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A READER'S JOURNAL

Background to the Gospel of St. Mark, GA# 124

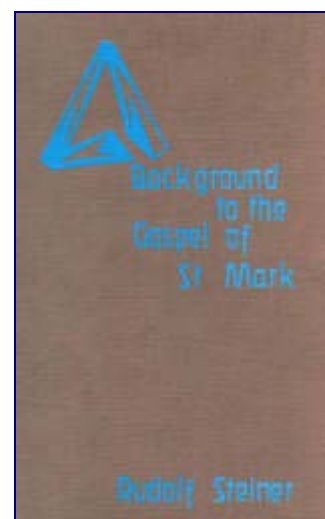
by

Rudolf Steiner

Thirteen Lectures given in Germany 1910, 1911

Published by Anthroposophic Press in 1985

A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©1998



Some twenty years ago I read several books about our native Americans, *The Book of the Hopi*, *Black Elk Speaks*, *Rolling Thunder*, and *Seven Arrows*. In one of these books I encountered the story of a shaman as a young boy. At the age of nine years old he got sick and went into a feverish coma for several weeks. When he awoke he acted strangely and didn't talk to anyone. He spent his time wandering around the village alone. One day an old man came up to him and said, "I know what happened to you." The boy stopped and listened to the old man. "You had a dream, a big dream, and you must share this dream or you will surely die." The young boy told the old man his big dream, which involved colored horses riding in from the directions of the four winds, a different color of horse from each wind. The old man listened intently to the boy's dream and said, "You must tell this dream to all the members of the tribe so that they will re-enact this dream with you." The boy did so. He got the tribe members to assemble the four different colored horses and created his big dream out in the world. This young boy grew up to be a very powerful medicine man for his tribe.

Like the four different colored horses racing from different directions, the four Gospels of John, Luke, Matthew, and Mark approach the Mystery of Golgotha from four different directions.

[page 13] The reason for studying the four Gospels separately is that we can then approach the Christ-problem from four different standpoints. We find that the four Gospels do, in fact, present four different

aspects, and we are reminded that this stupendous problem must not be approached from one side only but at least from the four directions of the spiritual heavens indicated by the names of the four Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. If this is done we shall come increasingly to understand the problems and the great truths which are needed for the life of the human soul; and on the other hand, we shall never say that the one form of truth we may have grasped is the whole truth.

The members of the young boy's tribe did not have clairvoyant consciousness as did the boy when he experienced his big dream, but when he communicated it to his people, they were able to experience, even without clairvoyance, the truth in his words, the power of his dream.. As these people were to the boy's revelations, we are to the four Evangelist's revelations of the spiritual world to us:

[page 15] . . . even without clairvoyance, everyone will be able to test them by reference to the normal feeling for truth present in every soul, and by applying to them his own unprejudiced reasoning faculties.

The young boy was able to translate his big dream into a story that his fellow tribe members could comprehend. This process of translating spiritual insights into ordinary language so that others may read and understand it is critically important if one is to carry these insights into one's next lifetime. Understanding is not enough; communication to others in ordinary language is essential. Steiner could not be clearer nor more emphatic on that point:

[page 16] There is a radical test which can be applied to what I have just said. Among many other valuable spiritual truths and communications you will certainly attach very great importance to those concerning what a man can take with him through the gate of death of the spiritual truths he has assimilated on the physical plane between birth and death. Or to put it differently: How much remains to a man who, by cultivating the spiritual life, has mastered the substance of communications relating to the spiritual world? The answer is: Exactly as much remains to him as he has fundamentally grasped and understood and has been able to translate into the language of ordinary human consciousness.

Lest anyone reading these words rush to judgment and boast, "I have done this," be aware that egoism is anathema to existence in the spiritual world. Rather it is truth that is important.

[page 23] A man should demand truth of himself instead of claiming to be without egoism. At least if we acknowledge our egoism we have a chance to get rid of it!

We had best admit to having a trace of ego because truth matters. I have been guilty of a trace of egoism in all matters, up until now. The preceding is a true statement now, and will likely continue to be a true statement each time I say it. Just as Moses said, "Let my people go," we might say "Let my ego go." That's the truth, so far as I know.

What Steiner says of truth is especially worth repeating in this year of 1998 when the president of the United States of America stands impeached by congress for not telling the truth under oath:

[page 24] Truth justifies itself by its fruitfulness and by the blessings it brings to mankind. Untruths and lies are always barren. They have only one result which I cannot go into in any further detail now; I can only say that they react most violently against those who actually spread them abroad.

Matherne's Rule #6 is "All Meanings Are True (AMAT)" — it expresses in a few words an insight I had over twenty years ago of the many-sides from which truth may be approached. AMAT means you can always agree with someone by saying, "Yes, what you say is true." You know it's true from that person's

perspective — which is only one approach to the truth — and all approaches, all ways of holding meanings, are true. Here's how Steiner approaches this truth:

[page 24-25] We are always conscious of the fact that truth must be approached from many sides and that we must wait patiently until its different aspects merge into a single picture We shall adhere faithfully to this attitude of humility in knowledge. Let us not say that man can never experience truth. He assuredly can! But he cannot know the whole truth at once; he can know only one side. This makes for humility in knowledge and true humility is a feeling that must be cultivated in our Groups and carried into the general culture of the day, for the whole character of our age needs such an attitude.

How did one person communicate a truth to another person before writing was invented? Steiner says it was by a "direct streaming of knowledge from soul to soul." A couple of weeks ago as I was reading aloud to Del something I'd just written, she interrupted me at the end of a sentence. In the middle of reading that sentence, I was suddenly taken by an idea of an alternate way to approach explaining something, but I did not vary the tempo or tone of my reading. Del had been receiving the communication streaming from me with no problems until the point when suddenly what was streaming from me no longer matched the words coming from my mouth. It occurred to me at that time that the importance of written words is the thought paths that they carry us and others along. This was not the way of understanding written words in earlier times.

[page 46] It would have unthinkable in those days for listeners to take down in writing what was being said; anything recorded in this way would have been considered quite worthless. Value was attached only to what a man preserved in his soul and might later reproduce for others. It would have been regarded as desecration to write anything down. The view rightly held at that time was that what is transcribed is not, and cannot be the same as the oral communication.

One further note: in old Hebrew the vowels were omitted in the written script precisely so that only someone, who fully understood the process being communicated, could be able to read the words aloud and convey meaning to another. They simply added in the vowel sounds appropriate to the meaning of the words as they read it aloud. This process permitted very little latitude in the interpretation of the texts as they were read aloud. The possibility of fanciful interpretations such as by those of modern scholars was unheard of in those days.

[page 64] Arbitrary interpolations were quite impossible. This was partly because in the ancient Hebrew language the vowels were not marked in the script, and by varying them, world-secrets could be revealed in the sounds themselves. In those days men had a true feeling for all this.

One may rightly ask how does one ever learn anything worthwhile from written words absent a live reader who understands the essence of what is being read. Matherne's Rule #23 says: "When learning a new subject, it's best to know all about it before you start." This rule may not make sense to you, unless you allow the possibility of the *you-of-the-future*, who will understand the material, to stream its understanding to the *you-of-the-now*, who is beginning to study the material. Here's how Steiner explains it:

[page 56] There are two streams of time: the etheric stream, flowing into the future, and the astral stream, moving from the future back into the past. It is unlikely that anyone in the world today will discover anything of this character without a spiritual impulse, but there can be no real grasp of the life of soul until we recognise that something is perpetually coming towards us from the future.

One cannot look only to the past for cause and effect explanations. To look only to the past is to create "a science of the soul without soul" — modern psychology. In the growth of a plant, a time comes when

nothing from its past of a physical and etheric body can help it to complete its destiny. Its etheric body can create leaves, mutate leaves into flowers, pistils, stamens, and even seeds, but without an infusion from without by astral energy, the plant will never create a fertile seed that can sprout a future plant. Plants have a distant future when they will have created an astral body for themselves (See ARJ: [Spiritual Hierarchies and the Physical World](#), *Table of Evolution*), so that astral energy will be a part of their distant future, and it is that very astral energy from the future that must reach the plant in the region of its flowers to create that miracle of new life, a fertile seed. In the plant we can envision the etheric stream of life moving into the future as the plant grows and the astral stream of life moving from the future towards the past into the plant's reproductive system to create new life.

If we move to investigate the two streams of time in the human being at this point in history, we would find Physical-man, Soul-man, and Consciousness-soul flowing into the future and Spirit-Man, Life-Spirit, and Spirit-Self flowing from the future backward in time into the current time, the present life of human beings to infuse them with the energies of their life to be. [See the *Gospel of St. Matthew* by Rudolf Steiner, page 192, which contains a diagram in which the human being is drawn as a flower drawing these higher energies to itself.]

With this prologue, we are now ready to begin our approach to the Gospel of St. Mark, in particular Verses 1:2 and 1:3:

Mark 1:2: As it was written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.

Mark 1:3: The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Steiner explains that *wilderness* was not meant in an external sense, but rather in an internal sense of desolation or solitude. The word *straight* was also not meant in a moral manner as we might say, "Lead a straight life." but rather it combined the meanings of *straight* and *open* to indicate that the path of the Lord to the human soul must be direct, open, and clear. Lastly, the word *Lord* had a deeper meaning in its original usage which was that of *Lord of one's Soul*. As Steiner talks of the people of the time:

[page 70] They felt the 'I' rising upwards from the depths of towards the surface of the soul as the appearance of a Lord and Master, the Director and Ruler of the soul-forces. . . In olden times man could not say, 'I think.' He said: 'It thinks' — or 'it feels, it wills in me.'

With this background one is able to sound out the true meaning of these two verses as one reads aloud the following translation by Rudolf Steiner:

[page 71] Mark well! I send my angel before the 'I' in you; he will prepare the way. Hear the cry in the solitude of the soul — the cry for the Lord of the soul. Prepare the way of the Lord of the soul; labour to make the path open for him.

Steiner gives a more comprehensive spiritual interpretation of this verse in the following passage:

[page 192] The passage should be rendered more or less as follows. — Prepare yourselves, you human souls, to move along those paths that will awaken the Kyrios, the powerful 'I' within you; listen to the cry in the solitude of the soul. Make ready the path (or way) of the 'I', the Lord of the soul. Open the way for his forces so that he may no longer be the slave but the Ruler of thinking, feeling, and willing. Lo, the power that is the 'I' sends his Angel before you, the Angel who is to give you the possibility of understanding the cry in the solitude of the astral soul. Prepare the paths of the 'I', open the way for the forces of the 'I'. — Such is the meaning of these significant words of the prophet Isaiah; they point to the greatest of all events in the evolution of humanity. You

will now understand the sense in which he speaks about the future John the Baptist, indicating how man's soul in its solitude longs for the coming of its Lord and Ruler, the 'I'. Such is the real meaning of this passage and in this sense it is to be understood.

Science with its materialistic measuring instruments can only investigate the etheric streaming from the past into the future, whether it be of plants, animals, or humans. As such science can see and make a record of the part of the world that is dying. It can not see or record the part of the world that is coming into being by virtue of the astral streaming from the future into the past, up until now, up until spiritual science.

[page 58] Ordinary science knows of the Copernican system only that part which is in process of dying. The part that will live on and bear fruit — and that is not the part that has been influential for four centuries — must now be mastered by men through their own efforts. Copernicanism as presented to-day is not strictly true. Spiritual investigation alone can reveal its real truth. The same holds true for Astronomy, and for everything else that is regarded as knowledge to-day. Science can of course be of practical use and as technology completely justified. But in so far as it pretends to contribute to human knowledge in its real form, it is a dead product. It is useful for the immediate handiwork of men and for that no spiritual content is necessary. But as far as it purports to have anything vital to say about the mysteries of the Universe it belongs to the culture that is dying. If knowledge of the mysteries of the Universe is to be enriched, the orthodox science of to-day must be imbued with life through the findings of Spiritual Science.

"The Way Out is The Way In." is an epigram that expresses the two paths to initiation taken by Buddha and Zarathustra. Buddha's way was the mystical way: "the descent through a man's own nature and being to the point where the bounds beyond which lies the spiritual world are broken through." (page 80) This is the descent into the microcosm, the way in, also called the Southern way.

The other way was that of Zarathustra, the Northern way, the way out, in which the human being is "permeated by a spiritual Being who drives them out of themselves, enabling them to rise into the Macrocosm." (page 94) What characterizes such a being can be found in the life of Zarathustra and other great spiritual leaders of history: immediately at birth the baby smiles, the child is abandoned in the wilderness, and instead of dying, is succored by wild beasts. In St. Mark's Gospel 1:13, "And he was there in the wilderness for forty days, tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels administered unto him."

[page 93] The Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke describe the path taken by the Christ when descending into the sheaths He received from Jesus of Nazareth. St. Mark's Gospel describes the kind of temptation which the Christ was obliged to undergo when He confronted the environment — as happens with all great founders of religion who had been inspired from above by a spiritual Being. Christ Jesus experienced both types of temptation, whereas earlier leaders of humanity had experienced only one. Christ united in Himself the two ways of entering the spiritual world. — That is the all-important point. What had formerly taken place in two separate streams into which smaller streams then flowed, was now united in one.

In Lecture Six Steiner reveals a basic principle that may be stated succinctly thus: the higher the spirit, the lower the level of humanity it works on.

[page 99] The Angeloi, Archangeloi and Archai influence man through what concerns the soul and spirit only — language, current modes of thought, ideas, and so on, but they do not work through the forces of nature; their operations do not directly affect the etheric body or the physical body, which are the lower members of man's organism.

On the other hand, spiritual Beings from the rank of the Exousiai upwards work not only upon man but also in the forces of outer nature; they are the 'Directors' as it were of air and light, of the different ways in which foodstuffs are produced in the kingdoms of nature.

Steiner explains how one ought to interpret the passage in St. Mark 1:22, "for he taught them as one that had authority, not as one of the scribes." In the original Greek text, the phrase "as one that had authority" reads "as one of the Exousiai". [Note: in the Table of Evolution the Exousiai are called Powers. See ARJ: [Spiritual Hierarchies and the Physical World, Table of Evolution](#)]

[page 101-102] Hence these words in St. Mark's Gospel are an indication that in men living in those days an inkling was beginning to dawn that something entirely *new* was speaking to them; that through this man who came among them something revealed itself which was like a power of nature herself, like one of the supersensible Powers behind the phenomena of nature. Men began gradually to divine what it was that had entered into Jesus of Nazareth and was symbolized in the Baptism by John. The people in the synagogue were very near the truth when they said: When he speaks it is as though the Exousiai were speaking, not merely the Archai, the Time-Spirits, or the Folk-Spirits.

One of the most troubling questions of our day is "How can bad things happen to good people?" Much of the content of news programs and sensationalistic broadcast journalism is devoted to this topic and people shudder at the poor innocent victims of this fire or that plane crash. This question is a puzzlement only if one attempts to answer it from within the bounds of a single human lifetime.

[page 106] If, for instance, anyone gets his windows broken he is apt to take this as an offence directed at himself, and he is annoyed by it because he feels himself to be an isolated being. But were he to believe in karma he would feel related to the whole Macrocosm and would know that in point of fact it is we ourselves who have broken the windows.

If we ourselves break our own windows, then there are no innocent victims. As Walt Kelley had Pogo say, "We has met the enemy, and he is us." Every action we take, every plan of action we propose has an effect on our lives and well-being. The importance of planning, of holding ideals that cause our reach to exceed our grasp, is stressed in these passages from Steiner below:

[page 116] But there is one great difference between the reflected pictures of actions springing from instincts, desires and passions, and the reflected pictures of actions which are the outcome of idealism. The first contain something which endures as a destructive element in a man's whole life; they are images held in the astral body which react upon the whole human constitution and gradually undermine it; they are closely connected with the way in which a man in his life on the physical plane slowly undermines his forces until he dies. On the other hand, reflected pictures or images springing from thoughts that are loftier than our actions have life-giving properties. They are particularly stimulating for the etheric body and continually bring new life-giving forces into our whole constitution.

[page 116 — 117] In short, there are individuals who in their later years become melancholic, sullen, unable to adjust themselves inwardly and are in many respects unbalanced. If we were to look for the cause of bearing and conduct of this kind we should find that such individuals had little opportunity in earlier life to experience how idealistic thought can be loftier than action.

Couple these quotations with Steiner's view that the "mark of an idealist is that his thoughts are loftier

than his deeds" one can see that students of anthroposophy by the very nature of their study are continually bringing life-forces into their whole constitution and by those salubrious forces are less likely to spend their waning days in a decrepit condition. Rightly seen, ideals may be the true vitamins of our lives. As I was writing these comments, the following quotation by Oliver Wendell Holmes appeared on an electronic newsletter I received:

I find the great thing in this world is not so much where we stand, as in what direction we are moving: To reach the port of heaven, we must sail sometimes with the wind and sometimes against it, -- but we must sail, and not drift, nor lie at anchor.

The presupposition is that we have a port of call in mind, an ideal that we hold before us as we sail, so that we are constantly adjusting our direction with our goal in mind, so that we move towards our goal instead of drifting aimlessly with the tide. I do not know whether this quote came from Oliver Wendell Holmes the jurist or his father the writer, but both of them lived well into their eighties.

In Lecture Eight on pages 140 and 141 Steiner tells us that our fifth post-Atlantean epoch is inspired by the Gospel of St. Mark, while the fourth epoch was inspired by the Gospel of St. Matthew. For the future epochs he says the sixth epoch will be inspired by the Gospel of St. Luke and the seventh by the Gospel of St. John.

In closing let's read what Steiner says specifically about the Gospel of St. Mark:

[page 78] Try to grasp what is meant by saying that earthly events are shadows of macrocosmic events and you will then have taken the first steps towards a gradual understanding of St. Mark's Gospel — one of the greatest sacred records in the world.

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