

The Gospel
according to
MARK

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Introduction

1. HISTORY OF THE INTERPRETATION OF MARK

Until modern times the Gospel of Mark has received considerably less attention than the other three Gospels. In comparison to John with its lofty theology, Matthew with its narrative structure, or Luke with its imitable parables and stories, Mark has often been judged as a rather artless and pedestrian Gospel, even by scholars.¹ The eclipse of Mark goes all the way back to the dawn of the Gospel tradition, which, according to the general consensus of the church fathers, ascribed the earliest Gospel to Matthew.² Since Mark contains only three pericopes that are not found in either Matthew or Luke, or both (Mark 4:26-29; 7:31-37; 8:22-26), from the middle of the second century onward (e.g., Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.1.1)

1. G. Dehn, *Der Gottessohn. Eine Einführung in das Evangelium des Markus* (Hamburg: Im Furche-Verlag, 1953), 18, declared that Mark was "neither a historian nor an author. He assembled his material in the simplest manner thinkable." R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. J. Marsh (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 350, wrote that "Mark is not sufficiently master of his material to be able to venture on a systematic construction himself." E. Trocmé, *The Formation of the Gospel According to Mark*, trans. P. Gaughan (London: SPCK, 1975), 72, scoffed at Mark's literary achievement: "The point is settled: the author of Mark was a clumsy writer unworthy of mention in any history of literature."

2. Six fathers — Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, Epiphanius, and Jerome (and seven if one counts Papias) — state that the earliest record of Matthew was written in Hebrew (although no Hebrew Gospel text is extant today). The Islamic Hadith also preserves a tradition of an early Hebrew Gospel: "Kadija then accompanied [Muhammad] to her cousin Waraqa ibn Naufal ibn Asad ibn 'abdu'l 'Uzza, who, during the Pre-Islamic period became a Christian and used to write the writing with Hebrew letters. He would write from the Gospel in Hebrew as much as Allah wished him to write" (*Sahih al-Bukhari* 1:3).

Mark was placed second (and sometimes fourth) in the canon as a rather inferior abridgment of Matthew. Throughout the patristic period quotations from the Gospels were cited from Matthew and John, in that order; from Luke as a distant third; and from Mark last and only rarely. A dictum of Augustine with regard to the Gospel of Mark typifies not only the judgment of the fathers before him but also that of the succeeding centuries until the age of the Enlightenment: "Mark imitated Matthew like a lackey (Lat. *pedisequius*) and is regarded as his abbreviator."³ As a consequence of this view, the Christian church has historically derived its picture of Jesus primarily from the Gospel of Matthew. Because Matthew appears first in the NT canon, and because it emphasizes Jesus' fulfillment of OT promises, for seventeen centuries the church regarded Matthew as the earliest and most reliable Gospel. Readings for Sundays and holy days were taken from Matthew, the other Gospels being utilized generally only when Matthew was thought to be deficient.

Opinion on the value of Mark underwent a radical shift in the first half of the nineteenth century when, on the basis of careful internal investigations of the first three Gospels, scholars⁴ hypothesized that Mark was not a slavish follower of Matthew but rather the *earliest* of the Gospels, and a primary source for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. This reevaluation has radically affected scholarly interest in Mark. For the past century and a half, Mark has received attention of celebrity proportions, and the resultant crest of scholarship on the Second Gospel is so prolific that no one scholar can claim to have read it all, let alone mastered it all. The theory of Markan priority, although not uncontested, continues to be held by a majority of scholars today, the present author included. The relationship of the four Gospels — and especially the first three — poses one of the most difficult problems in the history of ideas and cannot be rehearsed in this commentary.⁵ The most that can be done in the present volume with respect to Markan priority is to draw attention to the significant number of passages where Mark reasonably can be supposed to precede, and to have influenced, the other Synoptic Gospels, and Matthew in particular. The spate of recent scholarship devoted to Mark has succeeded in laying to rest, I believe, the pejorative judgments of earlier

3. *De Consensu Evangeliorum* 1.2.4.

4. K. Lachmann, 1835; C. H. Weisse and C. G. Wilke, 1838; H. J. Holtzmann, 1863; B. Weiss, 1886; B. H. Streeter, 1924.

5. H.-H. Stoldt, *History and Criticism of the Marcan Hypothesis* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press/Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980), 1. "The critical analysis of the sources of the Gospel is justifiably regarded as one of the most difficult research problems in the history of ideas. . . . One can truly say that no other enterprise in the history of ideas has been subjected to anywhere near the same degree of scholarly scrutiny."

scholars that Mark was a clumsy and artless writer. The position represented in this commentary is that Mark was a skilled literary artist and theologian. Although the style of Mark approximates everyday spoken Greek rather than affecting high literary quality, the Gospel nevertheless displays considerable sophistication in literary intention and design, as is evinced by Mark's sandwich technique, use of irony, and special motifs of insiders-outsiders, command to silence, and the journey. These and other literary conventions are employed by the author of the Second Gospel in order to portray a profoundly theological conception of Jesus as the authoritative yet suffering Son of God.

2. AUTHORSHIP AND PLACE OF COMPOSITION

Like the other canonical Gospels, the Gospel of Mark nowhere identifies its author, nor even, as is the case with Luke (1:1-4) and John (20:30-31), the occasion of writing. The titles of each of the four Gospels, which were assigned on the basis of church tradition, appear in the first half of the second century. The normal nomenclature is "Gospel According to Matthew" (Gk. *euangelion kata Maththaiou*), "Gospel According to Mark" (Gk. *euangelion kata Markon*), and so on. With reference to the Gospel tradition, the early church used the word for "Gospel" (Gk. *euangelion*) regularly in the singular and rarely in the plural, indicating that it conceived of the Gospel tradition as a unity, that is, the *one* Gospel in four versions.⁶

The first reference to the author and circumstance of the Second Gospel comes from Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor, in a work entitled *Exegesis of the Lord's Oracles*, composed sometime prior to Papias's death in A.D. 130.⁷ Although the *Exegesis* has since been lost, Papias's testimony has been preserved by Eusebius in the following version:

Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not, indeed, in order, of the things said or done by the Lord. For Mark had not heard the Lord, nor had he followed him, but later on, as I said, followed Peter, who used to give teaching as necessity demanded but not making, as it were, an arrangement of the Lord's oracles, so that Mark did nothing wrong in thus writing down single

6. M. Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, trans. J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 64-69; M. Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, trans. J. Bowden (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000), 34-115.

7. W. R. Schoedel, "Papias," ABD 5.140, places Papias's literary activity in approximately 110.

To this account we may add the corroborating testimony of Irenaeus in the middle of the second century that after Peter and Paul had preached and laid the foundations of the church in Rome, "Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, also himself handed on in writing the things that had been preached by Peter" (*Adv. Haer.* 3.1.1). The tradition that Peter was a key source for Mark's Gospel — indeed, that the Second Gospel was in many respects "Peter's memoirs" — found, as far as we know, unanimous agreement in the early church.⁹ Thus, from a variety of traditions from the end of the first century onward we see a complementary testimony that the author of the Second Gospel is Mark, the interpreter of Peter, who composed the Gospel in Rome.

The Mark under consideration is evidently John Mark, son of a woman named Mary, in whose house the early church gathered in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12). The same dwelling was apparently the site of the Last Supper (Acts 1:13-14; Mark 14:14).¹⁰ In the NT John Mark appears only in association with more prominent personalities and events. He accompanied Barnabas and Saul as an assistant on the first missionary journey (Acts 12:25; 13:4), evidently being responsible for travel arrangements, food, and lodging. At Perga he quit the journey for undisclosed reasons (Acts 13:13). The question whether Mark should participate in the second missionary journey in approximately A.D. 50 caused a rift between Paul and Barnabas: Paul, considering Mark's desertion of the first journey unjustifiable and being unwilling to take him on a second journey, took Silas and returned to Asia Minor; whereas Barnabas returned to Cyprus with Mark (Acts 15:37-41). John Mark is not heard from again until a decade later, when scattered references show him reconciled to Paul (Col 4:10; Phlm 24; 2 Tim 4:11). A final NT reference shows him laboring with Peter

9. The Anti-Marcionite Prologue; Justin Martyr, *Dial. Trypho* 106; Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.1.1; Hippolytus, on 1 Pet 5:13; Clement of Alexandria (cited in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.14.6; Origen (cited in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.25.5); Jerome, *Comm. in Math.*, *Prooemium* 6). Further, see Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 2.15; 5.8.2. See the material gathered in V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 1-8; W. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, 22-23; and H. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 289-90. To the above testimonies could also be added that of the Muratorian Canon, which contains a list of books recognized for their authority in Rome in the period 170-90. The initial part of the Muratorian Canon has been lost, the extant portion containing only a fragment of the final statement about Mark ("at which, however, he was present, and so he has set it down"). Despite its incompleteness, the above phrase is reasonably explained, as in the traditions preserved by Papias, Irenaeus, and Eusebius, as a reference to Mark's attendance on Peter's preaching, i.e., "at Peter's preaching, however, Mark was present and has set it down in writing."

10. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, 21, suggests that the young man carrying the water jug in Mark 14:13 was Mark, the author of the Gospel. There is no further evidence either for or against this intriguing suggestion.

points as he remembered them. For to one thing he gave attention, to leave out nothing of what he had heard and to make no false statements in them. (*Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.15)

Although this testimony was penned in the early fourth century, it comes from sources two centuries earlier and represents very reliable tradition. Eusebius derives the above tradition not only from Papias but also from the respected second-century church father Irenaeus. Eusebius includes a lengthy preface to the Papias testimony, noting that although the latter had not heard the apostles directly, he had made careful inquiry into the origins of the Gospel tradition and had received the above information through their immediate successors, a John the Elder and a certain Aristion, who were disciples of the apostle John. This dates the Papias tradition to between 90 and 100. The reliability of the Eusebius quotation is further enhanced by the fact that, in this instance, Eusebius is willing to trust the testimony of a man whom he did not automatically regard as a dependable source.⁸

The salient points of the Papias testimony are that the Second Gospel derives from Mark, who, although not an apostle, was a faithful interpreter of the apostle Peter's testimony. Papias further testifies that Mark wrote accurately and endeavored to make no false statements; that he wrote fully in setting down all he remembered; but that he did not write in entirely chronological order. The last statement shows that Papias was aware that, at least in some circles, Mark was being criticized for presenting a variant chronology of Jesus' life. That criticism probably derives from the fact that Mark's chronology departs in certain particulars from the Gospel of John, to whom the protégés of Papias adhered.

The reference to Peter "teaching as necessity demanded" is elaborated in a further testimony of Eusebius, the substance of which he attributes to the late-second-century church father, Clement of Alexandria:

When Peter had publicly preached the word at Rome, and by the Spirit had proclaimed the Gospel, that those present, who were many, exhorted Mark, as one who had followed [Peter] for a long time and remembered what had been spoken, to make a record of what was said; and that he did this, and distributed the Gospel among those that asked him. (*Hist. Eccl.* 6.14.6-7)

8. In one instance Eusebius dismisses Papias as "a man of very little intelligence, as is clear from his books" (*Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.13). Eusebius's willingness to trust the Papias tradition related to Mark indicates that he has reason to do so in spite of his estimate of Papias's reputation. For the whole discussion, see *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.1-17.

