

# Mark's Gospel

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John Painter



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## Mark's Gospel

Mark's 'biography' of Jesus is the earliest of the four Gospels and influenced them all. The distinctive feature of this biography is the quality of 'good news' which presupposes a world dominated by the forces of evil.

John Painter shows how the rhetorical and dramatic shaping of the book emphasise the conflict of good and evil at many levels: between Jesus and the Jewish authorities; Jesus and the Roman authorities; and the conflict of values within the disciples themselves. These matters of content are integral to this original approach to Mark's theodicy, while the stylistic issue raises the question of Mark's intended readership.

John Painter's succinct yet thorough treatment of Mark's Gospel opens up not only these rhetorical issues but the social context of the Gospel, which Painter argues to be that of the Pauline mission to the nations.

**John Painter** is foundation Professor of Theology at St Mark's National Theological Centre, Charles Sturt University. He has taught New Testament Studies in England, South Africa and Australia and is a member of *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas*. His publications include *The Quest for the Messiah* (second edition 1993) and *Theology as Hermeneutics* (1987).

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# Mark's Gospel

Worlds in conflict

John Painter



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*For Margaret and Penelope, Katherine and  
Janet*

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# An Outline of Mark

In this analysis, upon which the commentary is based, changes in time, place and *dramatis personae* are given due weight in discerning the structure of the Gospel. Attention is also given to the arrangement of rhetorically shaped stories into collections which shape the plot of the story. At one point in the analysis, the structure determined by a change of place (5.1–20) interrupts the analysis of the structure based on a collection of rhetorically shaped stories (4.35–5.43). In this case the change of place indicates a significant change in the orientation of Jesus' mission which proves to be a foreshadowing of the mission to the regions beyond Galilee in 7.24–8.10. While this commentary has been written to be read as a whole, this outline provides page references to each rhetorical unit of Mark, thus enabling the reader to find quickly the discussion of any passage.

The outline is also a better guide to the structure of Mark and the relative importance of the units of tradition than the Chapter divisions of the Table of Contents which have been introduced to make this book conform to the pattern of the series in which it appears.

**Note:** Those sections beginning with 'And...' are signified by+ left of the numbered section. Other sections are indicated by\*.

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John Painter  
Minnesota, November 1996

# Abbreviations

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| BCE         | Before the Common Era   |
| CE          | Common Era  |
| LXX         | Septuagint  |
| NT          | New Testament   |
| OT          | Old Testament   |
| <i>ABD</i>  | <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>  |
| <i>JBL</i>  | <i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>   |
| JSNTMS      | Journal for the Study of the New Testament<br>Monograph Series                                |
| <i>NovT</i> | <i>Novum Testamentum</i>  |
| <i>NTS</i>  | <i>New Testament Studies</i>  |
| SBLDS       | Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series  |
| SNovT       | Supplement series of <i>Novum Testamentum</i>   |
| SNTSMS      | Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas Monograph<br>Series  |
| WBC         | Word Biblical Commentary  |
| <i>ZNW</i>  | <i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft<br/>und die Kunde der ältern Kirche</i> |

# Introduction

Sensitive readers, who want to hear more than their own ideas echoing back from the text, know that they need to attend to the signals within the text that can keep the reader on course. These signals are especially important for the reader of Mark, who is separated from the teller of the story and the subject of the story by almost two millennia of radical changes in the perception of reality and commitment to values. Reading Mark jolts us into the awareness of an understanding of the world that is in conflict with our own.

## MARK AMONGST THE GOSPELS

Each of the Gospels tells the story of Jesus in its own way. This is both an advantage and a problem. Four Gospels enrich the depth of our perception of Jesus but cause problems with conflicting presentations. Modern critical scholarship is more conscious of conflicts than was the early church but, from the second century, there have been attempts, such as Tatian's *Diatessaron*, to harmonise the Gospels. Although the four Gospels are read in the churches today, most readers tend to conflate them in their minds. Yet each Gospel has its own story to tell, its own contribution to make to our understanding of Jesus.

From the end of the second century the order of the Gospels was discussed. Clement of Alexandria said that the Gospels with the genealogies were earlier than those without. The view soon emerged that Mark summarised Matthew (thus Augustine in his *Harmony of the Gospels*). Only in the nineteenth century did the deficiencies of this view become apparent. Augustine had recognised that there was a literary relationship between the first three Gospels. He argued that Luke and Mark were both dependent on Matthew. At first he accepted the canonical order, but later came to see that if the composition of the

## 2 INTRODUCTION

three Gospels was to be explained on the basis of Matthew, Mark must also have used Luke.

From the late eighteenth century the first three Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) have been known as the Synoptic Gospels because, when their accounts are laid side by side, they can be seen to tell the same story in more or less the same order and words. There are also differences and it is the combination of similarities and differences that constitutes the Synoptic problem.

In the nineteenth century comparative study of the Synoptics led to the recognition that, almost without exception, where the three Gospels cover the same material, either Matthew or Luke supports Mark. This observation led to the conclusion that Mark best preserves the common source used independently by each of the three evangelists. This gave way to the view that Mark was the common source and thus the first Gospel. It seemed to follow that it presented a relatively undeveloped and straightforward account of the ministry of Jesus, a view seemingly supported by the relatively simple language used by Mark and the unsophisticated literary style of the book.

Today it is generally conceded that Mark was the first of the Gospels and that it was used, in different ways, by Matthew and Luke. In doing so they modified the Markan material to suit their own purposes. Matthew used about 90 per cent of Mark and Luke about 50 per cent. Only about thirty verses of Mark do not appear in some form in either Matthew or Luke. Nevertheless, Mark has survived and continues to be read and valued because it presents a distinctive and powerful account of the mission and message of Jesus.

Mark used traditions, oral and written, in composing his Gospel. Some scholars think it possible to separate neatly tradition used by Mark from Markan interpretation and editorial additions. The aim of that enterprise, which is known as 'redaction criticism', is to show how Mark utilises tradition, bringing to light more clearly the precise interpretation of Mark. Over the years a number of criteria have been developed in the attempt to identify tradition and distinguish it from Markan interpretation.

First, there was the distinction between the individual narratives (*pericopae*) and the linking framework, leading to the conclusion that Mark was responsible for these frameworks. This position is undermined by the recognition that Mark made use of collections of stories and is further complicated because Mark has modified traditional material and might have constructed individual *pericopae*. Then there was the recognition of summary statements, which are

generally taken to be Markan constructions. It is likely, however, that some summaries are traditional.

It is commonly thought that sandwich structures or intercalations are Markan redaction or arrangement of traditions. Even this criterion is problematical because such a wide range of material is covered under this category and some of the clearest examples of the category look suspiciously like pre-Markan connections. See 2.1–12; 3.1–6, 20–35; 5.21–43; 6.6–30; 11.12–25; 14.53–72; 15.6–32 (all biblical references are to Mark unless otherwise stated). The problem is that 2.1–12 and 3.1–6 can be understood as traditional *objection* stories rather than as ‘a story within a story’ and 3.20–35 depends on identifying ‘those with him [Jesus]’ in 3.20 as his family, although the family has not been mentioned to this point in the Gospel. It is more likely a reference to the disciples (see 3.13–19).

There is no doubt that 5.21–35 is a good example of intercalation, but the reasons for the connection suggest a pre-Markan arrangement, perhaps from the oral period. The woman had been afflicted for twelve years and the little girl raised from death by Jesus was twelve years old. Connection by catchwords is characteristic of oral tradition. Both stories are good examples of restored life.

That some of the intercalations are Markan arrangements is almost certain. Mark’s story of the mission of the twelve presupposes a gap between the sending out and return of the twelve to allow time for their mission. Something (the account of the death of John) had to be put in that gap (see 6.7–30). Between the cursing and withering of the fig tree Mark had placed the cleansing of the temple, not only to fill a necessary gap but because the cleansing of the temple is the interpretative clue to the cursing and withering of the fig tree (11.12–26). But intercalation was not peculiar to Mark and some of these arrangements were probably traditional.

### EVIDENCE OF AUTHORSHIP

Like the other Gospels, Mark is anonymous. The title of the Gospel, though quite early, is an addition appearing in longer and shorter forms (‘Gospel according to Mark’ and ‘According to Mark’). In a fragment preserved by Eusebius, the fourth-century bishop of Caesarea and church historian Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in the mid-second century, wrote:

And the *Elder* used to say this, 'Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not, indeed, in order, of all the things said or done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord, nor had he followed him, but later on, as I said, followed Peter, who used to give teaching as necessity demanded but not making, as it were, an arrangement of the Lord's *oracles*, so that Mark did nothing wrong in thus writing down single points as he remembered them. For to one thing he gave attention, to leave out nothing of what he had heard and to make no false statements in them.

(Eusebius, *History*, 3.39.15)

According to Eusebius, Papias attributed this and other traditions to the *Elder* John, whom he distinguished from the apostle. The Mark spoken of by Papias is John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, companion of Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey and later, according to tradition, a companion of Peter. According to Acts the Last Supper was held at the home of the parents of Mark and there the early Jerusalem church used to meet. Papias provides no clues as to the order of the composition of the Gospels. Papias makes three points. He identifies Mark as author of the Gospel and he associates him with Peter. The link with Peter is made the basis of the claim for the reliability of Mark.

Some scholars continue to defend the Petrine connection with Mark but it has no widespread support today. The Papias tradition is the only basis for this and its credibility is put in question by what Papias said of Matthew:

Matthew collected the *oracles* in the Hebrew language and each person interpreted them as best he could.

(Eusebius, *History*, 3.39.16)

Scholars today are convinced that Matthew was written in Greek, not in Hebrew or Aramaic. There is no good reason for connecting the second Gospel to Peter. Matthew appears to be the Petrine Gospel and a good case can be made for identifying Mark more closely with Paul.

The titles of the Gospels are earlier than the Papias tradition and give grounds for associating the Gospel with Mark quite independent of the Petrine tradition which is used apologetically to validate Mark. On the assumption that Peter stands behind Mark, apparent irregularities are explained in terms of the purpose of Mark. The Papias fragment shows that Mark's failure to provide an ordered account of the *sayings*

(oracles) of Jesus was perceived as a problem in the light of Matthew. Such is the focus on the passion of Jesus that Mark came to be characterised as a passion narrative with an introduction, inviting comparison with the Pauline passion gospel. While Mark and Paul knew and valued the sayings of Jesus, their purposes in writing concentrated attention on the *death* of Jesus.

## MARK AND PAUL

Paul was at pains to demonstrate his independence from Jerusalem (Galatians 1.11–12) but his ‘gospel’ is not what we mean by ‘gospel tradition’. Paul’s gospel, which is the ‘drift’ of what Paul preached, can be summarised in terms of the justification of the sinner, apart from the works of the law, by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul did not get this gospel from the Jerusalem church. Indeed, this gospel brought him into serious conflict with the Jerusalem church. This does not mean that Paul had no interest in the gospel tradition. Indeed, there is a case for connecting Mark with Paul (Acts 12.12, 25; 13.5, 13; 15.36–41). While there is evidence of a rift between Mark and Paul, there is also evidence that suggests a later reconciliation (Philemon 24; Colossians 4.10).

Although Paul wrote letters not a Gospel, he used and appeals to the Jesus tradition on various issues such as marriage and divorce, the Last Supper, the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus (1 Corinthians 7.10; 11.23–26; 15.3–11). On such matters Paul and the Jerusalem church were in complete agreement (1 Corinthians 15.11). But concerning Paul’s gospel there was serious contention. Perhaps we can say the same concerning Mark’s Gospel. The defence of that Gospel by Papias reflects an awareness of its questionable status.

Not only is there a concentration on the passion of Jesus (the cross) in Mark (see 1 Corinthians 1.17–18, 23), there is also a critique of the law more in keeping with Paul than Peter. The use of ‘gospel’ language and the equation of the gospel preached by Jesus (1.14–15) with ‘the word’ (4.33) are also features common to Paul (see 1 Corinthians 1.18). The Jesus of Mark not only does not keep the sabbath, he declares all foods to be clean (7.19), thus invalidating food and purity laws which were essential to the Jewish way of life.

Each of the four Gospels represents a different faction within early Christianity. Although Matthew and Luke used Mark, they did so by reinterpreting Mark. Matthew is a major modification of the Markan

perspective through the interpretation of the Markan material and the introduction of new material, largely teaching of Jesus.

B.H.Streeter recognised that the final form of Matthew, with the well-known Petrine text (16.18), is the Petrine Gospel. It reinterprets Mark and a more extreme Judaising position represented by M (tradition peculiar to Matthew), emanating from the faction of James the brother of Jesus which restricted mission to the Jews. Matthew, under the influence of Petrine tradition (Q), broadened the Christian Jewish mission to include the nations, demanding circumcision and the keeping of the law (Matthew 28.19–20) but without observing the tradition of the elders (15.1–20). The Jesus of Matthew represents a reformed Judaism in which the demands of the law are intensified by Jesus (Matthew 5.17–48) who is seen as the one who has authority to reinterpret the law. This represents the position of the Jerusalem church as it developed after the Jewish war. Both Mark and Paul struggled with this at an earlier stage of development.

Mark presents a Jesus who provides a basis for the law-free mission to the nations, whose first public act after calling his disciples occurs on the sabbath (1.21). Although this exorcism of an unclean spirit occurred in a synagogue on the sabbath, there is no controversy at this point. An implied growth in opposition to Jesus for his failure to keep the sabbath is found in 3.2, where the opponents of Jesus watched him to see if he would heal on the sabbath.

After summary material Mark provides an account of the healing of a leper (1.40–45). The means of healing the leper used by Jesus in response to the man's request was to stretch out his hand, to *touch* the man and to say, 'I will, be cleansed'. In the first two detailed healing stories two purity issues are dealt with (see also 7.1–23, especially 7.19), and the first also raised the question of sabbath observance, although the narrative of Mark passes over this at this point. Sabbath controversy is raised later (2.23–28; 3.1–6). The issues of purity and sabbath observance were crucial boundary markers for Jewish self-definition. These were challenged by the Markan Jesus at the beginning of his ministry.

### PLACE AND DATE

Tradition associates Mark with Peter in Rome. While a Roman destination is possible, there is no positive indication that this was the case. The concentration of Mark on the passion of Jesus and the call of the disciples to follow Jesus, bearing a cross, is thought to fit the



situation of Rome in the time of Nero's persecution or the consciousness of it. Yet Mark 13 makes sense in a Palestinian context, immediately before, during, or soon after the Jewish war (66–73 CE). Thus it would be unwise to tie Mark to a Roman context. Mark 13 makes the Jewish war a more specific and likely context for Mark, which was probably written in the turmoil leading up to the war or in the throes of the war itself.

### THE APPROACH OF THIS STUDY

It might be possible sometimes to isolate pre-Markan tradition. It is likely that the evangelist drew on a wide fund of material including collections of stories and sayings. Because Mark was the first Gospel, the task of separating tradition from redaction is quite uncertain. It seems best, therefore, to concentrate on those aspects of compositional technique that apply whether or not Mark was working straightforwardly with tradition. A case can be made for approaching the Gospel from the perspective of the selection and arrangement of the material, whatever its origin. At this point redaction criticism operates in a way similar to narrative criticism, which pays attention to what is in the text, how it is arranged and the overall effect produced by the text. Repetitions and resumptions are important, as is the use of characteristic Markan language spread throughout the Gospel.

Recognition of these characteristics brings to light the diversity of early Christianity. Each of the Gospels gives expression to its own distinctive view of Jesus and in so doing provides a 'mission statement' for a 'faction' or 'sect' in early Christianity. Although almost all of Mark was used by Matthew and Luke, the distinctive perspective of Mark remains. Where, in the history of early Christianity, does the distinctive language and perspective on Jesus place Mark? This study shares with redaction criticism the concern to understand Mark in its historical context. Mark is recognised as a document aimed at persuading its readers and needs to be understood in terms of the rhetoric of its day. (See 'What is a Gospel?' below, p. 10).

Mark's use of the noun 'gospel' appears at the very beginning of his book and has a concentration not found in the other Gospels, being absent altogether from Luke and John. Mark's focus on exorcisms is altogether absent from John, and only present in Matthew and Luke when dependent on Mark. The same is true of the theme of the suffering Son of Man. This alerts us to the distinctive and overarching Markan christology. Other overarching themes concern the 'disciples' and the

secrecy motif which run through the Gospel. The geographical basis for the structure of Mark's plan raises the question of what is meant by the focus on Galilee at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. While it is followed by an excursion into dominantly Gentile territory before returning through Galilee on the way to Jerusalem, the Gospel concludes with a narrative redirecting the disciples back to Galilee from whence they began (16.7). Identification of these Markan characteristics should alert the reader to watch out for them in the text.

Some peculiar aspects of Mark's vocabulary are not *theologically* charged:

- 1 The use of 'and' (1,078 times), especially opening sentences, paragraphs and *pericopae*. Eighty-nine of Mark's 105 rhetorical units set out in our 'Outline' of the Gospel begin with 'And...'
- 2 The use of the historic present tense (the present tense when an aorist tense is expected) over 150 times compared with about twenty times in Matthew and only once in Luke.
- 3 'Immediately' forty-three times in Mark, eight times in Matthew, only three times in Luke and four times in John.
- 4 'Again' twenty-eight times in Mark, seventeen times in Matthew, three times in Luke and forty-three times in John.

Given that this vocabulary is spread throughout the Gospel we seem to have identifications of Markan characteristics. These few pieces of evidence are indicators of the rudimentary nature of the Markan *literary* style which must be set over against the overall dramatic effectiveness of the Gospel. Limited facility with syntax, grammar and vocabulary makes clear that Mark is not a work of 'high literature' and was capable of being read by those of moderate education.

The beginning and ending of the Gospel (1.1–20; 16.1–8) are sections of great importance, revealing its meaning and purpose. The beginning introduces the term 'gospel' as a key to the understanding of the book and key christological terms provide the reader with a privileged position. The story is quickly given an eschatological (concerning the end of the age) setting in which John (the Baptist) is portrayed as the forerunner of the day of the Lord and the place of Jesus is confirmed by the heavenly voice at his baptism. Nevertheless, the kingdom of God, which the Markan Jesus speaks of rather than the day of the Lord, does not arrive without a struggle, which is signalled immediately (1.12–13).

Given that Jesus' triumph over the demonic powers is presented as evidence of the dawning of the kingdom of God, the crucifixion of