

## INTRODUCTION

### *The task of a commentator*

Commentators have long posed the question ‘What is a gospel?’ The time has perhaps come to raise the question ‘What is a commentary?’ For though the ‘genre’ of a commentary may remain more or less constant, the presuppositions or questions which commentators bring to bear on the text vary enormously. Anyone who examines commentaries on Mark written over the centuries will soon become aware of the very different ways in which the gospel has been expounded at different periods of time. Some of the most dramatic changes, however, have come about quite recently, as we can see by considering a few of the many commentaries which have been published in the last forty years.

The year 1952 saw the publication of a commentary which quickly established itself as a classic – Vincent Taylor’s *The Gospel According to St Mark*. Taylor was typical of the British scholars of his period: approaching the gospels from the stand-point of the source critics, he took it as axiomatic that Mark was the earliest of the gospels, and that it was composed by a companion of Peter, an eye-witness of the events which are recorded. Thus though Taylor was familiar with the work of the form critics, and used their literary classification in analysing Mark’s material, he did not allow the recognition that the early Church might have shaped the stories to raise questions about their historical value. The chief questions Taylor addressed to the text were very largely at the historical level: what had Jesus done and said, or what had been the order of events in the course of his ministry? He assumed that Mark was able to provide the answers to such questions.

A very different approach was taken by Dennis Nineham, whose Pelican Commentary on *Saint Mark* appeared eleven years later. Versed in the methods of form criticism, he saw the gospel as reflecting primarily the beliefs and concerns of the early Christian community. Though he did not deny that the tradition might embody historical recollection, he recognized the difficulty of separating history from interpretation. The questions posed by Nineham were thus chiefly questions about how Jesus was seen and interpreted by the early communities and by the evangelist who wrote the gospel,

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST MARK

---

rather than questions about what Jesus himself had done and said.

The form critics tended to see the evangelists as collectors of material, rather than as theologians with minds of their own. Thus though Nineham discusses Mark's arrangement and presentation of the tradition, he regards him as representing the view-point of the church c. AD 75, rather than as a creative writer. It was left to the redaction critics to focus on the concerns of the evangelist and his method in handling the story overall, rather than concentrating on the smaller units of tradition within the gospel. Redaction criticism is concerned with the way in which tradition has been handled and modified; with what has been selected and what has been omitted. It thus attempts to separate the redaction from the tradition by concentrating on particular features of an evangelist's vocabulary or style or method. If we assume Markan priority, discussion of Matthaean and Lukan redaction of the material taken from Mark by the later evangelists is comparatively easy – though complications arise where 'Q' material overlaps with Mark, and where the text of one gospel has been assimilated to that of another. In the case of Mark, the separation of redaction from tradition is much more complicated – though the summaries, 'seams' and parentheses provide an obvious starting point for discovering Markan redaction (see E. Best, *The Temptation and The Passion*, for an example of this approach). The work of the redaction critics opened up a third '*Sitz im Leben*': questions were now being asked, not about the setting of the tradition in the life of Jesus, nor about its use by the early Christian communities, but about its significance for the evangelist. Eduard Schweizer's commentary, *The Good News according to Mark*, originally published in German in 1967, only a few years after Nineham's, marked a new approach, since it concentrated on how Mark himself interpreted 'the good news'.

Just as form criticism involved far more than an analysis of the material into forms, so redaction criticism has led to far more than a study of the redaction of the tradition. The way had now been opened up to study each gospel as a whole – as a presentation of the Christian gospel. But no book is written in a vacuum; nor is it read in one. Questions were now raised about the community for which Mark was writing – about its situations and concerns: these must surely have influenced the way in which Mark wrote, and are thus reflected in his book. Similarly, the way in which the gospel is read depends very largely on the situation and concerns of the reader, with the result that it is interpreted in different ways at different times and in different places. New methods of literary criticism now being used are based on the belief that the text can properly be considered in its own right, without any consideration of the original author's

## INTRODUCTION

---

intention. (An interesting example of interpreting the text primarily from the reader's view-point is found in Fernando Belo's *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark* (originally published in 1974)).

These few examples serve to show the many different ways in which, in the course of a few years, a commentary can be written: the focus of concern has shifted from the historical Jesus, through the early history of the traditions, through Mark the evangelist, through the community for which he wrote, to what modern readers can make of the text. Cynics might well say that the questions addressed to the text have been changed as each set of questions has proved impossible to answer! The source critics supposed that Mark could be used as an historical source providing them with information about Jesus, but the historical Jesus proved elusive, and investigations came to an impasse. Form critics concentrated on the belief of the early communities – but were in fact unable to provide clear evidence about either the communities or their beliefs, since the traditions had already been taken over by the evangelist and incorporated into his gospel. With some relief the redaction critics turned to the gospels themselves: here, surely, one is in touch with what was actually written by a particular person in a particular time and place. But who *was* this person – and what *were* the time and place? If we knew the answers to these questions we might better understand what the evangelist has written. And how much of the gospel is due to the author and how much to the tradition? Is it any easier to separate redaction from tradition than it is to separate interpretation from history? Is it possible to distinguish deliberate alteration from chance? And can we be certain that the particular theory of literary relationships between the Synoptics on which our redaction-critical analysis is based is correct? Certainly a different theory will lead to different results, and if we have chosen the wrong one our conclusions will be false. Deducing the situation and concerns of Mark's community is equally complex, for it can be done only through an analysis of the gospel, which we are attempting to interpret in the light of the community's needs! We cannot be certain how the gospel would have been read (or rather heard) in that community. Moreover, the community was not itself static, and so almost immediately the gospel would have been read in new ways, a process of reinterpretation which has been at work ever since. It is hardly surprising if the new form of literary-critical analysis has now become popular, for here the text alone is important. When interpretation is a matter of the text's speaking to the interpreter, then it is no longer necessary to strive for 'objective' exegesis. The presuppositions which influenced earlier commentators, and which are so clearly reflected in their work, are no longer hindrances, but

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST MARK

---

part of the interpretative process, once we recognize that every reading of a text involves some kind of interpretation.

This present commentary has been in the process of preparation for over twenty years, and I am therefore very much aware of these changes in approach. Some of the questions which were raised at the beginning of my research no longer seem relevant, but they have been replaced by many more. It seems proper, however, to ask questions at every level. The work of the new literary critics reminds us that it is important to recognize that our own reading of the text plays a very large part in the interpretation that we give to it, but the author, his community, the men and women who handed on and moulded the tradition, and, beyond them all, Jesus himself, all play a significant part in its meaning. The primary concern in this commentary is with the interpretation of the evangelist himself – always recognizing, however, that we may be imposing our own understanding of the text on to him, or be attributing to him ideas that are embedded in the tradition. It is not strictly a ‘redaction-critical’ approach, in that it is not primarily concerned with the changes Mark has made in the tradition. Rather, it attempts to look at the finished product, not simply analysing individual units but examining the structure of the book as a whole, in order to discover, if possible, what lessons the evangelist is trying to convey to his readers. Since we think of Mark as writing for a particular community, we regard him (like Paul) as being a pastor, as well as a theologian. By asking questions about the original audience (who would have heard the gospel read, as a congregation, rather than reading it themselves, as individuals), we hope to keep in contact with the author and his intentions, and to learn something of his understanding of the nature of ‘the good news about Jesus Christ’.

One crucial question which has played an important role in the interpretation of Mark’s gospel is that of the relationship between history and *kerygma*. If we recognize that the authors of the gospels were ‘evangelists’ – preachers of the gospel – we still have to deal with the question of the importance for them (if any!) of history. Those who interpret Mark as ‘kerygmatic history’ include both those who see him primarily as a careful recorder of the tradition, and those who believe that his only concern was to present the significance of Jesus for his own community, with little or no interest in the original Jesus. Did Mark simply preserve the tradition or freely create it? The approach adopted here falls between these extremes. While we believe that Mark was an evangelist, and that he selected and arranged the material to proclaim the significance of Jesus for the community of his day, we do not think that the fact that Mark addressed his gospel to the needs of his readers means that he had no

## INTRODUCTION

---

interest in history.<sup>1</sup> It seems unlikely that he created material *ex nihilo*. His creative activity is seen, rather, in the way in which he used the tradition which was available to him – in its selection, arrangement, presentation, wording, adaptation and in the added explanations. We do not believe that every word and phrase in Mark need necessarily be traced to the hand of the evangelist or receive the explanation for its position in his gospel from his grand theological design; some material may have been included because it was already attached to incidents he deliberately chose to include. Those who find significance in every word and phrase Mark used are as likely to distort our understanding of the gospel as much as those who insist that his presentation is an accurate historical record of what Jesus did and said.

In the course of the commentary there are frequent references to the words and actions of Jesus. These references are not intended to beg the question of historicity, but it would clearly be tedious to raise historical questions on every occasion. Usually we mean 'Jesus as Mark presents him'; occasionally our intention is to distinguish Jesus' own words from those of Mark's interpretation, but in these cases the distinction is clear.

### *Authorship, place and date*

The earliest statement about Mark's gospel to have come down to us was made by Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis, in about AD 130, and is preserved by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* (iii.39.15). In a book since lost, Papias recalled the tradition which had been told to him by 'the Elder' (i.e. John) about Mark, who, 'having been the interpreter (ἑρμηνευτής) of Peter, wrote down accurately (ἀκριβῶς), but not in order (οὐ μέντοι τάξει), all that he remembered of the Lord's sayings and doings'. Papias adds what is probably his own comment: Mark 'had not heard the Lord, nor been a follower of his, but later (as I said) of Peter; who used to adapt his reading to the needs [of the situation], but not so as to make an orderly account of the Lord's sayings. So Mark did no wrong in writing down some things just as he recalled them. For he had one purpose only – to omit nothing of what he had heard, and to state nothing falsely.'

This early testimony is frequently appealed to by those who wish to affirm the historical reliability of Mark's account. If Mark records

<sup>1</sup> It is worth remembering that historical information can be conveyed even when this is not an author's primary concern. A great deal of the material used by historians (whether documents or inscriptions) is not in fact intended to inform us about historical questions, but historical information can nevertheless be gleaned from it.

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST MARK

---

tradition which he had received from Peter, does this not put us in touch with 'eye-witness' tradition? This view has often been passionately maintained, in contrast to the form-critical position that the material has all been passed on through the community and adapted to its needs. But how reliable is Papias' evidence? Is it simply, as has been argued, based on conjecture? Is it merely an attempt to provide credentials for the gospel by linking it with the name of an apostle?

Assuming that Papias is right in attributing the gospel to someone called Mark, what more do we know about him? We may reasonably accept his statement that Mark knew Peter, for this tradition is supported by 1 Peter 5.13 (whoever may have been the author of that epistle). At the same time, we need to note that this tradition is often questioned, since Papias might well have identified Mark with Peter's companion *on the basis of* 1 Peter 5.13. Papias' description of Mark as Peter's 'interpreter' seems strange, but the word can also mean 'translator', and this seems a natural explanation: Peter would probably have needed a translator if he addressed congregations whose language was Greek. Mark is often identified with the 'John whose other name was Mark' referred to in Acts (12.12,25; 15.37-9), who is presumably the 'Mark' referred to in Col. 4.10, Philemon 24 and 2 Tim. 4.11. Apart from the somewhat tenuous link in Acts 12.12, however, there is nothing to connect this figure with Peter. Moreover, we have to remember that 'Mark' was a very common name at the time. It would be no surprise if there were two men with this name in the early Christian community. Nothing else is known about the Mark who wrote the gospel. It has often been suggested that the young man who fled naked from Gethsemane (14.51f.) was in fact the evangelist, but this speculation has no evidence to support it; indeed, if we accept Papias' evidence, it is contradicted in his statement that Mark had neither heard the Lord nor been his follower.

Papias may well be right, therefore, in claiming that the gospel was written by someone who had known Peter. Does this tell us anything about the nature of the tradition the evangelist includes? Now one of the interesting things about Papias' statement is the way in which he in effect apologizes for Mark's presentation of his material. To be sure, he tells us that Mark wrote accurately, and took care to omit nothing and to get nothing wrong. But twice he says that the material was not arranged in order, and he also remarks that 'he (presumably Peter) used to adapt his teaching to the needs' (perhaps of the moment or of his hearers) – statements which all tally with the insight of the form critics. The whole passage reads like a defence of Mark – perhaps because his gospel was already being unfavourably compared with those of the other evangelists. Papias does not claim that Mark presented the material in the correct chronological order–

the very opposite; and he speaks of its having been adapted: this does not amount to very strong support for the idea that Mark was presenting an 'eye-witness account' of Jesus' ministry.

The tradition linking Mark with Peter is repeated by various writers in the next couple of centuries, though they may, of course, be dependent on Papias: Justin Martyr (c. 150) refers to the 'memoirs of Peter'; the Anti-Marcionite Prologue (c. 160–80) tells us that Mark (known as 'stump-fingered') was the interpreter of Peter, and that he wrote his gospel after Peter's death in the regions of Italy; Irenaeus (c. 180–200) similarly describes Mark as the disciple and interpreter of Peter and says that he wrote after the deaths of Peter and Paul; this tradition conflicts with that recorded by Clement of Alexandria (c. 180) who refers several times to Mark's writing down the words of Peter during the latter's lifetime; Origen (c. 200) also speaks of Mark's doing as Peter instructed him.

It was undoubtedly this association with Peter that preserved the gospel for posterity, for it appears to have been less used than the other gospels and was somewhat neglected by commentators. Yet Mark's gospel was included in the canon from the beginning (though it was sometimes placed last of the four) and was sufficiently established to be used by Tatian (c. 170) in his *Diatessaron*, or compilation of four gospels. Since almost all of Mark's material is found also in either Matthew or Luke, it is remarkable that the gospel survived.

According to Clement of Alexandria, Mark wrote the gospel in Rome, a tradition which is backed up by the reference to 'the regions of Italy' in the Anti-Marcionite Prologue; Irenaeus, too, implies that the gospel was composed in Rome, since he speaks of Peter's work there. But the belief that Mark wrote in Rome could well be based on the link between Peter and Mark. The suggestion that the tradition of a Roman origin is backed up by Mark's use of 'Latin' words has no substance, since these words would have been used throughout the Roman Empire. Similarly, arguments that the constant warnings in Mark about suffering would be especially appropriate for a Roman congregation enduring the Neronian persecution ignore the fact that Christians elsewhere also suffered for their faith. Chrysostom (writing at the end of the fourth century) said that Mark wrote in Egypt, but he was perhaps misinterpreting Eusebius' comment that Mark went to Egypt and preached there the gospel which he had composed; certainly there is nothing to support this suggestion. Some have suggested Antioch as the place of origin, but this is simply a guess with little to support it. Another suggestion, that the gospel was written in Galilee, is based on the belief that it was intended to summon Christians to flee to Galilee in expectation of the parousia. This theory, put forward by Marxsen, has received little support, and

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST MARK

---

the location in Galilee is at odds with Mark's lack of geographical knowledge and his explanation of Aramaic terms. 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!

The gospel is usually dated between AD 65 and 75. An earlier date has sometimes been advocated (notably by J.A.T. Robinson, in his *Redating the New Testament*), but a date after 65 seems likely, partly because this agrees with the evidence of the Anti-Marcionite Prologue and of Irenaeus (though not with that of Clement and Origen) that Mark wrote after the death of Peter (who died in AD 64), and partly because evidence in the gospel itself suggests a date of this period. Arguments that the tradition indicates a certain period of development, or that it reflects concern for the Gentile mission (7.19; 13.10; 14.9) or persecution (8.34–8; 10.35–40; 13.9–13) are too imprecise to allow us to pinpoint the date; but the sayings in Mark 13 appear to reflect events associated with the Jewish revolt which began in AD 64, and which led to the destruction of the temple in AD 70. The belief that the gospel was written before AD 75 depends on the view that Mark was the first of the four gospels to be written, and that it was used by Matthew and Luke as a source for their own gospels. Since the latter are usually dated between AD 80–90, Mark (or at least an early form of Mark) must have been written previously. Those who argue that Mark is dependent on Matthew and Luke must necessarily date Mark later.

Among those who accept a dating between AD 65 and 75, however, there is considerable disagreement as to whether the gospel was written before or after the destruction of the temple in the year 70. Although many commentators believe that Mark was written before AD 70, our own view is that it was written subsequently, and that Mark 13 reflects the trauma of those who had assumed that the temple's destruction was the sign which heralded the end of this era.<sup>1</sup> Whatever one decides on this particular point, the evidence points to a date just before or just after the events of AD 70.

### *Interpretation of the gospel*

Mark is the shortest of our four gospels, and almost the whole of it is closely paralleled in either Matthew or Luke, often in both. The relationship between the three gospels is so close as to suggest that two of the evangelists must have copied this parallel material. The first to consider this problem was Augustine, who examined the

<sup>1</sup> See introductory note on Mark 13, pp. 297–303.

relationship between the gospels in his *De Consensu Evangelistarum* (c. 400). He regarded Mark's gospel as an abbreviation of Matthew's and apparently saw no conflict between this explanation of their relationship and the patristic tradition that Mark had been the interpreter of Peter.

It was no doubt the close relationship between Mark and Matthew which caused the comparative neglect of Mark by scholars and commentators for many centuries. Their preference for the longer gospel is understandable: it contained almost the whole of Mark and more besides; it was believed to be by an apostle, while Mark was not; its arrangement made it easy to comprehend. Mark was generally ignored, except for those short sections which have no parallel in Matthew. One of the few exceptions was the commentary by the Venerable Bede (676–735).

The modern era of Synoptic studies began with the publication by J. J. Griesbach of a synopsis of the gospels (replacing earlier harmonies) in 1774. Griesbach himself argued that Mark wrote after Matthew and Luke, and that he used both gospels, his purpose being to produce a shorter book. Griesbach also suggested that verses 9–20 of chapter 16 were spurious, and that the original ending of the gospel had been lost. His theory of synoptic relationships was accepted by many scholars in the early part of the nineteenth century, though by no means all. One theory (suggested by G.E. Lessing, and developed by J.G. Eichorn) was that all three synoptic evangelists had used a written Aramaic gospel, another (argued by J.G. Herder) that this source was oral. The idea that Mark's was the earliest gospel, and that it had been used by Matthew and Luke, was first seriously argued (independently) by C.J. Wilke and C.H. Weisse in 1838.

The importance of this debate lay in its relevance for the question of the nature of the gospels, and their value as historical documents. In contrast to D.F. Strauss, who had interpreted the gospel tradition as primarily mythical, scholars were now able to maintain that they were on firm historical ground with Mark, whose account of the ministry of Jesus was basically reliable. To Mark was now added 'Q', the sayings source believed to lie behind Matthew and Luke, and the two-document hypothesis of synoptic relations was born. For the next hundred years, the priority of Mark was almost universally accepted by Protestant scholars. After centuries of neglect, Mark's gospel was suddenly the focus of scholarly attention.

But the assumption that, because Mark was the earliest, it was therefore historically reliable did not go unchallenged. In 1892, Martin Kähler argued that the gospels could not be used as sources for the life of Jesus, since the figure they portray is the Christ believed in by the Christian community. In a famous phrase he described Mark as a 'passion narrative with an extended introduction'. William

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST MARK

---

Wrede, similarly, writing in 1901, argued that the Christ of faith had been superimposed on the historical Jesus, and that Mark's gospel was a theological work comparable to John's, not an account of the life of Jesus. Wrede's discussion of the part played by the messianic secret in Mark foreshadows the work of the redaction critics half a century later.<sup>1</sup> Wrede's book was not translated into English until 1971, but its influence, especially in Germany, was enormous. The belief that Mark could be used as the basis of a life of Jesus came under further attack from the form critics. The work of K.L. Schmidt, M. Dibelius and R. Bultmann in particular focused scholarly attention on the individual pericopae that made up the gospel, and attempted to ascertain the function of each pericope within the Christian community. The evangelists were now seen as mere collectors of material, and the historical value of the Markan outline was obviously suspect, since it was regarded as editorial. The recognition that the gospel stories reflected the beliefs and practices of the early Christian communities seemed to some of these scholars to point to the conclusion that they had been created by those communities and were therefore of no historical value. Although the extreme scepticism of certain form critics led many scholars (especially outside Germany) to reject their views, their contribution to Markan studies has ultimately proved enormous. It is now generally accepted that in the oral period the material was shaped (not necessarily created) by the believing communities, and that it cannot therefore be used directly as evidence for a 'life of Jesus' (though it is well to remember that the fact that the communities transmitted the tradition indicates that they valued it). Equally important has been the recognition that the Markan framework does not provide a chronological outline of the ministry. Few would now wish to argue, as C.H. Dodd did in 1932, that the framework itself represents 'a genuine succession of events',<sup>2</sup> for as D. E. Nineham pointed out 25 years later, even if Mark's framework were traditional rather than editorial, it amounts to little more than a summary statement that Jesus taught and healed.<sup>3</sup>

But if the framework is editorial rather than historical, then perhaps it reflects the interests and concerns of Mark himself. The form critics had compared Mark's gospel to a haphazard collection of beads on a string – but might those beads perhaps have been arranged in a deliberate order? If so, then the evangelist must be seen as an author who chose and arranged his material with particular purposes in mind, rather than as a mere collector. Mark returned to the centre of scholarly interest – not, this time, because he was being

<sup>1</sup> See additional note on the messianic secret, pp. 66–9.

<sup>2</sup> *Exp. Tim.* 43, 1932, p.400.

<sup>3</sup> *Studies in the Gospels*, pp. 223–39.

thought of as the closest of the evangelists to the historical Jesus, but because he was regarded as a theologian. We have already noted that the work of the redaction critics was foreshadowed by that of Wrede. Another precursor of the method was R.H. Lightfoot whose primary concern was with the purpose of the evangelists, in particular Mark. Other scholars, too, began to stress the creative role of the evangelist in presenting his material, and to see theological emphases in his gospel.

It was W. Marxsen, however, who coined the term 'redaction criticism', and applied this new method to Mark, in a study originally published in German in 1956. A flood of redaction-critical studies followed. This method still treats the gospels as essentially collections of traditional material, but assumes that the way in which the material is handled indicates the evangelist's own theological approach. In order to distinguish redaction from tradition it is necessary to consider literary factors, such as vocabulary and style: there are words (not just εὐθύς, straight away) which are particularly common in Mark; similarly, certain features of style (e.g.) parataxis and pleonasm) are especially frequent.<sup>1</sup> Compositional techniques, too, such as Mark's love for sandwiching incidents together (as, for example, in 5.21–43), betray his hand at work. Attempts to isolate pre-Markan blocks of tradition have been less successful. What seems to one generation of scholars to be a collection of similar pericopae from the oral period (e.g. 2.1–3.6) appears to the next to be a carefully designed section of the gospel! Unlike redactional-critical studies of Matthew and Luke, it was impossible to compare the evangelist's finished work with a document which was assumed to be his source. An alternative approach was to examine particular Markan concerns. Some studies concentrated on particular passages (e.g. Mark 13), others on prominent themes (e.g. the messianic secret), but all were based on the assumption that one could learn something of the theology of the evangelist himself from his gospel, and all took Markan priority for granted. Questions were now raised concerning the *Gattung* or 'genre' of the gospel. What kind of a document had Mark supposed himself to be writing? If the form critics were right in asserting that his gospel could no longer be seen as a biography, or as the memoirs of the apostle Peter, then what was it? Some critics saw it as an aretalogy, portraying Jesus as a hero figure, others as an apocalyptic message to the Christian community. Other suggestions were that it was modelled on Greek drama, or that it was intended to be used as a lectionary. One obvious reply to all these suggestions is that Mark wrote a gospel, and that this was a new literary genre,

<sup>1</sup> For discussion of these features, see E.J. Pryke, *Redactional Style in the Marcan Gospel*, and F. Neirynck, *Duality in Mark*.

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST MARK

---

designed to proclaim the good news. But since nothing is ever entirely new, attempts to discover partial antecedents in various literary models have continued. It has, for example, been argued that the gospels are, after all, similar to some of the biographies written in the ancient world, and that Mark's gospel is written in the style of Xenophon's *Memorabilia* which defends the central character against misunderstanding and provides a true image of the hero for others to follow.<sup>1</sup> Yet there are important differences: while it is true that the *Memorabilia* is a collection of anecdotes about Socrates (frequently introduced, as in Mark, with a vague phrase such as 'one day' or 'on one occasion' or 'he used to'), these anecdotes are all much longer than the Markan pericopae and consist entirely of conversations. Moreover, they are woven into an argument defending Socrates against the charges brought against him, whereas Mark claims to be writing 'good news' about Jesus, not defending him.

Linked with this interest in the genre of the gospel went concern to discover the situation which it addressed. What was it that led Mark to tell his story in the precise way that he did? Since the passion narrative dominates the gospel, this suggests that Mark was particularly concerned to show why Jesus came to die. Did he perhaps feel that the gospel of a crucified Messiah needed careful explanation? But if Mark is a 'passion narrative with a long introduction', we need to look at the introduction also: clearly one of Mark's central concerns is with the identity of Jesus, although this is deliberately concealed throughout his ministry. Was Mark anxious to present a particular aspect of Jesus' messiahship – as Son of God, or as Son of man? And if so, why?

One popular answer to these questions was that Mark wrote in an attempt to correct a false understanding of the gospel with a correct one. This approach was advocated in a remarkable exposition of the gospel by T. Weeden who argued that Mark's purpose was to combat a false christology with a true understanding of Jesus as the suffering Son of man: the first eight chapters of Mark's gospel present the false christology, which represent Jesus as a θετός ἀνήρ, or 'divine man', exercising miraculous powers, and this is then corrected, in the last eight chapters, with teaching about the suffering Son of man. The disciples represent the church leaders of Mark's day who hold the false belief in Jesus as a wonder-worker and ignore the message of the Cross.<sup>2</sup> Weeden's interpretation of Mark had moved on, beyond redaction criticism proper to a literary analysis of the gospel which

<sup>1</sup> Cf. C. Talbert, *What is a Gospel?*

<sup>2</sup> T. Weeden, *Mark – Traditions in Conflict*

attempted to understand the setting in which it was written, as well as the purpose of the evangelist. It is a good example of the dangers which beset such attempts. Much of Weeden's interpretation is based on the belief that Mark was totally opposed to the Twelve and conducted a vendetta against them, and on the understanding of the scene at Caesarea Philippi as a rejection by Jesus of Peter's acknowledgement of him as Messiah. These assumptions go far beyond the evidence and can, indeed, be refuted from the gospel itself. Moreover, the notion that the gospel had its origins in a situation of conflict is itself an assumption. In asking questions about the purpose and situations of the author and his community, we need to be careful not to read them in the light of our own presuppositions.

In spite of its popularity, there is no reason to suppose that the antagonistic model of the gospel is necessarily correct. In fact, the notion that Mark was correcting a 'heresy' is clearly anachronistic. And though he might be correcting a view that he believed to be mistaken, he could equally well simply be stating what he believed to be the truth. Emphasis on Jesus' suffering can certainly be explained as due to Mark's desire to combat a false christology which interpreted Jesus' messiahship in terms of glory without reference to the Cross; but it can equally well be seen as due to Mark's need to explain to his community the necessity for Christ's death, and to help them come to terms with the scandal of the Cross. Similarly, Mark's insistence that the disciples must share Jesus' suffering could well be due, not to the fact that the leaders of the church had played down the need for Christians to suffer, but because (as tradition has maintained) Mark's contemporaries were suffering persecution at the time. Mark certainly presents the disciples as hard of heart, but they may well represent Christian believers rather than heretical Church leaders, for their obtuseness is tied up with the 'messianic secret', and represents the inability of men and women to grasp the truth about Jesus until this is revealed through his death and resurrection.

The problem of separating tradition from redaction had thus proved as complex, in its way, as that of separating history from interpretation; in each case, the results depend very largely on a prior decision about the creativity of the evangelist or the community. Concern to discover the purpose of the evangelist and his *Sitz im Leben* meant that the gospel was now being analysed as a whole. But there was an inbuilt circularity in the method, for the answers one gave to questions about Mark's purpose and theology depended to a large extent on how much of the material one attributed to Mark, and how much to his sources. Since we do not have his sources, to act as a 'control', we cannot say how much of the material is directly

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST MARK

---

attributable to Mark himself.<sup>1</sup> This circularity became even more apparent when scholars such as Howard Kee attempted to answer questions about the community for whom Mark was writing: it might be possible to guess the social structure of a society from a sermon if there were no constraints on the author (such as history, sources and traditions), but in the case of Mark (which is far more than a simple sermon), such guesses have too little basis.

But the story as Mark tells it is a fascinating one, and there are various ways of approaching it. Since answering historical questions about the evangelist and his community has proved as difficult as answering questions about Jesus, it is hardly surprising if there has recently been a shift from concern with historical matters to interest in literary criticism. Here we find, at one extreme, those who are still concerned primarily with the author's intention: redaction criticism may help to pinpoint his special emphases, rhetorical criticism may reveal something of the methods he uses to say it. At the other extreme, there are those who have abandoned historical questions altogether, and who focus on the gospel as a document in its own right: they are not interested in the concerns of the evangelist, but in the literary-critical analysis of his gospel, and the way in which it is read by the reader.

Redaction-critical studies, building on the work of source critics, have assumed the priority of Mark. For the past hundred years or so, the 'Markan hypothesis' has tended to be regarded as one of the 'assured results' of New Testament criticism. It is true that the official Catholic view for much of that time was that Mark was the abbreviation of Matthew,<sup>2</sup> but the general view was that the Synoptic problem had been solved. Recently, however, the priority of Mark has been challenged by a revival of the Griesbach hypothesis, which holds that Mark was written last of the Synoptics and used the other two.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The problems of applying redaction criticism to Mark have been analysed in a recent study by C.C. Black entitled *The Disciples according to Mark*.

<sup>2</sup> This view was ably defended by B.C. Butler, in his book *The Originality of St Matthew*.

<sup>3</sup> See W.R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem*, and H.-H. Stoldt, *History and Criticism of the Marcan Hypothesis*. For a critical assessment of the Griesbach hypothesis, leading to the conclusion that it is 'considerably less viable as a solution to the Synoptic Problem than the two-document hypothesis' (p. 186), see C. Tuckett, *The Revival of the Griesbach Hypothesis*.



## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST MARK

---

was originally read *in toto*, or at least in fairly large sections. The fact that the gospel was composed for the ear, rather than for the eye, is reflected in the constant repetitions, and in the summaries, recapitulations and variations on a theme. The word *πάλιν*, 'again', is used no less than 26 times and serves to remind us of the previous occasion on which something occurred. Words, stories and geographical locations are repeated or echoed later in the gospel, so welding the whole narrative into a unity. Since hearers had to rely on what they heard and could not thumb back through the pages of the gospel, the editorial links between sections and the juxtaposition of material underlined the relationship of the various stories to one another. Reading the gospel today, we tend to analyse it, dividing it into sections and sub-sections which deal with different themes, but those who first heard it would have been far more aware of the links between different parts of the story rather than of the divisions.

This means that we must recognize that any attempt to analyse the gospel is bound to be arbitrary, since we are imposing our own pattern on the material. It is true that the gospel does have a clear shape: after the opening few verses, we have an account of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, in which the inability of Jesus' contemporaries (first the religious authorities, then the crowd, finally even the disciples) to comprehend the truth about him is more and more stressed. After the incident at Caesarea Philippi (8.27–30), Jesus teaches his disciples about his own future suffering and the meaning of true discipleship. At 11.1 he arrives at the gates of Jerusalem, and in 14.1 Mark begins the story of the passion; the gospel ends with the account of the empty tomb in 16.1–8. But one interesting feature of this scheme is the fact that commentators have found it difficult to agree as to where the divisions should be made. There is frequent discussion as to whether 1.14–15 belong to the 'Prologue' (vv. 1–13) or introduce the first main section; 3.7–12 and 6.7–13 are sometimes regarded as the opening paragraphs in new sections, sometimes as the closing paragraphs in the previous ones. So, too, at the major division at the end of chapter 8: does the new section begin in 8.22, 8.27 or 8.31? The very fact that the answer is not clear encourages us to believe that we are right in seeing these paragraphs as turning points – but wrong if we place them firmly 'before' or 'after' the division. We suggest, rather, that those paragraphs which tend to 'wander' in scholarly analyses do so precisely because they look both backwards and forwards; such passages have the nature of overlapping hinges. It is possible, of course, that breaks were made in the reading of the gospel, and that the summaries in 3.7–12 and 6.7–13 were designed to remind the congregation of 'the story so far'; one interesting fact is that the six major divisions usually described in the gospel are of very similar length, suggesting that this plan may not be

so arbitrary after all.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, we do well to remember that these divisions are artificial in the sense that they result from *our* reading of the gospel and do not necessarily agree with Mark's own intentions. But since we today read the gospel as written word, we have felt obliged to assist readers of this commentary to find their way around the gospel by adopting the conventional approach and dividing the gospel into sections.

For those who listened, rather than read the gospel, then, repeated words and ideas would have been significant. The setting of incidents in particular places may have rung bells, frequently reminding the gospel's hearers of other events set in the same spot, and sometimes linking with important Old Testament passages. Significant events take place at the very beginning in the 'wilderness' (ἐρημος: 1.3,4,12,13); the same word is used to describe a 'lonely place' where Jesus takes refuge (1.35, 45; 6.31, 32, 35). Many incidents take place beside the sea (1.16; 2.13; 3.7; 4.1; 5.21; 7.31), and three significant self-revelations of Jesus to his disciples are located *on* the sea, the first two reminiscent of theophanies in the Old Testament (4.35–41; 6.45–52; 8.13–21). Other incidents are set in 'a house' (1.29; 2.1,15; 3.20; 5.38; 7.17, 24; 9.28, 33; 10.10; 14.3). Again, there are constant references to the 'way' (ὁδός), and we soon learn that this way frequently refers, not simply to a road, but to a very particular way: it is the way of the Lord (1.2f.; 12.14), the way Jesus and his disciples take to Jerusalem (9.33f.; 10.32, 46, 52; 11.8).

The importance of ideas is underlined by repetition: the three-fold prophecy of the Son of man's suffering and resurrection (8.31; 9.31; 10.33) is an obvious example. The significance of events is also stressed by the frequent references to the amazement, fear or awe of those who witnessed them (e.g. 1.22, 27; 2.12; 4.41; 5.15, 20, 42; 6.2, 51; 7.37; 9.6,15; 10.32; 12.17; 16.8). The use of paradox (often in the sayings of Jesus) keeps Mark's readers alert: the statement that one must lose one's life in order to save it, for example (8.35), and the declaration that whoever wishes to be first must be the slave of all (10.44) shock those who have not been lulled into complacency by familiarity. Nor would the use of irony be lost on Mark's readers (see, e.g., 3.1–6; 14.65; 15.31).

The juxtaposition of material on similar themes would help to impress an idea on Mark's readers. Of particular importance here is his fondness for sandwiching together two stories which have something in common, as in 3.21–35; 5.22–43; 11.12–26; 14.54–72. Sometimes two stories simply stand side by side (e.g. 7.1–23, 24–30;

<sup>1</sup> B. Standaert, *L'Évangile selon Marc*, divides the gospel somewhat differently: he finds three major divisions instead of six (1.14–6.13; 6.14–10.52; 11.1–15.47), but he also traces concentric patterns in each division.

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST MARK

---

8.22–6, 27–38). Occasionally a series of stories builds up an idea, as with the ‘conflict’ stories in 2.1–3.6; most notable of all here is the block of material which falls between the two stories about blind men who were given their sight, since every incident between these two stories demonstrates the ‘blindness’ of the disciples and their inability to understand Jesus and his teaching (cf. 8.31ff.; 9.2–13, 14ff., 30–2, 33–7, 38–50; 10.10f., 13–16, 23–31, 32–45).

All four of our gospels end with the passion narrative, followed by an account of the empty tomb and the news of Jesus’ resurrection; Mark alone lacks a resurrection appearance, since 16.8 is certainly the last verse in the gospel from his hand.<sup>1</sup> The four introductions, on the other hand, are strikingly different: yet they have this in common – they all begin with a section which is markedly different from the rest of the gospel. John 1.1–18 and Mark 1.1–13 are commonly referred to as the ‘Johannine prologue’ and the ‘Markan prologue’ respectively, but Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2 perform the same function, spelling out the significance of Jesus without any suggestion of secrecy.<sup>2</sup> This means that all four gospels have a ‘second introduction’ (Matt. 3.1f.; Mark 1.14f.; Luke 3.1f.; John 1.19), where the story proper begins; it is interesting to note that John the Baptist features in all four, even though in Mark he receives only a bare mention, since his work has been adequately described already.

Mark’s prologue has frequently been compared with the prologue of a Greek play, in which the chorus introduces the story to the audience and explains the significance of the scenes they are about to see. The device is familiar to many modern readers who have not necessarily watched Greek drama, because it is used by Shakespeare in *Henry V*, though Shakespeare uses it to tell parts of the story which take place offstage, rather than to reveal the hidden meaning of the events taking place on the stage. Whether or not Mark himself attended the theatre we do not know.<sup>3</sup> He is certainly not the only biblical writer to use this dramatic device, for, in addition to the parallels in the other gospels, there is an interesting precedent in the book of Job: after the scene has been set in 1.1–5, the explanation of the story is given in the first scene, vv. 6–12, which is set in heaven. The story then returns to earth and thereafter, apart from 2.1–7 which provides us with the second part of the explanation, it is told from the point of view of Job and his contemporaries, who are totally unaware of the real issues which are being decided by their reactions to events. Only because we, the readers of the story, have been allowed to witness the scenes set in the heavenly court, do we

<sup>1</sup> See below, additional note on Mark’s ending, pp. 391–4.

<sup>2</sup> M.D. Hooker, in *N.T.S.*, 21, 1974, pp.51f.

<sup>3</sup> M.A. Beavis, *Mark’s Audience*, argues strongly that he did.

appreciate the significance of the story. In a similar way, Mark 1.1–13 provides us with the key information about Jesus which enables us to understand the drama which is about to be unfolded before us. Occasional comments ‘from beyond’ (the heavenly voice at 9.7, and the unclean spirits at 1.24; 3.11; 5.7) punctuate the narrative and remind us of the real meaning of the story.

### *The theology of Mark*

Because of the difficulty of separating Markan interpretation from the material which he inherited, and because of the impossibility of isolating Mark’s own understanding of the story from that which we ourselves read into the text, we cannot claim to be able to present Mark’s theological position with any certainty. We can, however, point out what appear to us to be the important issues in his presentation of the gospel. Several of these issues are dealt with in more detail in the additional notes in the commentary.

Mark introduces his gospel with the declaration that it is ‘good news’. The good news which he unfolds, however, is strangely disturbing. It brings salvation, but it also brings the threat of destruction – symbolized by torn garments (2.21; 14.63) and burst wineskins (2.22) – not simply for the temple (13; 14.58; 15.29, 38), but for the nation as well (11.12–14, 20–5; 12.9). The climax of the story is the gruesome death of its hero who has summoned men and women to abandon everything they value (10.17–31) and follow him to the scaffold (8.34–8). The ‘good news’ must be good indeed to justify Mark’s title! His claim is that those who abandon everything to follow Jesus will ‘be repaid a hundred times’ (10.30), and that those who lose their lives for Jesus’ sake will save them (8.35). The radical challenge presented to men and women is to abandon their old way of life in order to do the will of God; those who do this belong to the new community (3.35). The new existence is symbolized by miracles of healing, restoration and forgiveness, as well as by parables which describe abundant harvests (4.1–32). But no one in the story seems capable of responding to the call: the disciples, who follow Jesus as far as Jerusalem, run away at the critical point; even the women, who are present when he dies, flee from the empty tomb (16.8).

The gospel is ‘good news about Jesus Christ’, and the whole book is focused on the figure of Jesus. Earlier commentators who discussed Mark’s christology began from an investigation of the christological titles in the gospel. But titles are simply a form of shorthand – a useful way of summarizing beliefs – which became important at a later stage as confessions of Christian faith. Moreover, it appears that many of these titles were originally far more ‘fluid’ than we once supposed. The term ‘messiah’, for example, could be used for a

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST MARK

---

variety of figures and was not nearly as specific as Christians later supposed it to be. Though Mark himself sometimes uses one or other of these titles as the climax of particular stories, they sum up truths which have already been demonstrated in the course of the narrative. The confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi (8.29) and that of the centurion at the moment of Jesus' death (15.39) point Mark's readers to the true interpretation of the story which he has been telling.

Recent investigation of Mark has stressed the importance of the fact that he presents his gospel in narrative form. A great deal of Mark's christology is implicit, conveyed by the way in which he presents the material. The identity of Jesus is deliberately concealed from the characters in the story.<sup>1</sup> A glance at John's gospel reveals a very different approach: there, Jesus frequently makes specific claims for himself, e.g. in the 'I am' sayings; he refers to himself as the Son, and to God as his Father. In Mark, Jesus nowhere preaches himself: his own 'good news' is summed up in 1.15 – it is good news about the Kingdom of God. Jesus calls men and women to follow him (to a scaffold!), but it is left to others to make statements about who he is; the only 'claims' he makes are those in which he refers to himself obliquely as 'the Son of man'.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless every part of Mark's story makes implicit claims on his behalf. His every action is characterized by authority; though he does not teach about himself, his teaching challenges men and women with a choice between believing in him and rejecting him. In Jesus, Mark's readers are confronted by the Kingdom of God in action, and they must decide for or against him.

Not surprisingly, the theme of discipleship runs throughout the gospel: the disciples are called (1.16–18, 19f.; 2.14), chosen (3.13–19) and sent out (6.7–13). Much of the teaching in the second part of the gospel concerns the meaning of discipleship (8.34–8; 9.42–50; 10.23–31, 35–45), and the story, when it is not the story of Jesus, is the story of the disciples' failure – of their misunderstanding and lack of faith (4.13, 40; 6.37, 52; 7.18; 8.4, 14–21, 32f.; 9.5f., 10, 14–29, 32–41; 10.10, 24–6, 32, 35–41), and of their final collapse (14.33–42, 50), Judas' betrayal (14.10f., 43–6) and Peter's denial (14.54, 66–72). Their failure is so great that it is sometimes suggested that Mark is launching a deliberate attack on the Twelve, who perhaps represent a group in his own community.<sup>3</sup> It is more likely, however, that Mark's emphasis on the inability of the Twelve to comprehend the truth about Jesus is due to his insistence that this truth is revealed through the Cross and resurrection. The disciples thus act as a foil to

<sup>1</sup> See additional note on the messianic secret, pp. 66–9.

<sup>2</sup> See additional note on the Son of man, pp. 88–93.

<sup>3</sup> So, e.g., T. Weeden, *op. cit.*

## INTRODUCTION

---

Mark's own readers who are able to recognize the good news for what it is. There are three ways in which the Twelve fail to comprehend. First, they do not understand Jesus' teaching (4.13; 7.17f.; 10.10; 10.23–6); second, they cannot grasp the significance of his divine authority (4.35–41; 6.45–52; 8.14–21); and third, they are bewildered by his teaching about his approaching death and resurrection (8.31–3; 9.9f.; 9.30–7; 10.32–45). To those who read the gospel all these things should be plain.

The disciples are not the only characters in the story to fail to comprehend its significance, however: indeed they do better than most, since they have *some* inkling of the truth (4.11f.; 8.27–30; 9.2–8). If Mark's story is a story about the meaning of discipleship (barely understood), it is also a story about misunderstanding and opposition, incomprehension and rejection. It begins with the authorities, in the series of 'conflict stories' found in 2.1–3.6 and continues in the confrontation between Jesus and the scribes from Jerusalem in 3.20–30. Linked into this last story is that of Jesus' rejection by his own family (3.20f., 31–5). At the same time, in contrast to these 'outsiders' (v.31), we find a group emerging who have chosen to be with Jesus (3.13–19, 32–5). In the next chapter, the contrast between those who are with Jesus and those 'outside' continues, but now it is the crowd who, though they listen to Jesus, are without understanding (4.10–12). In 5.17, the inhabitants of 'the district of the Gerasenes' beg him to leave their country, and in 6.1–6, echoing the rejection by his own family, we find the inhabitants of his own home village refusing to believe in him. From this point on, Mark emphasizes the hostility of the religious authorities who have rejected Jesus' authority (7.1–23; 8.11–13; 10.1–12; 11.15–33; 12; 14–15), and the incomprehension of the disciples who have accepted it. The divisions are not always clear, however. True, some groups (scribes and Pharisees, Herodians, elders and chief priests) are always opposed to Jesus; even so, individuals are sometimes sympathetic (12.28–34; 15.42–7). The crowds are ambivalent; though they follow Jesus, they are without understanding (4.11f.). Others besides the Twelve are called to follow Jesus (2.13f.; 8.34–8; 10.21); and outsiders often show greater faith in Jesus than do the disciples (7.24–30, cf. 7.17f.; 9.24, cf. 9.28f.; 10.46–52; 15.39), sometimes persisting in spite of discouragement (2.4f.; 5.35f.; 7.27–9; 10.47f.). Only the women are consistently shown in a positive light (5.25–34; 7.24–30; 12.41–4; 14.3–9; 15.40f., 47), and even here there is one surprising exception – his own mother (3.31).

We have already referred to the fact that Mark's story is dominated by the death of Jesus. Why is this so? Is it perhaps merely a reflection of early Christian preaching? Or is there some other reason why Mark devotes so much space to this theme? One obvious explanation

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST MARK

---

is that Mark felt it necessary to explain the scandal of the Cross: Paul had described the message of a crucified Messiah as 'an offence to Jews, and folly to Gentiles' (1 Cor. 1.23), and such it certainly was. By emphasizing that the death of Jesus was 'necessary', that it took place in accordance with God's will and was foretold in scripture, Mark would be able to deal with this particular problem. Another explanation links up with the traditional belief that Mark was written in a time of persecution. The stress on Jesus' willing acceptance of suffering, and on his call to his followers to share his suffering, may well have encouraged Christians facing persecution for their faith.

A very different explanation suggests that the Markan community, like the Corinthian church, was ignoring the message of the Cross altogether, and interpreting the Christian life (as do James and John in Mark 10.35–45) in terms of glory and honour; they emphasized the nearness of the End and forgot that distress and persecution must come first (cf. Mark 13). In such circumstances, Mark felt it necessary to tell the story of Jesus' sufferings at some length, and to emphasize that those who wished to be his disciples must be prepared to follow him along the same way of rejection and shame.

The appropriateness of Mark's message to these very different situations illustrates the difficulty of recovering the original situation which Mark was addressing. It also demonstrates very well the part which readers themselves play in the interpretation of the gospel, since clearly this can mean very different things in different circumstances.

Whatever the reason, Mark's story deals with the question 'Why did Jesus die?' and answers it at various levels. At one level, his answer is that Jesus died because it was the will of God; at another, that he died because he was obedient; at a third (paradoxically!), that he died because of the wickedness of his enemies and the treachery of Judas. All three explanations tell us how it came about that Jesus died: they do not tell us what his death achieved. None of the evangelists has a great deal to say about what we would call 'the atonement'. Nevertheless, there are in Mark two passages where Jesus describes his death as being 'for many' (10.45; 14.24); his death is a 'ransom' and effects a 'covenant'. These two terms remind us of God's choice of Israel to be his people, of the Exodus from Egypt and the covenant made with them on Sinai: Jesus' death creates a new people of God, who will inherit the Kingdom of God (14.25).

But Jesus' death cannot be separated from his resurrection (as we see in all the so-called passion predictions), and Jesus himself is not separated from the redeemed community: he too will drink wine in the Kingdom of God (14.25); he himself leads the disciples into Galilee (14.28; 16.7); he is raised up by God to be the chief stone in the new building (12.10) – a theme which is echoed in the accusations

about his threat to replace the temple with a new one (14.58; 15.29). The life of the new community depends upon his death *and resurrection*. Nevertheless, it is only because of Jesus' obedient acceptance of suffering and death that he is vindicated, and Mark's narrative concentrates on the story of the passion. One of the remarkable features of this section of the gospel is the way in which, in contrast to the earlier chapters, implicitly rather than explicitly, but nevertheless clearly to those with eyes to see, Jesus is now revealed as Christ and Son of God. It begins with Bartimaeus' acknowledgement of Jesus as 'Son of David' as he approaches Jerusalem; Jesus then enters the city on a donkey, while his followers greet the one who comes in the name of the Lord, together with 'the coming kingdom of our father David'. He comes to the temple in judgement (as Mal. 3.1 foretold of 'the Lord'), and looks for fruit on the barren tree of Israel which fails to respond to its Messiah; Jesus' question about John the Baptist in 11.30 makes the significance of this section clear. He then tells a parable and, unlike the parables in 4, the meaning of this one is plain (12.12): there is no doubt that Mark understood it as a claim by Jesus to be God's final messenger, his 'beloved son' (12.6). Jesus then demonstrates, in a series of debates, an authority to teach which is superior to that of the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes, and finally claims to be greater than the son of David (12.35–40). After chapter 13, which spells out the judgement on the temple and the nation, we come to the passion narrative itself. This begins with the anointing of Jesus (by a woman!), an incident which is interpreted as pointing forward to his burial: the story is a symbol of the fact that Jesus is to be proclaimed King through his death. But only with the 'trial' and crucifixion of Jesus is this theme brought out into the open. Remarkably, the three men who pass sentence of death on him and carry it out all proclaim the truth about him, though the first two merely ask (incredulous) questions: the high priest asks 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?' (14.61), Pilate asks 'Are you the King of the Jews?' (15.2) and the centurion declares 'Truly this man was [the] son of God' (15.39). Throughout chapter 15, Mark hammers home the truth that Jesus was crucified as King of the Jews: Pilate refers to him as such (vv. 9,12), the Roman soldiers mock him as a king and salute him as 'King of the Jews', and the inscription on the cross reads 'the King of the Jews'; finally, the chief priests and scribes mock him as 'the Christ, the King of Israel'. The one who saved others cannot save himself, and the Christ the King of Israel cannot come down from the cross, because that would be a denial of his kingship (vv. 31f.). In his dying, as in his living, Jesus embodies his own teaching: by losing his life he saves it (8.35), by being last he is first (9.35), and by serving and giving his life as a ransom for many, he is acknowledged to be great (10.42–5). Through

his death he is proclaimed Messiah and Son of God. This is why the full truth about Jesus cannot be grasped by men and women until after his death and resurrection. They cannot comprehend who he is because they refuse to accept the necessity for shame and death – something Mark emphasizes by linking every reference to the fate which lies in store for the Son of man with the disciples' failure to understand (8.31ff.; 9.9–13, 30–7; 10.32–45; 14.17–21, 41f.).

It is not surprising if the event which reveals Jesus as Messiah also brings about the redemption of the people of God. Nor, since this new community replaces the old, is it surprising to find another theme interwoven into it – namely, that of Israel's condemnation. The link is clearly set out in the parable of the vineyard tenants in 12.1–12: because the tenants kill the beloved son, they will themselves be destroyed. The chief priests and scribes and elders refuse to recognize Jesus' authority in the temple (11.27–33) and plot his death (11.18; 14.1f.); they accuse him of speaking against the temple and condemn him to death (14.53–64). By doing so, they bring judgement on themselves and seal their own fate and that of the temple (11.12–22; 13; 15.38). In seeking to destroy their Messiah, Israel's rulers destroy their nation: it is they, not he, who have broken the Law and who are therefore condemned. Mark's bitter portrait of the Jerusalem authorities may have been influenced by the events of AD 70.

The new community is established by Jesus' death, but it has already been called into being earlier in the gospel. The people who have already experienced the benefits of God's Kingdom have *not* been the 'religious'. Jesus has included 'sinners and tax-gatherers' (2.16), men and women who were excluded from society because of some infirmity or impurity (1.40–5; 5.25–34), those with 'unclean' spirits, those who were not over scrupulous in their interpretation of the requirements of the Law (2.23–8; 7.1–23). The community he calls is Jewish; but a Gentile woman creeps in because of her faith (7.24–30) and at the end of the story Mark depicts a Gentile centurion as the one who acknowledges Jesus as son of God.

The gospel reflects the tensions of a time when Jewish Christians were coming to terms with the failure of their fellow Jews to respond to the gospel. The rejection of Jesus' own message by his contemporaries had been followed by the rejection of the message about him by the great majority of Jews. But the Jewish background is still vitally important: Jesus was a Jew, his whole ministry was spent among Jews, and finally he is proclaimed King of the Jews on the cross. Although he is attacked by his opponents for laxity towards the Law, Mark affirms that Jesus is in fact *loyal* to the Law (1.44; 3.4; 10.19; 12.29–31); it is his enemies who ignore the Law and are castigated by Jesus for doing so (3.4; 7.8–13). The debates in the gospel are concerned with the interpretation of the Mosaic tradition,

and the question at issue is whether it is Jesus and his followers or their Jewish opponents who are faithful to it. Yet Mark's picture is not entirely consistent, for he attributes to Jesus teaching which in effect challenges the Law and frees the community from the obligation to keep the Jewish food laws, teaching which was of vital importance for Gentile Christians of Mark's own day (7.19).

Jesus' loyalty to Judaism is demonstrated also in his use of scripture. Apart from the Pharisees in 10.4 (who are referred to Moses by Jesus himself), the scribe in 12.28–34 (who simply echoes Jesus' own words) and the Sadducees in 12.19, the quotations from scripture in Mark's gospel are all found in the mouth of Jesus, often in arguing against his attackers (7.6f., 10; 10.6–8; cf. also 2.25f.; 4.12; 10.19; 11.17; 12.10; 12.26; 12.36; 14.27, as well as many echoes of scripture which are not specifically introduced as quotations). Jesus appeals to Moses and is supported by Moses (see 9.2–8), for, at the end of the day, Jesus is greater than Moses (1.41; 2.7; 6.50–2; 9.7; 10.2–12; 10.21; 12.1–12).

Because of the misunderstanding which surrounds the word 'Law', the Jewish word Torah ('teaching') has frequently been used in this commentary in referring to the Mosaic tradition; its use helps to remind us that the idea that the religion of the Old Testament is a legalistic one is a caricature. Judaism (like Christianity after it) was open to a legalistic interpretation, but the disputes in Mark about the interpretation of Torah imply acceptance of the Torah itself, and we should avoid reading back into the gospel the later antithesis between Law and Gospel.

We have suggested already that the opening verses of Mark's gospel are equivalent to a prologue in a classical play. The analogy of a drama is a helpful one in understanding the gospel as a whole, for it consists of a series of short, crisp scenes; the action moves speedily from one incident to another, but what unites them all is the fact that every scene in the drama is focused on the figure of Jesus. Moreover, the arrangement of these scenes means that they demand a response from those who watch, as well as from those who play a part in them. 'What is this?' the characters ask, then '*Who* is this?' The answer seems clear to us, but not to the participants in the play: we are surprised at their incomprehension, forgetting that they have not been present for the prologue and have not understood the comments of the vanquished demons. We are relieved when Peter finally acknowledges that Jesus is greater than anyone who has gone before (8.27–9). But we are still involved as the story proceeds, because Jesus addresses the crowd as well as the Twelve: this drama involves audience participation, and we, too, are summoned to take up a cross and follow him. And at the end of the story, we are invited to leave the theatre and to go, not to our own homes, but 'to Galilee',

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST MARK

---

where we shall see the Risen Lord, for the promise of Easter morning is made to anyone who is prepared to follow Jesus on the path of discipleship. Mark's gospel is above all a powerful challenge to faith and to commitment.

Mark's story is written from a standpoint of faith. No one who reads it can be neutral towards it: inevitably we read it in the light of our own presuppositions, and this goes for the commentator also! It is not the commentator's task to make judgements about Mark's interpretation of the story, and we have tried to avoid doing so: it is for each individual reader of the gospel to decide the extent to which Mark's interpretation rings true.

## ANALYSIS OF THE GOSPEL

### A *The Prologue: the basis of Jesus' authority* 1.1–13

- 1 The beginning 1.1 – 8  
Additional note: the baptism of John
- 2 The baptism of Jesus 1.9–11
- 3 The battle with Satan 1.12–13

### B *Authority at work: success and opposition in Galilee* 1.14–3.6

- 1 Jesus proclaims the Good News 1.14–15  
Additional note: the Kingdom of God
- 2 The call to discipleship 1.16–20
- 3 Authority in teaching and exorcism 1.21–8  
Additional note: the messianic secret
- 4 Jesus heals a friend 1.29–31
- 5 Healings and exorcisms 1.32–4  
Additional note: miracles
- 6 Jesus extends his ministry 1.35–9
- 7 Jesus makes a leper clean 1.40–5
- 8 Authority to forgive sins 2.1–12  
Additional note: the Son of man
- 9 Jesus and the outcasts 2.13–17
- 10 Old and new 2.18–22
- 11 Lord of the Sabbath 2.23–8
- 12 The opposition hardens 3.1–6

### C *Truth hidden and revealed: parables and miracles* 3.7–6.6

- 1 The crowds follow Jesus 3.7–12
- 2 Appointment of the Twelve 3.13–19
- 3 Misunderstanding 3.20–35
- 4 The parable of the sower 4.1–9  
Additional note: parables
- 5 The purpose of the parables 4.10–12
- 6 The parable explained 4.13–20
- 7 More sayings on the same theme 4.21–5

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST MARK

---

- 8 Two parables about the Kingdom 4.26–32
- 9 Jesus' use of parables 4.33–4
- 10 Power over wind and waves 4.35–41
- 11 Power over demons 5.1–20
- 12 Power to restore life 5.21–43
- 13 Disbelief in his own town 6.1–6a

### D *Hard hearts and lack of faith* 6.6b–8.21

- 1 Jesus sends out the Twelve 6.6b–13
- 2 The death of John the Baptist 6.14–29
- 3 The Twelve return 6.30–1
- 4 Jesus feeds five thousand 6.32–45
- 5 Jesus walks on water 6.46–52
- 6 Many are healed 6.53–6
- 7 A dispute about purity 7.1–23
- 8 A Gentile girl is healed 7.24–30
- 9 A deaf man hears 7.31–7
- 10 Jesus feeds four thousand 8.1–10
- 11 The Pharisees demand a sign 8.11–12
- 12 The blindness of the disciples 8.13–21
- 13 A blind man sees 8.22–6

### E *The way of the Cross: teaching on discipleship* 8.27–10.52

- 1 The disciples' eyes are opened 8.27–30
- 2 Jesus predicts his death 8.31–3
- 3 The way of discipleship 8.34–9.1
- 4 The transfiguration 9.2–8
- 5 Elijah and the Son of man 9.9–13
- 6 A dumb spirit is driven out 9.14–29
- 7 Jesus again predicts his death 9.30–2
- 8 True greatness 9.33–7
- 9 For and against Jesus 9.38–40
- 10 Sayings about life and death 9.41–50
- 11 A question about divorce 10.1–12
- 12 Jesus blesses the children 10.13–16
- 13 A rich man loses eternal life, but others find it 10.17–31
- 14 Jesus predicts his death for the third time 10.32–4
- 15 The cost of discipleship 10.35–45
- 16 A blind man sees the way 10.46–52

### F *The King comes to Jerusalem* 11.1–13.37

- 1 Jesus rides into Jerusalem 11.1–11

- 2 Israel's failure 11.12–26
- 3 The authority of Jesus 11.27–33
- 4 A parable about rejection 12.1–12
- 5 A trick question about tax 12.13–17
- 6 Another trick question: about the resurrection 12.18–27
- 7 A question about the Law 12.28–34
- 8 Jesus asks a question 12.35–7
- 9 Jesus attacks the teachers of the Law 12.38–40
- 10 A widow's gift 12.41–4  
Introductory note to Mark 13
- 11 The temple's destruction 13.1–4
- 12 The beginning of sufferings 13.5–8
- 13 Persecution 13.9–13
- 14 The sign of destruction 13.14–20
- 15 More false alarms 13.21–3
- 16 The coming of the Son of man 13.24–7
- 17 A parable about the fig tree 13.28–31
- 18 Another parable 13.32–7

**G** *The story of the Passion* 14.1–15.47

- 1 The plot 14.1–2
- 2 Jesus is anointed 14.3–9
- 3 The traitor 14.10–11
- 4 Preparations for the Passover 14.12–16
- 5 Prophecy of betrayal 14.17–21
- 6 The Last Supper 14.22–5
- 7 Prophecy of denial 14.26–31
- 8 Gethsemane 14.32–42
- 9 The arrest 14.43–52
- 10 Jesus before the Sanhedrin 14.53–65
- 11 Peter disowns Jesus 14.66–72
- 12 Jesus before Pilate 15.1–15
- 13 The King is mocked 15.16–20a
- 14 The crucifixion 15.20b–32
- 15 The death of Jesus 15.33–41
- 16 The burial 15.42–7

**H** *The Epilogue: the Resurrection* 16.1–8

- 1 The empty tomb 16.1–8
- 2 A short ending
- 3 A longer ending (16.9–20)  
Additional note: Mark's ending