
THE PESHARIM AND THE GOSPEL OF MARK: UNBINDING TRUE MEANINGS OF CURRENT REALITIES

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Abstract: *This article discusses the importance of understanding a worldview in order to uncover the essence of writings that may or may not conform to a particular genre. It shows how an understanding of the world can break the bounds of genre and find its way into a variety of documents. The Gospel of Mark takes center stage as it is compared to the pesharim of Qumran and other second temple documents to show how it reflects a pattern of thought and a conceptual framework that mirrors that of apocalypses. The Gospel of Mark is the product of a particular culture. Its author assimilates Jesus into an already established tradition that is both literary and oral. This is not a matter of Jewish materials being taken over by Christians, but another example of a culturally conceived world continuously evolving both in literary form and in the minds of followers.*

In an article entitled “Scripture and Apocalypticism: Breaking the Bounds of Definitions and Taxonomies”, I discussed how a predominant ideology of a culture might reveal itself in its literary documents.¹ The *pesharim* a unique type of biblical interpretation found in the caves of Qumran are an example of how this can occur. Although the *pesharim* are not formal apocalypses, they may be categorized as a broader category of material that more accurately indicates the prevalence of apocalypticism in a given culture. In this paper, I present this in connection to the *Gospel of Mark* which, like the *pesharim*, was also influenced by an apocalyptic ideology. Similar to the

pesharim, *Mark* is an interpretation of authoritative scripture in light of an apocalyptic understanding of time, space and God. As in the case of the *pesharim*, the author of *Mark*, a specially endowed interpreter, added his perception of reality to his assessment of present occurrences revealing the divine plan of God and the salvation of his chosen elect. At Qumran, the *peshairm* served as a mirror of the Community’s identity, showing how they understood their own history and spirituality. The same is true for *Mark*. By explaining Jesus’ life through his apocalyptic worldview, the writer of *Mark* extracted from authoritative texts what he believed was their “true” meaning, revealing God’s divine plan and the destiny of his elite.

¹ Jennifer Tacci, “Scripture and Apocalypticism: Breaking the Bounds of Definitions and Taxonomies” *Scriptura* forthcoming.

What Exactly are the Pesharim?

The *pesharim*, found among the scrolls of Qumran, are a type of biblical interpretation. The word *peshet* can refer to either the use of the technique or the genre. A *peshet* is a detailed exposition of a selected biblical text, intended for Qumran sectarians, these texts applied present history to authoritative texts. For example, in the Commentary on Habakkuk, the coded prophetic messages of the book are deciphered by the author of the commentary explaining its true meaning for the sect in connection to their current situation. The composition of *pesharim* could only be done by those whom the Community considered to be specially endowed. The basic structure of a *peshet* is simple, it is broken in to sections, the *lemma* is a direct citation from an authoritative text followed by the *peshet* which is the application the author's contemporary reality to the original text. Essentially the *pesharim* contemporize biblical verses, identifying their referents in history through "inspired" application.

The Pesharim at Qumran

In a world where prophecy was exceedingly common, the community that safeguarded their precious literary documents in the dark caves of the Judean Wilderness sometime prior to the fall of the Second Temple, felt the need to ground themselves in past prophecies. Returning to the trusted prophets of scripture they studied them afresh. Searching for guidance and answers, specially gifted interpreters guided by a specific worldview added to these written texts their own perception of reality and their assessment of present occurrences. By doing this they were able to reveal the divine plan of God and the salvation of his chosen elect, in this case, the community that once inhabited the ruins of Qumran.

The Community believed they were living in a world that was on the brink of an irreversible turning point. Their worldview was permeated with the same ideology that stood behind the compositions of texts such as *Enoch* and *Daniel*. For them, scripture not only held the answers to how to live the right way of life, but also spoke of the fate of those living in the present world. However, these meanings were not obvious; they had to be extracted from the texts being revealed in pieces to those who had the ability to comprehend their essence and hidden truths. When we look at texts that contain scriptural interpretation, we must try to see how these interpretations functioned within the community for which they were meant, and how these interpretations helped shape self-understanding, identity and place in life.² No piece of literature is produced in a vacuum. Every text has a social context and a function. As a mirror of the Community's identity portraying its history and spirituality, the *pesharim* also serve as an insight into the ideology that fueled the existence and purpose of the Community. Through applying an apocalyptic worldview to non-eschatological texts, the Community believed that they had extracted from these authoritative texts their "true" meaning, revealing God's divine plan and the destiny of his elite, the Community of Qumran. As representatives of the Community's apocalyptic worldview, the *pesharim* should be categorized as a sort of apocalyptic writing.

As way of introduction into the world of the *pesharim*, scholars have identified five different types of biblical commentaries at Qumran. Some of these commentaries served to augment or rearrange traditional texts. Others set out to make biblical stories more comprehensible and some

² J. Jokiranta, "Pesharim: A Mirror of Self-Understanding" in *Reading the Present in the Qumran Library: The Perception of the Contemporary by Means of Scriptural Interpretations*, eds. Kristin De Troyer and Armin Lange. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 24.

went so far as to create new stories relying on one or more passages from authoritative texts. However, the type of biblical commentary that is most characteristic and distinctive to the Community is a form of exegesis that reinterprets prophetic texts in order to apply them to the past, present and future of the sect. The authors of these texts achieve their goal by expounding verses from prophetic texts relating them to the history of the sect. The *pesharim*, unique to Qumran, are where prophetic texts are updated and actualized for the Community with regard to their specific life and theology.³ The *pesharim* give the modern reader a glimpse into the ancient interpreter's perception of reality and the reality that was created by their scriptural interpretation, providing us with the religious point of view of the Community that is primarily apocalyptic. While the *pesharim* cannot be defined as apocalypses, they share a number of affinities with the genre and should be associated with it. John J Collins defines the genre of apocalypse as "a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial as it involves another supernatural world"⁴. The structure of the *pesharim* does not follow this outline and cannot be defined as an apocalypse; however, it is still best understood as a form of apocalyptic literature.

The *pesharim* share the same conceptual framework that is found in apocalypses. The root of the Hebrew term *peshar* means "to unbind" or "release" and came to specifically denote the unbinding of dreams. The Community perceived biblical prophecy in itself as revelation,

the mystery of which might only be revealed by a specifically endowed individual. Daniel has visions and dreams but is only able to decipher them with the help of an angel for example Daniel 8 verses 15 and 16 "When I, Daniel, had seen the vision, I tried to understand it. Then someone appeared standing before me, having the appearance of a man, and I heard a human voice by the Ulai calling, 'Gabriel, help this man understand the vision'". Similarly the coded prophetic messages of biblical texts could only be understood by the author of the *pesharim* with the help of a spiritual aid.⁵ An example found at Qumran is in the *Peshar on Habakkuk*, the pesharist interprets the biblical prophetic book of *Habakkuk* as:

...concerning those who will be faithful at the end of days. They, the men of violence and the breakers of the Covenant, will not believe when they hear all that [is to happen to] the final generation from the Priest [in whose heart] God set [understanding] that he might interpret all the words of His servants the Prophets, through whom He foretold all that would happen to His people and His [land].⁶

There are a number of important elements that should be drawn out here. The commentary concerns "those who will be faithful at the end of days". The revelation in this work is the writings of a past prophet, in this case *Habakkuk*. Its interpretation has been given to the Priest by God who set it in his heart, endowed with the ability to provide the interpretation and give it to his community. The interpretation itself consists of knowledge of what is to occur at the end of days. While the Priest does not have direct access to God, he does have a special ability that enables him to unlock the secrets of the text before him.

³ J. Jokiranta, "Pesharim: A Mirror of Self-Understanding", 24.

⁴ J. J. Collins, ed., *Apocalypse the Morphology of a Genre* (Semeia 14; Missoula) 1979, 5.

⁵ S. L. Berrin, "Pesharim" in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, in L. H. Schiffman and J. C. VanderKam et al., (vol.1) (New York, Oxford University Press, 2000), 644.

⁶ Commentary on Habakkuk- II, 5-9 as found in G. Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, (Penguin Classics, London, 2004), 510.

The meaning has been hidden in the scriptures and only the Priest can reveal their intended meaning of which directly concerns the Community of Qumran. The Priest plays a role that is comparable to the one played by Daniel in the book that bears his name as the recipient of knowledge that can only be understood with the aid of an otherworldly being. There is nothing to suggest that the writer of *Habakkuk* held an apocalyptic worldview. However, the interpretation of the author of the *peshet* ascribes themes familiar to apocalypses to it, transforming its meaning and implications. The key message of *Habakkuk* is “wait and be faithful”.⁷ The *peshet* expounds this message and transforms it to explain *what* is being waited for and the *purpose* for being faithful: the end times are near and salvation is at stake. Interestingly, while the author of a *peshet* updated scriptural passages to reveal the “true meaning” of the text, they did so in veiled terms.

Since the author uses code words, it is often difficult to recognize the historical realities that are being reflected in the text. The primary purpose of the *peshet* genre was not to record history, but rather to relate the *values* by which to understand history so that readers of the *pesharim* could understand their current reality correctly.⁸ The *pesharim* use scriptural compositions as their starting point and interpret them to convey eschatological fulfillment. These texts contemporized authoritative biblical verses and reinterpreted history through ‘inspired’ application.⁹ The *peshet* uses allegory, textual variants and paraphrase to imply eschatological hopes to the original prophetic text. *Peshet Nahum* is a refined example of the *peshet* genre. The manuscript that dates to the first century bce transforming Nahum into a text about impending judgment against all enemies

of God and the Community.¹⁰ The commentary breaks down the original prophetic text to unveil its “true” eschatological significance. The ‘original’ Nahum’s description of God’s powerful effects on nature is interpreted by the writer of the *peshet* as a symbol for God’s coming intervention against political entities, presenting rivers for example as governing powers.¹¹ However, the eschatological implications of the commentary are the same as those found in the apocalypses. Apocalyptic eschatology asserts that the present age has reached the end of its given existence and anticipates God’s decisive action that will bring about its finality, but promises retribution for individuals beyond the limitations of human history and corporeal death.

The affinities between the *peshet* and apocalyptic literature reveals how the apocalyptic worldview can find its way into a wide variety of genres and is not limited to those texts that fit neatly into the genre of apocalypse. An important aspect of the *peshet* that reveals an apocalyptically oriented mindset is the role of the author of the commentary. The *peshet* is a specially endowed person who has access to hidden knowledge that enables him to interpret scriptural texts accurately. The *peshet* states that the Teacher’s words come ‘from the mouth of God’ however; an additional elite individual is needed to unveil coded predictions.¹² Like Daniel or John of Patmos, the *peshet* is chosen by God to reveal the destiny of a particular group. In a world where God is removed from the daily lives of people, the only way to access him is through channeling through angels or the Holy Spirit. Since God no longer manifests himself in an anthropomorphic way to his people, he interacts with his chosen ones in a new way through the agency of human being he selects himself. The audience of a

⁷ See Habakkuk 3:17-19.

⁸ See J. Jokiranta, “Pesharim: A Mirror of Self-Understanding”, 34.

⁹ See S. L. Berrin, “Pesharim”, 645.

¹⁰ S. L. Berrin, “Pesharim”, 653.

¹¹ S. L. Berrin, “Pesharim”, 653.

¹² S. L. Berrin, “Qumran Pesharim”, 124-125.

pesher understands that not just anyone could author such a text. It is not by human qualities that the *pesherist* is able to reveal the meanings of the literary prophets, but through spiritual gifts granted to him by God.

The *Gospel of Mark* and its Affinities with the *Pesharim*

When we look at the *Gospel of Mark* with all this in mind many new insights come to light. The *Gospel of Mark* is a unique Gospel. It begins with Jesus' baptism by John the Baptizer. There is no mention of his genealogy as in the other two synoptic Gospels, and it does not start like the Gospel of John with an intertextual reference to Genesis 1:1 recalling pre-creation. *Mark* instead begins with a reconfiguration of prophetic discourse swiftly recalling the prophet Isaiah, giving an account of Jesus' adult life and death as the continuation of a redemptive story that began in the time of the prophets. *Mark* is a narrative that tells its story through an apocalyptic lens. The *Gospel of Mark* tells the story of how the advent of Jesus of Nazareth would impact the conflict between good and evil in the world and the *Gospel* also introduces a slightly altered version of the worldview shared by so many. The *pesharim* and the *Gospel of Mark* share common social and cultural values. Together these literary pieces build a mosaic of commonplaces, conventions, traditions and culture growing out of one another to form branches of a common root.

Many of us still have a tendency to assume that a work should not be classified as "history" unless it represents events accurately and reliably. Neither *Mark* nor the *pesharim* should be considered objective history; however, they should not be dismissed as mythology either. They represent communal history. For Qumran the fact that the Community existed meant something important for history, as does the existence and death of Jesus for the *Gospel of Mark*. Jesus' identity is important

to the author of *Mark*, not in the interest of establishing character or example, but as a means to write a particular kind of history based on a specific worldview. The *Gospel of Mark* gives a symbolic account of history that reflects the apocalyptic understanding of time, space and God. Like the Qumranites, *Mark's* audience believed prophecy was being fulfilled in their own time in their community. By using scripture and familiar themes the author of *Mark* explains how Jesus affected the goal of history:

Mark's notion of an eschatological fulfillment, of course, has its origin in the prophetic books of the Old Testament or Jewish Bible. His overall conception of history, however with its notion of fixed divine plan (8:31, 13:7, 20; 14:36, 49) and its incipient periodization is due to the influence of apocalyptic tradition and literature...From the point of view of its Jewish heritage, Mark may be seen as an eschatological and apocalyptic counterpoint to the biblical foundational histories. It continues Israelite and Jewish ethnic sacred history and illustrates the fulfillment of the universalist tendency in Israelite and Jewish literature through the extension of the revitalization movement begun by John and Jesus to the Gentiles.¹³

In the second verse of the first chapter, *Mark* identifies John the Baptist as the prophet predicted in Isaiah 40:3. *Mark* validates both John and his own work by referring to a prophetic work of the past that has already an established authority among his audience since it is a recognizable reference to scripture. In addition, the writer of the second gospel makes a distinction between John and Jesus; John is a prophet but Jesus is the interpreter blessed not only through the waters of the Jordan, but with the Holy Spirit, (*Mark* 1:8). The juxtaposition between John and Jesus marks an important distinction, John is the

¹³ Collins, A. Yarbro. *Mark*. Hermeneia. Ed. Harold W. Attridge., (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2007), 43.

continuation of the past into the present: Jesus is the turning point of the beginning of the end of time. The author of the Gospel gives no explanation as to why Jesus is the one to be blessed with the Holy Spirit; he just is. Through the reference to Isaiah 40:3 the audience is made aware that the task of Jesus is to prepare the people for the full manifestation of the end of time. The anointing of Jesus is quite significant. Jesus, like the authors of the *pesharim*, becomes a specially endowed person. It is through the guidance and power of the Spirit that Jesus will exercise his ministry and teach secrets that no one else can understand (*Mark* 4:11). Jesus is a man like any other until he is given the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The function of the Holy Spirit here is the same as it is for the Teacher of Righteousness and for the authors of the *pesharim*. It is what gives these human agents access to higher knowledge and God's plan. The emphasis of the *Gospel of Mark* is on the present being the fulfillment of past prophecy and as being the final age, as Jesus himself asserts: "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power" (*Mark* 9:1).

The strong sense that the end is near typical of the Jesus-tradition is a clear influence of Jewish apocalyptic ideas. This apocalyptic promise provides the audience with a powerful incentive to faithful discipleship. It also, as in the *pesharim*, functions as an important reward for those who withstand persecution and wait for eternal salvation beyond this world. The readers of *Mark* form an inner circle, like that of the Qumran Community (*Mark* 4:11). They see themselves as the inheritors of God's kingdom at the end of time. There is in *Mark* a conviction that the biblical text held contemporary relevance for his immediate readers' beliefs and experiences. The Markan Jesus is the subject of Old Testament prophecies. This connection goes beyond validating his ministry; it presents Jesus as the final

interpreter and the first man to be resurrected (*Mark* 8:31, 9:31, 10:32-34). If Jesus has been raised, then it will not be long before the living would see the rest of what is expected for the end of time.

While the whole of *Mark* reflects an apocalyptic worldview, scholars interested in apocalypticism often focus on the thirteenth chapter since it has come to be known as the Markan Apocalypse. It is in this chapter that Jesus looks into the future in order to predict what is in store for his followers. The structure of *Mark* 13 does not imitate the apocalyptic genre. There are too many elements missing for it to be described as an apocalypse. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that this section of *Mark* is apocalyptic in nature. It is difficult to decipher how much of this section was compiled by *Mark* from other traditions, how much of it is original to the Gospel and how much originates to the historical Jesus. However, for our purposes what is interesting here is how this particular chapter does reflect a pattern of thought and a conceptual framework that mirrors that of apocalypses. The *Gospel of Mark* is the product of a particular culture. Its author assimilates Jesus into an already established tradition that is both literary and oral. This is not a matter of Jewish materials being taken over by Christians, but another example of a culturally conceived world continuously evolving both in literary form and in the minds of followers. Jesus was not the first to predict the fall of the Temple. In chapter 13 verse 14 the author of *Mark* refers to "the desolating sacrilege" and quickly reminds his audience "let the reader understand" that what is being referred to is the Book of Daniel: "the aside is a literary device to indicate that the preceding allusion to the 'desolation sacrilege' or 'abomination of desolation' is a cryptic saying that requires interpretation. This literary device belongs to the ancient practical apocalyptic hermeneutics".¹⁴ Apocalyptic visions of

¹⁴ Collins, A. Yarbro. *Mark*. Hermeneia. 596.

the world were widespread in the time of Jesus and during the Second Temple Period. It is a worldview that implies a sectarian context seeking to maintain conviction in its own authority against the confusion of real historical events. Believers adapted the apocalyptic worldview into their daily reality and lived by this understating of the world. The advent and threat of Hellenism affected the thinking of Jews and produced a new kind of literature which reveals a change in values and a shift in spirituality. This shift set the stage for the literature produced after the fall of the Second Temple.

Conclusion

There are qualities that belong to *Mark* that are not shared by other texts and vice versa. To focus on topics such as the “son of man”, “messiah” or “kingdom of God” is necessary, but it also runs the risk of missing the bigger picture. All these texts are as much alike as they are different from one another. *Mark* is not an apocalypse, neither is it a *peshet*, however, the Gospel does share attributes with apocalypses and *pesharim* and it should be categorized as a type of apocalyptic literature. The strong influence of apocalyptic Judaism can be felt throughout all these literary documents. Apocalypticism is a worldview that has the ability to adapt and change with the needs of the communities who use it, it is not a static worldview; it is one that has been able to stand the test of time.

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