



## INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPEL OF MARK

The Gospel of Mark was neglected by early Christian tradition, rarely—if ever—used in preaching. The Gospel of Matthew surpassed it in both length and detail. Mark was seen as something of a poor cousin to the great Gospel of Matthew, used so consistently by the fathers of the church. Already at the turn of the first Christian century authors were citing Matthew (the *Didache* [90s C.E.], *1 Clement* [96–98 C.E.], *Barnabas* [about 110 C.E.], and Ignatius of Antioch [110 C.E.]). Toward the middle of the second century (circa 130 C.E.) Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis in South Phrygia in the province of Asia, associated the Second Gospel with a certain “Mark” and the Apostle Peter, and Clement of Alexandria located that association in the city of Rome. Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Jerome, and Tertullian agree: the Gospel of Mark appeared in Rome, and reports a Petrine story of Jesus, interpreted by his associate, Mark. But the great fathers of the church scarcely use this gospel in their writings.

Augustine articulated most clearly an understanding of the Gospel of Mark that has endured till the modern era: “Marcus eum subsecutus tamquam pedisequus et brevior eius videtur.”<sup>1</sup> As the emerging Christian church looked consistently to Matthew for its instruction, no commentary on the Gospel of Mark appeared until the turn of the sixth century. From 650 to 1000 C.E. thirteen major commentaries were written on Matthew, and four on Mark. This neglect continued down to the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> The Gospel of Mark maintained its place in the Christian canon because of its traditional relationship with Peter and the city of Rome. But it has been well described as “present but absent.”<sup>3</sup> As the Christian church became an increasingly unified political, social, and ideological phenomenon in the early centuries, “biblical texts were not used as narratives in themselves but as sources for proofs of doctrinal and ecclesiastical positions. In this enterprise, Mark was a weak contender.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *De consensu evangelistarum*, 1.2 (PL 34:1044): “Mark appears only as his follower and abbreviator.” See E. Massaux, *The Influence of the Gospel of Saint Matthew on Christian Literature before Saint Irenaeus* (trans. N. J. Belval and S. Hecht; ed. A. J. Bellinzoni; New Gospel Studies 5; Macon: Mercer, 1993), and B. D. Schildgen, *Power and Prejudice: The Reception of the Gospel of Mark* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), 35–42. Through a rebirth of interest in J. J. Griesbach’s theory (see Schildgen, *Power and Prejudice*, 111–23), a number of contemporary scholars continue to claim that Mark abbreviated Matthew. See below, note 8.

<sup>2</sup> See R. H. Lightfoot, *The Gospel Message of St. Mark* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), 1–14; S. P. Kealy, *Mark’s Gospel: A History of Its Interpretation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 7–57; Schildgen, *Power and Prejudice*, 43–110.

<sup>3</sup> This is the title of Schildgen’s first chapter (*Power and Prejudice*, 35–42).

<sup>4</sup> Schildgen, *Power and Prejudice*, 41.

## The First Gospel

Things have changed since that time, and it could be claimed that gospel scholarship over the past 150 years has been dominated by a fascination with the Gospel of Mark.<sup>5</sup> The turn to the Gospel of Mark was initiated by the so-called source critics who began to question the long-held tradition that Matthew was the first of the gospels to appear. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the source critics established the priority of Mark over Matthew and Luke. The traditional “Second Gospel” became the first gospel. The modern era, ushered in by the Enlightenment, saw a rapid development of critical thought. The English deists, themselves products of the Enlightenment, demanded that the biblical tradition be subjected to the scrutiny of hard logic. The doublets, contradictions, and non sequiturs had to be explained.<sup>6</sup> A “higher criticism” emerged, especially in Germany, but also in England and France, applying more rational criteria to biblical studies. The source critics were part of the “higher criticism.” Their work, especially that of H. J. Holtzmann,<sup>7</sup> sought to establish a firm historical basis for the life of Jesus. Holtzmann argued that Mark, the most primitive of all the gospels, took us back to a reliable “framework” for the life of Jesus: Jesus’ messianic consciousness developed over a period of preaching in Galilee, and reached its high point at Caesarea Philippi. There he made known to his followers his belief that he was the expected Jewish Messiah. His journey to Jerusalem and his end there were the result of the Jewish leadership’s rejection of his claim.

Contemporary scholarship is skeptical about Holtzmann’s discovery of a framework for the life of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. But close and detailed study of the use of individual passages in each of the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) suggests that Mark’s Gospel is the most ancient. Although the so-called Synoptic Question, i.e., the order of appearance and the related question of the literary dependence of one Synoptic Gospel upon another, is still debated,<sup>8</sup> the priority of Mark is the best explanation for a number of the features of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Matthew and Luke had their own sources for their accounts of the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Some material is found only in Matthew (sometimes called M; see, for example, Matt 16:16–18), or only in Luke (sometimes called L; see, for example, Luke 15:1–32). A large amount of ma-

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<sup>5</sup>For a survey down to 1985, see W. Telford, “Introduction: The Gospel of Mark,” in *The Interpretation of Mark* (IRT 7; ed. W. Telford; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 1–41.

<sup>6</sup>See Schildgen, *Power and Prejudice*, 111–23.

<sup>7</sup>H. J. Holtzmann, *Die synoptischen Evangelien: Ihr Ursprung und geschichtlicher Charakter* (Leipzig: Wilhelm Engelmann, 1863). For a full discussion of this period, see Kealy, *Mark’s Gospel*, 58–89. Other important figures were K. Lachmann, C. H. Weisse, J. Hawkins, and P. Wernle. See also U. Schnelle, *The History and Theology of the New Testament Writings* (trans. M. E. Boring; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 162–79.

<sup>8</sup>See, for example, W. R. Farmer, “Modern Developments of Griesbach’s Hypothesis,” *NTS* 23 (1976–1977): 275–95; T. R. W. Longstaff, *Evidence of Conflation in Mark? A Study in the Synoptic Problem* (SBLDS 28; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977); H.-H. Stoldt, *History and Criticism of the Markan Hypothesis* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980); J. J. Griesbach: *Synoptic and Text-Critical Studies* (ed. B. Orchard and T. R. Longstaff; SNTSMS 34; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); M. D. Goulder, *Luke: A New Paradigm* (2 vols.; JSNTSup 20; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989). See, however, the critical response to these proposals by C. M. Tuckett, *The Revival of the Griesbach Hypothesis* (SNTSMS 44; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), and idem, *Q and the History of Early Christianity: Studies on Q* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 1–39.

terial in both Matthew and Luke is not present in Mark (sometimes called “Q,” from the German word *Quelle*, meaning “source”; see, for example, teachings in Matt 5:1–7:28 found in Luke 6:12–49 and elsewhere in Luke, but nowhere in Mark). It appears that the authors of both Matthew and Luke had the Gospel of Mark before them as they penned their particular stories of Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

On this supposition, it was Mark who invented the literary form which we call gospel: a narrative telling the story of the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, proclaiming the good news (Greek: εὐαγγέλιον;<sup>10</sup> Old English: *god-spel*) that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (see Mark 1:1). Only about forty of Mark’s 675 verses are not found somewhere in Matthew.<sup>11</sup> The presence of material from the Gospel of Mark in the Gospel of Luke is not so obvious. But this can be accounted for by Luke’s very skillful storytelling techniques. He uses the tradition in a creative way and has some memorable material not found in either Mark or Matthew, especially some parables, e.g., the Good Samaritan (10:25–37) and the Father with the Two Sons (15:11–32). Yet, both Matthew and Luke have accepted the basic story line of the Gospel of Mark: beginnings in Galilee; a journey to Jerusalem; a brief presence in the city, leading to his arrest, trial, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. Only the Gospel of John dares to break from this story line, as the Johannine Jesus journeys from Galilee to Jerusalem, especially for the Jewish feasts of Passover, Tabernacles, and Dedication.<sup>12</sup> When Matthew and Luke agree in sequence, they also

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<sup>9</sup>The greatest difficulty, and the departure point for those who deny Markan priority, are the so-called “minor agreements.” These are passages where Matthew and Luke agree almost word for word, over against Mark. See F. Neirynck, T. Hansen, and F. van Segbroeck, *The Minor Agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark, with a Cumulative List* (BETL 37; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1974), and the briefer survey of Schnelle, *History and Theology*, 170–72. The solution lies in the vitality of the oral tradition and not, as Schnelle and others suggest, in a *Deuteromark*, a second edition of the canonical Mark used by Matthew and Luke (thus the minor agreements). If there was a second edition of our Gospel of Mark, what happened to it? It has left no trace in early Christianity, except in the “minor agreements.” This is unlikely.

<sup>10</sup>The verb εὐαγγελίζομαι and the noun εὐαγγέλιον are found in the LXX and in secular Greek. Second Isaiah uses it to present the one who brings glad tidings (see LXX Isa 52:6–7). But it is a rare word; among the Greeks the expression is used in contexts that announce great events: a victory in battle, deliverance from powers of evil, the birth of a son to the King, etc. Paul applies it to the “good news” of what God has done in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus (see, for example, Rom 1:1; 10:15; 15:12; 1 Cor 9:14, 18; 15:1–2; 2 Cor 2:12; 8:18; 10:16; 11:7; Gal 1:8, 11; 4:13; Phil 4:3, 15). Thus, the appearance of the word εὐαγγέλιον in Mark 1:1 (“The beginning of the *good news* [τοῦ εὐαγγελίου]”) is not new in early Christian tradition. What is new, however, is the use of the word to describe the story of the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and to use that story to proclaim him as “the Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). Indeed, it is this use of the Greek εὐαγγέλιον (English: *gospel*) which is most common today. For contemporary Christians, a “gospel” is a life story. On this, see G. Friedrich, “εὐαγγελίζομαι κτλ,” *TDNT* 2:707–37; W. Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist: Studies on the Redaction History of the Gospel* (trans. R. A. Harrisville; Nashville: Abingdon, 1969), 117–50.

<sup>11</sup>The chapters and verses, so much a part of modern Bibles, and of our citation of the biblical text, are recent additions. Various divisions of the books and passages had been attempted in antiquity, but present chapter divisions were created by Stephen Langton in the thirteenth century. Verse divisions were added by Robert Estienne in the sixteenth century. They are not always a sure guide to the original literary design of a biblical author, but are useful in locating specific texts.

<sup>12</sup>See F. J. Moloney, *Signs and Shadows: Reading John 5–12* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996). This may be one of several elements in the Fourth Gospel that reflect more accurately what actually took place during the life and ministry of Jesus. On this, see F. J. Moloney, “The Fourth Gospel and the Jesus of History,” *NTS* 46 (2000): 42–58.

agree with Mark.<sup>13</sup> Matthew's order of events is closer to that of Mark's, but even Luke, who intersperses his account more systematically with other material, follows the Markan order of events. This fact points to the possibility that the authors of Matthew and Luke both had the same text, the Gospel of Mark, before them as they wrote their versions of the life of Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

These are but some of the reasons for the widespread scholarly consensus on the priority of Mark. Perhaps the most significant factor, however, is not found in the Synoptic Tradition's use of the same material in terms of words, style, and the location of each single, self-contained passage, called "pericopes" by critics. If Matthew was the first gospel, as Augustine suggested, and Mark derived his account from Matthew, it is difficult to find good reasons why Mark would have performed such a radical operation on Matthew's carefully assembled work. It is, on the other hand, easier to find satisfactory reasons for a Matthean or a Lukan reworking of the Gospel of Mark. It takes a deal of imagination and mental gymnastics to read the Gospel of Mark *in its entirety* as a deliberately shortened version of the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>15</sup> However, as Fitzmyer has pointed out " 'the truth' of the matter is largely inaccessible to us, and we are forced to live with a hypothesis or a theory."<sup>16</sup>

### Mark the Historian

But does the primitive nature of the Gospel of Mark give us privileged access to a framework for the life of Jesus of Nazareth, as Holtzmann claimed?<sup>17</sup> At the turn of last century two scholars almost single-handedly brought such speculations to an end and thus established a new era for the study of the Gospel of Mark. In 1901 William Wrede, among other things, addressed the thesis of those who, like Holtzmann, regarded the Gospel of Mark as a faithful record of Jesus' life. In his book, titled *The Messianic Secret in the Gospels*, he demolished the suggestion that the Gospel of Mark represented a primitive portrait of Jesus' story.<sup>18</sup> He argued, on the basis of Jesus' continual commands to silence in the Gos-

<sup>13</sup>For a thorough presentation of the case for Markan priority and the existence of Q, see J. A. Fitzmyer, "The Priority of Mark and the 'Q' Source in Luke," in *To Advance the Gospel: New Testament Studies* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 3–40. For a more recent and equally thorough discussion, see Tuckett, *Q and the History of Early Christianity*, 1–39; J. Marcus, *Mark 1–8* (AB 27; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 40–47, and R. E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (ABRL; 2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1:40–46.

<sup>14</sup>See the useful summaries of the "argument from order" in Fitzmyer, "The Priority of Mark," 7–9, and Tuckett, *Q and the History of Early Christianity*, 8–10.

<sup>15</sup>I stress *in its entirety* as it is possible to pick scattered Markan pericopes and show that they can be understood as an abbreviated rewriting of the Matthean parallel. Then there is the further problem of those places where both Matthew and Luke omit Markan material (e.g., Mark 1:1; 2:27; 3:20–21, etc.), and other sayings where there are minor verbal agreements (omissions or alterations) of Matthew and Luke against Mark. See Fitzmyer, "The Priority of Mark," 11–16; Marcus, *Mark*, 45–47. However, such an exercise must be extended to show how *all* the pericopes *in their Markan order* make theological and literary sense as an abbreviation of Matthew. No contemporary return to Matthean (or Lukan) priority has done this convincingly. See Tuckett's survey in *Q and the History of Early Christianity*, 11–34.

<sup>16</sup>Fitzmyer, "The Priority of Mark," 4.

<sup>17</sup>For a helpful survey of all the issues surrounding this question, see W. R. Telford, *Mark* (NTG; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 36–85.

<sup>18</sup>W. Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien: Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901). The book, reprinted four times

pel of Mark, that Jesus made no messianic claims. They were added to the story by the early church, and the Gospel of Mark was clear evidence of this process. Jesus was not the Messiah, and never made such a claim. Many were surprised to hear early Christian preachers claim that he was. In the Gospel of Mark the nonmessianic Jesus was explained by Jesus' repeated insistence that no one be told of his messianic words and deeds. He was not widely known as the Messiah because he himself forbade any such proclamation in his own time. This meant that the Gospel of Mark was not a reliable historical report; it was part of the theological creativity of the early church. "The Gospel of Mark belongs to the history of dogma."<sup>19</sup>

Shortly after Wrede's epoch-making study, Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* reviewed nineteenth-century scholars' portrayal of the historical Jesus.<sup>20</sup> He showed that each "life of Jesus" was more a projection of German scholarship than an objective historical reconstruction.

The Jesus of Nazareth who came forth publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the kingdom of God, who founded the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, and died to give His work its final consecration, never had any existence. He is a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in an historical garb.<sup>21</sup>

For Schweitzer, Jesus preached the imminent end of time and must be judged to have failed in terms of his own understanding of his God-ordained mission, however much the four gospels and subsequent Christian culture had reinterpreted his person and message.

These debates were not limited to the studies and the lecture rooms of German universities. Critical biblical scholarship had its origins in an attempt to put the study of the Bible on the same scholarly footing as the emerging sciences in a post-Enlightenment world. Its activities and conclusions captured the imagination of many, especially those responsible for the preaching of the word of God, so central to the Christian tradition. But a gulf was opening between the critical biblical scholars and those involved in a ministry of the word because, like many of their contemporaries, in their search for the scholarly excellence of their time, the biblical scholars had lost touch with the primacy of the story itself. This problem was to deepen with the passing of time.<sup>22</sup> The turmoil, suffering, and death which marked the First World War (1914–1918) did not lessen the growing skepticism among German scholars. Between World War I and World War II Karl Ludwig Schmidt, Martin Dibelius, and Rudolf Bultmann founded a new approach to the Synoptic Gospels

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since then (last reprint 1969), is now available in English: *The Messianic Secret* (trans. J. C. G. Grieg; Cambridge & London: James Clarke, 1971). See the critical discussion of Wrede's contribution, and responses to him, in G. Minette de Tillesse, *Le secret messianique dans l'Évangile de Marc* (LD 47; Paris: Cerf, 1968), 9–34.

<sup>19</sup>Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, 131.

<sup>20</sup>A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (trans. W. Montgomery; London: A. & C. Black, 1910). This was an English translation of Schweitzer's original book: *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: Eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1906)]. A considerably enlarged second edition, titled simply *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, was published in 1913 and has only recently appeared in English: *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (first complete edition; ed. J. Bowden; London: SCM, 2000; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

<sup>21</sup>Schweitzer, *The Quest*, 396 (1910 edition).

<sup>22</sup>For an analysis of this phenomenon, see H. W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974). See also the interesting (but debatable) remarks of Schildgen (*Power and Prejudice*, 29) on the impact of the shift from biblical exegesis done in the church to biblical exegesis done in the universities.

that focused upon the identifiable prehistory of the individual pericopes that had been assembled by an editor to produce the gospels as we now have them.<sup>23</sup>

This approach was called form criticism. It focused its attention on the literary form of each single pericope and attempted to locate its origin in the life of Jesus or the life of the early church. Using an increasing bank of knowledge about other ancient religions, the form critics traced parallel “forms” in the parables, the miracle stories, the conflict stories, the pronouncements, and the stories of suffering found in those religions. They identified (somewhat speculatively, and often with insufficient support) the “situation in the life” of Jesus or the church where such passages were born. From this comes the well-known expression, widely used even by non-German scholars, *Sitz im Leben* (the situation in life). The title of Schmidt’s study, *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu*, stated a truth by now accepted by all form critics: the “framework” (*Rahmen*) of Jesus’ story cannot be recovered from the Gospel of Mark. This had already been made clear by Wrede’s work on the messianic secret and quickly became a bedrock point of departure for all subsequent study. The first evangelist, Mark, was little more than an editor, gathering pericopes from various traditional sources, placing them side by side to form the Gospel as it now stands.<sup>24</sup> A fascination with the world behind the text led to an ever-decreasing interest in the story of Jesus *as it is told in the Gospel of Mark*. Matthew and Luke were also editors but were strongly influenced by decisions already made by Mark. Thus, a form-critical approach to Matthew or Luke looked to the “forms” and the *Sitz im Leben* of passages in the Gospel of Mark that had been taken over and modified in these *later* uses of the *same* traditions. Because of the emerging scholarly unanimity that Mark was the first gospel, all gospel studies had to take the story of Jesus as Mark tells it as an essential point of departure.

### Mark the Theologian

The establishment of the priority of Mark and the advent of form criticism moved this gospel to center stage. It has never moved far from that privileged position since the early decades of the twentieth century. After the Second World War (1939–1945) an issue raised by Wrede, largely ignored by the form critics, returned to dominate gospel studies.<sup>25</sup> Wrede had insisted that Mark did not write history but had told a story of Jesus of Nazareth and deliberately imposed a Christian dogma upon the narrative. The Gospel of Mark and the gospels that followed, insisted Wrede, were theologically motivated. German New

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<sup>23</sup>K. L. Schmidt, *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu: Literarkritische Untersuchungen zur ältesten Jesusüberlieferung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964 [original: 1919]); M. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (trans. B. L. Woolf; Library of Theological Translations; Cambridge & London: James Clarke, 1971 [original German: 1919]); R. Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (trans. John Marsh; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968 [original German: 1921]). For further detail, see Kealy, *Mark’s Gospel*, 115–58.

<sup>24</sup>See Bultmann, *History*, 338, 350: “In Mark we can still see clearly, and most easily in comparison with Luke, that the most ancient tradition consisted of individual sections, and that the connecting together is secondary. . . . Mark is not sufficiently master of his material to be able to venture on a systematic construction himself.”

<sup>25</sup>The issue was not entirely ignored. Bultmann (*History*, 337–67) devotes attention to the editing of the narrative material and the composition of the Gospels in a larger section (pp. 321–67) on the editing of traditional material. His approach, however, is still more concerned with sources than with the theology of each evangelist.

Testament scholars again led the way as Hans Conzelmann (Luke), Willi Marxsen (Mark) and Günther Bornkamm (Matthew) investigated the theological perspectives that inspired the evangelists to gather the material traditions and shape them in a particular way.<sup>26</sup> This movement, called redaction criticism, focused upon each particular gospel as a whole utterance, rather than upon the form, history, and *Sitz im Leben* of the pericopes that formed it. The redaction critics, however, depended heavily upon the form critics for their conclusions. The latter provided the necessary *historical* evidence for the *theological* conclusions drawn by the redaction critics. The project has been well described by Hans Conzelmann, widely regarded as the founder of redaction criticism (although it could be argued that this honor rightly belongs to Wrede):

Our aim is to elucidate Luke's work in its present form, not to enquire into possible sources or into the historical facts which provide the material. A variety of sources does not necessarily imply a similar variety in the thought and composition of the author. How did it come about that he brought together these particular materials? Was he able to imprint on them his own views? It is here that the analysis of the sources renders the *necessary service* of helping to distinguish what comes from the source from what belongs to the author.<sup>27</sup>

The Gospel of Mark has no small part to play in all such considerations, since “what comes from the source” for Matthew and Luke is largely determined by this first of all gospels. If the major source used by Matthew and Luke is the Gospel of Mark, then redaction critics must look carefully at the original theological perspective of the text that acts as matrix for the other two Synoptic Gospel accounts. When the interpreter finds that a particular Markan theological perspective is *consistently* reworked in either Matthew or Luke, then, it can be claimed, this is clear evidence for the theological point of view of either Matthew or Luke. The same could be said for the use of Q, and material unique to Matthew (M) or Luke (L). The canonical gospels' use of these reconstructed “sources” is often subjected to intense analysis in an attempt to rediscover its pre-Matthean or pre-Lukan form so that the redactional tendencies of each gospel author can be traced. Redaction criticism continued the tendency to shift the Gospel of Mark from the margin of scholarly interest to the center.

If redaction criticism determines the unique theological perspective of a single author by analyzing the way he has worked with traditions that preexisted the gospel under consideration, how do redaction critics approach the Gospel of Mark? How do they determine what came to Mark in his Christian tradition, and what Mark invented?<sup>28</sup> This is a perennial problem for contemporary redactional studies of the Gospel of Mark. Recent decades

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<sup>26</sup>H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (trans. G. Buswell; London: Faber & Faber, 1961 [original German: 1957]); W. Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist* (originally published in German in 1956); G. Bornkamm, G. Barth and H. J. Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (trans. P. Scott; London: SCM, 1963 [original German: 1960]). For a helpful study of the early years of redaction criticism, and the major contributors, see J. Rohde, *Rediscovering the Teaching of the Evangelists* (trans. D. M. Barton; London: SCM, 1968).

<sup>27</sup>Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, 9. The italics are mine, as I wish to stress the fact that redaction criticism does not disregard the historical work of the form critics, and their determination of various historically and culturally determined literary forms and *Sitze im Leben*. Such work performs a “necessary service” for the redaction critics. See further, Kealy, *Mark's Gospel*, 159–97.

<sup>28</sup>For a balanced analysis of Mark as an author who was conditioned by a received tradition, yet creative in his shaping of it, see Marcus, *Mark*, 59–62.

have seen sophisticated studies of how Mark dealt with pre-Markan traditions that told of Jesus' family, his miracle-working activity, his conflicts with Jewish leaders, the two bread miracles, journeys in a boat, and the passion narrative, to mention only some major Markan themes.<sup>29</sup> It could be said that source criticism is not dead. The difference between nineteenth-century source criticism and the source criticism that is a necessary part of redactional studies of Mark is that the former worked with the texts of the gospels. Today's redaction critics must reconstruct a hypothetical pre-Markan text.<sup>30</sup>

This is a speculative task. Scholars examine passages with great detail, determine typically Markan words and expressions, and eliminate them as the result of editorial activity on the part of the author. The process runs the danger of being circular. Everything "Markan" is eliminated from a given passage, so that what remains is "pre-Markan." What each scholar regards as "Markan" is eliminated, and thus (surprisingly!) a non-Markan (pre-Markan) fragment remains. This process also assumes that Mark was not influenced by the tradition in any way so that it is easy to peel away the Markan elements from what came to the author in the tradition. This is to assume too much, as many reviewers of contemporary Markan studies have said.<sup>31</sup> As we shall see in our reading of the Gospel, there are places where signs of a pre-Markan tradition emerge.<sup>32</sup> However, much redaction criticism of the Gospel of Mark is fragile because it is based upon the frail hypothetical reconstruction of a pre-Markan source, established by means of the elimination of all that is Markan according to each redaction critic's criteria.<sup>33</sup>

### More Recent Developments

Redactional critical scholarship has generated a large number of publications on the Gospel of Mark.<sup>34</sup> It is impossible to wend our way through those many and interesting

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<sup>29</sup>See the summary of major works in Telford, "The Gospel of Mark," 6–15. There are other important redactional studies not mentioned in this valuable article. See the fuller list in M. R. Mansfield, "Spirit and Gospel" in *Mark* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 1–2, 10–12.

<sup>30</sup>Some have suggested that Mark knew 'Q,' or *The Gospel of Thomas*, or the so-called *Secret Gospel of Mark*. For a consideration and rejection of these "sources" for Mark, see Marcus, *Mark*, 47–56.

<sup>31</sup>See C. C. Black, *The Disciples according to Mark: Markan Redaction in Current Debate* (JSNTSup 27; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 159–81; W. R. Telford, "The Pre-Markan Tradition in Recent Research (1980–1990)," in *The Four Gospels, 1992: Festschrift Frans Neirynck* (ed. F. van Segbroeck, C. M. Tuckett, G. van Belle, and J. Verheyden; BETL 100; 3 vols.; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 2:695–723. This study also contains an excellent bibliography (pp. 713–23).

<sup>32</sup>See J. Ernst, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (RNT; Regensburg: Pustet-Verlag, 1981), 10–13; Marcus, *Mark*, 56–59.

<sup>33</sup>A telling criticism of redaction critics who use these methods of establishing a pre-Markan tradition is that so many who analyze the same passages come up with different Markan and pre-Markan elements. This has led many to suggest that too much Markan, Matthean, and Lukan theology has its roots in the mind of the interpreter. See, for example, M. D. Hooker, "In His Own Image?" in *What About the New Testament? Studies in Honour of Christopher Evans* (ed. M. D. Hooker and C. Hickling; London: SCM, 1975), 28–44.

<sup>34</sup>For a summary, down to 1985, see Telford, "The Gospel of Mark," 15–28. For studies since then, see idem, *The Theology of the Gospel of Mark* (New Testament Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 29–163, and idem, *Mark*, 86–119, with special attention given to more literary approaches to the Gospel. Introducing his 1985 study, Telford remarks, "In evaluating the major contributions to Marcan scholarship in recent years . . . , the present reviewer was faced

studies. Some will appear as we read the Gospel of Mark. Studies of individual passages, and books and articles that attempt to trace the Markan redactional activity across the narrative as a whole, have rightly focused upon major themes in the Gospel. They include the secrecy motif, disciples, the kingdom of God, the Son of Man, the Son of God, Jewish leadership, the crowds, the function of Galilee, the significance of the crossings of the sea of Galilee, the Gentile mission, eschatology and apocalyptic (see Mark 13), discipleship, suffering, the cross, martyrdom, and the strange ending of the Gospel at 16:8 with the expression ἐφοβοῦντο γάρ (“for they were afraid”). As most redactional studies depend upon speculatively reconstructed pre-Markan tradition, it is not surprising that the conclusions reached by contemporary redactional studies of the Gospel of Mark have not met with universal acceptance among Markan scholars.<sup>35</sup>

There is a discernible movement from one approach to the Gospel to another. Source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism are all interrelated, and one leads to the other. The same could be said for more recent approaches to the Gospel of Mark. Difficulties are created by the speculative reconstruction of *the world behind the text* (sometimes called a “diachronic” analysis of the text). Recent scholarship focuses upon *the world in the text* (sometimes called a “synchronic” analysis of the text) and how it addresses *the world in front of the text*. An interest in the impact that the whole utterance of a narrative makes upon a readership is but a logical consequence of the work of the redaction critics. Redaction criticism attempts to trace the theological themes that determine the shape and message of a gospel. Newer approaches ask how a narrative’s use of these themes impacts upon a readership. It is not an easy task to classify recent Markan scholarship that has turned to these newer approaches. Some of it uses the techniques developed in the study of modern narratives, tracing an implied author’s manipulation of an implied reader by means of characters, plot, descriptions of place, the use of time, and the many other elements of a “good story.” This approach is generally called “narrative criticism.”<sup>36</sup> It opens the possibility of a greater focus upon the impact of the narrative upon the reader *in the text* and subsequently upon the reader *of the text*.<sup>37</sup>

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with the formidable task of assessing over two hundred and fifty essays, articles and books on the Gospel, ninety percent of which were written after 1960.” See also, Kealy, *Mark’s Gospel*, 198–237.

<sup>35</sup> Particularly helpful in this regard is the study of Black, *The Disciples according to Mark*. Black looks at the redactional critical work of R. P. Meye, E. Best, and T. J. Weeden, and shows that each of these studies of the Markan disciples is limited by the recourse to assumptions outside the text itself which are not open to empirical analysis. See also C. C. Black, “The Quest of Mark the Redactor: Why Has It Been Pursued, and What Has It Taught us,” *JSNT* 22 (1989): 19–39; R. H. Stein, “The Proper Methodology for Ascertaining a Markan Redaction History,” in *The Composition of Mark’s Gospel: Selected Studies from Novum Testamentum* (ed. D. E. Orton; Brill’s Readers in Biblical Studies 3; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 34–51.

<sup>36</sup> For an introduction to this approach to a gospel, see F. J. Moloney, “Narrative Criticism of the Gospels,” in *A Hard Saying: The Gospel and Culture* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 85–105, and for its application to the Markan narrative, see E. S. Malbon, “Narrative Criticism: How Does the Story Mean?” in *In the Company of Jesus: Characters in Mark’s Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 1–40. Early attempts to apply narrative criticism to the Gospel of Mark are F. Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969); N. Petersen, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978); and D. Rhoads, J. Dewey, and D. Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999).

<sup>37</sup> While they cannot be regarded as methodologically identical, a sample of recent narrative-critical studies of the Gospel of Mark can be found in W. H. Kelber, *Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Philadelphia:

A further development of this focus upon the reader, again adopting the terminology of contemporary literary criticism, has been called reader-response criticism. The turn toward the reader has opened the way to a number of further so-called postmodern approaches. This is something of a caricature, but one could say that an increased focus upon the reader lessens focus upon the text itself. Such readings become more subversive, finding surprising and new interpretations in a never-ending interplay of possible meanings, many of them strongly determined by the fragile and highly fragmented situation of the postmodern reader. Indeed, granted the all-determining role of the reader, the givenness of an ancient text can almost disappear, as all that matters is the reader.<sup>38</sup> Side by side with the growth in interest in the *literary* world which generated the text, and the ongoing impact of the Gospel as “story,” has been the study of the cultural and especially the *sociopolitical* world that determined the shape of the narrative, its plot, and its characterization. Drawing upon cross-cultural studies, the Gospel of Mark is found to be rich in its portrayal of marginalized artisans, farmers, and tradesmen, a wandering charismatic preacher, an oppressive taxation system, corrupt Jewish leadership exploiting those lower on the social scale, and the presence in the nation of an unscrupulous army of occupation. As with narrative criticism, reader-response criticism, and the more postmodern readings, a sociopolitical approach to the Gospel of Mark shows that the perennial problems of the use and abuse of power, subverted by the Markan understanding of the person and message of Jesus, are still eloquently addressed in our contemporary world.<sup>39</sup> Far from its former situation as the Cinderella of the New Testament, the Gospel of Mark has been the subject of intense focus from the days of the source critics till our contemporary scholarly world, marked by a multiplication of interpretative methods. There is no sign of any waning of this interest.

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Fortress, 1979); A. Stock, *Call to Discipleship: A Literary Study of Mark's Gospel* (GNS 1; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1982); B. M. F. van Iersel, *Reading Mark* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1988); M. A. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989); J. D. Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark: Jesus, Authority, Disciples* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989); D. H. Juel, *A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); *Der Erzähler des Evangeliums: Methodische Neuansätze in der Markusforschung* (ed. F. Hahn; SBS 118–119; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1985). The list is by no means exhaustive. Markan interpretation has shifted considerably from Bultmann's view that “Mark is not sufficiently master of his material to be able to venture on a systematic construction himself” (*History*, 350). It is Mark's “systematic construction” that interests these scholars.

<sup>38</sup>An excellent introduction to these less stable readings, as well as to a reader-response approach to the Gospel of Mark, is R. M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991). For a general introduction to the more subversive, postmodern, readings of biblical texts, see The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). As a contemporary literary critic puts it: “Once you take seriously the notion that readers ‘construct’ (even partially) the texts that they read, then the canon (any canon) is not (or not only) the product of the inherent qualities of the text; it is also (at least partly) the product of particular choices of the arbiters of choice who create it—choices always grounded in ideological and cultural values, always enmeshed in class, race, and gender” (P. J. Rabinowitz, “Whirl without End: Audience-Oriented Criticism,” in *Contemporary Literary Theory* [ed. C. D. Atkins and L. Morrow; London: Macmillan, 1989], 94).

<sup>39</sup>Three important and instructive sociocultural readings of the Gospel of Mark are F. Belo, *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark* (New York: Orbis, 1981); H. C. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power: A Socio-Political Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989); and C. Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990). More general, but useful, studies are: K. C. Hanson and D. E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998); E. W. Stegemann and W. Stegemann,

## Who, Where, and When?

Who wrote these 675 terse verses telling of Jesus' ministry, death, and burial? Where and when were they written? The Gospel itself gives no hint, although many have identified the author as the young man dressed only in a white robe who flees from Jesus' arrest in Gethsemane (14:51–52). Even if this suggestion were true, it would tell us only that the author was an eyewitness. It does not tell us his name or his role in the life of Jesus and the early church. At a later date, when the gospels were given titles, this gospel was given the title “according to Mark” (κατὰ Μάρκον).<sup>40</sup> The first witness to Mark as the author of this gospel comes from Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis who, in about 130 C.E., wrote a five-volume work titled *Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord*. We no longer have the works of Papias, but they are cited by the historian Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Ecclesiastical History* (about 303 C.E.). He quotes Papias as follows:

This also the elder (John) used to say. When Mark became Peter's interpreter (ἐρμηνευτής), he wrote down accurately (ἀκριβῶς), though by no means in order (οὐ μέντοι τάξει), as much as he remembered of the words and deeds of the Lord; [*what follows is probably from Papias, and not “the elder”*] for he had neither heard the Lord nor been in his company, but subsequently joined Peter as I said. Now Peter did not intend to give a complete exposition of the Lord's ministry but delivered his instructions to meet the needs of the moment. It follows, then, that Mark was guilty of no blunder if he wrote, simply to the best of his recollections, an incomplete account (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15).<sup>41</sup>

This identification of Mark as the secretary or interpreter or translator (ἐρμηνευτής is open to a number of translations) of Peter was accepted almost without question until the modern era. Possibly this ancient association of the Gospel of Mark with the figure of Peter assured its place over the early Christian centuries. As Morna Hooker remarks, “Since almost all of Mark's material is found in either Matthew or Luke, it is remarkable that the Gospel survived.”<sup>42</sup> According to Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.6), Clement of Alexandria (circa 150–215) located the association between Mark and Peter in the city of Rome.<sup>43</sup>

Papias's insistence upon Mark's accuracy (ἀκριβῶς), and his having written the Gospel in its entirety on the basis of Peter's account of Jesus' story, although not in order (οὐ μέντοι τάξει), flies in the face of the form critics' conclusions that the work is the result of a

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*The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century* (trans. O. C. Dean Jr.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

<sup>40</sup>Just how late has now become the subject of a minor debate. It was widely accepted that the titles were not given to the Gospels until late in the second century. However, M. Hengel (*Studies in the Gospel of Mark* [London: SCM, 1985], 64–84) has argued that Mark's highly innovative use of εὐαγγέλιον to introduce a new literary form into Christian literature may have led to its being called εὐαγγέλιον κατὰ Μάρκον from the beginning. The titles given to Matthew, Luke, and John, at a later stage, imitated that of Mark's Gospel.

<sup>41</sup>Translation from Kealy, *Mark's Gospel*, 12. The explanatory parentheses are mine.

<sup>42</sup>M. D. Hooker, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (BNTC; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 7.

<sup>43</sup>Modern scholars continue to support the witness of Papias. See, for example, V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (2d ed.; London: Macmillan, 1966), 26–31; W. L. Lane, *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 21–23; R. P. Martin, *Mark: Evangelist and Theologian* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1972), 51–79; Mansfield, “*Spirit and Gospel*,” 8–10, 145–63; Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, 1–6.

process of editing and that the various pericopes originated in different times and places. Some may have come from the life of Jesus, and others may have been developed in the life of the early church. However, there is nothing inherently impossible in the claim that an authoritative “Mark” in an early Christian community “authored” the Gospel.<sup>44</sup> Mark was a very common name at the time, but the association between Peter and Mark (“my son”) found in 1 Pet 5:13 quickly became attached to the tradition. Other occurrences of the name “Mark” in the New Testament were gathered around this figure, especially the “John Mark” of Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37–39, and the “Mark” of Col 4:10; Phlm 24; and 2 Tim 4:11. In the end, we cannot be sure who “Mark” was. Perhaps we should respect the author’s concern to keep his name and association with either Jesus or Peter out of the account, but we have no cause not to refer to the book as the Gospel of Mark, and to its author as “Mark.”<sup>45</sup>

Recent Markan scholarship is returning to the traditional view that the Gospel was written in Rome.<sup>46</sup> The association of Mark with Peter in Rome, the inelegant Greek style, the number of Latin loan words, and the author’s vague knowledge of the geography of first-century Palestine incline some scholars to locate the Gospel in a Roman setting.<sup>47</sup> In addition, many have pointed to the Markan theology of the cross and the failure of the disciples, read as indications that the community addressed is exposed to persecution and death, and has to deal with faintheartedness, fear, and failure in the community. For many, this admirably suits the church in Rome during and immediately after the Neronian persecution (65 C.E.).<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See R. Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium* (2d ed.; HTKNT 2.1–2; 2 vols.; Freiburg: Herder, 1977), 1:3–11. This would also allow for Hengel’s thesis that the Gospel was attached to “Mark,” whoever he might have been, from the beginning. For the form critics his “authoring” would have been more editorial than authorial. As the commentary will show, Mark may have edited sources, but he is to be regarded as a creative author in the best sense. Not only has he written a compelling narrative, but he created the gospel “form,” which has given Christianity its founding narrative. This is no small achievement.

<sup>45</sup> For a recent detailed discussion of the evidence, devoting particular attention to the question of “John Mark,” but deciding in the end that the case is “not proven,” see Marcus, *Mark*, 17–24.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Ernst, *Markus*, 21–22; Pesch, *Markusevangelium*, 1:112–14; J. Gnilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (5th ed.; EKKNT 2.1–2; 2 vols.; Zurich/Neukirchen/Vluyn: Benziger Verlag/Neukirchener Verlag, 1998–1999), 1:34–35; R. E. Brown and J. P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 191–97; R. A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26* (WBC 34A; Dallas: Word Books, 1989), xxix–xxxi; J. Donahue, “Windows and Mirrors: The Setting of Mark’s Gospel,” *CBQ* 57 (1995): 1–26; Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, 1–30; D. Senior, “‘With Swords and Clubs . . .’—The Setting of Mark’s Community and His Critique of Abusive Power,” *BTB* 17 (1987): 10–20. C. C. Black (*Mark: Images of an Apostolic Interpreter* [Studies on Personalities of the New Testament; Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1994], 238) remarks that a Roman origin for the Gospel of Mark “if not proven, is, at least, not improbable.” See also his “Was Mark a Roman Gospel?” *ExpTim* 105 (1993–1994): 36–40. For a survey of contemporary opinion on the place of origin for the Gospel of Mark, see J. Donahue, “The Quest for the Community of Mark’s Gospel,” in *The Four Gospels, 1992: Festschrift Frans Neirynck* (ed. F. van Segbroeck, C. M. Tucker, G. van Belle, and J. Verheyden; BETL 100; 3 vols.; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 2:819–34. Recent popular studies of Mark are now adopting this position. See P. J. Flanagan, *The Gospel of Mark Made Easy* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997); P. J. Cunningham, *Mark: The Good News Preached to the Romans* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998).

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Taylor, *St. Mark*, 44–54; Martin, *Mark*, 63–65.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Martin, *Mark*, 61–70. For a summary of the case for the contemporary interest in Rome as the Gospel’s place of origin, and its rejection, see Marcus, *Mark*, 30–33.

Redaction critics, however, have focused upon the use of Galilee in the narrative. The Gospel begins in Galilee, where Jesus exercises his ministry. As he moves to Jerusalem the disciples become increasingly timid, and Jesus goes alone to the cross as the disciples flee. Yet the Gospel ends with the command from the young man in the tomb, recalling Jesus' promise of 14:28: he is going before them into Galilee (16:7). This message is not delivered (16:8), and thus the Markan community waits in Galilee, experiencing the absence of the Lord, waiting for his promised return. According to this reading, the Gospel was written either during or shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., somewhere in Galilee.<sup>49</sup> The social science critics locate the Gospel in a setting where the exploitation and suffering of the Jesus story is found in the life experience of the original readers of the Gospel. For example, Waetjen locates it somewhere in Syria, also early in the 70s of the first Christian century,<sup>50</sup> while Myers suggests that life in first-century Palestine best responds to the Markan narrative.<sup>51</sup>

Three elements must be taken into account and held together in these discussions.<sup>52</sup> In the first place, the syntax and the loanwords that indicate a Roman setting must be explained.<sup>53</sup> Second, there is a concern in the Gospel of Mark for the Gentile mission. Jesus heals a demoniac in Gentile territory and tells him to go to his hometown to announce what the Lord has done (see 5:1–20). After a bitter encounter with Israel (7:1–23) Jesus journeys outside the borders of Israel to the region of Tyre and Sidon, again to bring healing, this time to a Syrophenician woman (7:24–30). His passage from the region of Tyre and Sidon back to the eastern side of the lake deliberately keeps him in Gentile lands (see 7:31). There he again heals a Gentile, and for the first time in the narrative his actions are recognized by others—Gentiles—as the work of the expected Messiah (7:31–37). He immediately nourishes Gentiles, who “have come a long way” (8:1–10). As he defuses anxiety about the end of time, in the midst of many false signs, he tells disciples that “the gospel must first be preached to all the nations” (13:10). The end will come, however, and at that time the Son of Man “will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (13:27). At his death the veil that “hid” the Holy of Holies from the rest of the world is rent asunder (15:37–38) and a Roman centurion confesses that Jesus was the Son of God.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, although not all would agree, the discourse in Mark 13 presupposes that Jerusalem has fallen.<sup>55</sup> Many details *look back* to that dramatic experience for both Israel and the

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<sup>49</sup>Although differing in their approach to this issue, Marxsen (*Mark the Evangelist*, 54–116), N. Perrin (“Towards an Interpretation of the Gospel of Mark,” in *Christology and a Modern Pilgrimage* [ed. H. D. Betz; Claremont: Society of Biblical Literature, 1971], 1–78), T. J. Weeden (*Mark: Traditions in Conflict* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971]), and H. C. Kee (*Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark's Gospel* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977]) have adopted this position.

<sup>50</sup>Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power*, 1–26.

<sup>51</sup>Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 39–87.

<sup>52</sup>Some reader-oriented studies neglect these issues, but they must be raised. See, for example, van Iersel (*Reading Mark*, 15): “The fact that the author time and time again warns his audience so seriously of the danger of persecutions says much about their situation but little or nothing about the time when the book was written.” As one element among several, it may be a very helpful indicator of when the book was written.

<sup>53</sup>See J. Marcus, “The Jewish War and the *Sitz im Leben* of Mark,” *JBL* 111 (1992): 441–46.

<sup>54</sup>See Marcus, “The Jewish War,” 453–54; Pesch, *Markusevangelium*, 1:10–11.

<sup>55</sup>See Marcus, “The Jewish War,” 446–48. As Pesch (*Markusevangelium*, 1:14) remarks: “Thus the dating of the Gospel of Mark depends upon the interpretation of Mark 13.” (Here and throughout I have translated into English quotations from German and French works.) Myers (*Binding the*

early Christian church: false prophets (see 13:5–6; 21–22), wars and rumors of wars (see 13:7, 14–20), events that took place at the fall of the temple (13:14). Mark 13 is “rather like a window which allows a close view of Markan circumstances.”<sup>56</sup> The Gospel of Mark must have reached its final shape in the period just after 70 C.E., as the horror and significance of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple made its impact upon the Markan community.<sup>57</sup>

These three elements leave us with some hard facts, which can, in turn, lead to a suggestion (which nevertheless remains speculative) about the time and the place of the Gospel of Mark. I would regard the following details as hard facts:

1. The author is familiar with the Roman world, its language, and its mode of government.
2. The author and the community for whom he was writing were concerned about the mission to the Gentiles.
3. The community is exposed to suffering and persecution, and its members are probably discouraged by the failure of some to commit themselves, unto death, to the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>58</sup>
4. The Gospel was written shortly after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.

The traditional location of Rome has much to offer, but the background of the fall of Jerusalem to Mark 13 suggests a location closer to these events. Were the Roman Christians in need of severe warnings not to listen to false prophets, rising up in the midst of the post-war chaos to declare that the end time had come (see 13:5–6, 21–22)? Was it necessary to tell Roman Christians, who lived at the center of the known world, that they must calm their apocalyptic fever because before the final coming of the Son of Man the gospel must be preached to all the nations (see 13:10)? How real were *all* the threats of 13:11: “They will deliver you up to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake” (13:9)?<sup>59</sup> The Gospel of Mark never creates the impression that the storyteller and the community receiving the Gospel had a special interest in

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*Strong Man*, 39–87) dates the Gospel between 68–70. He determines this date through a number of sociocultural reflections that depend, on the one hand, on speculations about the situation of Palestine during those turbulent years, and on the other, through a reconstruction of ideological and social strategies that appear to have been established with one eye on the Gospel of Mark and the other on the relevance of the Gospel for the post-Reagan era in the United States. For an alternative reading of the pre-70 period in Palestine, see J. McLaren, *Turbulent Times? Josephus and Scholarship on Judea in the First Century C.E.* (JSPSup 29; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998). As Myers confesses: “This discussion has been intended to make the notion of socio-symbolic codes, so crucial to a political understanding of the Gospel, more meaningful to the reader” (p. 72). I suspect that the evangelist’s agenda may be playing second fiddle to Myers’s sociopolitical commitment.

<sup>56</sup>W. Kelber, *The Kingdom in Mark: A New Place and a New Time* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 110.

<sup>57</sup>Myers’s claim for a pre-70 dating, in his commentary on Mark 13 (see *Binding the Strong Man*, 324–53), is not supported by a satisfactory explanation of such crucial texts as 13:14 (“the desolating sacrilege where it ought not to be”). Interestingly, Myers’s radical reading of Mark turns at this point to the conservative work of J. A. T. Robinson (*Redating the New Testament* [London: SCM, 1976], 16) to speak vaguely of the siege of Jerusalem (see p. 335). On the importance of 13:14, see D. Lührmann, *Das Markusevangelium* (HNT 3; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1987), 5–6, and the full-scale study of W. A. Such, *The Abomination of Desolation in the Gospel of Mark: Its Historical Reference in Mark 13:14 and Its Impact in the Gospel* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1999).

<sup>58</sup>See Marcus, *Mark*, 28–29.

<sup>59</sup>Ernst (*Markus*, 21–22) hesitatingly opts for Rome as the place of its origin, but on pp. 22–23 correctly points to Mark 13 as the key to the issue of when it was written, some time shortly after 70. The time (after the destruction of Jerusalem) and the place (Rome?) need to be held together.

Rome or the Romans. Roman characters, even in the passion narrative, where they could have been drawn more deeply into the story, remain peripheral. They are there only when they have to be there. Matters Roman, whether they be Latin loanwords or Roman characters, remain extrinsic to the Markan story. Without the long-standing *tradition* concerning the Roman origins of the Gospel of Mark, there is little that would force a reader to think that this is a gospel concerned with “matters Roman.”<sup>60</sup>

I find it impossible to determine an exact location, region, or city where the Gospel might have first seen the light of day. I can only speculate and suggest a possible scenario. The might of Rome was felt in many parts of the Mediterranean world, and powerfully so in the recalcitrant states of Syria and Palestine. I suspect that the traditional location of the birth of Mark in the city of Rome leaves too many questions unresolved. Thus I would agree with Morna Hooker: “All we can say with certainty, therefore, is that the gospel was composed somewhere in the Roman Empire—a conclusion that scarcely narrows the field at all!”<sup>61</sup> I would, however, “narrow the field” to the extent that the place in the Roman Empire that produced the Gospel of Mark must have been reasonably close to Jerusalem. Reports of “wars and rumors of wars” (see 13:7) are reaching the ears of the Markan Christians. They know what the author means when he writes of “the desolating sacrilege set up where he ought not to be” (v. 14). They are wondering: is this the moment for the return of the Son of Man (vv. 7, 10, 13)? They are told: not yet, but that day will come. Be ready, and watch (vv. 24–37). For these reasons, I would hypothesize that the Markan community was somewhere in a broad area that might be called “southern Syria.”<sup>62</sup> The dating of the Gospel also plays a part in determining its likely place of origin. A date after 70 C.E. but probably before 75 C.E. is called for.<sup>63</sup> The latter date presupposes that the Gospel of Mark was available to both Matthew and Luke, who wrote some time between 80 and 90 C.E. Given the almost thirty years since the death of Jesus, wherever the precise location, these early Christians were involved in a mission to the Gentiles. A number of places in the Gospel provide evidence of this mission (see, for example, 5:1–20; 7:24–8:10; 13:10). This aspect of the Markan narrative may tip the balance in favor of southern Syria,<sup>64</sup> but we cannot be sure of the ethnic mix of Palestine in the 70s of the first Christian century. Northern Palestine may also have provided a missionary setting, but it makes Mark’s vagueness about Palestinian geography difficult to explain.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>Gnilka (*Markus*, 1:34) suggests that the Gospel was written in Rome, but is puzzled by this issue. He resolves it by claiming that Mark was written in Rome, but not for the Roman Christians.

<sup>61</sup>Hooker, *St. Mark*, 8. See also Lührmann (*Markusevangelium*, 7): “Mark and his reader may have lived anywhere in a region close to or distant from Palestine, perhaps in Syria. However, this cannot be proved. It may have been anywhere from the Mediterranean as far into the East as the Iran and Iraq of today.”

<sup>62</sup>See also Marcus, *Mark*, 33–37. See also, R. I. Rohrbach, “The Social Location of the Markan Audience,” *BTB* 23 (1993): 114–27.

<sup>63</sup>See also Marcus (*Mark*, 37–39), who suggests a time not earlier than 69 C.E. and not later than 74 C.E.

<sup>64</sup>Marcus (“The Jewish War,” 460–62) suggests “one of the Hellenistic cities” (perhaps even Pella) on the basis of the Gentile mission. As he says elsewhere, “A provenance close to Palestine, but not in it, is thus an attractive possibility” (idem, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God* [SBLDS 90; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986], 10). On literary grounds (reader-response), M. A. Beavis, *Mark’s Audience: The Literary and Social Setting of Mark 4:11–12* (JSNTSup 33; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989) suggests a Greco-Roman missionary context for the Markan community. See especially pp. 157–76.

<sup>65</sup>See Marcus, *The Mystery*, 10.

### The Plot of the Gospel of Mark

Unlike the readers of most “stories,” the original Christian readers and hearers of the Gospel of Mark knew the ending: Jesus was crucified and, they believed, raised from the dead. The following suggested plot of the Gospel of Mark traces the larger blocks of material and the smaller episodes that unfold within them according to a logic that leads inevitably toward the cross. The reader is led further into a story whose ending is known, yet is surprised along the way—and at the end. The plot as a whole is shot through with hints that look forward to the end of the story. The Gospel of Mark is unique among the gospels and unlike most other narratives in that the crises which emerge during its course are not resolved through a *dénouement* at the end of the story (Mark 16:1–8). Much is resolved, but a further crisis emerges that cannot be resolved by the story itself.<sup>66</sup> If I might anticipate one of the major conclusions of this commentary, this suggests that it might be resolved in the lives of the people reading the story. We should recall that in a good story the reader is told enough to be made curious without ever being given all the answers. Narrative texts keep promising the great prize of understanding—later.<sup>67</sup> The “later” of the Gospel of Mark, I will suggest, is the “now” of the Christian reader.

These principles provide us with a tool for understanding the emerging plot of a narrative. If we are to follow the strategies of the author as the plot unfolds, we must focus our attention upon elements in the narrative indicating major turning points in the story. These so-called textual markers indicate to the reader that the author is “up to something.” Initially one notices four significant turning points in the story. The Gospel begins (1:1), Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee (1:14–15), he announces his journey to Jerusalem and his forthcoming death and resurrection for the first time (8:31), and women discover an empty tomb (16:1–4). We have domesticated the gospel story to such an extent that we are not sufficiently aware of the dramatic nature of these turning points. As has been obvious since the days of Wrede, Schweitzer, and Schmidt, this “framework” was devised by the evangelist Mark, and its appearance in the first early Christian “gospel” was intentionally a theological statement. *Whatever the first readers knew of the life-story of Jesus of Nazareth was subverted by the Markan story. They were not familiar with this plot: Jesus’ presence in Galilee, his single journey to Jerusalem to be rejected, tried, and crucified, the resurrection, and the surprising silence of the women.* It saw the light of day for the first time when Mark invented it. It is this radical newness of the Markan story which must be kept in mind.<sup>68</sup> It is

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<sup>66</sup>A strong case for the influence of Greco-Roman tragedies upon the Markan plot has been argued by G. Bilezikian, *The Liberated Gospel: A Comparison between the Gospel of Mark and Greek Tragedy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), and B. Standaert, *L’Evangile selon Marc: Composition et genre littéraire* (Brugge: Sint-Andriesabdij, 1978). For a summary, see M. A. Beavis, *Mark’s Audience*, 31–35. See also the survey of studies of Mark’s genre, finally suggesting that the Gospel may have been written as a dramatic reading for a Christian liturgy, in Marcus, *Mark*, 64–69.

<sup>67</sup>See S. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (New Accents; London: Methuen, 1983), 125.

<sup>68</sup>See the important essay by E. Schweizer, “Mark’s Theological Achievement,” in *The Interpretation of Mark* (ed. W. Telford; IRT 7; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 42–63. W. H. Kelber (*The Oral and Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983]) pushes this to the limit. He rightly argues that Mark took a vivacious and living oral tradition and created something quite different with his “writing” (see pp. 44–139). But he argues that the movement from oral tradition to written gospel created a writ-

an original way of telling the story of Jesus, and its author must be credited with an equally original rationale for plotting the story in this way.

On the basis of the textual markers just mentioned, one can begin to trace the author's literary design:<sup>69</sup>

1. Mark 1:1–13 serves as a prologue, providing the reader with a great deal of information about God's beloved Son.
2. Through Mark 1:14–8:30 the words and deeds of Jesus' ministry increasingly force the question: who is this man (see 1:27, 45; 2:12; 3:22; 4:41; 5:20; 6:2–3, 48–50; 7:37)? Some accept him, some are indifferent, and many oppose him, but the question behind the story is: can he be the Messiah? In 8:29 Peter, in the name of the disciples, resolves the problem by confessing: "You are the Messiah." The guessing has come to an end. This section of the Gospel can be framed as a question: "Who is Jesus?" It closes with an initial response to the question with Jesus' warning Peter not to tell anyone of his being the expected Messiah (8:30). This may not be the whole truth about Jesus.
3. Mark 8:31–15:47 tells of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and his crucifixion in that city. One can sense that this part of the story forms a "second half" of Mark's literary and theological presentation of the story of Jesus. Mark 1:14–8:30 made it clear that Jesus is the Messiah (8:29), but suggested that this designation may not be adequate by itself (8:30). The second half of the story shows that Jesus is the Messiah who will be revealed as Son of God on the cross, the suffering and vindicated Son of Man (8:31; 9:31; 10:32–33; 13:26; 14:61–62). In 15:39 a Roman centurion confesses: "Truly this man was God's Son!" The suffering Christ is truly the Son of God. The mystery has come to an end. Mark 8:31–15:57 can be called "The suffering and vindicated Son of Man: Christ and Son of God."
4. Many questions raised by the story remain unresolved. The disciples have fled (see 14:50) and Jesus has cried out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (15:34). Jesus' question is resolved in the concluding story of women visiting an empty tomb. In 16:1–8 the reader learns that God has not forsaken his Son. He has been raised (see 16:6). But the problem of the failing disciples is yet to be resolved. They are to go into Galilee, there they will see him (v. 7). The women, frightened by all that they have seen and heard, flee and say nothing to anyone (v. 8).

The identification of these major sections in the narrative rests upon the obvious textual markers at 1:1, 1:14–15, 8:31, and 16:1–4.<sup>70</sup> Other markers indicate that the two larger blocks of material, 1:14–8:30 and 8:31–15:47, can be further subdivided. The first half of the Gospel establishes relationships as well as raises questions concerning the person of Jesus. The Gospel of Mark is not only about Jesus, Christ and Son of God (see 1:1, 11). It is

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ten text which was a contradiction of what went before. The thesis is overstated, but does underscore the radical newness of the Gospel of Mark. For a sympathetic use of Kelber's insights, see Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 91–109. For a critique, see E. S. Malbon, "Text and Contexts: Interpreting the Disciples in Mark," *Sem* 62 (1993): 81–102. This essay is now available in Malbon, *In the Company of Jesus*, 100–30.

<sup>69</sup>For a similar focus on "textual markers" (which he calls "text signals"), see van Iersel, *Reading Mark*, 18–30. Van Iersel follows the earlier work of Standaert (*L'Évangile selon Marc: Composition et genre littéraire*), which uses textual markers to trace a chiasmic structure across the Gospel of Mark and within its single sections. See also A. Stock, *Call to Discipleship*, 47–53.

<sup>70</sup>Beavis (*Mark's Audience*, 163–65; see also 126–29) ignores the textual markers to produce a structure based upon an interplay between alternating blocks of "narrative" and "teaching" material that would have appealed to a Greco-Roman readership.

equally about the challenge of “following” a suffering Son of Man to Jerusalem—and beyond, as he promises resurrection and life to those who lose their lives for his sake (see 8:38–9:1). It is as much about how others, especially the disciples, respond to Jesus as it is about Jesus himself. There are indications that the first half of the Gospel has been shaped as three units, each one focusing upon a response to Jesus.<sup>71</sup>

On three occasions across 1:14–8:30 the narrator makes a general statement (called a “summary”) about Jesus’ ministry that introduces a series of events illustrating that activity (see 1:14–15; 3:7–12; 6:6a). While the Gospel of Mark contains a number of such summaries of Jesus’ ministry (see, for example, 1:39, 45b; 4:33–34; 6:53–56; 9:30–31; 10:1),<sup>72</sup> these three are unique in that each is immediately followed by material that deals with disciples and discipleship (1:16–20; 3:13–19; 6:6b–13). Further episodes follow until, serving as a climax, three different audiences respond to the words and deeds of Jesus. Two of the responses are negative: 3:6 (the Pharisees and the Herodians) and 6:1–6a (people from “his own country”). The third is a misunderstanding: 8:29 (Peter, responding on behalf of the disciples). Each of the three summaries begins a narrative block. Each leads directly into passages that deal with disciples, and each of the three responses concludes that section of the story. These three sections unfold as follows:

1. In 1:14–15 we read a summary of the ministry of Jesus: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.’” This summary is immediately followed by the account of the vocation of the first disciples (1:16–20). Jesus then exercises his ministry in Galilee, chiefly at Capernaum (1:21–3:6), until representatives of the Jewish people, the political leaders and the religious authorities, respond to him: “The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him” (3:6). This narrative unit (1:14–3:6) can be entitled: *Jesus and the Jews*.<sup>73</sup>
2. In 3:7–12 we find a lengthy general statement about Jesus’ Galilean ministry. It concludes with the following summary: “He had cured many so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him. Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, ‘You are the Son of God!’ But he sternly ordered them not to make him known” (3:10–12). This summary leads into the account of Jesus’ institution of the twelve (3:13–19). But Jesus’ ministry meets opposition from his family and from Israel (3:20–30). He institutes new principles for belonging to his family (3:31–35) and teaches through parables (4:1–34) and a stunning series of miracles (4:35–5:43). When he returns to his home-

<sup>71</sup>For this proposal, which many have followed, see Schweizer, “Mark’s Theological Achievement,” 46–54. For a more detailed analysis, resulting in the overall structure followed by this study, see A. George and P. Grelot, eds., *Introduction à la Bible*, tome 3, *Nouveau Testament* (7 vols.; Paris: Desclée, 1976–1986), 2:48–51.

<sup>72</sup>The study of the summaries has played an important part in recent Markan scholarship. See, for example, C. W. Hedrick, “The Role of ‘Summary Statements’ in the Composition of the Gospel of Mark: A Dialog with Karl Schmidt and Norman Perrin,” *NovT* 26 (1984): 289–311 (now available in *The Composition of Mark’s Gospel: Selected Studies from Novum Testamentum* [ed. D. E. Orton; Brill’s Readers in Biblical Studies 3; Leiden: Brill, 1999], 121–430). See also E. Best, *The Temptation and the Passion: The Markan Soteriology* (2d ed.; SNTSMS 2; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 63–102. Redactional studies of Mark have concentrated on these “summaries” because here, claim the redaction critics, Mark’s hand is most obvious.

<sup>73</sup>Care must be taken with the use of the expression “the Jews.” For Mark, the first part of his story of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee is entirely focused upon a Jewish region and the Jewish leadership. This will be broadened in 5:1–21 and also in later episodes (see 7:24–8:10). It is in this sense that the expression “the Jews” is used.

town, his own people reject him: “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him” (6:3). Jesus was “amazed at their unbelief” (6:6a). This narrative unit (3:7–6:6a) can be entitled: *Jesus and his own*.

3. Following Jesus’ rejection in his hometown, we find another brief general summary about his ministry in Galilee: “Then he went about among the villages teaching” (6:6b). Jesus’ sending out the Twelve on a mission that parallels his own follows immediately (6:6b–13). The narrative is now marked by increasing hostility between Jesus and the Jews (see 7:1–23), and a deeper involvement of his disciples, his new family, with his ministry (see 6:7–13, 30–44; 8:1–10). It draws to a close as the question that has been lurking behind the narrative from 1:14 is broached by Jesus himself: “Who do people say that I am?” (8:27) . . . “Who do you say that I am” (v. 28). Peter responds: “You are the Messiah” (v. 29). The reader, informed by the narrator at 1:1, has known from the outset that Jesus is the Messiah. However, the characters in the story, and especially the disciples, have had to stumble to this point on the basis of Jesus’ words and actions. The question “Who is Jesus?” has been answered. There is a sense in which Peter is correct, but Jesus’ response to the disciples (“them”) sounds a warning bell and opens the door to the second part of the Gospel: “He charged them to tell no one about him” (8:30). This narrative unit (6:6b–8:30) can be entitled: *Jesus and the disciples*.

The second half of the Gospel (8:31–15:47) is provocatively introduced by Jesus’ commanding his disciples to silence in 8:30 and predicting his future death and resurrection in Jerusalem in 8:31. Textual markers across 8:31–15:47 point to a further threefold articulation of the suffering and finally vindicated Son of Man, the Messiah and Son of God. There are obvious changes of place, characters, and situations across this second half of the story.

1. Mark 8:31–10:52 reports Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem (8:22–52), largely focused upon Jesus’ teaching of his oncoming death and resurrection (8:31; 9:31; 10:32–33) and his instruction of increasingly recalcitrant disciples. In this section *Jesus and the disciples journey to Jerusalem*.
2. He enters Jerusalem (11:1–11), brings all temple practice to an end (11:12–24), encounters and silences Israel’s religious authorities (11:27–12:44), and prophesies the end of the Holy City and the world (13:1–37). This description of Jesus’ ministry in Jerusalem and its temple can be entitled: *Endings in Jerusalem*.
3. The ministry is over as Jesus accepts his passion and death (14:1–15:47). The classical description of these episodes retains its cogency: *The Passion of Jesus*.

But there is more to the architecture of the Markan narrative. The evangelist designed the first half of his gospel asking the question, “Who is Jesus?” The second half responds: “the suffering and vindicated Son of Man, the Christ and Son of God.” However, these two “halves” of the plot overlap. Narrative units are not separated by brick walls. One flows into the other, looks back to issues already mentioned, and hints at themes yet to come.<sup>74</sup> Peter’s confession of faith in Mark 8:29 might mark the closure of “The Mystery of the

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<sup>74</sup>For extensive consideration of this phenomenon in the Gospel of Mark, see J. Dewey, “Mark as Interwoven Tapestry: Forecasts and Echoes for a Listening Audience,” *CBQ* 53 (1991): 225–36; E. S. Malbon, “Echoes and Foreshadowings in Mark 4–8: Reading and Rereading,” *JBL* 112 (1993): 211–30. S. Kuthirakkattel (*The Beginning of Jesus’ Ministry according to Mark’s Gospel (1,14–3,6): A Redaction Critical Study* [AnBib 123; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1990]) offers detailed support for the structure adopted above (see pp. 26–60). However, there is little allowance for “echoing and foreshadowing” in his analysis.

Messiah,” but a theme of “blindness” has emerged in 8:22–26 in the strange story of a blind man at Bethsaida who has his sight restored in stages. This theme will be resumed in 10:46–52 where a further story of a man coming to sight is reported: the story of blind Bartimaeus. Between these two stories of the miraculous cure of blind men, Jesus speaks of the upcoming death and resurrection of the Son of Man (see 8:31; 9:31; 10:32–35), an issue that has also lurked behind the events reported in 1:14–8:30 (see 3:6; 7:14–29; 8:11–15). Surrounding the passion predictions, Jesus instructs his increasingly obtuse disciples, who will not or cannot understand what it means to follow him (see 8:32–33; 9:33–37; 10:36–45). An earlier accusation of blindness also comes into play. After the second multiplication of the loaves and fishes (8:1–10) Jesus asks his dull disciples: “Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? *Having eyes do you not see*, and having ears do you not hear?” (8:18).<sup>75</sup> These few examples of the overlapping themes of Jesus’ destiny and the failure of the disciples—equally significant textual markers for the reader—although not as important *structurally* as 1:1, 1:14–15, 8:31, 11:1–11; 14:1–2, and 16:1–4—are further indications of Mark’s artistic skill. The following reading of the Gospel will highlight the regular appearance of these simple but effective literary techniques.

### The Literary Shape of the Gospel of Mark

We are now in a position to suggest an overall literary shape for the Gospel of Mark. This structure, based upon the above considerations of the plot of the narrative, will determine the basis of the following interpretation. It will also allow us to see, before we begin our detailed reading, the guiding hand of a good, although uncomplicated storyteller, leading readers who know the ending of the story through a new telling of the story that transforms that well-known ending. Mark has faced a problem stated some twenty years before the Gospel appeared: “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than any human strength” (1 Cor 1:22–25). Mark attempts to solve the scandal of the cross by means of a story which begins as “the good news” that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (1:1, 11), and ends with a scream from a cross and an agonizing death, an empty tomb, and an Easter message that is not delivered (15:33–16:8).

Many object to attempts to find “divisions” and “sections” in the Gospel of Mark. One of our best commentators, Morna Hooker, remarks as she makes her own first division at 3:7: “Most commentators make a major break at this point, but such divisions are largely arbitrary. There are plenty of links with previous sections.”<sup>76</sup> There are certainly links with

<sup>75</sup> See Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 110–11. For a comprehensive study of the two “halves” of the Gospel, showing that the break comes between 8:30 and 8:31, see Q. Quesnell, *The Mind of Mark: Interpretation and Method through the Exegesis of Mark 6,52* (AnBib 38; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969), 126–76. R. E. Watts (*Isaiah’s New Exodus and Mark* [WUNT 2. Reihe 88; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1997], 124–32) also suggests that 8:22–26 serves as a “hinge” in a section he identifies as 8:22/27–10:45/11:1, on the basis of its parallels with the new exodus theme of a journey.

<sup>76</sup> Hooker, *St. Mark*, 109. Similar remarks recur throughout her commentary. Dennis Nineham is even more skeptical: “Scholars are looking for something that is not there and attributing

what went before, and there are also pointers to what is yet to come.<sup>77</sup> But that is one of the many skills of a good storyteller. Nothing is compartmentalized, but a steady and carefully articulated argument unfolds in story form as follows:<sup>78</sup>

1. Prologue: The beginning (1:1–13)
2. Who is Jesus? (1:14–8:30)
  - (a) Jesus and the Jews (1:14–3:6)
  - (b) Jesus and his own (3:7–6:6a)
  - (c) Jesus and the disciples (6:6b–8:30)
3. The suffering and vindicated Son of Man: Christ and Son of God (8:31–15:47)
  - (a) On the way from blindness to sight (8:31–10:52)
  - (b) The symbolic end of Israel and the world (11:1–13:37)
  - (c) The crucifixion of the Son of Man, the Christ and Son of God (14:1–15:47)
4. Epilogue: A new beginning (16:1–8)

At several places in the Gospel the logic of movement from one pericope to the next is somewhat hard to follow—evidence that pre-Markan sources have been put together in a way that leaves an uneven final product. My reading of the Gospel of Mark will note these difficulties, and even some of the attempts to resolve them, but will also involve two further principles. First, whoever was responsible for the final form of the Gospel (and I will call him “Mark”) attempted to write a coherent story. Second, every reader strives “even if unconsciously, to fit everything together in a consistent pattern.”<sup>79</sup> I will trace literary and theological connections across the Gospel that may be judged as the striving of this reader to impose his *own* consistent pattern. However, it is respect and admiration for a

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to the Evangelist a higher degree of self-conscious purpose that he in fact possessed”; *The Gospel of St. Mark* (PNTC; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), 29. For a survey of the multiplicity of conflicting opinions on the structure of the Gospel, see Dewey, “Mark as Interwoven Tapestry,” 221–25.

<sup>77</sup>The number and variety of “structures” proposed for the Gospel of Mark warn against rigid division into self-contained units. For a helpful survey, see H. Baarlink, *Anfängliches Evangelium: Ein Beitrag zur näheren Bestimmung der theologischen Motive im Markusevangelium* (Kampen: Kok, 1977), 73–83. For a useful, but overcomplicated, attempt to show the interplay of themes across the two halves of the Gospel, see Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 111–17.

<sup>78</sup>There is widespread agreement that the scene at Caesarea Philippi (8:27–30) is something of a watershed at the center of the narrative, and that this event divides the Gospel into two even halves. Many, however, influenced by the “inclusion” between 8:22–26 and 10:46–52 (two cures of blind men), end the first half of the Gospel at 8:21. See, for example, Marcus, *Mark*, 63–64. The above literary shape understands 1:1–13 as a prologue (widely accepted) and 16:1–8 as a conclusion, reading 16:7, “there you will see him as he said” (see 14:28), as a resumption of the theme of “beginning” from the prologue (see 1:1). See also Bilezikian, *Liberated Gospel*, 131–34, and Beavis, *Mark’s Audience*, 128–29. Standaert (*Marc*, 82–108), followed by Stock (*Call to Discipleship*) and van Iersel (*Mark*), reads 1:1 as a title, 1:2–13 as a prologue, and 15:42–16:8 as a matching epilogue. Besides the literary features that Bilezikian, Standaert, and Beavis have highlighted (influenced by Greco-Roman drama), theological considerations have informed my analysis. Baarlink (*Anfängliches Evangelium*, 83–107) has developed a literary structure similar at many points to the one proposed, but devoting more attention to how one section leads to another. He denies that 16:1–8 is an epilogue (p. 107), as it is part of a fully integrated message. I agree, but suggest that this integration is its theological relationship with 1:1–13. In this sense, 16:1–8 is an epilogue that takes the reader back to the prologue.

<sup>79</sup>W. Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 283.

“responsible Mark” that inspires this striving.<sup>80</sup> “Every element in the story is there for a reason, which we will discover only by combing back and forth through the text until it yields its own narrative coherence.”<sup>81</sup>

### A Theology of Jesus and His Followers

The story of Jesus, as it is told throughout the Gospel of Mark, is a story of human failure: the apparent failure of Jesus, the failure of the disciples, and the failure of Israel. But it closes with a loud, clear message; in his journey away from the absolutes of a human success story, Jesus of Nazareth has led the way into the only enduring success story: resurrection. The Christology of the Gospel of Mark is clear: Jesus, the Son, wins through to life by his willingness to lay himself open to the ways of God, no matter how much these ways may question the absolutes of history and culture. In his acceptance of God’s will, through death on the cross, Jesus is Messiah and Son of God. The Roman centurion admits this as he gazes upon the crucified Jesus (see 15:39).

Much of this gospel’s story is about Jesus’ attempts to draw other people into a following of this way—a loss of self in the cross, a service and a receptivity that produces life (see 8:22–10:52). What of these disciples? What of the women? The disciples, whose following of Jesus had been marked by fear once Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem (see 9:30–32; 10:32; 14:51–52) has ended in flight: “And they all forsook him and fled” (14:50). It appears, however, that this will be resolved as the women are commanded to take the Easter message to the failed disciples: “But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you” (16:7). But the last word belongs to the storyteller: “And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:8).

As we look back from our comfortable position of many centuries of Christian life and practice, it appears extraordinary that the women responded with terror, flight, and silence. This, we might claim, is a most unsatisfactory conclusion to a gospel that claims that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (see 1:1, 11; 9:7; 15:39). From our knowledge of the gospel tradition as a whole, we recall that Matthew, Luke, and John have the women report the events of the empty tomb, and the disciples, seeing the risen Lord, are restored to discipleship (see Matt 28:5–10, 16–20; Luke 24:8–12, 36–49; John 20:17–29). The Pauline record of these events is similar (see 1 Cor 15:3–8). None of this is found in the Gospel of Mark. At points the Matthean and Lukan narratives, although *written* after the Gospel of Mark, are probably closer to what actually took place: the account of the women’s report to the disciples is one such instance (see also John 20:2).<sup>82</sup> It is the Markan theological agenda that has created the startling silence of the women, not the events surrounding “the third day.”<sup>83</sup> Although later scribes added more comfortable

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<sup>80</sup>For some hermeneutical reflections on this process, see F. J. Moloney, “To Teach the Text: The New Testament in a New Age,” *Pacifica* 11 (1998): 159–80.

<sup>81</sup>Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 109.

<sup>82</sup>See H. von Campenhausen, “The Events of Easter and the Empty Tomb,” in *Tradition and Life in the Church: Essays and Lectures in Church History* (London: Collins, 1968), 42–89, esp. 54–77.

<sup>83</sup>The bold originality and uniqueness of the Gospel of Mark as a literary initiative needs to be affirmed. The “manipulation” of the tradition in 16:8 is but one outstanding example of this originality.

endings,<sup>84</sup> Mark ended his gospel with an account of an empty tomb (16:1–4), and a resurrection proclamation (vv. 5–7) in the midst of terror and flight (v. 8). It appears that the story of the failure of the disciples is maintained to the last line of the Gospel. The women had not joined the disciples' flight in 14:50. They were present at the cross (15:40) and saw where he was buried (15:47). But in the end they share the fear (see 10:32) and the flight (see 14:50) of the disciples (16:8).

Throughout the Gospel of Mark it has been the disciples who, in a "this-worldly" way of judging events, had the good sense to oppose Jesus' suicidal journey to Jerusalem and to death (see especially 8:32–33). They were wise to make a few plans about how things should be organized when Jesus finally made his coup and reestablished the Davidic kingdom (see especially 9:34 and 10:35–37). Even their eventual flight (14:50), Peter's denials (14:66–72), and the flight of the women from an empty tomb (16:8) are sensible approaches to very uncomfortable and unpromising situations. Yet Mark writes "good news" (1:1, 15; 8:35): the death and resurrection of Jesus reverse the common sense of this world. The suffering Son of Man has been vindicated. The crucified Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, while the sensible approaches of the disciples and the women lead to failure, fear, and flight. The Markan resurrection story proclaims that the way of Jesus is the way to victory, while the way of the worldly-wise leads into terror and flight (see 14:50 and 16:8).

But problems still remain for the reader, for the disciples of later generations who take this text in hand as a word of life proclaimed in the church. The terrible question of the crucified Jesus (15:34) is resolved by the action of God in his resurrection (16:6). But what of the terror of the disciples and the women? The Gospel ends with flight and terror—yet it also ends with a promise. Even to the worldly-wise there is a word of hope in the midst of their failure and terror: "But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you into Galilee; there you will see him as he told you" (16:7). Do the terror and flight of the women thwart the promise of an eventual encounter with the risen Lord in Galilee? Is it possible that the story of the disciples, women and men, characters in the story, has been told in this way to issue a challenge to the story of the disciples, women and men, who are the readers of the story?

## Conclusion

Only a more detailed analysis of the Gospel will answer that question. Today, almost two thousand years after the events reported in the story, there are still readers of the story of Jesus as it is found in the Gospel of Mark. This must say something as we go on struggling to be followers of Jesus and celebrating Easter. However complete the failure of the women reported at the end of the Gospel (16:8), the promise of 16:7 took place. There was a Galilee encounter for the failed disciples, and the church rose from the first disciples' failure and flight. There would be no Gospel of Mark unless the original writer and addressees of this particular life story of Jesus believed that such was the case. The Gospel of Mark proclaims this message to frightened and fleeing disciples of all times.

The interpretation that follows attempts to describe how the story of Jesus, as it is told in the Gospel of Mark, is not a dusty page from the past reflecting the experience of a

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<sup>84</sup> Our present 16:9–20 is only one of several such endings found in the ancient manuscripts. See chapter 10, pp. 355–62.

remote Christian community. Much less is it a gospel proclaiming the “absence of Jesus” to fearful disciples struggling in the midst of a heresy that avoided the implications of following a crucified Son of Man, waiting for the Parousia.<sup>85</sup> While Mark has no illusions about the ambiguity of the human condition, and ultimately about the ambiguity of a church made up of failing and terrified men and women, the Markan Jesus nevertheless proclaims, in the midst of that terror: “I will go before you into Galilee. There you will see me” (14:28; see 16:7). A reading of this mysterious gospel challenges us to hope in the midst of ambiguity and failure.

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<sup>85</sup>This is a caricature of the position taken by important American redaction critics who, under the leadership of the late Norman Perrin in Chicago, carry Marxsen’s suggestions further. See N. Perrin, *The Resurrection Narratives: A New Approach* (London: SPCK, 1977); Weeden, *Traditions in Conflict*; J. R. Donahue, *Are You the Christ? The Trial Narrative in the Gospel of Mark* (SBLDS 10; Missoula: Society of Biblical Literature, 1973); W. H. Kelber, *The Kingdom in Mark*; W. H. Kelber, ed., *The Passion in Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976). For detailed examinations and critiques of this perspective, see J. D. Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark’s Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) and E. Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (JSNTSup 4; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981).