....“Irony” is the appropriate term. Events are unfolding just as Jesus has predicted—and just as the prophets have announced. Characters in the story understand their roles only within their limited spheres and have no idea that they are playing roles assigned to them by God.<sup>68</sup>

Because the reader understands the true meaning of events, beneath the surface at which the story’s characters play out their roles to the best of their flawed understanding, dramatic irony runs throughout Mark from stem to stern.<sup>69</sup>

Yet, in a mind-boggling masterstroke, the evangelist trumps his own ironic stance by ensnaring readers—alongside others within the narrative—who reckon themselves insiders. For Juel, “however successful we are at penetrating the secrets of Mark’s Gospel, there will always be those dimensions that we cannot probe. We

<sup>63</sup>Juel, *Messiah and Temple*, 47.

<sup>64</sup>Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953) 40–49.

<sup>65</sup>Juel, *Messiah and Temple*, 45; *An Introduction to New Testament Literature*, 199; *The Gospel of Mark*, 141.

<sup>66</sup>Juel, *Mark*, 16–17; *Messiah and Temple*, 45.

<sup>67</sup>Juel, *The Gospel of Mark*, 128.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 69, 143. See also *A Master of Surprise*, 69; *Mark*, 111–112 (on Mark 6:30–44; 8:1–10); *ibid.*, 122 (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34); 154 (11:1–10); *Messiah and Temple*, 56–57 (14:53–65).

<sup>69</sup>Juel, *An Introduction to New Testament Literature*, 178–179. See also *Mark*, 204 (on Mark 14:53–72); *ibid.*, 228 (on 15:39).

still read as outsiders.”<sup>70</sup> Mark accomplishes this feat by springing on the knowledgeable reader gaps without plugs and provocations without resolution. Among many others:

Is there reason to believe Jesus’ ministry has anything to do with the glorious kingdom of God?...The decision about Jesus will have to be made on evidence from his ministry. There is no escape from the decision that must be made. The tension between Jesus and the tradition will have to be resolved, and Jesus will not do the resolving.<sup>71</sup>

Perhaps Mark, like Matthew, attributes Peter’s insight [at Mark 8:29] to inspiration. But inspiration by whom? If Peter and the disciples are addressed as Jesus addresses others who are possessed, perhaps we are to wonder if Peter’s insight is not of the same order...akin to the confessions of the demoniacs....If that is true, then Peter, and the rest, will have to be set free. Satan will have to be exorcised from their imaginations.<sup>72</sup>

The most revealing moment in [Mark’s] story [namely, 14:62] is, paradoxically, the moment at which the darkness seems most impenetrable.<sup>73</sup>

Interpretation [of Mark] must respect the two impressions with which the story concludes: disappointment and anticipation....Loose ends are infrequently tied up in real life; disappointment is the universal human experience. There may be some point to life, but we will never know it. The most we can hope for, as one author so eloquently puts it, is a “glimpse...before the door of disappointment closes on us.”<sup>74</sup>

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***“the most revealing moment in Mark’s story is, paradoxically, the moment at which the darkness seems most impenetrable”***

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At bottom: Mark “portrays a world, and the world it portrays—the world it allows us to experience—is one in which there is far less stability than we may have imagined.”<sup>75</sup>

Enter Kermode: “If there is one belief (however the facts resist it) that unites us all,...it is this conviction that somehow, in some occult fashion, if we could only detect it, everything will be found to hang together.”<sup>76</sup> Interpreters’ resistance to accept, not to explain away, textual *aporiae* gave Juel some hermeneutical leverage that his approach to Markan theology required:

<sup>70</sup>Juel, *Mark*, 201; see also 156.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, 68, 113; see also 72, 87, 99, 117, 156; Juel, *A Master of Surprise*, 56.

<sup>72</sup>Juel, *A Master of Surprise*, 74–75.

<sup>73</sup>Donald Juel, “The Function of the Trial of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel,” in *Society of Biblical Literature 1975 Seminar Papers*, ed. George MacRae (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1975) 102; see also Juel, *Mark*, 100.

<sup>74</sup>Juel, *Mark*, 233; see also Juel, “The Parable of the Mustard Seed,” in *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, ed. John Reumann with Samuel H. Nafzger and Harold H. Ditmanson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 366.

<sup>75</sup>Juel, *The Gospel of Mark*, 151.

<sup>76</sup>Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979) 72.

One of Kermode's great gifts is the ability to unmask interpretive strategies that seek to protect readers against overly difficult and painful insight. He is able to demonstrate the degree to which much scholarship is little more than a way of protecting ourselves from painful or disappointing readings by the employment of cunning and violence....One of Kermode's great contributions is a willingness to entertain the possibility that there are no satisfying endings—in Mark or in life.<sup>77</sup>

Nevertheless, an unflinching commitment to the God who finally will keep all his promises prevented Juel from capitulating to any postmodern failure of nerve before the truth of the gospel. On that point, Juel rightly challenged Kermode for prematurely closing all possibility of an ending that God, in Mark's Gospel, leaves open.<sup>78</sup>

Mark's Gospel forbids...closure. There is no stone at the mouth of the tomb. Jesus is out, on the loose, on the same side of the door as the women and the readers. The story cannot contain the promises. Its massive investment in the reliability of Jesus' words becomes a down payment on a genuine future....That end is not yet, but the story gives good reasons to remain hopeful even in the face of disappointment. The possibilities of eventual enlightenment for the reader remain *in the hands of the divine actor* who will not be shut in—or out.<sup>79</sup>

#### AN OPEN QUESTION

By commonplace standards of propriety, Mark's Gospel seems curtailed; it does not end where or as it should. So many have said of the life and career of Don Juel, among this generation's preeminent Markan interpreters. So coherent, so consistent was his vision of Mark across three decades that it is jarring to recognize in Don's own life and death echoes of a mysterious revelation by that Gospel he loved so well and taught us to read with such insight. Before the uncanny, one trembles with awe and terror (Mark 16:8). In life, as in Mark, things do not hang together; the endings do not satisfy. In the Christian life, as also in Mark, there remain promises from agents of unimpeachable integrity, "good reasons to remain hopeful even in the face of disappointment." All of us—our lives and deaths, our possibilities and prospects—remain in the hands of the same divine actor to whom Christ Jesus and all his servants have entrusted themselves, the One whose "plan for the fullness of time [is] to recapitulate all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:10). In the meanwhile:

<sup>77</sup>Juel, *A Master of Surprise*, 61, 112; see also *ibid.*, 29–30 (on Mark 16:1–8).

<sup>78</sup>Donald H. Juel, "Christian Hope and the Denial of Death: Encountering New Testament Eschatology," in *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, ed. John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000) 180–181. In a personal letter to Juel, received before his death, Kermode conceded his error: "I remember at the time of writing [my studies of Mark] that I found part of my mind rebelling against my own arguments, and in a sense it is a relief that you have been able to dismiss all the more obvious excuses and evasions, stick to the text that ends at 16:8, and still find the door open. And so I find myself trapped by my own Kafkaesque evasions—or by your knight's move, the introduction of all those other open doors" (quoted in Thomas W. Gillespie, "A Case of 'Doctrinal Adhesion,'" *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 24 [2003] 189).

<sup>79</sup>Juel, *A Master of Surprise*, 120 (my emphasis); see also *Mark*, 177, 233–234

Truthfulness comes to focus on the character of God. Can we afford to trust the One in whose hand the future lies? Is there a reason to imagine that we can live at the mercy of God—and that in so doing we will live richer, more productive lives? That depends on God’s coming to us to accomplish reconciliation and deliverance that are not within our power. It is the testimony of the church that God does indeed come and that Jesus’ plantings will ultimately flourish. For us, the truthfulness of the parable [in Mark] must remain to some degree an open question.<sup>80</sup> ⊕

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<sup>80</sup>Juel, “Encountering the Sower: Mark 4:1–20,” *Interpretation* 56 (2002) 283: the concluding words of the last article that, to the best of my knowledge, Donald H. Juel published in Markan interpretation.