

The Gospel of Mark

Two Source Theory In the remarks that follow I shall shamelessly adopt the two-source theory for Synoptic composition: that is, that the first Gospel to be composed was Mark, and that Matthew and Luke amplify Mark in their different ways, using one common source (“Q” – containing sayings of Jesus) and separate sources of their own (M and L).

Papias For a very long time all sorts of assumptions and traditions were current in the Church about the four Gospels. Some of these are to a certain extent traceable; few of them are very reliable as historical conclusions. Thus we can trace back to the infamous Papias of Hierapolis certain statements about the order of the Gospels’ compositions and their authors (but how did he learn these things?). The names he attached to the Gospels have become so standardised that to refrain from using them seems almost unnecessarily prissy; but in fact the Gospels are all anonymous documents in a way which is conspicuous (especially in view of the common Biblical phenomenon of adopting a much grander name than one’s own as a *nom de plume* (even in the New Testament; many Pauline letters are not in fact by Paul). Why are the evangelists so unwilling to reveal their names, to stand up like men and take responsibility for their work? Perhaps because they did not consider the Gospels to be *their own* in that sense, but acts of obedience to the tradition itself; if that were true, it would tell us something vital about the documents they produced.

Three Stages Papias calls Mark the *hermeneutes* of Peter, which can mean *interpreter*, but also *translator* (Peter presumably did not speak habitually in the Gospel’s Greek. Would this imply that Peter had needed a live companion to interpret his sermons, or merely that the author of the Gospel had acted as a *literary* translator?) However this may be, the idea implies that Mark’s rôle in the composition of the Gospel was relatively minor – Papias even makes the point that the “memoirs” are devoid of any particular ordering. We can be quite sure that this is not true, because we can detect a very conscious editorial design in the Gospel; indeed, if this is an index of the reliability of Papias, it isn’t speaking well for him. Those commentators who, in ancient times and more recently, accepted Mark’s stories as simple, naive reportage of eyewitness material had really only one question to ask of the text: *What happened?* Scholars regard this as the “Stage One” question, and the answer will furnish us with a knowledge of the actual situation in which the words and deeds of Jesus took place. German scholars term this the “*sitz in leben*” or “life-situation” for the particular story or saying. But there are further stages of questioning to be faced.

Synoptic Criticism The critical study of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke is made particularly engrossing and in a sense easy by the fact that each of them is actually an amplified version of their common predecessor, the Gospel of Mark. Where they repeat the words of Mark unadorned, we may assume that they are in perfect accord with what he has written; where they decide to edit, add to, or subtract what Mark has written, we may detect a sensibility of their own which helps us to understand the mind of each of them, the community for which they were writing, and perhaps various developments in history or the history of theology, which intervene between the writing of Mark and that of Matthew or Luke. This gives us an insight into the second stage of the tradition, no longer the *sitz in leben Jesu*, but that of the Church remembering and preserving the Gospel tradition, preaching it, and certainly modifying it to suit the situation the Church was addressing: perhaps no longer in

Palestine, perhaps no longer in a Jewish environment, perhaps under persecution, and so forth.

When we are reading Mark, however, there is nothing for us to compare him with. It is therefore quite hard to isolate Mark from the traditions he received, or to recognise what he may have added to these traditions on his own account. I advise all of you to beware of facile assumptions about any single line of Mark, based on the musings of the ancient Papias or others. The image of an identifiable Mark sitting on the pulpit steps listening to St Peter telling stories of his distant youth may be a beguiling one. But it is hardly the more likely to be true for all that.

Formgeschichte Rather than drawing a simple, direct line between eyewitnesses like Peter and the author of our Gospel, we should accept the gift of *the form-critics*. In 1901 the German scholar Hermann Gunkel first published his methodical analysis of stories in Genesis, proposing that they existed in - and were modified by - a *long process* of oral transmission before ever they were committed to writing. The time spent passing from mouth-to-ear is, like Chinese whispers, never neutral, and a careful critic can identify the modifications to the story introduced by those who are interested in it.

Stage Two Now a new, second-stage question arises: *Why was this story saved, and who will have saved it?* - and this question is important to us as we read Mark's Gospel too. The method of Gunkel became known as *form criticism* because he relied on discovering various different literary forms, related to the oral traditions people habitually preserve, each of which has rules of its own which can be used to illuminate the various contents of a finished work like this Gospel. We will study form-criticism itself when we come to read the Old Testament. After applying form-criticism, therefore, we may expect to have an overview of the beliefs and preoccupations, not only of the eyewitnesses of the original happenings in Jesus' life, but of the community at the time of Mark's writing, and their forebears, who transmitted and formed the tradition before anyone wrote it down.

Pericope At first the image offered by this form-critical way of looking at authorship was a rather minimal one. The evangelist was seen as a man who has been given a box full of beads - all the different stories and relics about his subject - and his task is to thread them together, in a sequence of his own choosing, to create a collection that is orderly. We call these beads of tradition, originally free-floating and separate, by the Gk term *pericope*. But we can soon tell that this doesn't give sufficient creative rope to the likes of Matthew and Luke and their way of dealing with Mark; so we can have little doubt that Mark himself was much more of an author than the bead-threading image allows. The personal agenda of Mark is, as remarked earlier, far more difficult to establish than that of his two successors; nevertheless, by looking at the seams between stories, and the way he presents summaries of what has gone before, and his sandwiching technique (the insertion of one story between two halves of another) we can detect things about the creative mind of the author.

Stage Three So we have a third question to ask: our first was, *what happened?* Our second, *who saved the story of what happened, and why?* Now we add a third, *what did the Evangelist personally add to the situation in the process of his composition of the Gospel?* These questions are the ones which opened up a new mode of scholarship, called *redaction-criticism*. It was asking how people edited the tradition.

Redaktionsgeschichte This opens up the way in which we study each Gospel as a whole work. About each incident we can ask, *How does this part of the Gospel relate*

to the overall plan? A good example will be the theme of secrecy in Mark. Every so often we find Jesus insisting on keeping miracles quiet, silencing the demons *because they know who he is*, and forbidding his disciples to tell anyone about him. That theme is one about which we can ask our three questions: did it happen? Why would Jesus have felt and acted like that? Secondly, is its presence in the story ascribable to anything we know of the earliest Church – perhaps its fear of persecution, and the consequent habit of secrecy? Thirdly, can we relate it to anything we recognise in Mark himself and his plan? All these considerations bring us further forward, and into the world of the evangelist. Now the Gospel traditions have a third *sitz in leben* – that of the author himself, who is putting the traditions into literary form, editing here, amplifying there, criticising and harmonising according to his own plan.

The reader It's worth pointing out that these complications of the process don't end with the "final" production of the written word. The first person who *read* Mark's work was already transferring it from one ambience to another; as Morna Hooker remarks, no work is *written* in a vacuum, but neither is it *read* in one either. If you include in the term *reading* the further demands of *translating*, it will be plain that the history of the Gospel is a complex one indeed. You yourself can't read it without imposing on it your own interests, your own weaknesses and prejudices, your own education, the way you've become used to hearing it preached and expounded, and so on. And into that you can feed the powerful and insidious influence of pictures, static and motion, respectable and blasphemous, Raphael, Caravaggio, and Cecil B. de Mille.

The Evangelist Of course, one of the most important collection of such prejudices, weaknesses, and interests will be those of Mark himself. Evangelists are not devoid of such accidental influences and tendencies; so we must leave enough latitude in our reading of the Gospel for the fact that it is a human production, and that it sometimes gets swamped by the humanity of its own human author. At the same time, we should beware of assuming that the breathless pace of the Gospel, and its occasionally artless style, indicate any measure of thoughtlessness or carelessness. What is written here is written to carry a message.

Mark and Matthew/Luke

This is the briefest possible visit to the great campaign of scholarship which is called "**the Synoptic Problem**". You can easily read about this in hefty tomes like the NJBC.

Partly because of Papias and his like, the original order of the Gospels in the Bible was established. To this day we accord to Matthew the title of "the first Gospel". It was this way of looking at their order that meant Mark was a neglected Gospel for many centuries; it was assumed that, since the vast majority of Mark's verses are reproduced in Matthew, Mark must have been a recension or *précis* of the longer (and earlier) work.

That learned people could have accepted this theory seems odd to us.¹ To suppose that Mark, for the sake of brevity, comprehensively tore out from Matthew half the parables, the Lord's Prayer, the Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes, the greater part of Jesus' actual doctrine, the genealogy and the birth narratives, takes a good deal of believing. Nevertheless, for centuries it was assumed that reading Mark

¹ And it is pleasing to observe that the venerable Bede was one of the few scholars who thought fit to present a commentary on Mark in the early eighth century

was something of a waste of time, because you got all of Mark *and more*, by reading Matthew – which thereby became the standard source of what you might call pastoral teaching in the Church.

Scholars then began to study the shared elements in Matthew and Luke which were absent from Mark. If Matthew were the first Gospel, the implication would be that Mark had purposely thrown this material away, while Luke had not. Modern linguistic analysis confirmed that Matthew and Luke's shared material was indeed copied from a single source: but not from Matthew. When the document "Q" was proposed as the second great shared source of the first and third Gospels, Mark was simultaneously established as their first source. His narrative line is adopted by the other two, enriched in their different ways both by "Q" and by further, separate sources which make them individually different from each other. It is the study of these differences which teaches us how the evangelists can be considered true authors in their own right.

It's important to remember that no-one has a copy of "Q". Its existence is conjectural, but perfectly defensible. It is not by Matthew or by Luke, and its words stand in far too similar form in their two Gospels for this material to represent any merely oral tradition: they both had copies of a single document.

Mark's Theology

For the reasons mentioned before, it is not easy to isolate a theology that is special to Mark. As he is the first to write a Gospel, he is in some way incomparable. We can certainly say that the heart of his message is Jesus of Nazareth, and we can also say that his understanding of the message he wants to enshrine in his book is controversial. He calls it *Good News* at the very beginning, but it is not immediately easy to see the content of his book as good news. The most significant content of his story is conspicuously the moment when his hero is subjected to a grisly death on the worst possible terms – a condemnation by the most powerful and the most respected of his contemporaries. From the beginning the disciples he gathers prove to be of almost animal stupidity, which frequently draws from him exclamations of impatience. He meets misunderstanding and, increasingly, rejection, not only from natural opponents, but from supernatural powers, from authorities of all sorts, from his townsfolk, from his own family (including his mother), and even from his closest disciples, one of whom acts as guide to those who arrest him. The message he preaches is similarly challenging and disturbing, and he leaves us in no doubt that he expects those who follow him to meet the same kind of rejection, and the same kind of end, that he meets himself. He dies without a friend, surrounded by the mockery of his triumphant enemies, and his own last decipherable words ask why God has abandoned him. His last earthly expression is a wordless cry of horror, drawing from the Roman NCO the ironic verdict, *Truly, this was the Son of God!* and as a final irony, the last people left anywhere near are the women who come to his grave. They meet an angel who shows them his empty tomb, and they receive the commission to announce his resurrection to his friends; but on emerging they hurry home, too terrified to announce anything to anyone. That is how the Gospel Mark wrote ends.

It is open to you to assume that the Gospel text is corrupt. In one huge instance this has been the verdict of the Gospel's readers: the stark and unrelieved ending has been "supplied" with a rather broken rewriting by several other hands. The canonical choice has been made to include the longest of these as part of the Gospel. In many other ways the Gospel is filled out to resemble better what the Church would wish it

to be; mentally we supply from other sources what we feel the Gospel as written is lacking. It takes some effort for us to refrain from “filling in” the details we might consider as “missing” from this short account of the salvation of the human race. The habit of reading the four Gospels as one may be natural, but we who are studying them must unlearn it, and listen to the message of each of them separately: which is why I asked you to read Mark from end to end. I imagine that for many of you it will have been the first time you’ve ever done this. It’s doubtful whether the experience did what it was meant to, however, because I am willing to bet that you will have mentally supplied the “missing” details as if they had been there on the printed page. It is exactly the same with the birth narratives, which we habitually form into a single porridge of mingled - or mangled - details, with shepherds following the star and camels delivering eastern potentates to a stable; in this way we lose the whole meaning of what has been written, under the mistaken impression that everything in the Gospel belongs to stage one of the tradition, as if they were four scene-of-crime reports; and if we lump everything in together the soup will taste right. This is very bad advice for those wishing to make soup. It is even worse advice for those wishing to make sense of the Gospel.

The most convincing heart for anything called “the teaching of Mark” is the Cross itself. Martin Kähler famously calls the Gospel “a Passion narrative with an extended introduction”, and the dominance of the Passion Account is far more than a matter of space. Jesus thrice foretells his death, lays down the principle that his followers must be cross-bearers, and focuses his sights on the Cross as a revelatory moment of irreplaceable significance. The sharing of this meaning will result in the resurrection, where Jesus will drink wine in the kingdom of heaven: but the sharing that is to be sought by a true disciple, the only one that can with certainty be granted, is to share in the drinking of the cup, the baptism of suffering which is all Jesus has to offer. So Mark gathers around the condemned and crucified Christ the titles “King of the Jews” and “Son of David”. It is under these titles that he is crucified. The High Priest asks him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” Pilate asks him “Are you the King of the Jews?” and the ironic words of the Centurion charged with his crucifixion are “Truly this was the Son of God!” Mark could not have been more explicit.

In the circumstances the enigmatic ending of the Gospel has its own eloquence. From the beginning the disciples of Jesus have been unable to grasp the meaning of his Gospel. His injunction to them to keep silent about him has been part of an atmosphere of waiting for the Cross, which in ways beyond earthly words and concepts will reveal the person and nature of Jesus the Christ. If you want to see the reason for the broken and failing mission of Jesus during his earthly ministry, you have to notice how his followers refuse to accept the need for his suffering, for the Cross. Jesus does not reveal the destination of his journey until he receives Peter’s testimony of faith, “You are the Christ”; once these words are in the open forum, Jesus, as it were, closes them down by the revelation of the suffering and death which these words will demand of him. Peter’s protest is only the beginning – however firmly Jesus punishes it – of a dividing of the ways between the Master and the disciples. We should think of two agendas within the group: one in the mind of Jesus, which is open to the Cross, and the other in the half-formed minds of the Twelve, which will be closed to the Cross, and open only to their own ways of understanding his Messiahship. As the will of the Father unfolds, Jesus loses his disciples and indeed everybody else, until he hangs on the Cross completely alone, with the ironic taunts of the onlookers revealing the meaning of what he is doing, not as reverent interpretations, but cloaked in ridicule and sarcasm.

It must be clear from all of this, that the Gospel of Mark is no artless ragbag of memories, but a carefully orchestrated presentation of the meaning of Jesus. Its

intention is clearly stated, to be *a document which grounds faith in Christ*. If there is any further determination of theological intent, it is in terms of the insistence on the necessity, and the precise functioning in the plan of God, of the rejection of the Messiah and his crucifixion.