
Introduction

Very possibly the oldest written account of Jesus' ministry that we possess, the Gospel of Mark is a vivid and fast-paced writing that holds the interest of the popular reader and the biblical scholar alike. When Christians first began discussions about drawing up a list of writings that would be regarded as authoritative for Christian faith (a discussion beginning perhaps in the middle of the second century), the Gospel of Mark was among the first writings selected for inclusion in this list and is today, of course, still regarded as one of the four "canonical," or authoritative, written portraits of Jesus in the New Testament. For these and other reasons (some of which will be discussed in the following pages) the Gospel of Mark is an important document and well repays the time spent in studying it.

The purpose of this commentary includes encouraging and making more profitable the study of Mark for readers with little or no formal training in biblical and theological subjects. The translation referred to in this commentary, the New International Version, is a recent but already widely used version of the Bible in modern English. The discussion in the commentary, however, is based on my own direct study of the Greek text of Mark.

Before we deal with the contents of Mark in detail, however, we shall, in this introductory section, look at some more general information gathered to orient the reader toward a more intelligent study of this lively story of Jesus.

Mark and the Other Gospels

Mark is one of four New Testament writings that we call Gospels, and there are still other writings from the ancient church that are described today by the same term. In order to appreciate properly the Gospel of Mark, it is helpful to see something of the relationship of this writing to these other Gospels. First, we

shall look at Mark and the other canonical Gospels in the New Testament.

An examination of the four canonical Gospels will show that, though all four obviously have many features in common, Matthew, Mark, and Luke have many specific similarities, and John seems somewhat more distinctive. The similarities among the first three Gospels are so striking that most scholars think that some kind of literary dependence must be postulated. The majority of New Testament scholars believe that Mark was the first of these Gospels and that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a major source. This view has been disputed, especially in recent years, and the attempt to explain the similarities and differences among the first three Gospels is a continuing matter for scholarly activity among some Bible specialists. The debate about the relationship of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke (called the Synoptic Problem) need not detain us here. We are more interested in noting simply the basic similarities and differences between Mark and the other Gospel writings.

The characteristic that unites all four New Testament Gospels is the presentation of the ministry of Jesus, describing him in ways that accord with Christian faith. He is, for example, described as the fulfillment of Old Testament (OT) promises of a God-appointed figure (Messiah) who would represent and carry out salvation for Israel and for all nations. The Gospels use titles such as Son of God, Christ (Messiah), and Lord, and consistently portray Jesus as sent by God. This sort of portrayal of Jesus means that writers of the Gospels present Jesus for the purpose of encouraging faith in him; they are not simply trying to give a documentary account for historical study.

Although emphasis on the ministry of Jesus characterizes all the canonical Gospels, Mark can be distinguished from the other Synoptic Gospels (Matthew and Luke) by the absence of a birth story and genealogy and by a smaller amount of material containing the teachings of Jesus. In the ancient church, Mark was frequently described as an abbreviated form of Matthew, and it is easy to see how this impression could have arisen.

In spite of these major differences (and several smaller ones) between Mark and the other Synoptic Gospels, nevertheless it

is clear that all three are very much alike in certain respects. Scholars have shown, for example, that all three pursue basically the same narrative of Jesus' ministry. There are variations among the Synoptic Gospels in the ordering of incidents and sayings, and there are individual features in one or another of the Gospels that "interrupt" this basic narrative outline (such as Matthew's block of sayings material in chaps. 5-7, for example), but Mark represents, on the whole, the narrative of Jesus' ministry shared by all three Synoptics. So, although the scholars debate the question of whether Mark was the earliest Gospel written, it is plain that Mark represents the "basic" Gospel writing. Indeed, it is very fitting to recommend that one begin studying the Gospels by looking at Mark.

In a later section of this Introduction we shall examine more closely the distinguishing characteristics of Mark over against the other canonical Gospels, but these are not the only writings that are called Gospels. Additional writings, usually called apocryphal Gospels, appeared in the early church but were not included in the New Testament (NT). These writings appeared later than the canonical Gospels and often seem to have been written to some degree in imitation of them. A number of these writings survive and are available in English translation, making comparison of them with the NT Gospels an easy and fascinating procedure.¹ Several of these apocryphal Gospels show a great concern with the childhood of Jesus and contain many accounts of miraculous deeds attributed to him during his infancy and childhood, accounts that are certainly pure invention. This concentration on the childhood of Jesus distinguishes several of the apocryphal Gospels from the canonical ones.

Another kind of apocryphal Gospel consists of sayings of Jesus with little or no narrative framework, and in such a writing as the Gospel of Thomas, one is given what are presented as revelations of Jesus spoken to his disciples after his resurrection. This sort of Gospel seems to have been popular among groups of Christians deemed heretical by the "great church" (the Christians who won the right to be called "orthodox") and seems to have been a vehicle for attributing to Jesus sayings that supported their religious views. Thus, characteristic features of this sort of

writing—a preoccupation with the sayings of Jesus to the exclusion of narrative, the absence of a narrative of Jesus' death, the claim to be delivering (secret) revelations of the risen Jesus—all set these apocryphal "Gospels" apart from the canonical Gospels. Indeed, if one uses the NT Gospels as models of what qualifies a writing to be called by the description Gospel, it is questionable whether these documents really qualify for the same label.

In addition to studying the Gospels of the NT in comparison with one another and with the later, apocryphal Gospels, scholars also compare them with non-Christian writings of the ancient Greco-Roman world. This sort of study requires a great deal of specialized knowledge of the Gospels and ancient literature, and there is a continuing debate in recent times as to whether the Gospels are to be likened to biographical writings of the ancient period. We shall not attempt to review this complex discussion here, and we shall by no means try to formulate a judgment on the issue involved. It may be helpful for the reader to know, however, that even among those scholars who argue that the Gospels *are* a kind of ancient biographical writing, there is the admission that they are somewhat distinctive. The Gospels must certainly be distinguished from *modern* biographical writings by their lack of attention to the development of Jesus and by their close connection with the preaching and teaching activity and interests of the churches of their own time. The impetus for writing the Gospels did not spring from biographical interests, at least as we today would know them, but from a desire to encourage and shape faith in Jesus. Therefore, while it is important for scholars to study the Gospels against the background of the ancient literature from the Greco-Roman world, it remains a fact that the most important context for understanding the Gospels is the life of the early church and the nature of its faith.

The Circumstances for Mark's Gospel

The opening verse of Mark's writing connects his work with the "gospel," the preaching of Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God. When speaking of the circumstances for Mark's Gospel writing, therefore, we must begin with the life of the early church, especially its presentation of Jesus in preaching and in the in-

struction of converts. Mark wrote his Gospel because first there was a church that built its life upon the ministry of Jesus.

This preaching and teaching activity of the early church provides not only the occasion for Mark's Gospel but also much of the explanation for the actual contents of his book. For several decades now, scholars have seen in all the canonical Gospels evidences of the earlier, and primarily oral, use of tradition about Jesus in the early church. Form criticism is the name given to the study of the Gospels conducted with a view to describing the kinds of tradition about Jesus that may have been used by the authors of the Gospels in preparing their own accounts. This line of study begins by noting the kinds of material in our present Gospels—for example, miracle stories, parables, and "pronouncement stories" (in which a short narrative leads to some pithy statement of Jesus); it then analyzes the individual units of material to describe how they may have been affected by the churches that transmitted and used this material. Though scholars who pursue this research are by no means in agreement on all points, all would concur that the Gospels contain material about Jesus that was used and transmitted in the early church primarily because this material was useful for the ongoing life of the church in such matters as proclamation of Jesus, instruction on ethical matters, and debates with other religious groups (such as Judaism).

The above remarks provide a brief description of the general circumstances for Mark's Gospel, but can we be more specific as to why, when, and where this particular early Christian writing came into being? The answers to these questions about Mark's Gospel are not easy to come by, primarily because the author does not directly give us information of this kind. The document itself gives no name for the author, no date of writing, and no place or reason for the writing. (Contrast this with the opening remarks in Luke 1:1-4.) This means that the attempt to supply this kind of information for Mark must, of necessity, involve a very close scrutiny of the document itself for any indirect clues, and as one might suspect, the interpretation of these clues involves both scholarly sophistication and a great deal of judgment. For this reason, scholars are not in agreement about *any* of the specific circumstances for this writing! In view of this, therefore, we shall have to remain tentative in suggesting answers to

the questions here. It should be of no small comfort to the general reader and the scholar alike that the author did not apparently think that such specific information was essential for an understanding of his book, otherwise he surely would have included it.

Since at least the second century of the Christian era, it has been suggested that the author of Mark was John Mark, the relative of Barnabas (Acts 12:12, 25), and that he wrote his Gospel in Rome, basing it in some way on the preaching of the Apostle Peter. This is still the view of some scholars, though it must be admitted that the evidence is little more than early church tradition. Some have seen a very indirect reference to the author in the “young man” mentioned in Mark 14:51–52, but there is no hint within the document that the incident is intended to be taken this way. It may seem strange, or even disconcerting at first, but we shall probably never know for sure who penned this—perhaps the first—written Gospel. Because the name of the author is finally uncertain, most scholars today use the name Mark simply as a convenient way of referring to the author of this anonymous document, and in the commentary we shall do the same. In any case, far more important than the name of the author is what can be gleaned from the book about the author’s purposes and emphases and, perhaps, the setting of this writing.

To begin with the obvious, the author wrote for Greek-speaking readers, for this is the language of the original text. More specifically, the first readers appear to have been unfamiliar with the Semitic languages of Palestine (Aramaic and Hebrew), because the writer pauses to interpret phrases in these languages when he employs them (see 5:41; 7:11, 34; 10:46; 15:22, 34). Further, the writer explains Jewish customs and religious groups to his readers, indicating that they were not residents of Palestine and were probably not Jews (see 7:3–4; 12:18; 14:12). All this is, however, only slightly helpful, telling us only what the original readers were *not*. The only positive conclusion to draw is that Mark wrote for gentile Christians located somewhere outside of Palestine. Attempts to locate the Gospel more specifically have not won wide acceptance. This does mean, however, that the book’s historical circumstance reflects the spread of Christianity among the Gentiles, the development that changed the Christian move-

ment from what must have appeared at first as a Jewish sect into a separate religion.

The most direct information about this development in its early stages is contained in the Letters of Paul in the NT, and several scholars have pointed out in some detail the similarities between vocabulary and themes in Mark and in Paul's writing. It is our purpose here not to illustrate any direct connection between Mark and Paul but only to indicate that this Gospel was probably written for Christians like those addressed in Paul's Letters and that it is to be seen as part of the movement of Christianity out into the larger Greco-Roman world of the first Christian century.

Scholarly discussion of the date of Mark revolves around when and whether to place the book in relation to the revolt of the Jews against the Romans in A.D. 66-72. Mark 13:14-20 prophesies great turmoil in Judea in language borrowed from the OT—"When you see 'the abomination that causes desolation' standing where it does not belong . . ." (see Dan. 9:27). Some scholars are convinced that no such prophecy could have been uttered by Jesus, that the passage refers to the siege and capture of Jerusalem by the Roman army (A.D. 67-70), and that the passage was written in the form of a prophecy after the events had taken place. According to these scholars, the Gospel of Mark was probably written in A.D. 70 or shortly thereafter. Other scholars agree that the passage does not stem from Jesus but argue that its somewhat veiled language indicates that it was written shortly before the conquest of Jerusalem had been completed, placing Mark sometime during the A.D. 67-70 siege. Still other scholars find no good reason for doubting that such a prophecy of divine judgment by military destruction could have been uttered by Jesus some thirty-five to forty years before the Jewish revolt. Further, they argue that details in the passage may in fact indicate that the prophecy *did* originate well before the war in Judea. Such details include the fact that the turmoil prophesied is not described clearly but only in words borrowed from OT prophetic passages and the interesting fact that the advice given, to flee to the Judean hills, was not what refugees of the Jerusalem siege did, because the hills surrounding Jerusalem were controlled by the Romans. These scholars conclude that the date of the composition of Mark cannot be determined with any precision but that

it is probably to be placed sometime between A.D. 50 and 70. It is probably best to avoid becoming preoccupied with the question of exactly when or where Mark was written, since all discussion of these matters seems somewhat inconclusive and based upon intricate judgments about the Gospel and the whole history of the first century.² For our purposes, we shall allow for the writing of Mark any time between A.D. 50 and 75, as I see no compelling basis for being more precise here.

Just as there is no direct indication of who the author was or when he wrote, so there is no statement in the book as to why it was written. Here, also, conclusions about the author's purposes can be based only on a careful study of what the book contains. (Compare the explicit statements of intention in Luke 1:1-4 and in John 20:30-31.) More specifically, in their effort to discover the author's purposes in writing this Gospel, scholars try to determine the themes and emphases of Mark by looking for things that are repeated and matters to which large amounts of space are given in the book. This scholarly activity is usually called redaction criticism or sometimes literary criticism, depending on the exact nature of the procedure followed. Scholars also study Mark (or any of the Gospels) by comparing it with the other Gospels, and this comparison can be done in great detail when the same incident is recorded in Mark and in one or more of the others. For this kind of study a synopsis of the Gospels is very helpful. A handy tool is B. H. Throckmorton, *Gospel Parallels* (New York: Nelson, 1967), a synopsis that employs the RSV text of the first three (Synoptic) Gospels. We shall make many such detailed comparisons in the main body of this commentary, but here let us examine a few major emphases of Mark. It is clear that we can not always determine an author's purposes or occasion for writing by what seems to be emphasized, but the study of an author's emphases and themes has its own reward in helping us to become better acquainted with the writing we may be examining.

The Major Themes and Emphases of Mark

Although each of the four Gospels is a book about Jesus, each of them has particular things to say about him, and so we may begin this introduction to the themes and emphases of Mark

by describing what in particular this Gospel seems to underscore about Jesus.

It is immediately apparent to the reader that Mark gives a picture of Jesus from the standpoint of Christian faith. The opening line shows this: "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." In keeping with this, the book gives bits of information about Jesus' background only incidentally. We learn that he came from Nazareth (1:9), that his mother's name was Mary and he had four brothers and an undisclosed number of sisters (6:1-3), and that he had responded favorably to John the Baptist's ministry, undergoing baptism at his hands (1:9), but this is virtually all. Indeed, if Mark were the only Gospel writing, there would be a great mystery about Jesus' earthly origins. This relative silence about the birth and childhood of Jesus, when compared with the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke, has been understood often as indicating that the author of Mark knew of no such traditions; but this view is neither more nor less likely than the opposite view—that the author knew of a birth/childhood tradition and deliberately refrained from including it in his book. So, though we do not know with certainty the full reasoning, we can say that Mark is a book dealing with the adult *ministry* of Jesus and that the author regarded his information about Jesus' ministry as sufficient to portray his Good News about Jesus.

The lack of information about Jesus' background does, however, agree with the larger note of mysteriousness that hangs over the figure of Jesus in Mark. For although the reader is given the religious significance of Jesus in the opening line of the book, the author consistently portrays the human characters who encounter Jesus as seriously defective in their apprehension of him. This theme of mystery and secrecy is a well-known feature to students of Mark and has generated much interest. Some have described Mark as portraying a "messianic secret," the secret of Jesus' messiahship, that is kept hidden from the people who witnessed Jesus' ministry and revealed only in the preaching of the church. There is no denying that, more than any of the other Gospels, Mark shows Jesus insisting on secrecy: silencing the demoniacs who acclaim him (e.g., 1:25, 34), commanding those healed not to publicize it (e.g., 1:44; 5:43), and ordering the disciples to keep revelations of his glory to themselves (8:27-30; 9:2-9). As we will

see in the discussion of particular passages, the Markan theme of Jesus' secrecy is probably to be seen as part of a larger emphasis on the mystery of Jesus' real significance and person. A debate continues among scholars as to how much this theme of secrecy stems from Jesus' own actions and how much it is an editorial emphasis coming from Mark or his tradition. I incline to the view that the Markan emphasis on the mystery of Jesus' person is to a large degree attributable to the author of Mark. The secrecy theme may in some degree reflect Jesus' own attempts to contain speculations that he was presenting himself as a messianic leader of a new movement with political aspirations. His crucifixion by the Romans, as one claiming to be a king (15:26), shows that he did excite hopes and fears that he was a claimant of messiahship.

But to return to the question of why the secrecy theme is so prominent in Mark, I suggest that its prominence is to be understood as part of a larger Markan theme. One of his major points is that Jesus' crucifixion was his key work and that all else—even the exorcisms, healings, and other miracles—was only an incomplete hint of Jesus' true nature and meaning. This is why no one is allowed to acclaim Jesus openly as Son of God or Messiah, for any acclamation uninformed by the crucifixion is misleading and invalid. This is why, also, the people and the disciples are presented in Mark (much more so than in the other Gospels) as bewildered and even stupid. In Mark's view, no one could understand the true meaning of Jesus and his work until Jesus had actually completed it by his death as a ransom for others (10:45). Thus, there is a theologically profound reason for the emphasis on secrecy, mystery, and the dullness of crowds and disciples.

This mysterious Jesus also acts with great authority (e.g., 1:27; 2:10, 28; 7:19; 11:15–19, 27–33), even doing things proper only to God such as forgiving sins. He demonstrates the powers of God over nature (e.g., 4:35–41; 6:45–52), and receives the acknowledgment of demons (e.g., 1:24; 5:7) and of God himself (1:11; 9:7). All of this strongly indicates that Mark wished to emphasize that the one who offered his life as a ransom, whose greatest work was his humiliation and death, is in fact far more than a prophet, Messiah, or mere man of any category; he is the Son of God and

is in some mysterious way divine. It is this concern with the person of Jesus that accounts for Mark's emphasis upon Jesus' conflict with demonic powers (also more emphasized in Mark than in the other Gospels). In Mark, Jesus actually brings the kingdom of God into the world troubled by evil powers and disrupts their hold over people, and this direct conflict shows him to be the divine Son who does God's work of expelling the powers ranged against him.

But not only is Mark a book about Jesus, it is also a book about being a follower of Jesus, a disciple. Mark was concerned to emphasize that the cross was not only the key work of Jesus but also the pattern for discipleship. As we shall see in the comments later, Mark 8-10, especially, is concerned with Jesus' description of his own coming sufferings as his essential duty, and his definition of discipleship as following his example (e.g., 8:27-38). Just as Mark wished to emphasize that the gospel is centered in Jesus' suffering for others, so he wished to correct the notion of discipleship as an easy, triumphant life. There is not only a profound theology of the gospel in this book but also a profound grasp of Christian life.

We have noted briefly the major emphases, and in the actual examination of the text we will discuss these and other themes more fully. Before we turn to the text of Mark, however, it will be helpful to describe briefly some features of his style, so that the reader is better prepared to follow what he writes.

Mark's Literary Style

To begin with basics, Mark's account is heavily narrative, conveying the feeling of fast-paced action. His Greek style is simple and unsophisticated, using many simple sentences connected by the word for "and." A comparison of events found in Mark and in the other Gospels will show that his version often seems wordy and less well constructed.

Yet, Mark did employ certain techniques that demonstrate some skill and literary intent. As we shall see, he sometimes quotes, but more frequently alludes to, the OT and seems to have expected his readers to be sufficiently familiar with it to appreciate these allusions. For Mark and his readers, the OT was holy

Scripture and a prophetic foreshadowing of Jesus' work. Several times Mark connects two stories by enclosing one within another, his intent being to use the two stories to cast light on each other. Mark also groups stories together to make a sustained point (e.g., the conflict stories in 2:1-3:6), and this sometimes includes quite a large amount of material, as his handling of chapters 8-10 shows.

Above all, a comparison of Markan passages with parallels in the other Gospels shows that the writer was not carelessly relaying stories. He wrote with theological intentions and worked to make his material bring out his points forcefully. To understand and appreciate Mark's intentions, the reader must read the text closely and must give it the thought it deserves. In the commentary that follows, I hope the reader will find assistance and encouragement for this effort.

Basic Outline

Rather than attempt to justify a detailed outline here, I have thought it better to give only the most basic description of the structure of the Gospel of Mark.

1:1-13	Prologue and Setting
1:14-8:30	Ministry, Conflict, Rejection, and the Question of Jesus' Identity
8:31-10:52	Jesus' Mission and Discipleship
11:1-16:8	The Jerusalem Ministry, Jesus' Death and Resurrection

Notes

1. The standard English translation of many of these apocryphal Gospels is E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2 vols., trans. R. McL. Wilson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963).

2. Major reference works on questions about the date, authorship, and origin of the NT writings and related matters are the following: W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. H. C. Kee (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975); D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*

(Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1970). A student-level discussion of the nature and origin of the Gospels is R. Martin, *New Testament Foundations: A Guide for Christian Students* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

Note: A list of the abbreviations used in the commentary is found at the beginning of the book (see p. xv). See also "For Further Reading" (pp. 291-92); full bibliographical references for works referred to in short-form notes within the commentary are supplied there.