

Mystical holiness in Mark's Gospel

**Author:**Pieter G.R. de Villiers¹**Affiliation:**¹Department of New Testament, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa**Corresponding author:**Pieter G.R. de Villiers,
pgdevilliers@mweb.co.za**Dates:**

Received: 07 July 2016

Accepted: 13 Aug. 2016

Published: 31 Oct. 2016

How to cite this article:De Villiers, P.G.R., 2016, 'Mystical holiness in Mark's Gospel', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72(4), a3697. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.3697>**Copyright:**© 2016. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

The article discusses holiness as a theme in the Gospel of Mark from the perspective of biblical spirituality. It first establishes the framework within which holiness is understood by discussing holiness in spirituality, in the early Christian context of Mark and in terms of Mark's focus on the identity of Jesus. The article then focuses on holiness in terms of the human pole in the divine-human relationship by investigating how holiness is about awe and fear before Jesus as the mystery of God's kingdom (Mk. 4:11). It then analyses holiness in terms of the divine pole in the divine-human relationship by investigating Jesus as the Holy One of God. It concludes with an analysis of Jesus' reaffirmation, interiorisation, radicalisation and embodiment of holiness and of Mark's mystagogical approach to holiness within the lived experience of his community.

Introduction

Holiness is in more than one way an important theme in Mark's Gospel. The beginning of the Gospel reports the promise of the Holy Spirit (Mk. 1:8), the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Jesus (Mk. 1:10) and then the healing of a demoniac (Mk. 1:24) during holy worship on the holy Sabbath in the Holy Land. In the rest of its narrative, holiness is closely linked with Jesus' identity, while his ministry often brings about the healing of impure people. In addition, the descriptions in Mark's Gospel of the context in which Jesus lived are decisively determined by the holiness discourse that existed in Israel. The Gospel reflects new ways of understanding holiness that would later become typical of an own Christian identity (Donahue 2006:85–86). These readings reflect a *hermeneutical* process in which the lived experiences behind (prefiguration), in (configuration) and in front of (refiguration) their sacred texts unlocked new forms of holiness in the spiritual journeys of believers and their identities.¹ This hermeneutical process represents that which has become known as 'spiritual hermeneutics' because it investigates the spiritual dynamics at work in the lived experience as reported in the scriptures and in its interaction with later readings.

Mark's Gospel is a valuable source for investigating holiness in early Christian lived experiences. It has for a long time now been liberated from its earlier, negative image as a rather colourless, uninspiring summary of the other Gospels.² Historical critical scholarship have illustrated how Mark's text predates the other Gospels and reflects a lived experience that responded to particular challenges in its own context. Literary research has delineated how Mark plotted and structured his text as a communication about this lived experience (Tannehill 1979:57–95; Vorster 1980a, 1980b; Williams 1996:332–348). Theological analyses have provided useful information about theological themes in Mark's Gospel that expressed this experience.³ A spiritual reading of the Gospel makes use of these insights but moves a step further by seeking to integrate them in the holistic context of the early Christian community's faith experience in order to investigate the spiritual dynamics behind, in and because of Mark's Gospel.⁴ Especially helpful for a spiritual reading, also in this

1. See in this regard the informative discussion of Ricoeur and Nussbaum, in Gorospe (2007:1–10).

2. It is ironic that this led to a reappraisal of the Gospel as being the older and supposedly more reliable of the four gospels. This scholarship for a long time stimulated research into the historical context of Mark's Gospel to such an extent that it often overshadowed research on its theological and spiritual nature.

3. New Testament scholarship often weighed the interface of historical and theological approaches to Mark's Gospel. Wrede (1901), for example, argued that Mark's Gospel with its Messianic secret was a theological construct to cope with questions about Jesus' identity rather than a historical report about Jesus' ministry. For other discussions about the relationship between theology and history in Mark, see Räisänen (1976:159–168), Fendler (1991:191), Marcus (1992:6) and also Via (2005:60–100), whose publication on Mark's ethics illustrates how the Gospel is interpreted theologically with reference to themes like kingdom, eschatology, ritual and obedience. Deppe (2015), who adapts and modifies some traditional scholarly insights, argues that Mark countered a triumphalistic Messianic expectation by posing a Christology in which Christ's exalted and powerful nature is constantly linked with his passion and death. Mark wanted to show how the cross as symbol of shame is transformed by presenting it as God's way to deliver Israel. However, Mark also wanted to deal with the challenges caused by the absence of Jesus, with the inclusion of Gentiles in the community and with the notion of purity that kept Jews and Gentiles apart. The latter theme is pertinent to this article and to the theme of holiness.

4. See the interesting article of Mathew (2000) that relates the Markan pericope about the cultic purification of the leper (Mk 1:40–45) with an Indian context in which discrimination on the basis of caste is prominent. The influence of his context on the reading of Mark is to be seen in his analysis of the healing of a leper as an outcast and his restoration to purity and holiness (Mk 1:40–45). Whilst most scholars interpret Mark 1:41 as an indication of Jesus' compassion for the leper, Mathew prefers a Greek reading that speaks of Jesus' anger in order to criticise the discrimination against the impure (Mathew 2000:103–104). This reading enables Mathew to appropriate the episode in his Indian context.

Note: The financial assistance of the National Research Foundation (NRF) towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the NRF.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

article, is a model that describes spirituality as an ongoing, transformative divine-human relationship.⁵

Holiness is especially a fitting theme with which to analyse the spiritual impact of a text. Waaijman (2002:320) pointed out its importance when he observed that, materially speaking, holiness is one of four key terms in spirituality. It 'concerns a core component present in all spiritualities'. He gives insight in the meaning of holiness when he adds, 'Spirituality is the transfer from the unholy (the profane, impure, perishable) to the holy (the pure, eternal, inviolable)'. It has to do with a field of tension in which holiness stands in opposition to the unholy and impure: this again implies a source of holiness. In the Hebrew scriptures, God is the Holy One, the One who is Light, like the Sun, the One who purifies like fire and water purify (Waaijman 2002:320; referring to Ex. 3:2-3; Lv. 10:3; Nm. 20:13), so that God is not compromised in any way in God's sovereignty and creatorship. People stand in awe and fear before the divine holiness, aware of the otherness of the divine, but also fearful to intrude or contaminate God in God's holiness.

This source of holiness affects and permeates all levels of existence on a bodily, psychological, ethical, social and religious level. While God sanctifies and purifies, human beings devote themselves to God to be brought into the sphere of holiness. This happens through the sacrificial cult but affects the whole of human existence up to its most mundane aspects. They then become saints, permeated by and radiating divine holiness.

In this paper aspects of Mark's Gospel are investigated against this background to illustrate how holiness was understood in the text and what a spiritual reading of Mark's Gospel entails. The article first establishes a framework within which holiness is understood by discussing its place in the early Christian context of Mark, followed by its role in Mark's characterisation of Jesus' identity. The article subsequently focuses on holiness in terms of both the human and divine poles in the divine-human relationship. It concludes with an explanation of Mark's mystagogical use of holiness, illustrating how Mark appropriates the motif of holiness in his context and how he uses it to accompany his readers in their spiritual journey.

Holiness in Mark's society

Mark's Gospel reflects a context that was profoundly determined over many centuries by a comprehensive holiness code. Holiness was so important that one can say that it was 'the premier structuring value of Jewish religion and culture' (Neyrey 1986). This holiness order was

authorised also in early Christianity by motivating it as a reflection of God's holy character and as the divinely created order of the world (Lv. 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:8; 11:44-45; 1 Pt. 1:16).⁶ Holiness was especially linked with purity as it became institutionalised in Jewish society in terms of space (e.g. the temple with its various parts), people (high priest, priests, Levites and other groups) and times (the Sabbath, Passover, Day of Atonement, feasts and festivals). A holiness code comprehensively ordered society in all its activities, including matters like marriage, social contact with others and membership of the people. The aim of the code was to ensure the holiness of God's people and to guard against impurity.

Mark's Gospel contains a plethora of remarks that relate to the holiness code. The contents of the Gospel reflect an intricate social structure that is permeated by an awareness of the holy.⁷ The attacks of religious leaders because of Jesus' meetings with undesirables, Jesus' pronouncements about the temple, healings and other facets of his actions and thoughts take on special significance when it is read within this framework of holiness.

Awe and fear of Jesus in Mark's Gospel

The spiritual perspective on holiness is embedded in and determined by a mystical dimension of the Markan Jesus. Many scholars agree that the Gospel of Mark is about the identity of Jesus.⁸ Their interpretations of his identity vary because of the complex portrait of Jesus' identity. Mark uses several descriptions for Jesus (e.g. Son of David, Messiah, Son of Man, Prophet, Teacher and Son of God). There is, however, a certain consistency in Mark's portrayal of Jesus' identity that has to do with the numinous and, by implication, its holy nature. At an early stage Wrede (1901), for example, drew attention to the repeated failure of people to understand Jesus fully, despite all the disclosures given to them. People stand in awe of and are attracted to him as a powerful figure whose 'fame soon spread far and wide' (Mk. 1:28). He evoked in them a transformative religious experience: Mark notes how, when they saw Jesus, they abandoned their religious leaders and ran to him, 'overwhelmed with wonder', but also eager to listen to his different, but authoritative, teaching about God (Mk. 9:15; 1:22, 27). For example, they hear from Jesus that God was working in the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac (Mk. 5:19) and thus in sanctifying the impure person. Their awareness of the divine action through Jesus finally brings them to praise God (Mk. 2:12).

6. Mark follows the lead of early Christian communities who kept to this order, with, for example, apostles visiting the temple to pray and Paul travelling to the temple to make a vow (Acts 3; 21). The influence of this order is further illustrated by the holiness symbolism in the Letter to the Hebrews. The pervasive nature of this order explains the trauma of early Christians when Jerusalem as holy city with the holy temple was destroyed.

7. In a seminal essay Neyrey (1986) analysed the comprehensive and profound influence of the holy on Jewish society in the time that Mark's Gospel was written. Neyrey's work, developed in dialogue with Mary Douglas, has had some notable influence on Markan research. See for example Mathew (2000).

8. See also Shiner (1995), Marcus (1992:6), Schmahl (1974); Fendler (1991:193). Thielman (2005:57) writes that it is a central concern of Mark's Gospel. 'All three major groups in the gospel – the populace, the antagonistic Jewish leaders, and the disciples – from the beginning of the gospel to its conclusion want to know who Jesus is. Mark's gospel was written, in part, to provide an answer'.

5. See the extensive discussion in Waaijman (2002: 689–773) for a thorough overview of Spiritual Hermeneutics. He follows a phenomenological approach, analyzing how sacred texts are read in various religious traditions, reconstructs a model that explains the basic characteristics of such readings and then integrates and develops the model in terms of contemporary hermeneutics of scholars like Buber, Levinas, Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur. Though his model is more explanatory in nature, it offers insights that can function heuristically to interpret texts. For an example of the way in which biblical texts can be read from the perspective of Spirituality Studies, see Schneiders's publication on the Gospel of John (2003) and on the nature of the Bible as a sacred text (1991).

And yet, there is also distance. Despite his fame, the huge gatherings, public miracles, healings and exorcisms, his audiences and even the disciples who are constantly in his presence are incapable of understanding who he really is (e.g. Mk. 1:32–34, 45), but, more than that, they are also afraid, perplexed and terrified because of him (Mk. 5:15). People in his hometown, though amazed by his teaching, discern his identity on social grounds and ultimately reject him because of his lowly family history (Mk. 6:2, 3). Even the disciples fear his presence. Though they have been told of their privileged position as his disciples, they experience with terror Jesus' stilling of the storm and ask, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him' (Mk. 4:41). So strange is he that some are outright hostile towards him or repelled by him, sending him away from them (Mk. 5:17). Those in position of authority (e.g. Mk. 1:6) seek to eliminate him.

The mystical Jesus of Mark

The human response of awe and fear to Jesus assumes and points to the holy character of his enigmatic presence. What this entails is illustrated when Mark reports what Jesus himself said about his identity. This happens at an important moment in his ministry when he, for the first time, speaks in public about his teaching in parables (Mk. 4:1–20) from a boat because of the huge crowd who gathered at the lake (Mk. 4:1). Afterwards, 'when he was alone' with his disciples (Mk. 4:10), he explains that his parables were given to 'outsiders'. This spatial remark has a symbolic impact. It suggests that the disciples are privileged insiders. Jesus confirms their insider status further when he reveals that 'the mystery of the kingdom' is given only to them (Mk. 4:11; see also 4:34).⁹

With this description the Markan Jesus explicitly speaks about the nature of his ministry: it has to do with divine rule as God's communication with humanity. God reveals in him what has been hidden (as the divine passive in Mark 4:11 indicates). On the surface of things, people may encounter 'Jesus of Nazareth' (as the demoniac identifies him in Mark 1:24), a carpenter from a local family (Mk. 6:3) who was born and lives among them (e.g. Mk. 4:21–25). And yet, beneath the surface God is at work in him. This is confirmed in another way when Mark relates that Jesus is revealed in teaching and miraculous works as the Son of God (Mk. 3:11; see also further below). The hiddenness is revealed to insiders, to those who are alone with him as those who respond to him in faith: They are, as Jesus suggests in the preceding parable, the seeds that fall in good soil and bear a large crop. They hear the word, accept it and bear fruit (Mk. 4:20). On the deepest level they are made aware through Jesus' revelation that in the person of Jesus, God is present for and among them.

Here an aside remark is needed: Mystical movements (like Merkavah mysticism) were characterised by the conviction that initiates received divine revelations that were hidden from ordinary people. In terms of the existing worldview in

those times, the visionaries travelled through heavenly spheres to ultimately experience the divine, holy presence on the throne (Rowland 1982).¹⁰ Merkavah mysticism was heavily dependent on key passages like Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 7 with acute consciousness of holiness as the glorious majesty of God that evokes awe and fear (Davies 2005:341). The notion of Jesus as the mystery of the kingdom who is revealed to insiders has a mystical touch to it, even though it differs in significant ways from Merkavah mysticism. Johnson (1999:168–169) therefore with good reason related this Markan portrait of Jesus as the awesome, fearful 'mystery' to the dictum about the *mysterium tremendum et fascinosum*, a major theme in Otto's work on the holy. This resonates in Johnson's remark, 'Jesus himself is the singular "mystery of the kingdom," and he is so as the Holy One' (Johnson 1999:169). This is also the context for Johnson's remark that, '[t]he mystery of the holy, even when revealed, remains beyond reach' (Mk. 9:10, 32).¹¹ Jesus' identity in Mark as the Mystery of the Kingdom, as the Son of God, is ultimately also about the Holy One of God.

Mark depicts Jesus as a divine figure and mystery of the kingdom, as being beyond human initiative, control and even conceptualisation. One stands before him like Moses before the burning bush. Jesus distinguishes himself as the divine from everything that is outside him and emits an atmosphere of unapproachability (Waaijman 2002:320–1). He can be known to some extent, but never in an exhaustive manner.¹² And yet, despite this, Jesus as divine figure relates to humanity, who is invited to remain in his presence (Mk. 10:21, 28, 52). The enigmatic Holy One has to be followed in discipleship wherever he leads. Jesus as the 'mystery' is not about secret or unknown matters that can be 'explained' to the disciples (like in Mt. 31:11) and that can be 'clarified' to others (Mt. 28:20).¹³ One relates to the mystery of the kingdom and this relationship centres in the innermost being of humanity, from where it determines humanity's lifestyle as a purifying force (Waaijman 2002:321). Where the mystery inhabits the inner being, one's perspective is transformed. This is spelled out in Mark 7:14–23, where Jesus discusses purity and 'declares all food pure' (7:19).¹⁴ He observes that someone becomes impure because of an impure inner

10. Rowland (2009:7) later on wrote more explicitly about the mystical Jesus that one encounters in Mark's Gospel. The readers of Mark are given hidden knowledge of Jesus in visionary form. In addition, their knowledge has, as is characteristic of mystical texts, a theophanic character. In the episode about the transfiguration there is a theophanic appearance of a cloud that envelopes Jesus, Moses and Elijah followed by the heavenly acclamation of Jesus as beloved Son. It is such an overwhelming experience that Peter out of fright does not know what to say (Mk. 9:6). Elsewhere Jesus is given a vision at the baptism that indicates who he is (Mk. 1:10). He also appears to others in a theophanic manner, such as in Mark 6:45–53 when he walks on the lake. There is also striking symbolism in Jesus' ascent on the mountain (Mk. 9:2).

11. The identity of Jesus in Mark reflects some key characteristics of holiness. See also, for example, the remarks of Waaijman (2002:320): 'that which is holy withdraws itself and remains absolute'.

12. What Mark portrays is not a sequence of hiddenness and later revelation, which would fit a Jesus whose identity is generally acknowledged, but a simultaneity of hiddenness and revelation, which matches the still generally unacknowledged nature of Jesus' identity' (Shiner 1995:290).

13. The few exceptions underline this general trend. God, demons and supernatural characters know, recognise and reveal Jesus' true identity (Mk. 1:12; 3:11; 5:7).

14. Holmen (2009:199) remarks about purity: 'Jesus' attitude toward purity matters is certainly one of the most intriguing and entangling questions in current research of the historical Jesus'. He stresses the importance of the theme (2009:200), noting that Jesus' purification of unclean persons is a regular pattern of his behaviour. It is a 'bedrock' element of his activity (2009:201).

9. Mark stresses this distinction by repeating in Mark 4:33 that Jesus spoke only in parables to the outsiders, but 'when he was alone with his disciples, he explained everything' (Mk. 4:34).

disposition and the evil deeds that flow from it. Such impure people have an external relationship with the divine determined by outward rules and regulations – as with the religious leaders of the faith community.

Mark's thoughts on this are further illustrated in Mark 7:17–20, which also illuminates holiness as a numinous motif. The passage describes how Herod refused to kill John because he 'feared' him as 'a righteous and holy man'. This is then followed by the remark, 'when Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him'. Mark reveals with this remark how John mirrored the divine presence in his own person and thus offers an example of the holiness that Jesus embodied: he is the one who lives in the presence of God, who is holy and righteous, fearless and powerful, but also different and awesome. In addition, the remark reflects the ethical nature of holiness: To live holy is to be 'righteous', to reject a lifestyle that is impure and to live in absolute devotion to the divine will (Mk. 7:18). Like Herod, one 'listens' to such a holy one but is also repelled, standing back in awe, in fear before his holiness. And, once again, on a deeper level, the reader of Mark also knows that the holy ones are not spared the fate of Jesus as the Holy One. Holiness is dangerous: it elicits awe, but it can also bring one's death and destruction, as John's ultimate faith reveals.

This Jesus of Mark's Gospel as the mystery of the kingdom sheds more light on the nature of the divine-human relationship. It reveals that this relationship finds its source, origins and initiative in God, who purifies, includes and inhabits despite ignorance, lack of faith and impurity. And yet, though powerful, the divine initiative is not coercive. It comes to humanity in a hidden form to invite. The mystery of the kingdom is to be found in him who teaches the integrity of the other even if the other is unfaithful (Mk. 4:13, 40; 6:53; 7:18; 8:17, 18, 21), arrogant (Mk. 8:32), self-seeking and abusive (Mk. 9:34) and treacherous (Mk. 14:10, 11; 50 and 66–72; see also Wrede 1971:83–113; Johnson 1999:169; Shiner 1995:291). Jesus lives in complete respect of the other, allowing them to be. The holy essence of his hidden, mystical nature is that it is frail and vulnerable, open to resistance and vulnerable to a hostility that seeks to eliminate and kill. However, where there is openness to him, his empowering presence never fails those who follow him. Then the divine grants purity, consecration, intimacy, closeness and reverence. Jesus' unfathomable and terrifying power is about God, who cannot be controlled but who also seeks to establish an inclusive and non-coercive relationship with humanity.¹⁵

Jesus as the Holy One in Mark

The intricate, yet implicit link of holiness with Jesus is made explicit in Mark's portrayal of Jesus as Son of God. From the very beginning of Mark's Gospel, Jesus is presented as a divine figure.¹⁶ Mark refers to Jesus in several places as the

Son of God (Mk. 1:1, 11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 14:6–62) and also to God as the father of the son (Mk. 8:38, 13:32–36). The notion implies a close relationship between Jesus and God that is likened to what exists in a family. It is a notion that confirms the authority of Jesus as the powerful messenger of God, who brings a divine message because of his intimate relationship with God the Father (Mk. 1:2, 3, 8).

This is the framework within which Mark understands holiness, as some examples will illustrate. The notion of holiness is introduced at an early phase in a seminal location¹⁷ in the Gospel 'of the Son of God' (Mk. 1:1) after the extraordinary identity of Jesus has been established: After the divine call of Jesus (Mk. 1:9–12) and Jesus' powerful calling of disciples (Mk. 1:14–19), the ministry of Jesus begins with a first miracle, in which he exorcises 'impure' spirits.¹⁸ The impure spirits reveal the identity of Jesus as the Holy One of God who sanctifies and purifies but, in line with the notion of holiness explained above, also show the huge gap between Jesus and his opponents, confirming the tension between the holy and unholy: 'What do you want with us,¹⁹ Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God?' (οἶδά σε τίς εἶ, ὁ ἅγιος τοῦ θεοῦ; Mk. 1:24). It is striking that the spirits recognise and name him as the Holy One of God, especially since Mark notes elsewhere that the demons normally responded to him by calling him the Son of God (Mk. 1:11).

These remarks also indicate Jesus' irresistible power over the unholy and impure. As the Holy One he consecrates others to bring them in to the sphere of the holy (Waaïman 2002:321). The bystanders are impressed that Jesus 'orders' impure spirits and they *obey* him' (Mk. 1:27; see also Grundmann 1980:151). He is, as the Holy One, because of his divine relationship, able to destroy them. The power of Jesus' holiness is also shown by his strict rebuke of the impure spirit to come out of the man (Mk. 1:25: ἐπετίμην²⁰). The violent convulsions of the man and the screaming of the departing spirits further reflect the mortal combat of the divine against the impure spirit. It is a battle through which God seeks the total elimination of evil as impurity. It reveals the all-consuming nature of divine holiness. God as the holy 'purifies and removes all dirt' (Waaïman 2002:320).

The passage also points towards the mystical nature of Jesus as the Holy One: Mark reveals hidden 'knowledge' about Jesus that differs fundamentally from what the religious

17. Iwe (1999:7–10) quotes several scholars who regard this as a programmatic passage that contains many themes and features of the Gospel, comparable to Luke 4:16–30 as programmatic for the Gospel of Luke. See also his discussion (23 and 37) of the chiasmic nature of the passage with its focus on Jesus' actions but also his unique and extraordinary authority – which confirms how carefully the text was conceptualised.

18. Holmén (2009:201) notes that an unclean spirit is an indication of a demon, 'and reflects the evil spirits' work of either causing uncleanness and leading to it, or their possession of people as a consequence of an impure life ... The term 'unclean spirit' appropriately marks off spirits which are not to be associated with God, who is holy.'

19. The impure spirit uses the plural 'us' in Mark 1:24 not to show 'that several spirits possess the man, but that the conflict pits Jesus as the holy one of God against the entire realm of impure spirits (see Mk. 5:9–13)'; Hodges and Poirier (2011–2012:167).

20. See the extensive discussion of this verb in Mark and the rest of the New Testament in Iwe (1999:83–84).

15. According to Mark 9:38, 39, even outsiders who use Jesus' name to perform miracles should not be rejected.

16. The category of 'divine' is here used without nuances of the later theological conceptualisation of God. Mark's Gospel had a predominantly Gentile readership, but also assumes a Jewish understanding of divinity. 'Son of God' is a term that is used in a premodern sense to refer to the unique and special relationship of Jesus with God.

leaders claim to know. This is also true of another feature in the text: Mark's characterisation of the demoniac indicates to his readers that unlike the bystanders, who are puzzled and ask 'Who is this man?' (Mk. 1:27), the impure spirits have no doubt about Jesus. They identify him as 'Jesus of Nazareth' (Mk. 1:24), but they have a deeper knowledge of his real identity. They recognise in him the hidden, holy presence of God – he is the Holy One of God.

The challenge of the impure spirits to Jesus furthermore shows the unbridgeable gap between them and Jesus. Jesus represents what they are not: in their words, he has nothing to do with them. His holiness also stands out through Mark's reference to the man as being possessed with an impure spirit (Mk. 1:23: ἐν πνεύματι ἀκαθάρτῳ²¹; Hodges and Poirier 2011–2012:167). Mark thus creates a contrast between Jesus as the Holy One and the demoniac as the impure spirit. Jesus is associated with the divine sphere of holiness. Holiness and impurity are two opposites, but at the same time he underlines the need for impurity to be eliminated. His Gospel focuses on a particular transformation that is needed: humanity, captive to and contaminated by the unholy, needs to be liberated from impurity and transformed to a holy lifestyle. It thus confirms the encompassing nature of the divine holiness. The Holy One challenges the destructive impact of the impure and restores the man physically and spiritually. Jesus as the Holy One transforms, brings healing and restores to life.

This description of Jesus as the Holy One of God is reminiscent of how holiness is inextricably linked with the divine in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures.²² It is used for God in passages like Isaiah 41:14, 16; 43:3, 14, 15.²³ One of the most quoted pronouncements that illustrates divine holiness is found in Leviticus 19:2: 'You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy' (see also 11:45). Yet this holiness is shared with humanity. Divine holiness is, therefore, contagious – it spills over and affects the people of God: the priest Aaron is called the 'holy one of the Lord' in Psalm 106:16 and the prophet Elisha a 'holy man of God' according to 2 Kings 4:9 (Neyrey 1986:105–106). For Mark, Jesus (like John the Baptist) shares the long history of God's holy people who were graced by the presence of God among them and who were holy because of the divine presence in their midst. This happens also in Mark's Gospel: The extraordinary holiness of Jesus who baptises with the Holy Spirit (see Mk. 1:10–11) flows over onto others and overcomes the destructive presence of the demonic. This is also suggested later on when, in Mark 5:30, a sick woman is healed after she touches his cloak and power leaves him.²⁴ It is a contagious holiness.

21. Lührmann (1987:51) notes the emphasis here on the conflict between the holy and the impure.

22. The term is also found in John 6:69, where Peter identifies Jesus as the Holy One of God.

23. See Isaiah 6:6; Hosea 11:9; also John 17:11; 1 Peter 1:16, Revelations 3:7, etcetra. Furthermore (for Jesus), Luke 1:35; Acts 3:14.

24. 'Holiness' thus implying being totally consumed by God and radiating God without being conscious of it (Waaïjman 2002:320) involves 'all the layers of human existence: the physical, psychological, ethical, social and religious'.

Redefining holiness

Pertinent for Mark's Gospel are the social implications of the notion of 'holiness', which have been noted briefly above. Mark highlights how holiness transforms the human condition and lifestyle in its everyday form. Some remarks illustrate this in more depth.

Humanity is, in Mark's conception, reaffirmed as having to live in complete commitment to God as the Holy One. Mark presents Jesus as *reaffirming* the holiness code of his day with all its outcomes and consequences.²⁵ The social implications of holiness are clear, for example, from the context of the healing in Mark 1:21–28, which is loaded with references to holiness. The episode takes place at a *time* of holiness, that is, the Sabbath²⁶ as the holy day of rest, in the synagogue²⁷ in Capernaum as a holy *space*, which is regarded as holy by many because the law was kept in it. It happens also before a gathering of *people* who are observant Jews, ritually pure and holy. The activity of Jesus underlines the holiness of the episode: Jesus is busy teaching, taking an active part in worship. In this way it shows how Jesus legitimises and participates in the religious institutions with their norms and values regarding holiness. Jesus' actions against the impure man, further indicates his active protection of the holiness code from contamination by the impure. With such an affirmation, Jesus presents himself as totally committed to God and the divine sovereignty and, thus, to God's holiness.

This confirmation of the holiness code is underlined in the rest of Mark. Jesus responds to the leper's request that Jesus help him to become clean by healing him from leprosy (Mk. 1:40–45), touching him and sending him to a priest to offer a sacrifice in accordance with the law for his cleansing. This represents Jesus' call to his disciples to live a holy life and to do so by participating in a sphere characterised by the holiness of God. By doing so, the leper will also be a testimony to his religious leaders that he adheres to requirements for purity (Mathew 2000:102), but it will also indicate his desire to live according to the divine will.

Not all examples of holiness in Jesus' ministry have to do with special institutions like the temple. The discipleship of Jesus is linked with an everyday, down-to-earth holiness. The holy lifestyle of a disciple is further shown in acts of kindness, that is, in giving a cup of water (Mk. 9:41), embracing the vulnerable ones and children (Mk. 9:37; see also Mark 10:13–16), serving rather than ruling (Mk. 43–45), displaying a loving openness to others (Mk. 12:33), praying with simplicity (Mk. 9:29), caring for widows (Mk. 12:40), being humble and

25. This interest in holiness is the reason why some argued that the Gospel was written after the destruction of Jerusalem in order to support the early Christian communities in their trauma and their questions about the future without this system of holiness (Marcus 1992:10–11).

26. The Sabbath plays a prominent role in Mark's Gospel. References to it are found 11 times in the Gospel (five times in Mark 2:23–28, twice in Mark 3:1–6, twice in Mark 1:21, 22; 6:2; and in 16:1, 2).

27. The passage confirms that the synagogue was the place where the holy scripture was read and preached and where God was worshipped. It was closely associated with holiness.

dressing simply (Mk. 12:38–40), even engaging in the impure act of anointing a dead body with spices (Mk. 16:1).²⁸

This suggests another important dimension of holiness in Jesus' ministry: Mark's Gospel reflects a marked shift that would see a new understanding of holiness in early Christianity. Jesus *reinterprets* holiness when he interiorises purity: a person is defiled by what comes out of the person's inner being (Mk. 7:15; see also 21, 22). Holiness is linked with an inner attitude (see Mk. 7:10; 10:19). Holiness is not determined by structures, rituals, prescriptions or other external matters, as is shown in Jesus' criticism of the legalistic teaching of his opponents:

This people (the Pharisees, in particular) honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men. (Mk 7:6, 7)

A person is holy as a result of honouring God and opening the heart as a dwelling place to God. As in other early Christian communities, holiness has to do with God's transformative relationship with humanity, as is illustrated by Peter:

Like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behaviour; because it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.' (1 Peter 1:13, 14; see also 2:9)

Those who are called by God to become the body of Christ are therefore named as saints. They represent the new temple of God. In Jesus the holiness code is, therefore, also spiritualised. He is the one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit (Mk. 1:8). Those who seek a holy lifestyle will find it in and through a relationship with him. Where this happens, his holiness becomes theirs. It has a contagious character: they too live as saints, wholly devoted to God and the Holy One of God. This reinterpretation would later on determine the early Christian approach to the cult and to rituals as no longer essential for the Christian identity.

Jesus, thirdly, *radicalises* holiness: While his society ostracises and victimises those on the margins of society, including the sick, because they are regarded as impure sinners, Jesus accepts, helps and reintegrates them in society without fear of becoming unholy. He does not hesitate to touch the impure, offer them compassion and restore them to new life – even where the sacred traditions instruct otherwise. Holiness thus implies merciful inclusivity with radical social consequences. Holiness is democratised as an open gift to those on the margins of society, at the bottom of the map of holiness, who were previously excluded and ostracised. In a radically new way Jesus expresses God's love to them. They are sanctified through mercy, rather than held at a distance and rejected as impure and under divine punishment.

Fourthly, Jesus *embodies and is the fulfilment of* holiness. He not only speaks about holiness. He is the Holy One in whom

28. Hebrew scriptures often show how holiness impacted on mundane relationships between people. In Leviticus 19, holiness is about avoiding the ceremonially unclean, respect for one's parents (19:3), generosity toward the poor (19:9, 10), honesty (19:11), justice (19:11–18) and love for one's neighbour (19:17, 18).

holiness can be recognised and through whom holiness is shared. Holiness can be seen, touched and celebrated in Jesus. It is no longer merely a theological concept. Holiness is incarnated and has become flesh. Ultimately, then, holiness is determined by Jesus representing and embodying the divine: the demoniac is healed of impurity because of Jesus' intervention as the Holy One of God in his life. Jesus' holiness is also not the result of being in a holy space at a holy time, but because God is working in him. The sphere of the impure is not simply about a state of being unclean. It is 'active opposition to God and God's holy things, which is activated by human actions and conditions' (Mein 2001:149). In a radical revision, holiness is transferred from space to person and integrated in relations.

Conclusion

Mark as mystagogical Gospel

Mark's Gospel yields more insights into holiness when its rhetorical function as a Gospel is considered. Mark reveals himself as the one who supports his readers in overcoming the impurity in their lives. In this regard Via (2005:93), in conversation with Douglas, made some salient remarks about impurity and its relevance for an ethical reading of Mark's Gospel. He notes: 'Uncleanliness is the confusion, confounding, disordering, and fragmenting of reality, while the purpose of purity rules and rituals is to reestablish order and wholeness'. Holiness has to do with the mixing of what cannot be mixed, 'a lack of wholeness, unity, and integrity which contradicts what makes God God (his holiness) and thereby makes one estranged from God'.

In such a situation of alienation, disintegration, uncertainty and indifference, God's presence is not self-evident and immediately accessible. Mark's Gospel wants to guide the broken society in this situation to an awareness of God's holiness. Its readers are re-introduced to the Gospel of Jesus in order to challenge them spiritually with its deeper meaning.

The readers of Mark's Gospel who live in a post-resurrection setting have encountered the powerful working of God in the resurrection of Jesus. They know Jesus' true identity. They should, however, not be too smug about themselves. In the denouement of the narrative, they are given an 'outsider' perspective of the disciples as 'insiders' who think they know Jesus but who fail in their commitment to God. Impurity of heart characterises their new existence in Christ. The end result is that the disciples appear smug, self-assured and even arrogant. Though they are informed about the mystery of the kingdom, they try to control the mystery (Johnson 1999:168). They reflect their own lack of holiness and their lack of spiritual power.

Mark as mystagogue seeks to guide his readers in their own spiritual journey against such arrogance. They need to live in awe of the Holy One (Mk. 5:40, 6:6). They need to be aware, as he pastorally reminds 'the reader' in Mark 13:14, that they

too can become false prophets and Christs, unholy and impure in their relationship with the divine. The elect should not be overconfident: they too can be led astray and deceived (Mk. 13:5, 22, 28, 33, 35, 37). This relates to the puzzling conclusion of the Gospel, in which the women, though they experience the empty grave, are bewildered and fearful instead of adhering to the request of the young man to bring the message of the resurrection to the other disciples (Mk. 16:7, 8). Let the reader beware: Even those who have experienced the resurrection can fail in their discipleship.

Mark's Gospel is a call to a holy lifestyle – that is, a call to follow the Holy One, even when it is at times difficult to recognise the hidden presence of God (Shiner 1995:289). Holiness, Mark teaches, is mystical to its very core. It is about discerning the divine presence in the most mundane places and persons and living in awe before its divine mystery.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

References

- Davies, O., 2005, 'Holiness', in P. Sheldrake (ed.), *The new Westminster dictionary of Christian spirituality*, pp. 431–442, WJK, Louisville, KY.
- Deppe, D.B., 2015, *The theological intentions of Mark's literary devices*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene, OR.
- Donahue, J.R., 2006, 'The quest for Biblical Spirituality', in B.H. Lescher & E. Liebert (eds.), *Exploring Christian Spirituality. Essays in honor of Sandra M. Schneiders*, pp. 73–97, Paulist Press, New York.
- Fendler, F., 1991, *Studien zum Markusevangelium. Zur Gattung, Chronologie, Messiasgeheimnistheorie und Überlieferung des zweiten Evangeliums*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.
- Gorospel, A.E., 2007, *Narrative and identity. An ethical reading of Exodus 4*, Brill, Leiden.
- Grundmann, W., 1980, *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, THKNT, 2, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, Berlin.
- Hodges H.J. & Poirier J.C., 2011–2012, 'Jesus as the Holy One of God: The healing of the Zava in Mark 5.24b–34', *JGRChJ* 8, 151–184.
- Holmen, T., 2009, 'A contagious purity: Jesus' inverse strategy for eschatological cleanliness', in J.H. Charlesworth & P. Pokorny (eds.), *Jesus research: An international perspective*, pp. 199–229, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Iwe, J.C., 1999, *Jesus in the Synagogue of Capernaum: The pericope and its programmatic character for the Gospel of Mark. An exegetico-theological study of Mark*, vol. 1, pp. 21–28, Editrice Pontifica Universita Gregoriana, Rome.
- Johnson, L.T., 1999, *The writings of the New Testament*, rev. edn., Fortress, Minneapolis, MN.
- Lührmann, D., 1987, *Das Markusevangelium*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen.
- Mathew, S.P., 2000, 'Jesus and purity system in Mark's Gospel: A leper (Mk.1:40–45)', *IJT* 42(2), 101–110.
- Marcus, J., 1992, *The way of the Lord. Christological exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark*, T&T Clark, London.
- Mein, A., 2001, *Ezekiel and the ethics of Exile*, Oxford Theological Monographs, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Neyrey, J.H., 1986, 'The idea of purity in Mark's Gospel', *Semeia* 35, 91–128.
- Räsänen, H., 1976, *Das 'Messiasgeheimnis' im Markusevangelium. Ein redaktionskritischer Versuch*, N.P., Helsinki.
- Rowland, C., 1982, *The open heaven. A study of apocalyptic in Judaism and early Christianity*, SPCK, London.
- Rowland, C. & Morray-Jones, C.R.A., 2009, *The mystery of God: Early Jewish mysticism and the New Testament*, Brill, Leiden.
- Schmahl, S., 1974, *Die Zwölf im Markusevangelium*, Paulinus, Trier.
- Schneiders, S.M., 1991, *The revelatory text: Interpreting the New Testament as sacred scripture*, 2nd edn., The Liturgical Press, Collegeville.
- Schneiders, S.M., 2003, *Written that you may believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, Crossroad, New York.
- Shiner, W.T., 1995, *Follow me! Disciples in Markan rhetoric*, SBLDS 145, Scholars Press, Atlanta, GA.
- Tannehill, R.C., 1979, 'The Gospel of Mark as narrative Christology', *Semeia* 16, 57–95.
- Thielman, F.S., 2005, *Theology of the New Testament. A canonical and synthetic approach*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Via, D.O., 2005, *The ethics of Mark's Gospel*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene, OR.
- Vorster, W.S., 1980a, 'Mark: Collector, redactor, author, narrator?' *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 31, 57 ff.
- Vorster, W.S., 1980b, 'Die Evangelie volgens Markus. Inleiding en teologie', in A.B. du Toit (red.), *Handleiding by die Nuwe Testament IV*, pp. 149–170, NGK Boekhandel, Pretoria.
- Waaiajman, K., 2002, *Spirituality: Forms, foundations, methods*, Peeters, Louvain.
- Wahlen, C., 2004, *Jesus and the impurity of spirits in the Synoptic Gospels*, WUNT, 2.185, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen.
- Williams, J.F., 1996, 'Discipleship and minor characters in Mark's Gospel', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153, 332–343.
- Wrede, W., 1901, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien. Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums*, Vandenhoeck, Göttingen.
- Wrede, W., 1971, *The Messianic secret*, Clarke, Cambridge.