

## **The Gospel of Mark in Current Study**

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### **Introduction**

In the last dozen years or so a large number of commentaries and monographs on the Gospel of Mark made their appearance. Many of them apply aspects of the newer methods of literary criticism; some follow older methods, but with fresh data and new insights. Markan studies in some ways constitute a microcosm, as it were, of New Testament scholarship in general.

In the paragraphs that follow I shall look at fifteen commentaries and more than twice that number of monographs. I divide the latter into three general categories, touching (1) questions of authorship, genre, and source, (2) themes, and (3) exegesis of specific Markan passages. The essay will conclude with an assessment of major issues, including proposals that place Mark in the context of the Roman Empire.

### **Commentaries**

The commentaries surveyed below range from various literary approaches to the more or less traditional philological and background approaches. All make significant contributions to Markan interpretation to one degree or another, though a couple of them stand out. My comments here are brief. One or two themes will be discussed more fully later.

*Edwin Broadhead's* commentary appears in Sheffield's series, called *Readings: A New Biblical Commentary*. He has published several monographs on Mark, as well as various articles. In his commentary Broadhead speaks of the "alert reader" or the "attentive reader" (and not the "implied reader," which is so popular today). The evangelist stakes out his story in 1:1-20 and then offers eight "acts," made up of several "scenes." Broadhead believes Mark's attentive readers will hear important echoes and allusions to Old Testament texts and themes (an aspect of Markan study that several commentators and authors of monographs have emphasized). The thinness of the book means that these allusions and themes are briefly treated, and sometimes

overlooked. The one aspect that I suspect many readers will question is Broadhead's lack of interest in Mark as an oral narrative.

*Michael Cahill*, *Christopher Hall*, and *Thomas Oden* have published important works that assemble and assess ancient commentary on the Gospel of Mark. Cahill's book consists primarily of a translation of a seventh-century exegetical work on Mark by an (Irish?) abbot, whose Latin text (*Expositio Evangelii secundum Marcum*) Cahill published previously in the Corpus Christianorum Series Latina (vol. 82; Turnhout: Brepols, 1987). Readers are treated to many examples of allegorical interpretation and at times insightful points of connection between Mark and the other Gospels. Hall and Oden have assembled ancient commentary on Mark from a variety of patristic sources, in keeping with the purposes of the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture series. This is a rich resource, gathering and translating pertinent comments from sources that in many cases are not readily accessible and have not been translated before.

*John Donahue* and *Daniel Harrington* have produced the commentary on Mark for the Sacra Pagina series. We have here an interesting team of scholars. Donahue is well known as a redaction critic, exploring what ways the evangelist's editorial work reflects his and his community's *Sitz im Leben*. Harrington is well known for expertise in Semitics, especially Aramaic. The merger of their respective skills makes for a learned and insightful commentary. Nevertheless, some readers may be disappointed that the commentary proper does not explore literary development and themes in as much detail as the Introduction seems to promise.

*James Edwards* published his commentary in the ad hoc series that has become known as the Pillar New Testament Commentary (for other examples, see Morris on Matthew and Carson on John; the latter is the series editor). Although this even-handed, balanced commentary is traditional in many ways, it offers a refreshing assessment of Mark's employment of irony, journey, and insiders/outsidere, complete with several excursuses on important themes. Edwards accepts the Roman province of the Gospel and gives it an early date (ca. 65).

*Richard France* has published the commentary on Mark for the highly technical New International Greek Testament Commentary series. His meaty work is on par with Howard Marshall's commentary on Luke, though in my opinion the former is more reader friendly than the latter (especially in that it does not become bogged down with interaction with secondary literature). France identifies Christology and discipleship as the key themes of the Gospel. In contrast to Broadhead, France views Mark as consisting of three acts—marked off by geography—following the prologue (1:1–13). He is inclined, moreover, to accept the Papiian tradition that lying behind Mark is Petrine and Roman tradition.

The editors of the Word Biblical Commentary originally assigned Mark to *Robert Guelich*. He brought out volume 1 in 1989, but died suddenly two years later. Guelich's volume emphasizes form criticism and redaction criticism. His thorough work is rich with interaction with major commentators and secondary literature. Volume 2 was assigned to me and appeared in 2001. Although issues relating to form and redaction are treated, I have chosen to emphasize comparative literature, background, and history. I have also been able to take advantage of the abundant harvest of research stemming from the pseudepigrapha, Dead Sea Scrolls, and archaeology, much of which came to light in the 1990s. In agreement with Gundry (considered next), I do not see hidden ciphers or double meaning in Mark or ideas in any way opposed to a theology of miracles or the like. I view the Gospel—written in the late 60s—as presenting Jesus, not Caesar, as the true “son of God.” (More will be said on this theme below.) Currently I am writing a replacement for volume 1. I have also written a brief commentary on the whole of Mark in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, edited by James Dunn and John Rogerson.

*Robert Gundry's* commentary is not in a series, but is free-standing. It is distinctive for its uncompromising rejection of what so many Markan scholars think they can detect in this Gospel. Gundry declares: “The Gospel of Mark contains no ciphers, no hidden meanings, no sleight of hand” (p. 1). He goes on to deny the presence of a messianic secret or mirror images of various enemies or heresies. “Mark's meaning lies on the surface. He writes a straightforward apology for the Cross, for the shameful way in which the object of Christian faith and subject of Christian proclamation died, and hence for Jesus as the Crucified One” (p. 1). As I state in the Preface of my commentary, I think Gundry is correct. However, I do think the evangelist Mark is instructing the faithful in matters of discipleship, but I also agree with Gundry that the disciples are not mirror images of enemies of the community. Gundry offers a detailed and sympathetic analysis of the Papiian tradition.

*Morna Hooker's* commentary appears in Black's New Testament Commentary series and as such replaces Sherman Johnson's commentary that appeared in 1960 (jointly under the series headings of Black's and Harper's New Testament Commentary). Hooker's readable commentary is far more detailed and is almost twice the length of Johnson's. Hooker judiciously reviews the Papiian traditions, concluding that the Gospel probably was written by someone who may have had contact with Peter and who wished to explain why Jesus died. She also dates Mark to just before or just after 70.

*Virgil Howard* and *David Peabody* have written the commentary on Mark in the *International Bible Commentary*, edited by William Farmer

and others. Curiously, though Howard and Peabody support the minority view that Mark's Gospel was written last, utilizing Matthew and Luke as sources, they choose not to emphasize this point in their commentary (p. 1334: "The present commentary is . . . not dependent upon any literary theory of synoptic relationships"). Also somewhat surprising, given the tendency of adherents of the Two Gospel Hypothesis (or Owen-Griesbach-Farmer Hypothesis) to argue that the authority of Peter lies behind Mark, Howard and Peabody do not press for either Roman or Petrine origin. For another significant "chapter-sized" commentary on Mark, see the one by *PHEME PERKINS* in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, edited by Leander Keck.

*Donald Juel's* commentary on Mark has been published in the Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament. It is a lightweight, reader-friendly commentary that cuts right to the chase, explaining the meaning of the text, passage by passage and often phrase by phrase. Juel is skeptical of the Papiian tradition, casting doubt on Markan authorship, Petrine influence, and a Roman provenance. He also dates Mark as late as 80. For an updated and thematic treatment, see Juel's *Master of Surprise* as well as his contribution to Abingdon's Interpreting Biblical Texts series.

*Eugene LaVerdiere* has written a two-volume commentary that is intended for the church, not the academic guild. Nevertheless, there are some intriguing interpretations that scholars will find interesting, even if not persuasive (e.g. the reference to the crowd in 3:20 and not being able to eat implies the presence of Gentiles; or "son of man" as part of an Adam Christology).

*Joel Marcus* has been asked to replace the weak commentary by *C. S. Mann* in the Anchor Bible series. This is a good choice. Marcus has produced some innovative studies of Mark, especially sensitive to the function of the Old Testament in this Gospel. Mann's commentary is plagued by the inconsistency of his exegesis with his adoption of the Two Gospel Hypothesis. Instead of finding evidence that Mark made use of Matthew and Luke (as the hypothesis requires), over and over again he finds evidence of the primitiveness of the Markan tradition. The commentary founders and critics have savaged it. The first volume of the replacement commentary appeared in 2000. Marcus thinks it likely that the Gospel was written by a man named Mark, perhaps John Mark. But he doubts the Papiian tradition that links the evangelist with Peter. Moreover, he doubts the Roman location, opting instead for a Syrian setting (as argued in his dissertation). Marcus describes the Gospel as a liturgical drama, whose purpose is to reassure Christians who are suffering persecution at the hands of Jewish revolutionaries shortly before or after the destruction of Jerusalem. The evangelist invites his

readers to take comfort in and to share in Jesus' suffering. We eagerly await the appearance of the second volume, in which Marcus may nuance his thesis.

*Francis Moloney* has produced a free-standing commentary. In my estimation it is one of the best in the middle-size category. The commentary sections are concise, with judiciously written footnotes that take readers to the heart of the important issues. There is no fluff in this commentary. It grew out of the classroom setting and is written with that setting in mind. Moloney believes Mark was written shortly after the capture of Jerusalem in 70, that the evangelist was familiar with Roman law and custom (and perhaps wrote in Rome), and that the Gospel reflects a community suffering persecution.

*John Painter's* commentary is in the New Testament Readings series. Treating whole passages, the commentary is eminently readable. Painter exploits the ambiguity of "the gospel of Jesus Christ," meaning either the gospel that Jesus himself proclaimed or the gospel concerning Jesus that the early church proclaims. Painter thinks the ambiguity is intentional and as such bridges the gap between the proclamation of Jesus and the later proclamation concerning him. In some ways this commentary is an updated version of the form critical approach. Painter identifies the various stories (correction stories, commendation stories, and the like). Speculatively Painter aligns the Markan evangelist with Paul, over against the central authority of the Jerusalem church. Mark's Gospel is thus "the Gospel which best represents the Pauline point of view" (p. 213). Painter has given a new spin to an old proposal.

*Bas M. F. van Iersel* has written a "reader-response" commentary on Mark, in which he compares what he imagines were the "first readers" with "present-day readers." He situates Mark's first readers in Rome, shortly after the fall of Jerusalem in 70. These readers are familiar with the Old Testament, particularly the Psalms and the stories of Elijah and Elisha. Problematic is van Iersel's belief that Mark's readers were familiar with Paul's letter to the Romans (whatever one thinks of Painter's arguments). Consequently the apostle's letter sometimes significantly influences interpretation of Mark. Not too many critics will accept this procedure.

*Ben Witherington III* has written a free-standing commentary that seeks to apply the insights of socio-rhetorical interpretation. The evangelist's preferred rhetorical form is the *chreia*, which was to be read orally. The whole of Mark constitutes an instance of biography (which is what many interpreters in recent years have recognized). This commentary is readable (though sometimes a little too cute) and enhanced with several brief excursions on various topics. Some will criticize the commentary for its failure to explain clearly its theoretical

basis, especially with regard to its subtitle (i.e. just exactly what is meant by “socio-rhetorical”?). Nonetheless, the commentary is helpful.

By way of conclusion, I offer a few comments about some of the German commentaries. Arguably the best is by *Rudolf Pesch*, whose two thick volumes are in Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament. This commentary—whose format is not particularly reader-friendly—is characterized by careful assessment of almost every issue and by substantial engagement with primary and secondary literature. The volumes appeared originally in 1976-77 and have been updated periodically on into the 1990s. The updates themselves are modest, focusing mostly on bibliography and brief supplemental notes. Consequently the commentary has fallen behind in some areas, such as in the Dead Sea Scrolls and recent archaeological finds.

Two other German commentaries that should be mentioned are those by *Joachim Gnilka* and *Dieter Lührmann*. The former has produced two slender volumes in the Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament. Like Pesch, Gnilka dates Mark’s publication to shortly after the fall of Jerusalem (ca. 70-73). Lührmann, known for his work in apocryphal gospel papyri and fragments, has produced a one-volume commentary in the Handbuch zum Neuen Testament. He accepts Papias’ attribution of the Gospel to Mark, but doubts association with Peter, and, as does Gnilka, he finds Mark’s structure revolving around Christology.

Readers should know that *Cilliers Breytenbach* is working on a replacement volume in Wilhelm Meyer’s *Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neuen Testament*. Ernst Lohmeyer’s work (first edition, 1937) is very much out of date. Breytenbach has already published several important works on the origins, composition, and perspective of the Markan evangelist and his community. Finally, all of us eagerly await *Adela Yarbro Collins*’s commentary on Mark, which is to appear in the *Hermeneia* series. Collins has published several works on Markan eschatology and *Sitz im Leben*. New volumes in the *International Critical Commentary* and the *New Cambridge Bible Commentary* may also be expected in due course.

### **Monographs on Authorship, Genre, and Source-Critical Issues**

It needs to be stressed here at the outset the studies treated below represent only a sampling of the many books that have been published in recent years. These books are selected for their distinctive contributions and illustrative usefulness. They are also readily available to readers of this journal.

*Clifton Black* has produced an outstanding study of the traditions relating to John Mark, which many early authorities believed was the author of the Gospel. Black reviews the references to this person in the

New Testament and in patristic sources. He then examines Mark in the light of these traditions. Black does not commit himself to a given conclusion, but he does prudently inquire in what ways the John Mark tradition contributed to the church's interpretation of the Gospel.

*Maurice Casey* investigates what Aramaic sources may have lain behind the Markan Gospel. He begins his work with a vigorous criticism of previous work that has explored this topic. Casey is particularly sharp in his criticism of C. C. Torrey and Günther Schwarz, and takes an unfair and misleading swipe at Stanley Porter, who has suggested that Jesus may have known some Greek (p. 67). (Ongoing research into the languages of Galilee suggests that many Galileans probably did know some Greek in the period in question). With the deck cleared, Casey states his contention: "Mark's Gospel contains some literal translation of Aramaic source material" (p. 86). He then treats four passages: 2:23-3:6; 9:11-13; 10:35-45; and 14:12-26. At many points his work results in exegetical gains. In my judgment, Casey is on the whole successful.

*Harry Fleddermann* and *Werner Zager* tackle the vexatious question of Mark's relationship to Q. Both presuppose Markan priority. (According to the Two Gospel Hypothesis the problem simply disappears, for the so-called "Q" material found its way into Mark because the evangelist found it in his Matthean and Lukan sources). Fleddermann argues that Mark knew and minimally made use of Q. This point is the primary burden of his work. Zager assumes that Mark and Q are independent, as he tries to argue for an eschatological dimension in Jesus' preaching (contra the Jesus Seminar).

*Peter Head* wades into the source-critical debate, investigating the development of Christology. He finds that the evidence does indeed favor Markan priority, with Matthew developing aspects of Christology found in the earlier Gospel. *David Neville* reopens of the question of the Synoptic Problem in terms of the argument from order. He finds that although at points this argument favors Markan priority, it is not decisive. Other criteria (such as redactional and theological criteria) are necessary to settle the question. It seems that Head's approach offers one such criterion.

Four significant studies have appeared that relate in various ways to the question of the genre of Mark. *Dennis MacDonald*, in keeping with a long-held interest, believes it is necessary to interpret Mark in light of Homeric epics. He finds Homer echoed at many points in the Markan narrative. Jesus is cast as Odysseus, both of whom "suffered much." The disciples of Jesus are compared to the feckless crew of Odysseus. The stilling of the storm, the Gerasene demoniac, the execution of John the Baptist, the feeding stories, the transfiguration, the healing of the blind man—all are said to have counterparts in Homer's tales of *Odyssey* and

*Iliad*. But what is the trigger in the Markan narrative that alerts readers and hearers that Homer's epics are indeed the underlying text? MacDonald can't say. Surely Mark's opening verse, which utilizes the language of the Roman imperial cult, would alert readers and hearers to a different paradigm. This is not to say that Homeric influence is not felt anywhere in Mark or other New Testament literature; it may well be. But these Homeric influences may play no greater role in Mark than do Shakespearean allusions in today's English. More will be said on this question below.

*Marion Moeser* finds analogs for Mark's stories, or anecdotes, in classical Greek literature and in rabbinic literature. She investigates fourteen Markan anecdotes (which are mostly identified as *chreiai*). Her conclusions are consistent with the point raised above against the hypothesis put forward by MacDonald. *Michael Vines* takes the study a step further, arguing that Mark's Gospel is not so much a biography as it is a novel, and a Jewish novel at that. That novelistic features may in fact be present in Mark is probably true, but I doubt seriously that the evangelist thought of his work as a novel or piece of fiction (any more than the tellers of the stories of Elijah and Elisha thought these stories were works of fiction). The Markan evangelist proclaims Jesus as God's Son because he actually did the things described in the narrative. The evangelist did not attempt to write a bestseller, but a narrative that boldly tells the story of one who possessed amazing power, a power seen even in death. The comments at the end of this essay will relate to this point. *Christopher Bryan* concludes, rightly in my opinion, that Mark is indeed a "life," which was to be read aloud.

### Monographs on Thematic Issues

Most learned monographs that treat the Gospel of Mark investigate general themes, hoping to shed light on the work as a whole. Most of books reviewed below fall into this category. And it is in this category more than in others that we encounter examples of special pleading and subjectivity. My comments are very brief.

*Barry Blackburn's* dissertation leveled much-needed criticism against the various *theios aner* ("divine man") hypotheses that had become so popular in previous years (as seen, for example, in work by Hans Dieter Betz). Not only has the concept itself been seriously challenged (and many would now say debunked altogether), Blackburn demonstrates that there is no fixed *theios aner* concept in late antiquity; there is no evidence of Hellenistic divine man concept influencing Judaism or early Christianity; and there is significant evidence that the miracle traditions of the Gospels, including Mark, reflect patterns seen in the Old Testament.



*Peter Bolt's* recent monograph is a model of properly contextualized historical and exegetical inquiry. He systematically works his way through the Gospel of Mark, asking the question in what ways would the narrative impact first-century readers in the Roman Empire. Aspects of health, disease, death, fear, bondage, and the like are taken into account, particularly from the point of view of the suppliant, who petitions Jesus for help. All of these problems—as understood in late antiquity—are linked to death, and this is what Jesus has confronted and defeated. Mark's Gospel is not simply an apology for the cross (as Gundry so forcefully argues in his commentary), but a demonstration of how Jesus has confronted and defeated humankind's greatest evil: death. This is the evangelist's good news. In my opinion Bolt's richly-documented study is of the utmost importance for Markan research.

*Edwin Broadhead* has produced three monographs that may be briefly mentioned. In *Teaching with Authority* (1992) the object is not the historical Jesus or the situation of the evangelist, but the meaning (or "grammar") of the Markan narrative. Broadhead attempts this by focusing on the miracle stories, showing how they advance the narrative in important ways. *Prophet, Son, Messiah* (1994) focuses on the Markan Passion Narrative and so is in a sense a sequel to the earlier study. He stresses the continuity of Passion Christology (the son of man who suffers) with the powerful Christology of miracles (the son of man who has authority). In *Naming Jesus* (1999) Broadhead focuses on the titles of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. Some of these titles are explicit (e.g. "Holy One of God" or "son of David"); others are "embedded" (e.g. Priest, Teacher, Shepherd, Suffering Servant). Careful and comparative consideration of the way in which the evangelist uses these titles and categories should clarify his Christology. *Peter Müller's* work might be mentioned here. He too recognizes the importance of titles for understanding Mark's Christology, but believes their significance is closely bound up within the narrative context, especially in the light of the resurrection.

In a collection of programmatic essays *Adela Yarbro Collins* proposes that Mark be viewed as an "apocalyptic historical monograph" (which strikes me as a little too modern), in which the healings and exorcisms play an important eschatological role. She also suggests that much of Mark 13 derives from the historical Jesus. Disappointingly, she thinks Mark 16:1-8 is fiction, intended to create a narrative context for the early church's proclamation of the resurrection.

*John Cook's* monograph takes a text-linguistic approach to Mark. In this highly technical and semantic study, the author follows ideas put forth by David Hellholm and others. Cook also makes use of speech-act theory and tries to make sense of Mark's alleged secrecy theme. In the

end, he thinks the evangelist's principal concern is "to draw people into discipleship" (p. 285). I think most students (and veteran scholars, for that matter) will find this book dense.

*James Crossley's* recent study tackles head on the question of the date of Mark's publication. He pursues this question from every imaginable angle. Crossley has little faith in the Papiian tradition, so he finds no help in external tradition. Mark 13 could reflect almost any time between the 30s and 70 and therefore has limited use for dating Mark. He also places no faith in arguments based on Mark's alleged relationship to Pauline theology. Crossley instead appeals to the attitude toward the Jewish Law in Mark, concluding that the evidence suggests this Gospel was composed sometime between the mid-thirties and the mid-forties, that is, before significant Pauline influence. It will be interesting to see how scholars react to this bold proposal. I plan to test it as I work through my commentary on Mark 1:1-8:26. Although for now I still hold to Mark's publication in the late 60s (i.e. before the conclusion of the Jewish war), I am certainly open to an earlier date. For more on the question of the Law in Mark, see discussions of Sariola and Svartvik below.

*Timothy Dwyer* probes the theme of wonder in Mark. The study is prompted by the observation of some thirty-two occurrences of words or descriptions of wonder, in reference to miracles, exorcisms, teaching, unusual events, and the empty tomb narrative. Dwyer studies aspects of wonder in the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds, concluding that the evangelist has exposed his readers and hearers to the ineffable, which cannot be explained but must be experienced. In my judgment aspects of this work comports well with Bolt's study described above.

*Susan Garrett* investigates the rhetorical and cultural conventions of Mark, focusing on the ways in which Jesus faces temptation (and not simply that of the "temptation story"). The failure of the disciples, the death of John the Baptist, and the agony in Gethsemane are investigated. Garrett concludes that the temptations of Jesus (as well as those experienced by his disciples) function paradigmatically for the Markan community.

*Douglas Geyer's* study grows out of his work as a psychiatric social worker, who has treated veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. For Geyer it is Mark's abrupt ending that provides the clue for the purpose of the Gospel. This purpose is to assure the followers of Jesus—past and present—that the "good news" of their master is sufficient for the terrors and uncertainties of a fallen world. Geyer's approach is highly symbolic and although it offers fresh and stimulating interpretations here and there (thanks in part to expertise in psychology), most will view his results with skepticism. Moreover, his conclusion,

that Mark's message is that "we can still follow Jesus to find out what might happen next" (p. 274), does not rise above banality.

*James Hanson* investigates Mark's portrayal of the conflict between Jesus and his opponents, on the one hand, and the conflict between Jesus and his own disciples, on the other. He is not sure if the negative portrayal of the disciples is polemical or pastoral. In my view this negative portrayal has been exaggerated and usually misunderstood by interpreters, who tend to read far too much into the Markan narrative. Hanson does not interact with the related and earlier published thesis by Shiner (see below).

*Thomas Hatina* argues that the context of Mark's use of Scripture is found within the narrative itself. Hatina examines the function of Exodus 23:20/Malachi 3:1/Isaiah 40:3 in Mark 1:2-3; Isaiah 6:9-10 in Mark 4:11-12; Isaiah 29:13 in Mark 7:6-7; Psalm 118:26 in Mark 11:19; and a cluster of texts in Mark 13:24-27. Hatina proposes an intriguing solution to the meaning of Mark 8:39-9:1 (viz. that the religious authorities will see judgment come upon them). The work represents a sophisticated advance in understanding the function of the Old Testament in the New.

*Konrad Huber* investigates the significance of the five "Jerusalem Controversy Dialogues" for Mark's understanding of Christology (i.e. 11:27-33; 12:13-17, 18-27, 28-34, 35-37; with 12:1-12 treated in an excursus). Huber believes that all five of these dialogues originated in the *Sitz im Leben Jesu*. Markan editing and contextualization have enhanced Jesus' authority as a greater religious teacher. The work suffers from insufficient primary data (such as early rabbinic examples of controversy dialogues) and does not take into account the possible significance of the function of the *chreia* in Greco-Roman sources.

*Paul-Gerhard Klumbies* examines Mark's Gospel in the light of theories about myth. This is an important study, regardless of one's view of the antiquity and reliability of the material. After all, the people of late antiquity will have read and heard the story of Jesus as presented in Mark from perspectives that will not have sharply distinguished "history" (especially as we moderns tend to think of it) from stories about the gods. Klumbies urges us to understand Mark's use of *archē* in 1:1 in the light of mythology (which imperial usage would also have done). That is, the new era (part of the mythological scenario) *begins* with the appearance of Jesus, God's Son. This not-easily-digested book scores some important points about the way the Markan narrative would have been understood in the first century.

*Ulrich Kmieciak* reopens discussion of the meaning of "son of man" in the Gospel of Mark. In doing so he reestablishes the importance of this curious epithet, but avoids (anachronistically) imputing to it messianic or technical meaning. The epithet derives from Jesus, to be sure, but takes

on important meaning in Mark, in which the authority of Jesus is underscored.

*Amy-Jill Levine* and *Marianne Blickenstaff* have edited *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, with contributions by Joanna Dewey (on Mark 8:34, to “deny” oneself), Deborah Krause (on the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law), Wendy Cotter (on healing the woman with the hemorrhage and raising the daughter of Jairus), Sharon Ringe (on the gentile woman), Elizabeth Struthers Malbon (on the poor widow), Dennis MacDonald and Marianne Sawicki (on the anointing of Jesus), Kathleen Corley (on female disciples), Victoria Phillips (on the women at the tomb), and others.

*Joel Marcus* has written an important book on the use of the Old Testament in Mark (and also a significant essay on Isaiah in Mark, in the *Festschrift* for David Freedman). The title of the book is *The Way of the Lord*, so Marcus appropriately launches his study with an investigation of the meaning of Isaiah 40:3 in late antiquity and its function in Mark 1. In the Markan context the “way of the Lord” is the way of the cross. The book is rich in background discussion and exegetical insight. It is must-reading for Markan study.

*Maksimilijan Matjaz* studies the theme of fear in Mark (and so in some ways is a companion to Dwyer’s investigation of the theme of wonder). This fear is understood in terms of the awe humans feel in the presence of the divine. The background here is developed out of the Old Testament, which is appropriate, but intertestamental writings are not brought into the discussion as fully as they should have been. Some interpreters will question Matjaz’s interpretation of the fearful women at Mark 16:8.

*Susan Miller* investigates the function of women in the Gospel of Mark. This recent dissertation complements the *Feminist Companion* mentioned above. Miller finds in Mark a very positive portrayal of women, which raises several interesting questions about the evangelist’s point and may well be of great significance for understanding the role of women in the church.

*Dwight Peterson* has written a hard-hitting and much-needed critique of the commonly held notion that a distinctive “community” can be reconstructed from the Markan Gospel and that apart from such reconstruction this Gospel cannot be understood. *Prima facie* evidence for this conclusion is seen in the “lack of agreement among Gospel community constructors” (p. 4). The most obvious problem is circularity: constructing an imagined community that then influences the interpretation of the text. Peterson illustrates this problem by assessing the differing reconstructions offered by Werner Kelber, Howard Kee, and Ched Myers.

*Narry Santos* investigates the implications of the authority-servanthood paradox in the Gospel of Mark. The whole of Mark is seen to contribute to dimensions of this paradox. Santos concludes that the evangelist has deliberately created tension, in order for his readers and hearers to appreciate the paradoxical nature of Jesus. I wonder if the evangelist created this paradox, or if it reflects the actual experience of Jesus?

*Heikki Sariola* investigates the function of the Jewish Law in Mark. He treats the controversy over purity in 7:1-23, the sabbath controversies in 2:23-3:6, divorce law in 10:2-12, the decalogue in 10:17-27, the Great Commandment in 12:28-34, and issues relating to the temple in 11:15-19. Sariola attempts to isolate Markan redaction and reconstruct pre-Markan forms. He sees Jesus exercising great authority in his interpretation of the Law, sometimes even nullifying it. In my opinion, Sariola does not always carefully distinguish the Written Law from the competing interpretations found in Oral Law. Crossley's sensitivity at this point makes his a better study.

*Brenda Deen Schildgen* has produced two studies. One treats the interesting history of Mark's reception in the church, highlighting its neglect over the centuries and its remarkable resurgence in the last one hundred and fifty years. The other study investigates the concept of time in the Gospel of Mark. Influenced by the theories of Paul Ricoeur, she identifies "sacred time," "mythic time," "ritual time," and "suspended time." I find this study highly theoretical and wonder if modern theories are being read into an ancient text. Indeed, some of the interpretation strikes me as bordering on allegorical interpretation (e.g. does John's head on a platter really foreshadow the Last Supper? See p. 110).

*Whitney Taylor Shiner* compares Mark's portrayal of the disciples with disciples and followers in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, Iamblichus' *Pythagorean Life*, Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, and the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira. Shiner's comparisons are interesting and suggest that Mark's view of the disciples is not nearly as negative as some in the past have thought. More engagement with early Jewish traditions is needed. Appeal to ben Sira is useful, to be sure, but in itself is insufficient. Shiner's important study would benefit from examination of rabbinic traditions of discipleship.

*Stephen Smith's Lion with Wings* examines Markan narrative along the lines of Alan Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*. Characters, plot, space/time, point of view, and rhetoric are the principal topics of study. Treatment of the last topic is probably the best part of the book, whose conclusion fragments with the interesting admission (pp. 235-36) of the limited value of narrative criticism and the difficulty and lack of

appeal that Smith's book will have for students and specialists alike. Curious.

*William Telford's* study of Mark is a strong addition to the Cambridge New Testament Theology series. He inquires into the three theologies of Mark: those of author, text, and reader. Telford also probes the Markan setting, which is understood in terms of persecution and estrangement from the community's Jewish heritage. The major contribution is to the Markan portrait of Jesus, who is seen as the suffering Son of God. This portrait is then compared to other New Testament writings, and the history of the interpretation of Mark is reviewed. This book is very helpful in orienting readers to the main lines of Markan research.

In contrast to Albert Sundberg's view that Daniel was the most important Old Testament writing for Mark, *Rikki Watts* now argues that the book of Isaiah (especially the second half of Isaiah) is the key influence. This ambitious study focuses on Mark's opening verses (1:1-3) with the conviction that they indicate Mark's "conceptual framework" (p. 370), which revolves around the theme of a new exodus. There is a great deal of insightful material in this engaging book.

*Joel Williams* investigates the role played by the minor characters in the Markan narrative. He finds that these minor characters sometimes play major roles. Foremost among the minor characters is blind Bartimaeus (10:46-52). He is portrayed as an exemplary figure who summons Jesus for help, leaves behind his property, and follows Jesus.

There are other, older studies that should be taken into account. One thinks of *Ernest Best's* solid work, in which in one study he argues for the influence of the Old Testament on Mark and that Mark falls between oral and written literature. His work on discipleship in Mark is a classic. *Phillip Cunningham* has written a useful, semi-popular treatment of Mark seen in Roman setting. *Frans Neirynck's* study of Markan redaction remains very helpful. The bibliography on Mark that was assembled under Neirynck's direction is of enormous value. The semi-popular studies on discipleship and the Passion, by *Dennis Sweetland* and *Donald Senior*, respectively, may be noted.

Lastly I mention *Burton Mack's* imaginative tour de force, *A Myth of Innocence*. In this extraordinary book Mack accuses the Markan evangelist of inventing the Passion story, whereby the Jewish religious authorities—instead of the Roman authorities—are blamed for the death of Jesus. The problems with this book are legion, with the hypothesis just mentioned seriously undermined by the independent accounts found in the fourth evangelist and in Josephus, accounts that corroborate the Markan narrative at just this very point. Infatuated with the Hellenistic world of the eastern Mediterranean, Mack ignores much of the relevant Jewish and Palestinian data, resulting in very skewed interpretations of

the meaning of Jesus' teaching and activities and Mark's presentation of them. A number of other weaknesses and improbabilities could be reviewed. As it has turned out, Mack's book has been largely ignored by mainstream Markan scholarship. Of course, it has been hailed in some circles, as illustrated in part by the jacket endorsements, some which are simply ridiculous. Werner Kelber describes this book as "the most penetrating historical work on the origins of Christianity written . . . in this century." Ron Cameron enthuses that Mack's book "is surely one of the most important studies of the origins of Christianity since Schweitzer's *Quest*." This is the stuff of utter nonsense, even when allowance is made for the hyperbolic nature of promotional endorsements. *A Myth of Innocence* exemplifies how far tendentious, axe-grinding scholarship is prepared to go. This book has not made and will not make a lasting contribution to either serious Markan scholarship or the investigation of Christian origins.

### Exegetical Monographs

A large number of exegetical monographs have appeared in the period under review. Some focus on a single passage; others on larger blocks of material. Many of the ones discussed below engage in comparative, traditional work and present useful insights.

In keeping with his interest in the Judaic background of the Gospels, *Roger Aus* has produced two interesting and learned studies of Markan passages. In one he probes the interpretive backdrop of the story of the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1-20) and other passages from Matthew, Luke, and John. In the demoniac story Aus brings to bear a wealth of background information, much of it concerned with demonology. The story "demonstrates with suspense and very many vivid details how Jesus, God's Son, has complete authority and power over the unclean spirits/demons" (p. 99). The second study investigates the backgrounds and overlapping points of contact in the parable of the Wicked Tenants (12:1-9) and Gethsemane (14:32-42). Aus thinks the beloved son of the parable is Isaiah (and this I find doubtful), while the portrayal of Jesus in Gethsemane has been colored by Moses traditions (which is a more plausible possibility). Whether or not one accepts all of Aus's proposals, one is treated to a rich feast of interpretive tradition and lore.

*Jean-François Baudoz* investigates the interesting passage of the Syro-Phoenician woman as presented in Matt 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30. He underscores the differences in perspective in the two versions. The passage in Matthew reflects a Jewish-Christian orientation, while the passage in Mark reflects a largely Gentile-Christian perspective. He treats the two versions of this story as independently derived, rather than viewing the Matthean version as a reworking of the Markan version.

Many Markan scholars will demur at this point. Baudoz is to be commended for trying to interpret the respective versions of this story in the light of different community situations, but I think some of his specific points of interpretation (e.g. the dogs under the table) smack of allegory and subjectivity. These details should be interpreted in the light of culture and convention. In this case the dogs under the table eat crumbs (which especially fall from tables when children are eating) before the dogs outside eat what is thrown out. Being *under* the table signifies nothing and should not be related to Pauline theology.

*Mary Ann Beavis* argues that Mark 4:11-12, which contains an allusion to Isaiah 6:9-10, plays a key role in Mark 4 and in the Gospel as a whole. She understands Mark as written for oral presentation (almost like a play), including evangelistic proclamation. Mark 4:11-12 consciously distinguishes between those inside the community of faith and those outside, and challenges those outside to reconsider their refusal to accept the Christian message. Isaiah 6:9-10 and Mark 4:11-12 are treated in studies by Lehnert, Marcus, and Mell, all of which are treated below.

*Agustí Borrell* treats us to a study of Peter's denials in Mark 14:54, 66-72. He contends that Peter's denials of Jesus constitute a "paradigmatic manifestation of the disciples' inability to follow Jesus to death" (p. 212). Peter's failure highlights Jesus' prognostic powers and strength in the face danger, suffering, and death. In this the Markan evangelist proffers his readers "good news," that is, despite the failings of his followers, Jesus himself does not fail, but fulfills his mission, accomplished God's purposes, and restores the ruptured relationships in his community.

*Michael Humphries* has written an insightful study of the synoptic tradition in which Jesus is accused of being in league with Beelzebul (Mark 3:19b-30 and parallels). Humphries offers some original work in the meaning of Beelzebul in tradition and in early Christian communities. Unfortunately, influenced by Burton Mack, he understands "kingdom of God" in the Hellenistic sense of wisdom and community, rather than in the Judaic sense of the ruling presence and power of God (as seen in the Psalms and elsewhere in Scripture and in the Aramaic paraphrasing of Scripture in the synagogue).

*John Chijoke Iwe* investigates Mark 1:21-28, where Jesus teaches in the Capernaum synagogue and heals a demonized man. Because themes from this passage recur in Mark, Iwe believes the passage serves a programmatic purpose. However, this may be a bit of an overstatement. The passage certainly does adumbrate things to come—such as Jesus' attack on the kingdom of Satan—but it is hardly programmatic. For one



thing, there is no overt Christology in this passage, nor is there mention of the kingdom of God, the very heart of Jesus' proclamation.

*Alberto de Mingo Kaminouchi's* monograph investigates the meaning and significance of Mark 10:32-45, the passage that addresses position and power in the Christian community. The author is sensitive to the innertextuality of the Markan narrative and the context of the first-century Mediterranean world. The latter point is especially concerned with the way power was understood in the first century. In view of Mark's narrative development, the reader and hearer will readily perceive how ill-conceived the question of James and John is in 10:35. Their misguided request, of course, gives Jesus the opportunity to give proper teaching on power. Kaminouchi hears echoes of Herod's banquet (Mark 6), as well as other banquet stories, at various points in the Markan story. He also makes the intriguing suggestion that the reference to *lytron* ("ransom") in 10:45 should be interpreted in the light of Roman practices of manumission.

*Volker Lehnert* reopens the question of the function of Isaiah 6:9-10 in Mark 4:10-13 (and in Luke 8:9-10; Acts 28:25-27). He reviews previous research on this interesting passage, including studies by Joachim Gnilka and me (see also Joel Marcus in the next entry). Lehnert examines the versions and the variants of the Isaiah passage, though curiously does not probe the variants of 1QIsaiah<sup>a</sup>, which may be deliberate and if so are quite interesting. He examines the function the passage had in various contexts and settings. He thinks Isaiah's original command not to hear or to see was reverse psychology, intending to provoke the hearers to hear. Lehnert believes Isaiah 6:9-10 plays a crucial role in Mark's Christology, touching on the question of Jesus' identity. I agree that this text is important, but think it has more to do with Jesus' message not his identity. (See also the study by *Mary Ann Beavis*.) This point is underscored in the next study.

*Joel Marcus* studies Isaiah 6:9-10 in the larger context of Mark 4 as a whole, asking the question how Mark's first readers understood the parable chapter. The evangelist has assembled and edited traditional materials, creating "apocalyptic epistemology" through which the real meaning of the kingdom of God can be understood and therefore the essence of Jesus' message as a whole. The passage reflects the Markan community's struggle to evangelize in the face of opposition. Some interpreters may question to what extent Mark 4 actually mirrors the community's *Sitz im Leben*, but on the whole this study makes an important contribution.

*Ulrich Mell* has published two exegetical treatments of important Markan passages. The first is a study of the parable of the Wicked Tenants, in the larger context of Mark 11:27-12:34, and the second is a

study of the parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1-9). Both studies evince detailed exegesis and consideration of pertinent parallels and cultural features. In the first, Mell argues that the parable of the Wicked Tenants does not derive from Jesus but originated in Hellenistic Jewish Christianity. Coherence with LXX Isaiah 5:1-7, which supplies many of the parable's details, and the quotation of LXX Psalm 118:22-23 at the conclusion of the parable constitute the primary reasons for this position. Unfortunately Mell does not take into account 4Q500 and early targumic and rabbinic interpretation of Isaiah 5:1-7 and thus fails to recognize the Palestinian character of this parable. In the second book Mell argues that the parable of the Sower derives from Jesus and originally concerned the kingdom of God. The parable is studied in the light of farming practices in Galilee and Markan editing and contextualization are taken into account in great detail. Mell suggests that the parable was originally uttered in Capernaum.

*Klaus Scholtissek's* study investigates the concept of the authority of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark (a study that in fact provided Mell with his point of departure), which is understood as a key component in Markan Christology. Jesus' authority is seen in his participation in the saving activity at work in God's inbreaking kingdom. Mark's Christology is therefore not limited to titles, but is acted out in the mighty deeds and teachings of Jesus, who possesses unrivaled authority. Paradoxically, the high point of Jesus' authority is seen in his obedience to God's will by going to the cross.

*Jesper Svartvik* investigates the meaning and authenticity of Mark 7:15, "There is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him." He concludes that the saying goes back to Jesus and that it was not anti-nomistic. Jesus' saying was part of an aggadic teaching concerning the perils of evil speech (perhaps related to Deuteronomy 24:9) and was not an abrogation of the Jewish food laws and should not be understood in terms of the gloss found in v. 19b ("Thus he declared all foods clean"). Svartvik thinks the utterance originally had this meaning: "It is not so much what goes into a person [*or* the mouth] which defiles, but what comes out of a person [*or* the mouth] which defiles" (p. 408). This detailed study makes an important contribution to the larger question of how Jesus and the evangelists understood the Jewish Law.

### **Major Issues**

As one might expect, Mark's Christology remains a hot, ongoing topic of discussion. Recent work seems to be moving more toward examining aspects of Mark's "narrative Christology." On this point, see *Jacob Naluparayil's* monograph and *Mark Powell's* essay. For additional

assessments of Markan Christology, see Naulparayil's very helpful essay, as well as the essays by *Eugene Boring*, *Cilliers Breytenbach*, *Gerhard Dautzenberg*, *M. M. Jacobs*, and *Donald Juel*.

Related to the question of Christology is the question of Mark's purpose and what type of literature it represents. As seen above, I have called into question Dennis MacDonald's appeal to the Homeric epics. I question this hypothesis, not because I think there are no allusions to Homer in the Gospel—there may well be—but because Mark's incipit (i.e. the opening verse, 1:1) unmistakably alludes to the Roman imperial cult: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, son of God." The Priene Inscription in honor of Augustus (*OGIS* 451) speaks of the emperor as "God" and the beginning of the good news for the world (and similar statements are made of other first-century emperors), a point for which I have argued in an essay. I find several points of contact between Mark's story of Jesus and aspects of the cult of the Roman emperor. One should also see *Detlev Dormeyer's* interesting essay on this topic.

I should also mention that *Adela Yarbro Collins* has concluded that "son of God" at the end of Mark 1:1 is a scribal gloss and not part of Mark's original text. Early manuscript evidence is almost evenly divided, and internal considerations cut both ways: either a scribe glossed the text with a common confessional title, or an early scribe omitted *huiou theou* through homoioteleuton. Mark's Christology seems to call for the retention of these words, especially in light of the centurion's confession in 15:39. I shall address this issue fully in the replacement volume 1 of the *Word Biblical Commentary*. Collins will doubtlessly address it further in her *Hermeneia* commentary.

If it is agreed that in its incipit the Gospel of Mark alludes to the Roman imperial cult, then we have clear indication of at least one of the Gospel's purposes: to challenge belief that Caesar is God's son and that in him good news for the world begins. The Markan evangelist has apparently attempted to apply Isaiah's message of good news to the empire as a whole and not simply to Israel, which longs for redemption. Accordingly, Mark's message constitutes a bold challenge to Rome. If Mark was written in the late 60s, then this bold challenge was issued shortly after the death of Nero, the last of the Julian emperors, when Roman imperial succession was plunged into chaos. If Mark was written in the 40s, as James Crossley argued, then it may be viewed as a challenge to Caligula and the threat to the Jewish people that he had become. In any case, ongoing scholarly support for placing Mark's Gospel in a Roman setting (with the notable exception of Joel Marcus) lends general support to my interpretation of Mark 1:1.

And finally, another battle is seen in the debate concerning the religious context of the Gospel of Mark. Some contend for a Hellenistic

background, appealing to various Greco-Roman epics or various literary forms and structures. Others have emphasized the Judaic background, especially in reference to Israel's Scriptures and the interpretive traditions that grew up around them. Here I might mention the essay by *Daniel Harrington* in the recently published volumes in memory of Anthony Saldarini. Harrington concludes that Mark is a very Jewish Gospel and is friendly toward the Jewish people, even if engaged in polemics with some Jewish leaders. Of course, elements of both Hellenistic and Judaic contexts are probably present in Mark. There is no need to choose one and exclude the other (keeping in mind Martin Hengel's important work on the blending of Hellenism and Judaism). But the question of which context is primary is a pressing issue and is sure to continue at the heart of the debate.

The Gospel of Mark, its sources, its relationship to Matthew and Luke, the evangelist and community from which it emerged, including its relationship to Judaism, and its genre will remain items of ongoing investigation and debate. In my view, significant progress has been made, thanks to new source material, a burgeoning of studies of Galilee, and the critical sifting of methods. Although consensus on many of these important questions is not yet in sight, convergence at some points seems to be taking place.

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