

THE ENDING OF MARK
AND THE ENDS OF GOD

Essays in Memory of
Donald Harrisville Juel

*Beverly Roberts Gaventa and
Patrick D. Miller, editors*

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Introduction

The ending of a story is never entirely satisfying. Sometimes the ending does not seem appropriate to the story that has preceded it. This problem can send authors into rounds of revisions and generate reams of criticism. In other cases, readers simply are not ready to be done with the story, in which case they join in the lament of small children, "But I don't want it to be over yet!" Or perhaps they simply read the last few pages again and again, hoping somehow to extend the story's grasp.

The ending of Mark's Gospel has produced much speculation and interpretation, but few biblical scholars have treated Mark's ending as provocatively as did the late Donald Harrisville Juel, whose most mature treatment of that text appears as the first chapter of this volume. Impatient with any attempt to convert Mark's abrupt ending into something mild and mellow, Don argued against interpreters who seek to force closure onto a text that so vehemently resists it. For him, Mark's Jesus is "on the loose," which means that the ending of the Gospel can neither be tamed nor confined. As a tribute to Don, we invited some of his close friends and colleagues to reflect on the intersections between Don's interpretation of Mark 16:1–8 and their own work, either with other biblical texts or with issues in systematic or practical theology.

Chapter 8

Baptism as Change of Lordship

Michael Welker

In his book *A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted*, Don Juel offers a powerful reading of Mark's account of Jesus' baptism.¹ He observes that Mark does not use the term for the "opening" of the heavens used by Luke and Matthew. "Mark uses *schizō*, which means 'tear' or 'rip'" (34; see Mark 1:10). The same term is used for the tearing of the temple curtain at the moment of Jesus' death. When the heavens are torn apart, he observes, the Spirit comes down and the voice of God declares, "You are my beloved son!" The moment the temple curtain is torn apart a pagan centurion declares, "Truly this man was God's Son!" (Mark 15:39).

Juel comments that at least for Mark, "Jesus' confirmation is a surprise, a shock; it occurs as part of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The Christ, the Son of God, opens his ministry where he is not expected, with outcasts in some desert place. When the expected one appears he does not meet expectations" (39). He speaks of "the one in whose ministry God comes frighteningly close" (42). These observations and insights can open an illuminating perspective on baptism in general, a perspective all too easily lost in our baptismal practices with the sweet little babies, children holding flowers and candles, and the images of Jesus' open arms and his gentle invitation: "Let the little children

come to me; do not stop them" (Mark 10:14). Juel's observations on the aspects of shock and surprise in Jesus' baptism according to Mark can open our eyes to the fact that baptism is a dramatic change of lordship.

Don Juel himself was, and indeed in his readings and writings continues to be "a master of surprise" also. Matthew Skinner, a former student of his, looks back on Juel's reflections on Mark 15:39 in the classroom:

Like a critic who delights in investigating and revealing the secrets behind magicians' illusions, Don dissected people's biblical exegesis, often wondering aloud why so much knowledge about texts and their histories prevented us from actually reading the texts. Likewise, he eagerly exposed students' hermeneutical assumptions, not necessarily to invalidate them but always to impel us to acknowledge and examine them. His sarcastic reading of the centurion's "confession" in Mark 15:39 best illustrates this practice. While reading the passion narrative aloud, he would voice "Sure this was God's son!" with acerbic scorn. He clearly enjoyed the effects of the reading as much as he believed it a faithful rendering of Mark's account. His bold interpretation sounded alarms among students, driving us to the text to examine its contours for evidence to support various readings.²

What are we left with in Juel's reading of Mark's account of Jesus' baptism—and maybe our own baptisms too—as a dramatic change of lordship? Or Jesus' inauguration in his baptism and death—and maybe also our own fellowship—as events constantly open to doubt, disbelief, and even sarcasm? Or is it both a change of lordship and an event open to severe doubt? And why and how so?

The biblical texts that speak about baptism certainly do not witness to an easy triumph of God. Like the inauguration of Holy Communion, which reaches into the depth of the night of betrayal—sustaining, comforting, and rescuing the disciples of Christ in the midst of their endangerment and self-endangerment under the power of sin and evil—baptism is a change of lordship that does not tell a simple story of God's victory won without labor and beyond any doubt. In the following essay, I would like to show that in different traditions the New Testament witnesses to baptism keep this strange double perspective, noticed and highlighted by Don Juel. I will try to demonstrate this with respect to John the Baptist, to Jesus' baptism, and to the voices of Paul and Luke.

THE BAPTISM OF JOHN: A REVOLUTIONARY EVENT

The baptism of John comes as a dramatic, provocative, even revolutionary event. Mark speaks of the astounding resonance of this man "crying in the wilderness": "And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (Mark 1:5). He invokes the authority of Isaiah: "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'" (1:2–3).

In order to understand its revolutionary impact, it is important to see that the baptism of John is a double provocation: It is a provocation for the Roman superpower present in Israel because it challenges the political status quo and prepares for the advent of a savior, and it is a provocation for the authorities of Israel's religion, particularly for the temple establishment and its taking care of sins via sacrifices. Over against these two powers, John with his proclamation points to a third and higher "way of the Lord." His baptism invites "people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem" to become cleansed in order to salute the Lord and to follow his ways. Here is more than a great, if struggling, tradition, and here is more than a worldly superpower.

The proclamation of the coming Lord does not occur in a palace or in the temple, but in the wilderness. The gathering crowd does not come to welcome the Lord directly, to sing and praise and jubilee—but to repent their sins. It is important to notice that the biblical notion of sin goes far beyond personal guilt and moral weakness. It includes the suffering under a desperate situation and the inability to do anything against it. Rome is too mighty and the law of God and the temple are simply not powerful enough. The Lord himself has to come.

The next move of surprise in Mark is that—although John seems to set the stage for Jesus so impressively—Jesus does not go on stage but rather joins the crowd. By asking to be baptized himself he joins his fellow humans who ask and seek and cry for God's presence in the middle of earthly regulations, laws, and powers. He joins those who want to discern their entanglement in earthly rules and powers—partly helpless, partly deserved—who above all would love to live under the rule and power of God, under God's righteousness and justice, under God's guidance. Come, repent and be cleansed! In this situation, John's baptism comes as a revolutionary message: The Lord is near, prepare the way for him. But then the Lord they meet joins them in their poverty and frailty. This change of lordship is vulnerable and open to doubt, disbelief, and even derision. What a dramatic surprise.

JESUS' BAPTISM AND HIS AUTHORIZATION FROM "ON HIGH"

The stories in the New Testament of Jesus' baptism speak in more or less dramatic and violent ways about the "opening of the heavens." For the biblical traditions, the opening of the heavens is not just an event in nature. To be sure, sunlight and water, warmth and cold come from heaven. Natural powers from "on high" shape all life in decisive ways. But for biblical thinking, "the heavens" are also the place from which normative cultural and historical powers determine life on earth. Powers of the past and of the future are seen to be assembled "in heaven" or "in the heavens." Like the sun and rain, storm and hail, and other natural forces, these powers "overcome" life on earth in ways that are very hard to predict and most difficult, if not impossible, to control, to direct, and to manipulate. When Jesus in

his own baptism joins the people from Judea and Jerusalem who seek cleansing and repentance, the heavenly realm of power opens upon him, or becomes torn apart. The unconditionally good, creative, life-supporting, and saving power of God, the Holy Spirit, descends on him. He becomes empowered by the divine power par excellence.

The fact that John's provocative baptism is thus confirmed is further strengthened by the following: The cult and the sacrifices in the temple of Jerusalem, now challenged and replaced by John's baptism, came to their annual climax on Yom Kippur, the great day of general atonement. Only on this day was the name of the Lord pronounced. Only on this day did the high priest go behind the temple curtain to bring about atonement for the sanctuary and for all of Israel through a blood rite. Only on this day did the high priest step in front of the ark of the covenant, the place of the encounter of heaven and earth, the encounter between God and the world. About the preparation of the high priest for the day of the direct encounter with God Leviticus 16:4 says: "He shall put on the holy linen tunic. . . . He shall bathe his body in water."

The story of Jesus' baptism, the story about the transparency between the heavens and the earth, about the direct encounter with God and God's powers from on high clearly alludes to Yom Kippur, to the great Day of Atonement. But no longer are this feast and this day and no longer are the high priest and the temple the temporal and spatial instances of this great encounter. The dramatic opening of the heavens and the encounter with God's power and God's voice occur after Jesus bathes his body in the water of Jordan. The second New Testament story about Jesus' authorization "from above," the story about Jesus' "transfiguration" (Mark 9:2–10 par.), obviously also alludes to Yom Kippur when it says that Jesus' "clothes became dazzling white." Cleansing bath, holy garment, dazzling white—in both cases the high priest and Yom Kippur seem to be associated. Does this mean that the theophany and the authorization of Jesus by the Holy Spirit and the Word of God point to a change of the religious authorities and of the representative of God?

These perspectives on baptism can be met with reserve or even sarcasm. Christian supersessionism, the ugly and brutal ideology of the substitution of the church for Israel, easily comes to mind. As soon as one imagines Israel's struggle against the Roman Empire in Jesus' days, the ambivalence over against this change of authority and lordship may even increase. Do we here just witness one religion pushing its key figure in the place of the other religion's main cultic event and representative? The continuity of the God of Israel and Jesus' stepping down to the repenting and confessing people in search of God help ease the deep irritation. But it is by no means easy to understand the high priest imagery and the message: Through baptism you are all brought into Jesus' place as witnessed to by Mark; you all become directly authorized by God's Word and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Even today, Christianity itself is divided over these promises and perspectives. Do we believe in the holy priesthood of all who are baptized? "Sure they are . . .?"

**" . . . BURIED WITH CHRIST BY BAPTISM INTO DEATH"
(ROM. 6:4): BAPTISM TEARS US AWAY FROM THE POWERS
OF THIS WORLD**

To become the child of the creative and saving God through baptism does not mean entering into a cozy religious relation with my "inner other" or with my romantic religious dream partner. Against many tendencies in current church life toward self-secularization and self-banalization, this has to be made clear time and again. The creative, sustaining, saving, and ennobling God establishes a relation to us through baptism, by guiding us through death into life. In a way that sounds very strange and appalling to most ears, this is thus expressed by Paul:

Therefore we have been buried with him [Christ] by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. (Rom. 6:4–6)

For the current consciousness, even a religiously literate one, these remarks of Paul's are very hard to take, particularly since they seem to express a certain hostility toward the bodily existence, a hostility we hardly want to share. In any case, they seem to stand in a deep conflict with the practice of child baptism. Who could dare to associate the sweet newborn babies with sin, cross, and death? Who could dare to name them "our old self" that should go, even symbolically, through death in order to gain the postbaptismal relation to God and to enjoy the change of lordship? Acceptance as a child of God seems in accord with child baptism. "Buried with Christ by baptism into death," however, seems to mirror a sinister theology that most people would rather like to dismiss, at best leaving it to mature and religiously experienced persons who are able to work it through.

However, behind Paul's words there is not only a deep understanding of the saving work of Christ but also the insight that the powers and ties of the world, including our bodily existence, can become forces that enslave us, forces that bring us under the powers of sin and evil, that distance us from God and from the life intended for us by God in the divine creativity and grace. Paul and other New Testament traditions therefore understand baptism as a symbolic act, full of indication, by which we are freed from these powers, ties, and bondages. God wants us to have a share in God's own life, in the divine and eternal life. In baptism we symbolically go with Christ through the abyss of death in order to become prepared for our participation in his resurrection; already here and now we become involved in God's eternal life. The deuteropauline Letter to the Colossians sees this similarly to Paul: "When you were buried with him [Christ] in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (Col. 2:12).

Baptism is an act of renewal, an act in which we become children of God and

are drawn away—indeed, torn away—from the principalities and powers of this world. This act can certainly happen at any phase of a human life. There is no good reason why it should not happen and be celebrated at the beginning of a human life. Already at its beginning this earthly and finite life should become connected, involved, and kept in the eternal life—the life with God, in God, and from God. This life with God, in God, and from God cannot be accessed and gained by education or maturity, nor through a conscious decision and attitude of faith or the best spiritual knowledge and practice. This entering into the new life with God is connected with such a radical disconnection from the principalities and powers of this world that only the talk about death—indeed, death on the cross—can capture the radicality and uniqueness of this change of lordship.

Jesus Christ was crucified in the name of religion, in the name of two laws (the Roman and the Jewish law), in the name of politics, even world politics and in the name of public opinion. Even his disciples and followers leave him and flee. At the cross, the total lostness of the world under the power of sin is revealed. Jews and Gentiles, friends and foes, residents and foreigners—the whole representative world is under this power of sin. Only a new creation out of chaos can overcome this situation.

The baptism in the name of Jesus Christ and in the name of the triune God enacts and witnesses such a radical change in human life. Through baptism we become filled by the saving powers of God that create new life in the midst of and out of death, despair, and chaos.

“YOU WILL RECEIVE POWER WHEN THE HOLY SPIRIT HAS COME UPON YOU; AND YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES . . . TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH” (ACTS 1:8): BAPTISM WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT ELEVATES US TO PARTICIPANTS IN CHRIST’S LORDSHIP

The baptism with water by John is a preparation for the presence of Jesus Christ in whom “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Luke 3:6). Jesus, over whom the heavens open or are torn apart, on whom the Spirit descends and who is designated “Son of God,” does himself not baptize with water but rather “with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:8 par.). He gives the power of the Spirit that awakens faith, love, hope, and many other spiritual gifts in human beings, thus working against their enslavement by the principalities and powers of this world, their endangerment and self-endangerment under sin and evil.

Baptism with the Holy Spirit is not a numinous or even a fantastic and magic enterprise. It is shaped by Jesus’ personhood and presence, by his proclamation and his life. The baptized persons become shaped by the identity of Jesus, by his life, his cross, and his resurrection. Therefore, they call themselves “Christians.” They take on Christ’s name. Baptized by the Spirit, endowed with the spiritual gifts, Christians participate in Christ’s power and reign. They are “sent” and they

are granted a “missionary existence.” This missionary existence finds expression in their witness, teaching, festive living together, loving care, help and support, and many other forms of life. Through the sacraments, through teaching and their witness, Christians remind themselves and others of the danger that all good norms and institutions, even religion and their very own faith and spiritual life, can fall prey to the power of sin. The baptism in the name of Jesus, the orientation on his life, and proclamation and the remembrance of his cross and resurrection counter this danger time and again.

According to the first chapter of Acts, Jesus appears before his disciples during the forty days after his resurrection. He speaks of the coming reign of God and asks them in their table fellowship to wait in Jerusalem for the pouring of the Holy Spirit: “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. . . . You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:5, 8). Baptism is not a saving act or a change of lordship that just restores past states of affairs. Those who are baptized are enabled to grow in faith, to become Christ’s witnesses “to the ends of the earth.”

You will be my witnesses! You will become bearers of the Holy Spirit! You will be a new creation! You will participate in a new life, in eternal life! These are different perspectives on the same event, inaugurated in and through baptism. A great event of sustenance, rescue, and ennoblement occurs here. The human beings who are baptized are not only brought under a new lordship, under the lordship of Christ. They become participants, bearers, mediators, representatives of this lordship. In their fragile and finite lives, they are to witness to this lordship, this new and eternal reign of God. This, of course, opens God’s mighty working among the creatures to all sorts of confusion, skepticism, and derision. The surprise of this freeing and ennobling lordship is not to be experienced without voices of disbelief and doubt.

The power of the resurrection does not annihilate the incarnation of Christ. It rather draws those who bear witness to it deeper and deeper into his life incarnate. The heavenly seed goes into the ground. More and more human lives become connected with his life and presence. Through baptism they are not only elevated and glorified and empowered by the great gifts from “on high.” Through baptism they are also drawn into the labor and the misery of his earthly life, even buried with Christ into death.

Don Juel saw these aspects of the gospel’s message. He saw both its comforting and its haunting dimensions. He saw the whole range of possible reactions to the Christ event in the voice of the pagan centurion: “Truly this man was God’s Son!” / “Sure, this was God’s son!” He had sensitivity for the actual and the potential witnesses from the right and from the left side of God, from on high and from the deep. This opened to him and this has opened to his students, colleagues, and readers a great sensitivity to the many ways the Holy Spirit works through the witness of the Bible and the life of the church. This also gave him

a great sensitivity to the frailty and the dignity of human voices echoing what the centurion had to say when the temple curtain was torn apart.

Notes

1. Donald H. Juel, *A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994). This book will be quoted in the text with page numbers in parentheses.
2. Matthew L. Skinner, "Marking a Life: A Tribute to Don Juel," *inSpire* 8, no. 1 (2003): 33.

Chapter 9

The End of the Beginning: Genesis 50

Patrick D. Miller

The beginning has to come to an end at some point. The biblical story has a clear beginning, and that beginning has a clear ending in the final chapter of the book of Genesis (= the book of Beginning). It is the end of the era of the ancestors of Israel. But the beginning is much larger than that, for the beginning that Genesis depicts is the beginning of everything, the world and all that is therein. There is no abrupt conclusion to the universal history recounted in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. There is clearly a movement from Genesis 11 into the beginning of Genesis 12 that may be recognized as a movement from universal history into the story of God's way with Abraham and his seed. That movement, however, is already anticipated in Genesis 11 with the recounting of the line of Terah, which is itself a continuation of the preceding genealogies of Noah and his sons, more specifically, the genealogy of Shem.¹ So there is no clear ending to the story of the creation of the world and its creatures, the beginning of culture, languages, and nations. There is a kind of seamless mix of genealogy and narrative until one realizes as one moves further into the book that the narrative now dominates. The focus of attention continues to be the family whose genealogy began in Genesis 1–11, but now it is much more concentrated, and God's attention is directed