


Aretalogy of the Best Healer: Performance and praise of Mark's healing Jesus

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The study proposes a link between Mark's healing stories in chapter 1 and praise songs and/or poems performed at Apollo's temple and other possible shrines of Asclepius in Southern Antioch. Mark chapter 1 begins with Jesus healing the demoniac (Mk 1:21–28), healing of Simon's mother in law (Mk 1:29–31) and healing of various peoples who gathered at Simon's mother-in-law's house (Mk 1:32–34) and people from the region and afar (Mk 13:39). The chapter finishes with the controversial healing of the leper (1:40–45). Assuming that Mark is located in Southern Antioch, with analogies from Zulu praise poems, this study reread Mark's healing stories alongside Greek aretalogies with a view to reveal the function and mood around which the stories were told and/or performed. As hypothesis, Mark's healing stories exudes similar characteristics as Greek aretalogies, praising the benefactor (Jesus) vis-à-vis known healers such as Apollo and Asclepius.

Introduction

This study builds on two recent studies on Mark's gospel. Firstly that the book was orally and publicly performed as entertainment stories within religious places and households (Boomershine 1988:217; Rhoads & Dewey 2012; Shiner 2003:214). Werner Kelber, Joanna Dewey and David Rhodes insist that the New Testament writings came from an oral and aural background. Viewing Mark as only a written product is missing the aural and oral context through which the stories circulated (Kelber 1997:90). Concerning this and based on analogies from storytelling in an African context, Musa Dube comments that storytelling is a performative event whereby the teller reincarnates the story through his or her gestures and voice (Dube 2001:3). In the process of storytelling, the audience's emotions are drawn into the story and they respond appropriately to the telling of each event in the story. Furthermore, with regards to Paul's letters, Peter Botha suggests that they were performed in front of the audience (Botha 1991:17). The limitation of Botha's suggestion is its lack of analogy regarding how the stories were publicly told. Using Greek aretalogy¹ and Zulu *isibongo* or praise performances, this study fills the crucial gap by reliving the mood and function around the telling of each of the healing stories. From observations of Zulu praise performances, I argue that Mark's healing stories were performed stories, celebrating Jesus as healer.

Secondly, I build on the argument that the gospel of Mark contains the earliest traditions concerning Jesus as healer. In addition to the passion, conflict or controversy, parables and feeding, Gerd Theissen argues that Mark's gospel contains the earliest layer of memory of Jesus as healer (Theissen 1983:20). Theissen thinks that the healing and exorcism stories are symbolic stories told by the suffering of early Christian communities. In response and in view of analogies of Greek aretalogy, Theissen's argument lacks the explanation regarding how the stories were relived. It is limiting as Theissen argues to simply view them as emotional copying narratives (Theissen 1983:20). Instead, with analogies from Zulu praise poems and songs and building on the argument of Morton Smith, I describe the healing stories as praise aretalogies, possibly performed or sung by community members in memory of the healing messiah – Jesus (Smith 1971:174). Similar to Greek shrines of Asclepius and Apollo, the poet or singer performed the narrative at the Shrine or during public religious gatherings with a view to celebrate Jesus' healing powers against those of competing healers.

Structure and purpose of Mark chapter 1

A quick review of current approaches to the function of the gospel of Mark and healing stories in particular is needed. For Robert Guelich, Mark's gospel has three main categories – eschatological,

1. Aretalogy comes from the Greek word *arête*, meaning virtue; therefore, aretalogy is the praise given to the benefactor because of the good deeds that he or she has done in the community. In the context of Jesus, Mark seems to tell the healing stories in a manner that praises Jesus as the best healer against implied healers during that time.

Christological and disciple perspectives (Guelich 2018; Gunner 1979:239). Firstly, eschatological approaches regard Mark as an apocalyptic community existing during the second half of the first century around Syria. E. Loymeyer and Werner Kelber, using narrative and redaction criticism, juxtaposed Jerusalem to Galilee and suggest that, after Jesus' death in Jerusalem, Mark's community was a community in waiting for the promised Kingdom of God (Best 1983:12; Kelber 1974:4; Lohmeyer 1936). Similarly, Howard Kee argues that the community regarded itself as an apocalyptic community living at an interim period before the advent of Jesus. A similar argument is made by Ambrozic (1972:18) (Kee 1977:14). To these scholars, Mark chapter 1, which details Jesus' healing stories, is about Jesus expressing his true identity as messiah and the miracles are signs of the times.

The second group of scholars argue for the purpose of Mark's gospel from a Christological perspective. Bultmann (1958:12) suggests that the gospel stories were remembered within Hellenistic contexts. For him, Jesus was remembered from the lens of gnostic redeemer myths and Marks' gospel sought to correct the wrong image of Jesus which had crept into the church (Bultmann 1958:12). Theodor Weeden, following Bultmann, suggests that Mark corrects the Greek, triumphalist Christology by replacing it with the traditional Christology of the suffering Jesus (Weeden 1971:54). Equally, Vielhauer explains that Markan themes such as son of God, transfiguration and baptism correlate with Hellenistic myths (Donahue 1978:369; Johansson 2011:364; Vielhauer 1964:155). In addition, William Wrede says Mark's community was baffled by the absence of Jesus' Easter title such as Christ during his life time (Wrede 1971:10). In summary, scholars in this category agree that the healing miracles in Mark's gospel imitate Hellenistic mythology; they are a clear evidence of assimilation of Hellenistic culture and beliefs by Mark's community.

The last category of voices, using persecution as lens, regards Mark's community as existing during times of suffering. Ernest Best suggests that Mark's community was experiencing suffering and that Jesus' story offers hope by encouraging them to carry their crosses and follow Jesus. With a common theme of suffering, scholars in this camp are divided between supporting Galilee or Rome as location, whilst scholars such as Ernest Best, Adam Winn and Brian Incigneri regard the gospel as having its origin in Rome (Best 1981:23; Incigneri 2003; Winn 2008). Richard Horsley, Ched Myers and Ernest van Eck think the gospel was written in Northern Galilee (Horsley 2001; Myers 1988; Van Eck 1995). Despite difference over location, both groups agree that the gospel of Mark reflects a period of persecution. For both camps, the extended passion narrative offers hope during a traumatic period of persecution, comforting Jesus' followers that being Jesus' disciple entails suffering.

As response and summary to the various perspectives, Mark's gospel cannot be described outside its worldview and context. Plausibly, Bultmann's, Wrede's and Weeden's

argument that the Gospel of Mark interacts with Greco-Roman culture and events is more plausible. Building on this and because several resident and/or itinerant healers existed during the New Testament times, Mark's healing stories are plausible if interpreted from the perspective of their similarity to healing performances found at Asclepius and Apollo's temple.

What is an aretalogy?

Unlike Theissen's sociopsychological approach and theological approaches, the hermeneutical lens that Mark's healing stories are aretalogies that imitate performances at Apollo or Asclepius' temple is plausible. The word aretalogy comes from the Greek word *arête*, meaning virtue. Within the ancient Hellenic environment, it refers to the manifestation of the deity, its power and accomplishments (Ferguson 2003:13). Aretalogies were collections of miracle stories sung or as 'praise and/or propaganda for what the deity supposedly has done' (Smith 1971:174). The practice started within Egyptian Asclepius temple and later spread to other temples and gods. An earlier suggestion by Dennis MacDonald that Mark imitates Greek epic, a long speech or play detailing various accomplishment of a noble character, is less convincing (Feeney 1993:20; MacDonald 2000). Given that Mark is composed of short narratives – healing parables, conflict and passion stories – these are too short to be described as epics, and MacDonald's argument is thus implausible (Kelber 1997:11). We can assume that the performance regarding the feeding of the masses, which includes celebration, was not performed in the same scene as stories about the death of the leader – which are passion stories concerning Jesus. Similarly, healing stories, unlike Gerd Theissen's symbolic view, were praise aretalogies at religious gatherings and/or within households. The praise singer or performer, as Smith indicates, celebrates the healing achievements of the god with a view to inculcate allegiance amongst the followers (Smith 1971:174).

Concerning class, because the lower class people had no public social capital to produce their collective or individual praise narratives, Smith thinks aretalogies were associated with the upper class or rulers. Aretalogies narrate and praise the good work of the community benefactors such as kings or gods. With regards to Jesus, Smith remarks saying, 'both Jesus and Apollonius ... were like Asclepius, primarily famous as miracle workers, especially healers ...' (Smith 1971:174). In response, Smith's reconstruction to an extent fits the cultural image behind the New Testament narrative, whereby the rich (the patron) receives public honour and praise from the poor (clients) through greeting, bowing and kissing of foot. Similarly, amongst the Shona people of Zimbabwe, various bodily habits exist where the young, women and poor express public honour to those who are senior or rich. For example, women are supposed to show respect by kneeling or giving way to men if they meet on the street. Equally, boys and young men are expected to show respect by kneeling or bowing to elders. Culturally, the young, the poor and/or women should initiate the greeting. To not do so is a sign of disrespect.

However Smith's argument is made from the perspective whereby the written is regarded as better than the oral; the only surviving memories of aretalogies were written. For example, several collections of Aristides' praise of Asclepius exist (Bowie 2008; Downie 2009:7). As argument, poor people though without written skills in Latin or Greek offer praise to their gods each day, thanking them for health and crops. Furthermore, regarding Jesus, though famous as a healer, his *modus operandi* without support from the traditional household makes him a poor person. During New Testament times, survival was within the household led by the *Pater*, giving one access to land, protection and honour (Moxnes 2003:23). In contrast, the narratives of Jesus, who operated outside the traditional household, make him economically vulnerable and socially questionable (Malina & Neyrey 1988; Pilch, Pilch & Malina 1993:14). This leaves us with the conclusion that though poor, Jesus accrued fame through his healing activities and also perhaps through his conflict with political leaders in large villages such as Capernaum and cities such as Sepphoris (Mk 6:14) and Pilate (Mk 15).²

Smith further explains that reverence was a central theme in aretalogies (Smith 1971:174). By 404 BC, the Greeks developed a culture of honouring benefactors such as rulers with the same cult status as gods. Amongst the Greeks, the belief that anthropology is ascribed to humans and gods is called *euhemerism*. Gods were described as having normal social lives, even bearing children, engaging in conflict and participating in the daily affairs of the living (Cavanaugh 1982:109; Roubekas 2014; 2016). Similar beliefs exist amongst many African communities who regard their daily lives as shared experience with the living-dead. Therefore, Greek *euhemerism* sounds closer to the idea of ancestorship; the living are infused by the divine and the spiritual is an extension of the living. Despite existence in different forms, both the living and the dead are in existence.

Surviving aretalogies are in written form – an obvious case. However, from the written aretalogies enough evidence exists that aretalogies were public performances that involved the community. Ferguson's (2003:13) studies reveal that Greek aretalogies follow the pattern and rhythm of Hellenic hymns. In the aretalogy, 'the deity is identified by name, parentage and place of worship'. This is an important comparative aspect with regards to Mark, looking at the manner and his interest in Jesus' origin and divine heritage. Many aretalogies were in first person as the deity relates his or her accomplishments.

Aretalogies start at the temple – a practice that originated within Isis temples in Egypt. No clear evidence exists regarding who keeps the songs and performance. A glimpse from Asclepius' shrine shows that priests had an important function of welcoming and orienting people regarding their conduct during their visit – not eating certain foods, abstaining from sex, and more (Dube 2018b:1). It seems, in addition to

²Mark does not mention Sepphoris, but it was the closest city to Capernaum, a village around which Jesus performed most of his healings.

performing hospitality duties, the priest also offered poems and songs to the deity. Perhaps part of this was entertainment, but also importantly for propaganda, marketing the powers of the god. How were the gods praised? Two aspects come up: Firstly, a celebration in songs of the lineage of the god or benefactor, and secondly, the celebration of the great power and deeds accomplished by the god. Smith (1971) gives further insights, saying:

... but what of the after-dinner entertainers who could be hired in the circus, the liars to whom Juvenal compared Homer, and the characters Manetho said were born under the adverse influence of the planet Hermes, tellers of myths and shameful and nonsensical stories, leaders in mockery and scornful laughter, who have in their aretalogies all sorts of deceitful yarns, experts in shell games, who live noisily on their takings from the crowd and wander the earth forever?' (p. 174)

Embedded within rhetorical questions are two issues: firstly, that some performers were hired – unlike priests who work the shrine each day, performers at the shrines and funeral wailers were hired to offer praise to the god or the benefactor. Secondly, instead of being only veneration, some praise includes comic performances to amuse the crowd. Insights from C.A. Faraone reveal that some performances were solo performances by an individual, whilst others involved the crowd. In the case of crowd involvement, the lead singer 'performs and the audience response to a choral performance' (Faraone 2011:206). Some aretalogies, because of being famous with the pilgrims, were common in various shrines in Antioch and Macedonia. One of the common songs or poems runs as follows:

Sing, lads of Paian famed for his cleverness, the farshooting son of Leto, Le Paian!, who fathered great delight for mortals, after he had lain in love with Koronis in the Phlegyeian land, le Paian! Asclepius, a god most famous, le Paian!

From him, (i.e. Asclepius) were also born Machaon, Podaleiros, Iaso, Le Paian!, beautiful-faced Aigla, Panakkeai, the children of Epione, with glorious, bright Hygieia, Le Paian!, Asclepius, a god most famous, le Paian.

Be pleased with me and approach our spacious city with gladness, le Paian and grant that we in delight see the welcome light of the sun with glorious bright Hygieia, Le Paian!, Asclepius, a god most famous, le Paian. (Faraone 2011:206)

From the song or performance we have a clearer example of celebration of the deity's origin or ancestry. Leto, Koronis, Machaon, Podaleiros and Epione are all great Greek gods now evoked in the moment of praise. However, the song or poem does not follow the genealogy of Asclepius properly because Leto is the grandmother who gave birth to Apollo and Artemis. Asclepius is the child of Koronis and Apollo. At birth, goddess Athena gave Asclepius the gift of healing, which angered Zeus upon seeing many of his enemies coming back to life. In the end, Zeus killed Asclepius, signifying the triumph of death over life (Edelstein & Edelstein 1998:10). To the hearers, the above song celebrates the brevity of Asclepius over powers of death. The evocation of the gods is a clear example of Euhemerism, whereby the gods take part in the festivals

of the mortals. The example of a song or poem that celebrates the achievements of the deity is the following:

Leto ... the defender, who once begot Asclepius, a healer of diseases and mortal woe, a vigorous lad, ie O Paian

Whom throughout the Pelian peaks the Centaur taught all skill and knowledge that wards off pain from mortal. (Faraone 2011:206)

Two things stand out: Firstly, Asclepius is the healer of diseases and mortal woes. Secondly, he wards off pain from mortals. Regarding Asclepius, a similar claim was made by Aristides saying Asclepius:

does marvellous deeds at Gadira (Diodorus) and is believed to be second to none of all gods. And on the other hand, Messene in Sicily he frees men from all diseases, and those who escaped danger on the Sea attribute the benefaction equally to Poseidon and Hercules. One could list many other places sacred to the god, and other manifestations of his power. (Cotter 1999:13)

Aristides goes further to praise Asclepius for other miracles – escaping danger from the sea and many other manifestations, thus in the process placing Asclepius amongst great gods. In summary, aretalogies praise the god or the divine man for his or her respectable genealogy and also for his or her great healing acts.

I take the comparative ideas of narrating of genealogy and praising the deeds of the benefactor as two analytical variables in rereading Mark's healing aretalogy. The fact that visitors to the cult knew about the songs or poems is a further indication that the songs were composed from various praise statements by various people.

Zulu Praise *Izibongo* – An analogue

Similar to Greek aretalogies, praise poems and songs are found in several African cultures. Amongst the Shona people of Zimbabwe, towards the rainy season, people visit local shrines petitioning the ancestors for rain (rainmaking ceremonies). At the ceremonies, the genealogy of the gods is recited and their previous deeds are recalled. Different tribes have their own praise songs addressed to territorial spirits (*mhondoro*) and boast of the great works of their ancestors to other tribes.³ At the rainmaking ceremony, the name of the great territorial spirit is evoked, the genealogy is narrated and the long list of the great deeds done by the spirit are recalled. As the praise singer or poet narrates and praises the god, the attendees affirm by ululating and repeatedly chanting the name of the great ancestor.

Amongst the Zulu people of South Africa, similar praise ceremonies are performed. Notable is the *isibongo* praise poems and/or songs. Each individual has a totemic praise poem derived from the clan name. The totemic praise poetry is sung as celebration after a household member achieved

something, for example, marriage, graduation or any success. Regarding totems, each clan identifies itself by a specific animal. The clan members are attributed animal characters and the animal is usually described with anthropomorphic terms. Mine is Dube totem, the Zebra. Traditionally, each household member, at a young age was taught to recite their clan poetry. From memory, after my first academic graduation, my mother burst into reciting my (Dube) clan praise poetry, saying:

Thank you, Zebra,
Adorned with your own stripes,
Iridescent and glittering creature,
Whose skin is as soft as girls' is;
One on which the eye dwells all day,
as on the solitary cow of a poor man;
Creature that makes the forests beautiful,
Weaver of lines
Who wear your skin for display,
Drawn with lines so clearly defined;
You who thread beads in patterns,
Dappled fish
Hatching round the neck of a pot;
Beauty spots cut to rise in a crescent on the forehead,
A patterned belt for the waist;
Light reflected,
Dazzling the eyes.
It is its own instinct, the Zebra's,
Adorned as if with strings of beads around the waist as women are;
Wild creature without anger or any grudge,
Lineage with a totem that is nowhere a stranger,
Line that stretches everywhere,
Owners of the land. (Smith 1980)

Amongst other clans, the people that belong to the Dube clan are regarded as peaceful and hospitable people. Praise poems and songs are mostly for identification and bolstering one's confidence. Poems and songs are also sung in praise of one's talent that serves the community, such as craft or healing. Elizabeth Gunner's ethnographic work amongst Zulu women in South Africa reveals praise poetry for self-praise of their beauty or craft (Gunner 1979:239).

Like others, poetry to a village healer is done in a circle format. The lead singer or poet would lead the crowd in showering praise on the benefactor. The singer or poet should be familiar with the genealogy and achievements of the person being praised. In the case of the clan praise poem, the person would be a relative or any person who knows the achievements of the persons being praised. Each time the narrator mentions the accomplishments by the benefactor, the crowd ululate and raise their hands. In many cases, someone would run inside the circle and perform a random dance whilst the crowd claps. Whilst reciting the poem or singing a song, gestures follow the mood and emotions expressed in the song or poem. For example, narratives of victory are accompanied by respective gestures of celebration and ululation.

As the crowd disperses, the celebrations spill into the streets and households. Taking this perspective, Mark's aretalogy of Jesus' healing miracles can be imagined as community praise

3. Shona people of Southern Africa believe in the existence of several spirits, each with their own function. Ancestors are divided into three categories. Firstly, family spirits which are responsible for household issues, then the territorial spirits which are responsible for tribal matters. Lastly, the Alien spirits are responsible for several extraordinary abilities or skills such as hunting, singing or dancing.

of a village healer. The praise that started at the shrine likely spilled over into households. The next section pays attention to the manner in which Mark narrates Jesus' accomplishments and the possible response from the crowd. Building on knowledge regarding Greek aretology and Zulu praise poetry, the response of the people is likely seen whenever the name of the benefactor (Jesus) and/or his or her accomplishments are mentioned. In this regard, verbs or actions that describe the benefactor are likely sites that evoke the audience's applause or cheer. For example, whenever the narrator says, 'Jesus healed', it was likely received by cheer and applause from the crowd.

Introducing the Healer *par-excellent* Ululation at the public entrance of the community benefactor – Jesus (Mk 1:1)

Similar to a public theatre performance, Mark 1:1–15 introduces Jesus' 'entry into public ministry, setting the stage' (Guelich 2018:56). Mark begins his performance by saying 'the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. Reference to Jesus as messiah has been viewed mostly from the perspective of Empire (Horsley 2003:64). However, in the Old Testament the term Messiah has a broader definition. It refers to a deliverer; a similar designation is given to even non-Jewish persons such as Cyrus, King of Persia (Mowinckel 2005:23). Here, Mark is using the term messiah in its general sense – Jesus as the deliverer. Located at the periphery of Antioch, Mark existed amongst subsistent peasant farmers whose idea of the Messiah encompassed ideas of a deliverer from various issues, including sickness, culture and well-being. A general regard of a god as deliverer, in my view, fits a similar worldview, whereby 'gods' such as Hercules were also viewed as messiahs, especially in Hercules' 12 labours or legendary activities which included fighting and healing (Jongste 1992:17).

From the perspective of aretology and praise poems, Mark's reference to Jesus as Messiah is indicative of his praise of Jesus, attributing to him the highest attribute – the deliverer. Similar to aretologies, by referring to Jesus as Messiah, Mark is beginning with a praise narrative and not a political or a theological statement. In both the Greek and Zulu praise songs, performances begin by praising the benefactor's genealogy or lineage. In ancient times, genealogies were citations of honour or shame; they reveal social status and class. People were known by and/or greeted by their family names. A good family or clan includes famous members who are sources of pride. For example, the description 'son of ...' was a source of identification and ascribed honour (Malina 2001:8). Good ancestry or lineage brings ascribed public honour whilst bad ancestry causes the clan to be filled with shame and curses. Similar to the Nguni and Bantu people of South Africa, the practice of reciting genealogies was a way of boasting one's public status; to be regarded as coming from a famous clan (Hood 1961:5).

As identity marker, Jesus is the anointed or Messiah, son of God – a title used twice by Mark (Mk 1:1 and 9:41). Mark 9:41 says, 'For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of

water to drink because *you belong to Christ* will by no means lose his reward' (English Standard Version [ESV]). The title Messiah is used as an identity marker. Around 53CE, in reference to 1 Corinthians 1:12, Paul also uses the same identity marker with reference to competing groups in Corinth who claim that they belong to the Christ group. Concerning aretologies of Mark chapter 1, it is plausible that attendees to Jesus' household identified themselves as Christ followers. Plausibly, and in the context of Mark's reference to Jesus as healer, the title distinguishes followers of Jesus from adherents of Isis, Asclepius or Apollo. When people define their identity by referencing their god, a common bond exists. With reference to Zulu performances, each time when the name of a chief is mentioned in a poem, the audience would clap hands and whistle whilst women ululate.

Furthermore, Mark refers to Jesus as son of God; a demigod. From similar usage by another Antiochean narrative in Matthew (27:40), the title 'son of God' suggests that Jesus has supernatural powers. Because gods were associated with miracles, being the son of God, the spectators at the cross expected divine spectacle at Jesus' death. By addressing Jesus as son of God, 'Jesus is demigod; his biological origin is cut-off, like Asclepius, to set the stage for cosmic battle with demonic forces of death' (Guelich 2018:56). Greeks, like the Bantu people of South Africa, ascribe divinity to anyone with extraordinary abilities; such people were believed to be gods or endowed with extraordinary abilities from the alien spirits (shave). Even in death, they believe that such people continue to offer services to humanity. With regards to Jesus as son of God, Mark is tapping into the worldview that Jesus is a demigod; God incarnate. Contextually, it refers to Jesus' good deeds amongst peasants of Mark's community. Concerning this, though Mark shares Paul's emphasis on the cross and suffering, for Mark, Jesus' suffering is a further explanation for his earthly deeds. Similar to Apollo, Jesus' gospel is his deeds of service (Guelich 2018:56). In praising, the community is saying Jesus, the demigod, is their deliverer.

John the Baptist heightens Jesus' credentials

The section regarding John the Baptist is a continuation of praise of the benefactor's genealogy. Two main sources concerning John the Baptist exist – Q and Josephus. Though Mark gives a brief description of Jesus' preaching, Christopher Tuckett discovered that in Q (3:7–9, 3:16) we have a longer treatment of John's ministry. This may suggest that the material regarding John circulated separately from the synoptic traditions (Tuckett 2004:12). Josephus refers to John as the baptiser, meaning that he was known for his rite of baptism (Josephus 2017:37). Baptism was only performed for the proselytised gentiles and the impression was given that this may have been the reason for the Jews to resist John's baptism. However, Tylor suggests that John's baptism reaffirms Judaism, the Temple, the Law and purity (Taylor 1997:15).

Mark's focus whilst introducing John heightens Jesus' credentials. By the time Jesus began his ministry of healing

and feeding the masses, John had several followers. Introducing John has the function of highlighting Jesus' greatness. To give authenticity that Jesus is the expected character on the stage, Mark conflates Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3. The citations give the impression that the unknown voice calling in the wilderness is John and the expected Lord is Jesus. The impression is given that John was a great man. Like Old Testament prophets such as Elijah, John wore 'camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey' (Mk 1:6) (Waetjen 2014:195). Furthermore, similar to Essene and apocalyptic movements, he focused on righteous living in anticipation of the Messianic age. Yet to Mark, John's identity should be understood from the background of Jesus as Messiah and son of God (Hartman 2010:13). Mark wants his listeners to understand that, if John was great, he was only a forerunner, and Jesus is the greatest of them all – the demigod and deliverer.

Though baptised by John, Jesus' true credentials came from a supernatural voice that came from heaven – 'you are my beloved son, in you I am well pleased' v. 11 (ESV). The proclaimers' reference to Jesus as the mightier one gives the expectation that indeed the time is fulfilled (Hartman 2010:13). That the voice spoke puts Jesus at the same level as Asclepius or Apollo whereby the gods speak through them. It further affirms the identity as demi-god and performer of supernatural deeds. Mark's audience are aware of the voices of gods, such as the oracles of Apollo speaking directly to people. For example, the temple of Apollo was known for its oracles from the gods (Fontenrose 1978:22). Equally, at the Asclepius' temple, the people received directives from the god through dreams or visions. Furthermore, Emperor Octavius and Alexander the Great received voices from the gods (Hartman 2010:13). To the listeners, the voice at Jesus' baptism endorses his credentials amongst the gods – he is a divine man.

Jesus – A more effective Healer than other gods

Though Mark does not mention other gods – Asclepius or Apollo – by name like typical aretalogies, the rest of chapter celebrates or details the god's (Jesus') accomplishments. From the perspective of Zulu *isibongo* and aretalogies, attention is given to the use of verbs which created the possible mood and construction of the attendees to Mark's narrative.

The aretalogy of exorcism performed at the Capernaum Synagogue

Associated with many healing shrines and temples, exorcism was not unique to Jesus. In Asclepius' temple, exorcism took place through dreams. During sleep at one of the healing shrines, the patient or one who visits on behalf of the sick receives a dream or instruction from Asclepius (Bonner 1943:39). However, amongst the Jews, exorcism was not universally accepted. The Jews prohibited people from

consulting diviners (Rosner 1977:50). Nevertheless, some Jewish sects, such as the Essenes, performed exorcism and other magical activities as signs of the presence of God. Perhaps, Jesus who had links with Essene communities through John the Baptist learnt from him about exorcism as divine proof of Yahweh's authoritative presence.

Because Capernaum was a village, the phrase that Jesus 'went to Capernaum' reinforces the idea that Jesus was a village healer. Josephus thinks that the population size of Capernaum was 15 000. Recent estimations place the population of Capernaum between 600 and 1500 people (Reed 2002:45).

The way Mark reports the exorcism in Capernaum is moving and is meant to heighten the celebration noise. Jesus is presented as a warrior and a hunter (vv. 21–23). He went εἰσπορεύονται to Capernaum, he entered εἰσελθὼν into the Synagogue, he taught and people were amazed. Jesus' movement and actions are meant to solicit jubilation. The Greeks believed that gods were not found at all places. Sometimes, they take time to appear at a particular shrine or temple. Meaning that there are certain temples gods frequently visited. Surely, the appearing and entering of a god at the shrine was a point of epiphany and celebration. In Zulu *isibongo* celebrations each time the action of a hero or a warrior is mentioned, the people make affirmative ululation whilst some even imitate the action. The amazement ἐξεπλήσσαντο of the crowd is indicative of the mood of the implied listeners. Of notice is the fact that Mark does not focus on the content of Jesus' teaching but at the grandeur and excitement that arouse from the presence of Jesus at the synagogue (vv. 21–23). They too should be amazed at Jesus' power.

However, the narrator seems to have done half of the job; he has an even more amazing event to be attributed to Jesus. The word εὐθὺς suggests that whilst the people were still ululating regarding the expressed authority, the narrator added a more perplexing story – this time Jesus confronts a demon-possessed man.

Interesting is the supplication from the demoniac, saying, 'what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? Art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God' (Mk 1:24) (ESV). The plausible way to understand Jesus' interaction with the demoniac is through the perspective of taunting. Glück (1964) says that:

reviling and monomachy were preludes to battles in primitive warfare and were characteristic of societies in an early or arrested stage of civilisation, marked by a total lack of military discipline. (p. 25)

For him 'the taunting of the opponent might have had a psychological effect on both parties – it piqued the foe and it inspired the abuser himself' (Glück 1964:25). Taunting has three elements – ridiculing, cursing and intimidating. By directly quoting the demoniac's supplication, the taunt is supposed to evoke humour. In addition to ratcheting the praise and allegiance by the devotees, knowing how the previous enemies were defeated sends a reverberating signal

to the others concerning the power and character of the god or benefactor. Equally, in Zulu *isibongo*, imitating the voice of the opponent evokes humour by recreating the humorous moment of victory.

The response from Jesus to the demoniac is supposed to evoke loud cheers as the audience witnesses the power of their god. To the demoniac, Jesus says, 'Hold thy peace, and come out of him' (v. 25) (ESV). One characteristic of Zulu *isibongo* is the amount of emotions associated with each gesture. By quietening the demoniac, Jesus is parading great authority. Similar exhibition of authority is a central phenomenon amongst traditional healers, especially the diviner (Dube 2018a). Central to the diviner is the use of greater spiritual power to cast out tormenting spirits. A healer that allows tormenting spirits to speak back is indicative of his weaker power. In the case of Jesus hushing the demoniac, he is demonstrating power, in the process belittling the tormenting spirit. The expected response from the crowd is jubilation, whistling and loud praises. Verse 26 is very dramatic, 'And the unclean spirit, tearing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him'.

Nicholas Richardson suggests that most hymns to the gods were sung at the temple and the celebration spills into the street and households, meaning that many of the performances were known by the public (Richardson 2010:15). Mark gives us a glimpse of what the attendees went about saying. Mark says:

And they were all amazed, inasmuch that they questioned among themselves, saying, What is this? a new teaching! With authority he commandeth even the unclean spirits, and they obey him. And the report of him went out straightway everywhere into all the region of Galilee round about. (Mk 1:27–28)

This last part of the exorcism of the demoniac replicates events at Zulu performances where people leave the performance venue but continue singing in small groups as they walk to their respective homes. No performance or music ends at the venue, with people instead carrying the mood home and to even continue talking about the event the following days.

Aretalogy of healing of several people

Mark further narrates the healing of several people, including Simon's mother-in-law (vv. 29–39). Malick David suggests that the term *diakoneō* used in reference to the angel in the wilderness is used in reference to Simon's mother-in-law, meaning that Mark is interested in her as a serving, true discipleship character (Malick 2017:1). In response, the fact that her name is not mentioned speaks to the patriarchal context where women were known by their husband's names. Furthermore, it speaks to the character of aretalogies that focus on the benefactor and not the victims.

The story is introduced by strong action from Jesus 'leaving' the synagogue and 'entering' Simon's mother-in-law's house. Like Apollo, Jesus is pictured as moving from one site of need to the other (Alcock & Osborne 1994:7). Mark used two verbs

to reveal the effectiveness of Jesus' healing – Jesus came *προσελθὼν* and he raised her up *ἤγειρεν*. Jesus, similar to aretalogy given to Leto and Asclepius, has divine power to snatch people from the power of death. To people who knew about patients sleeping at Asclepius' temple for days, waiting for healing, Jesus is an effective healer. To show that Jesus is an effective healer, Mark reported that the once sick woman rose and served the guests.

In telling this story, two possible gestures were performed by Mark. It is possible that he imitated the sick laying women and the posture of Jesus whilst, easily, helping the woman to her feet. To Zulu performers, when a chief or traditional healer helps the people in whatever case, people cheer and chant the name of the benefactor. Mark is mute on the reaction or possible cheers from the crowd, but it is possible that the villagers left the house talking about the event. Similar to how he ended narrating the exorcism of the demoniac, Mark ends this aretalogy saying:

that evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. (1:34) (ESV)

Here, Mark made a mistake by referring to Capernaum as a city – it was a village. However, his reference to Capernaum as city has an aretalogical narrative function, giving the impression that Jesus was operating with bigger and famous spaces such as cities. Like Aristides who praised Apollo for several healing and rescue actions, this section praises Jesus for his power to heal several people (Carey 1980:288).

Aretalogy over the man with leprosy

Mark finished his praise of Jesus by narrating the healing of the man with leprosy. As a skin disease, the man was not supposed to mingle with people. Lars Hartman says Mark described the man's sickness from the perspective of Jewish ideas of purity, meaning that the listeners knew about the purity rules (Hartman 2010:57). To engage the listeners in the story, Mark creates an impossible situation – the leprosy man came *ἔρχεται* to Jesus begging to be made clean (v. 40). To the listeners who had just listened to the previous aretalogies, this scene sets up a puzzling occasion. They wanted to continue praising the benefactor (Jesus) yet also did not want to witness Jesus breaching the purity teachings by making himself unclean. Given that Jesus did not act according to culture means he was regarded a demi-god; he was not affected by diseases that tormented mortals. To add to the perplexing situation, Jesus was moved by compassion, reached out his hand and touched the man with a skin condition. The word *πλαγγιτισθεῖς* places Jesus' action at the same level as those of Asclepius and Apollo. To the Greeks, gods were once humans. Jesus' gesture of touching and restoring the health of a man with leprosy draws people's allegiance to his movement. Perhaps the cheers generated by this aretalogy were mixed with affection and admiration towards Jesus.

Conclusion

Given the proximity of Mark to several Greek healers, this study reads Mark's first chapter as an aretalogy; a praise narrative given to the demi-god (Jesus). Following the pattern of aretalogies, Mark begins by narrating and praising the benefactor's genealogy, telling the listeners that Jesus is their deliverer and a demi-god, having supernatural powers. Though mortal and having been baptised by John, Jesus is the expected One to be sent by God, better even than John himself. As the praise continues, the rest of the chapter lists Jesus' accomplishment. He healed the demoniac by scoffing and belittling the demoniac. The taunt was meant to evoke laughter and derision – Jesus is powerful, and laughter and amazement are derived from the way he belittles what the mortals see as challenges. Furthermore, the healing of Simon's mother-in-law as allusions of Jesus to Asclepius; he seizes people from the jaws of death. Like a god, Jesus cannot contract sickness by touching or being near sick people. The manner in which Mark praises Jesus evokes amazement, laughter and further bolsters allegiance to the Jesus healing household. Indeed, for Mark's audience, Jesus is the best healer, a realisation and celebration that needs to be told and celebrated in the streets and households.

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