Mark

MARY ANN BEAVIS
Mark

MARY ANN BEAVIS
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Foreword

*Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament* is a series that sets out to comment on the final form of the New Testament text in a way that pays due attention both to the cultural, literary, and theological settings in which the text took form and to the interests of the contemporary readers to whom the commentaries are addressed. This series is aimed squarely at students—including MA students in religious and theological studies programs, seminarians, and upper-division undergraduates—who have theological interests in the biblical text. Thus, the didactic aim of the series is to enable students to understand each book of the New Testament as a literary whole rooted in a particular ancient setting and related to its context within the New Testament.

The name “Paideia” (Greek for “education”) reflects (1) the instructional aim of the series—giving contemporary students a basic grounding in academic New Testament studies by guiding their engagement with New Testament texts; (2) the fact that the New Testament texts as literary unities are shaped by the educational categories and ideas (rhetorical, narratological, etc.) of their ancient writers and readers; and (3) the pedagogical aims of the texts themselves— their central aim being not simply to impart information but to form the theological convictions and moral habits of their readers.

Each commentary deals with the text in terms of larger rhetorical units; these are not verse-by-verse commentaries. This series thus stands within the stream of recent commentaries that attend to the final form of the text. Such reader-centered literary approaches are inherently more accessible to liberal arts students without extensive linguistic and historical-critical preparation than older exegetical approaches, but within the reader-centered world the sanest practitioners have paid careful attention to the extratext of the original readers, including not only these readers’ knowledge of the geography, history, and other contextual elements reflected in the text but also their ability to respond
correctly to the literary and rhetorical conventions used in the text. Paideia commentaries pay deliberate attention to this extratextual repertoire in order to highlight the ways in which the text is designed to persuade and move its readers. Each rhetorical unit is explored from three angles: (1) introductory matters; (2) tracing the train of thought or narrative or rhetorical flow of the argument; and (3) theological issues raised by the text that are of interest to the contemporary Christian. Thus, the primary focus remains on the text and not its historical context or its interpretation in the secondary literature.

Our authors represent a variety of confessional points of view: Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox. What they share, beyond being New Testament scholars of national and international repute, is a commitment to reading the biblical text as theological documents within their ancient contexts. Working within the broad parameters described here, each author brings his or her own considerable exegetical talents and deep theological commitments to the task of laying bare the interpretation of Scripture for the faith and practice of God’s people everywhere.

Mikeal C. Parsons
Charles H. Talbert
## Abbreviations

### General

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>alt.</td>
<td>altered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>Babylonian Talmud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ca.</td>
<td>( \text{circa} ), approximately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cent.</td>
<td>century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cf.</td>
<td>compare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chap(s).</td>
<td>( \text{chapter(s)} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>col(s).</td>
<td>( \text{column(s)} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g.</td>
<td>exempli gratia, for example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>esp.</td>
<td>especially</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ET</td>
<td>English translation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>et al.</td>
<td>( \text{et alii} ), and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fig.</td>
<td>figurative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i.e.</td>
<td>( \text{id est}, ) that is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lat.</td>
<td>Latin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lit.</td>
<td>literally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m.</td>
<td>Mishnah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MT</td>
<td>Masoretic Text, Hebrew OT</td>
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<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>New Testament</td>
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<tr>
<td>OT</td>
<td>Old Testament</td>
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<tr>
<td>par.</td>
<td>parallel</td>
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<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>plural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rev.</td>
<td>revised</td>
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<tr>
<td>t.</td>
<td>Tosefta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trans.</td>
<td>translator</td>
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<tr>
<td>vol(s).</td>
<td>volume(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x</td>
<td>following a numeral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y.</td>
<td>Jerusalem Talmud</td>
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<tr>
<td>=</td>
<td>( \times ), number of occurrences</td>
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### Bible Texts and Versions

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Editor/Publisher</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KJV</td>
<td>King James Version</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LXX</td>
<td>Septuagint</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA\textsuperscript{27}</td>
<td>\textit{Novum Testamentum Graece}. Edited by [E. and NAB</td>
<td>New American Bible</td>
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Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NASB</td>
<td>New American Standard Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIV</td>
<td>New International Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLT</td>
<td>New Living Translation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSV</td>
<td>Revised Standard Version</td>
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Ancient Corpora

**Old Testament**

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<th>Book</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gen.</td>
<td>Genesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exod.</td>
<td>Exodus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lev.</td>
<td>Leviticus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Num.</td>
<td>Numbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deut.</td>
<td>Deuteronomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh.</td>
<td>Joshua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judg.</td>
<td>Judges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>Ruth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–2 Sam.</td>
<td>1–2 Samuel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–2 Kings</td>
<td>1–2 Kings</td>
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<tr>
<td>1–2 Chron.</td>
<td>1–2 Chronicles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezra</td>
<td>Ezra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neh.</td>
<td>Nehemiah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>Esther</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job</td>
<td>Job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ps./Pss.</td>
<td>Psalm/Psalms</td>
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<td>Prov.</td>
<td>Proverbs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eccles.</td>
<td>Ecclesiastes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song</td>
<td>Song of Songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isa.</td>
<td>Isaiah</td>
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<td>Jer.</td>
<td>Jeremiah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lam.</td>
<td>Lamentations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezek.</td>
<td>Ezekiel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dan.</td>
<td>Daniel</td>
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<td>Hosea</td>
<td>Hosea</td>
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<td>Joel</td>
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<td>Obad.</td>
<td>Obadiah</td>
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<td>Jon.</td>
<td>Jonah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mic.</td>
<td>Micah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nah.</td>
<td>Nahum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hab.</td>
<td>Habakkuk</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zeph.</td>
<td>Zephaniah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hag.</td>
<td>Haggai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zech.</td>
<td>Zechariah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mal.</td>
<td>Malachi</td>
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**Deuterocanonical Books**

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<tr>
<td>1–2 Esd.</td>
<td>1–2 Esdras</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jdt.</td>
<td>Judith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–4 Macc.</td>
<td>1–4 Maccabees</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sir.</td>
<td>Sirach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tob.</td>
<td>Tobit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wis.</td>
<td>Wisdom of Solomon</td>
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**New Testament**

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<th>Book</th>
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<tr>
<td>Matt.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Mark</td>
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<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>John</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acts</td>
<td>Acts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rom.</td>
<td>Romans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–2 Cor.</td>
<td>1–2 Corinthians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gal.</td>
<td>Galatians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eph.</td>
<td>Ephesians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phil.</td>
<td>Philippians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Col.</td>
<td>Colossians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–2 Thess.</td>
<td>1–2 Thessalonians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–2 Tim.</td>
<td>1–2 Timothy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Titus</td>
<td>Titus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philem.</td>
<td>Philemon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heb.</td>
<td>Hebrews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–2 Pet.</td>
<td>1–2 Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–3 John</td>
<td>1–3 John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jude</td>
<td>Jude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rev.</td>
<td>Revelation</td>
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Abbreviations

Dead Sea Scrolls
CD  Damascus Document
1QH  Thanksgiving Hymns
1QpHab  Pesher on Habakkuk
1QS  Community Rule
11QT  Temple Scroll

Rabbinic Literature
‘Abod. Zar.  ‘Abodah Zarah
Bek.  Bekorot
Ber.  Berakhot
B. Qam.  Baba Qamma
Giṭ.  Gitṭin
Mak.  Makkot
Mek.  Mehilta
Midr. Esther  Midrash on Esther
Ned.  Nedarim
Pesah.  Pesahim
Rab.  Rabbah
Šabh.  Sabbath
Sanh.  Sanhedrin
Tā’an.  Tā’anit
Tohar.  Tohorot
Yebam.  Yebamot

Old Testament Pseudepigrapha
Apoc. Ab.  Apocalypse of Abraham
Apoc. El.  Apocalypse of Elijah
Apoc. Zeph.  Apocalypse of Zephaniah
2 Bar.  2 Baruch (Syriac Apocalypse)

Apostolic Fathers
1–2 Clem.  1–2 Clement
Did.  Didache
Herm. Sim.  Shepherd of Hermas, Similitude

New Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha
Prot. Jas.  Protevangelium of James
Gos. Phil.  Gospel of Philip
Gos. Thom.  Gospel of Thomas

Ancient Authors

Ambrose
Spir.  De Spiritu Sancto

Aristotle
Poet.  Poetics
Pol.  Politics
Rhet.  Rhetoric

Athanasius
Hom. sem.  Homilia de semente

Cicero
Off.  De officiis

Demetrius
Eloc.  De elocutione

Dio Chrysostom
Or.  Orationes

Diogenes Laertius
Liv. Phil.  Lives of Eminent Philosophers

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### Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Work Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Epiphanius</td>
<td>Ancor. Ancoratus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pan. Panarion</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Eusebius</td>
<td>Hist. eccl. Historia ecclesiastica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hippolytus</td>
<td>Antichr. De antichristo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irenaeus</td>
<td>Haer. Adversus haereses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Chrysostom</td>
<td>Hom. Matt. Homiliae in Matthaeum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josephus</td>
<td>Ag. Ap. Against Apion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ant. Antiquities</td>
<td>J.W. Jewish War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin Martyr</td>
<td>1 Apol. First Apology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dial.</td>
<td>Dialogue with Trypho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenal</td>
<td>Sat. Satirae</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livy</td>
<td>Hist. Historiae</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origen</td>
<td>Comm. Matt. Commentary on Matthew</td>
</tr>
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<td>Fr. Matt.</td>
<td>Fragments on Matthew</td>
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<td>Philo of Alexandria</td>
<td>Contempl. Life On the Contemplative Life</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Embassy On the Embassy to Gaius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good Person That Every Good Person Is Free</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Names On the Change of Names</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spec. Laws On the Special Laws</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Virtues On the Virtues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philostratus</td>
<td>Vit. Apoll. Vita Apollonii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pliny the Elder</td>
<td>Nat. Naturalis historia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plutarch</td>
<td>Exil. De exilio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rom. Romulus</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tacitus</td>
<td>Ann. Annals</td>
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<td>Hist. Histories</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Terence</td>
<td>Phorm. Phormio</td>
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<tr>
<td>Virgil</td>
<td>Georg. Georgics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Valerius Maximus</td>
<td>Fact. Facta et dicta memorabilia</td>
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<td>Modern Works, Editions, and Collections</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
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Mark
Introduction

For most of Christian history, the Gospel of Mark has been neglected by church leaders and theologians because, following the opinion of Augustine of Hippo, it was thought to be an abridged version of Matthew:

For Matthew is understood to have taken it in hand to construct the record of the incarnation of the Lord according to royal lineage, and to give an account of a great deal of his deeds and words as they stood in relation to this present life of men. Mark follows him closely, and looks like his associate and epitomizer. For in Mark’s narrative he gives nothing in concert with John apart from the others. . . . Taken by himself, Mark has relatively little exclusively to record, and taken in conjunction with Luke, even less. In concurrence with Matthew, Mark has a great number of passages. Frequently he narrates in words almost numerically and identically the same as those used by Matthew. (Harmony of the Gospels 1.2.4, in Oden and Hall 1998, xxvii)

Furthermore, Mark, like Luke, was believed to have been written not by one of the apostles, as were Matthew and John, but by a second-generation Christian who had never met Jesus. Nobody seems to have bothered to write a commentary on Mark until the seventh century; the first was written by an anonymous Irish monk (Cahill 1998), closely followed by the British chronicler and theologian Bede (AD 673–735). Nonetheless, the so-called Second Gospel (because of its customary placement after Matthew) was recognized as Scripture from an early date, due to an early church tradition that connected Mark with Peter (see Schildgen 1998, 37).

The relative disinterest in Mark began to shift radically in the eighteenth century with the rise of the historical criticism of the Bible. Scholars began to question the traditional accounts of Gospel origins, and Christian Hermann Weisse (1801–66) marshaled evidence to demonstrate that Mark could
not be an abbreviation of Matthew, as Augustine had held. Rather, Matthew and Luke must have used Mark as their source, since both Gospels integrate large portions of Mark, follow Mark’s ordering of events, and seldom agree against Mark. Heinrich Holtzmann (1832–1910) accounted for the material shared by Matthew and Luke but missing from Mark by postulating a sayings collection “Q” (after the German word Quelle, meaning “source”) used by both Matthew and Luke in addition to Mark. This “Two Source Hypothesis,” accepted by the majority of NT scholars today, holds that Mark is not merely a digest of material that is more fully covered in the other Gospels, but rather the oldest of all, the source of Matthew and Luke (together with Mark, called “Synoptic Gospels,” from the Greek synoptikos, “seen together”), and the model for all four.

Initially the insight that Mark was very probably the earliest written account of the life of Jesus excited scholars because if Mark was the oldest Gospel, this made it the closest to the historical Jesus. This conclusion was challenged with the publication in 1901 of William Wrede’s Messianic Secret (ET, 1971), which argued that the evangelist’s purpose was theological, not historical—that Mark was written not to record eyewitness accounts of the
life of Jesus but to explain that Jesus was not recognized as the messiah in his lifetime because he deliberately suppressed his messianic identity. At the same time, scholars like Martin Dibelius (ET, 1934; lived 1883–1947) and Rudolf Bultmann (ET, 1963; lived 1884–1976) were dissecting the Gospels into their constituent “forms”—pre-Gospel materials such as parables, sayings, and legends—which had circulated orally among believers before they were compiled into Gospels by Mark and the other evangelists. The method of “form criticism,” which regarded the social settings of the pre-Gospel units of tradition as windows into the needs and concerns of the early church rather than as historical evidence about Jesus, dominated Gospel scholarship for the first half of the twentieth century. Consequently there was little interest in Mark in and of itself; rather, the Gospel was seen as a collection of sources to be dissected and analyzed.

In the decades since the publication of Willi Marxsen’s Der Evangelist Markus (1956; ET, 1969), scholars returned to the consideration of the Gospels as literarily unified works rather than as compendia of source materials. This began with the method of Gospel interpretation pioneered by Marxsen and other German scholars known as Redaktionsgeschichte, usually translated as “redaction criticism.” This method assumes the validity of form criticism but seeks to understand the use made of the forms (early Christian traditions) by the Gospel writers in order to uncover their distinctive theological outlooks and concerns. Initially the focus of redaction criticism was on distinguishing between editorial input and pre-Gospel material, but it soon became apparent that the evangelists were not just transmitters of tradition but also authors in their own right. Thus it became necessary to consider the Gospels as wholes and shaped by their authors’ aims and the needs of their respective communities, leading to more explicitly literary critical interpretations (cf. Perrin and Duling 1982, 236). More recently, redaction criticism has been superseded by a plethora of specialized methodological approaches, some literary (e.g., narrative criticism, reader response, deconstruction, reception history, rhetorical criticism), some ideological (e.g., feminist, liberation theological, Marxist), and some social scientific (for an overview of some of the methods that have been applied to Mark, see J. Anderson and Moore 1992).

The methods of source, form, and redaction criticism have undermined the argument that since Mark is the first Gospel to have been written, it is the most likely to contain eyewitness accounts of the words and deeds of Jesus. Nevertheless, scholars continue to use the materials preserved in the Gospels, other NT writings, and extracanonical works to reconstruct the career of the historical Jesus, albeit with widely differing results (for a survey of some of these, see Witherington 1997). This commentary recognizes that Mark contains some traditions that may go back to Jesus himself and will point out some of these, but the historical Jesus is not the main subject of the pages that follow. Rather, the focus is on the redaction-critical insight that the Gospels
were written by the evangelists not so much to convey historical information as to address the issues facing their own Christian communities—in the case of Mark, probably a small house church in a city somewhere in the Roman Empire. For Mark’s community, Jesus was not merely a revered historical figure but truly a living presence who instructed, encouraged, and challenged them through the medium of the Gospel.

Authorship, Date, Setting

While several scholars have argued that Mark was not written for a single church in a given locale but rather for Greek-speaking believers throughout the Roman world (e.g., Bauckham 1998; Peterson 2000, 200–201; Shiner 2003, 26–27), most regard the Gospel as addressed to a community whose location, geographically and temporally, is highly relevant to its meaning. It is certainly true that within decades of its composition, Mark began to be regarded as Scripture by Christians in various locales, but the evangelist wrote at a specific place and time for reasons relevant to local needs.

Unfortunately, the author gives us no explicit information about his identity, location, or circumstances. Like the other Gospels, Mark is anonymous in that the author does not identify himself in the body of the text; in this commentary, the name “Mark” (and the assumption that the author was male) will be used by convention—although as Virginia Woolf quipped, in literary history, “anonymous” has often been a woman. The titles of the Gospels are dated to the second century, when early Christian authors begin to mention Gospels “according to” Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The term “gospel” or “good news” (euangelion) to refer to these books was no doubt derived from Mark 1:1, which announces the “gospel/good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God.”

The name Mark (Markos), a common name in the Roman Empire, appears several times in the NT, but never in the Gospels. Mark is not listed as one of the twelve apostles. Notably, Paul mentions a “fellow worker” by the name of Mark (Philem. 24; cf. Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11, both regarded as deuteropauline), and Acts refers to a “John Mark” as the son of Mary of Jerusalem (12:12) and a companion of Paul and Barnabas (12:25; 15:37, 39). The late and pseudonymous 1 Pet. 5:13 ends with a greeting from the chief apostle and “my son Mark” from the church in “Babylon” (an early Christian code word for Rome). Early Christian tradition regards all these “Marks” as the same figure, the John Mark of Jerusalem who initially accompanied Paul, Silas, and Barnabas but who, along with Barnabas, parted ways with the others after an argument over the young man’s perceived unreliability: “Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company;
Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus” (Acts 15:37–39). Whether or not all these Marks were the same person, it is noteworthy that Acts, the first “church history,” contains this rather unflattering portrayal of a man later identified as the writer of an authoritative Gospel.

The first author to speak of Mark as a Gospel writer was Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor, who wrote in the first half of the second century. Although Papias is said to have written five books of *Expositions of the Sayings of the Lord* (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39), all that is left of them are scattered fragments in ancient ecclesiastical authors (see Holmes 2006, 302–18). Among them are two references to the authorship and composition of Mark, both quoted by the historian Eusebius (fourth cent.):

And the elder used to say this: “Mark, having become Peter’s interpreter, wrote down accurately everything he remembered, though not in order, of the things either said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, followed Peter, who adapted his teachings as needed but had no intention of giving an ordered account of the Lord’s sayings.” Consequently Mark did nothing wrong in writing down some things as he remembered them, for he made it his one concern not to omit anything that he heard or to make any false statement in them. (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.14–15, in Holmes 2006, 310)

The “elder” referred to as the source of the tradition is “the Elder John,” thought by Eusebius to be a figure distinct from John the apostle (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39.4). Papias’s other reference to Mark is cited as one of the sources for a tradition about the circumstances behind the writing of the Gospel:

But so great a light of godliness shone upon the minds of Peter’s listeners that they were not satisfied with a single hearing or with the oral teaching of the divine proclamation. So, with all kinds of exhortations they begged Mark (whose Gospel is extant), since he was Peter’s follower, to leave behind a written record of the teaching given to them verbally, and did not quit until they had persuaded the man, and thus they became the immediate cause of the scripture called “The Gospel according to Saint Mark.” And they say that the apostle, aware of what had occurred because the Spirit had revealed to him, was pleased with their zeal and sanctioned the writing for study in the churches. Clement quotes the story in the sixth book of the *Hypotyposes* (*Institutions*), and the Bishop of Hierapolis, named Papias, corroborates him. He also says that Peter mentions Mark in his first epistle, which they say he composed in Rome itself, as he himself indicates, referring to the city metaphorically as Babylon in these words: “She who is in Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, as does Mark, my son.” (*Hist. eccl.* 2.15, in Holmes 2006, 317)

Taken together, these early references to the Gospel’s authorship associate Mark (although not necessarily John Mark of Jerusalem) with both Peter and...
Rome, a triangulation repeated throughout church history, as ably summarized by Brenda Deen Schildgen (1998, 35–36):

The Papias tradition was repeated in a variety of ways by Justin Martyr, who, in his *Dialogue with Trypho* (ca. 135) refers to the *apomnēmoneumata* [“memoirs”] of Peter as the source of the “sons of Thunder” designation for James and John, a phrase unique to Mark (Mark 3:17). Irenaeus of Lyons (130–200) claimed Mark was Peter’s interpreter and disciple ([*Haer.*] 3.1.1). The *Anti-Marcionite Prologue* (ca. 4th cent.) and the *Esp. Prologi Vetustissimi* likewise refer to Mark as the interpreter of Peter and describe him as “*colobodactylus*” (stumpy-fingered), a description used by Hippolytus in the third century. Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria (ca. 180), and Origen (ca. 200)—according to Eusebius (260–339)—Tertullian (ca. 160–ca. 220) in *Adversus Marcionem* IV, 5, and Eusebius in *Ecclesiastical History* (323) connected Mark to Peter once again (II, XV:1–2), as did John Chrysostom (ca. 386–398) in his homilies on Matthew. Jerome, in his *Commentary on Matthew* and *On Famous Men* (392), repeated the by then well-established tradition that Mark was Peter’s interpreter who recorded what he had heard Peter preach in Rome. This association of Mark and Peter held such authority that it echoed through the Middle Ages and even showed up with the Reformers, such as John Hus, for example—“Mark was ordained by God to write the gospel of the true deeds of Christ, and instructed by Peter, with whom he was intimate”—and John Wyclif’s *Concordia evangeliorum super Mattheum*.

Although the volume of witnesses to the traditional triad of Mark-Peter-Rome is impressive, their historical value is questionable. Some early Christian writers (Papias, Tertullian, John Chrysostom) link Mark with Peter but do not mention Rome; others refer to Mark but link him with neither Peter nor Rome (Hippolytus, Adamantius, *Apostolic Constitutions*, Augustine; cf. C. Black 1993, 36). The ancient sources never link Mark with Rome independently of...
Peter, an association that seems to have originated with 1 Pet. 5:13, an epistle regarded by most contemporary scholars as written not by the apostle but by an admirer in the late first or early second century. Also, the Papias fragments contain some traditions that are obviously apocryphal, such as the fantastic tale of the death of Judas (see sidebar).

Moreover, Rome is not the only location associated with Mark in early Christian tradition; some third- and fourth-century Eastern writers place him in Alexandria, notably John Chrysostom (Hom. Matt. 1.7), who remarked that Mark composed his Gospel in Egypt at the entreaty of his disciples (see C. Black 2005, 238).

There are also features of the Gospel itself that cast doubt on the tradition that it was written by an associate of Peter. If the evangelist based his Gospel on the reminiscences of the apostle, why does he not mention his reliance on such an authoritative source? Why would a writing based on the teachings of Peter contain such unflattering stories about him (cf. Mark 8:32–33; 14:37, 66–72)? Although Mark is not written in sophisticated Greek, it is not “translation Greek,” militating against the notion that Mark was the “interpreter of Peter”; since John Mark was from Jerusalem, his first language, like Peter’s, would have been Aramaic (Juel 1990, 17; cf. Grant 1943, 89–124). Form and redaction criticism have demonstrated that, like the other Gospels, Mark is not a transcript of apostolic memoirs but a mosaic of pre-Gospel traditions from various sources, artfully edited together into a connected narrative.
Despite the many problems with the traditional account of Mark’s authorship, many contemporary scholars continue to argue for the Roman provenance of the Gospel (e.g., Lane 1974, 21–25; Pesch 1976–77, 1:112–13; Ernst 1981, 21–11; Hengel 1985, 1–30; Senior 1987; Gnilka 1998–99, 1; Donahue 1995; Donahue and Harrington 2002, 38–46; Moloney 2002, 11–12; Incigneri 2003; C. Black 2005, 237–38; Culpepper 2007, 26–29). However, those scholars who regard Mark as a “Roman Gospel” do not necessarily hold the view that the author was Peter’s associate (John) Mark (for a recent exception, see Stein 2008, 5–9) but identify him more cautiously as an anonymous leader addressing the members of a Roman house church. The author’s use and occasional explanations of Aramaic terms to his audience (5:41; 7:34; 9:5 [rabbi]; 11:21 [rabbi]; 14:36; 15:34) bespeaks a possible Eastern, Jewish background, although knowledge of the meanings of a few Aramaic words is no indicator of fluency. The evangelist’s apparent confusion over the details of Palestinian geography is often cited as evidence that he could not have been John Mark of Jerusalem—or anyone from that region—but the supposition that someone living in a given area would necessarily be well informed about local geography is highly questionable (cf. Stein 2008, 5–6).

In general terms, it can be cogently argued that references in the Gospel correspond well to what is known of Roman Christianity between the Claudian expulsion of Jews from the city “at the instigation of Chrestus” in AD 49 (Suetonius, Claudius 25.4; see Rutgers 1998, 105–6) and the Roman defeat of Jerusalem in AD 70. From Romans (1:8–15), we know that the church in Rome was not founded by Paul; scholars speculate that Christianity was brought
there by Hellenistic Jewish-Christians from the East, and that the Christ-faith in Rome began in the synagogues. If indeed disputes over “Chrestus”—possibly a (Latinized) misspelling of Christos—were what prompted Claudius to expel the Jewish population (or at least part of it) from Rome, their numbers would have included followers of Christ (cf. Acts 18:2). It is likely that even after the emperor’s edict had lapsed, tensions between the synagogues and their Jewish-Christian members would have escalated, leading to the formation of independent house churches and their incorporation of non-Jewish members.

Nero’s famous persecution of Roman Christians after the great fire (AD 64) would have driven a deeper wedge between synagogue and church as Jews tried to disassociate themselves from the “deadly superstition” that had erupted in Rome and had caused the horrible deaths of so many followers of Christ (Tacitus, Ann. 44.2–5). The eruption of the rebellion in Judea (AD 66–70), the “year of four emperors” after Nero’s suicide in 68, and the accession to the imperial throne of Vespasian, the general responsible for crushing the Jewish revolt, would have been alarming to both Jews and Christians throughout the Roman Empire, but especially in Rome. The impression made by the capture of Jerusalem on the Romans “is shown by the fact that the triumph of Vespasian and Titus celebrated in Rome in 71 was . . . the ‘only Roman triumph ever to celebrate the subjugation of the population of an existing province’” (Walters 1998, 184, citing Millar 1993, 79). The text of Mark reflects a fearful community (e.g., 4:40; 6:51; 9:32; 10:32; 16:8), where adherence to Jewish practices was controversial (e.g., 2:1–11, 15–28; 3:1–6; 7:1–23), and gentile members were accepted (e.g., 5:1–20; 7:24–30, 31–37). The prophetic discourse is designed to assuage anxieties over the war in Judea (13:14–23), and the destruction of the temple is expected, if not explicitly described, in 13:2 (cf. 11:11–23; 13:14). The apocalyptic outlook of the author and his audience (cf. Mark 13) can be

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Mark and Apocalyptic Literature

The term “apocalyptic” (“revelation” or “unveiling”), from the Greek name of the book of Revelation (Apokalypsis), refers to both the worldview that anticipates the end times in the near future (“imminent eschatology”) and to a body of visionary/prophetic literature that expresses that worldview. Apocalyptic speculation was popular in some Jewish, and eventually Christian, circles between 250 BC and AD 250. In the Christian canon, the only two full-blown examples of apocalyptic literature are Dan. 7–12 and Revelation, but there are many extrabiblical examples, such as 1 Enoch, 2 Baruch, and 4 Ezra (= 2 Esdras). Mark 13:1–37, known as the “little apocalypse,” and other references in Mark (e.g., 8:38; 9:1; 14:62), suggests that the evangelist and his audience shared an apocalyptic outlook, although it is an overstatement to call the Gospel an example of apocalyptic literature (e.g., Kee 1977; cf. Horsley 2001, 122–25).
explained with reference to the shocking prospect of the despoilation of the holy land, city, and temple in the East.

The members of the Markan community anticipated persecution (13:9–13; cf. 4:17). The only human character in Mark to pronounce Jesus “Son of God”—an identification that aligns with God’s (and the narrator’s) view—is a Roman centurion (15:39; cf. 1:1, 11; 9:7). Although Mark, like the other writings of the NT, is written in Greek, it contains a number of Latinisms: denarius, quadrans (both Roman units of currency), centurion, census, kraftatto (“cot”), legion, modios (a measure of grain), xestēs (a liquid measure), praetorium, spekoulatōr (“executioner”), and phragelloō (“to flagellate”). Mark also occasionally uses a Latin word to explain a Greek term (12:42; 15:16; see Harrison 1971, 183). Although these loanwords are suggestive of a Western provenance for the Gospel, they are common Latinisms that could be found in any Greek-speaking locale in the Roman Empire and do not necessarily point to Rome itself as the place of composition.

The main alternative to the Roman Gospel hypothesis locates the writing of Mark either in Galilee (Marxsen 1969) or nearby southern Syria (e.g., Kee 1977; Theissen 1991; cf. Marcus 1992a; Rohrbaugh 1993). Christians living in these areas would certainly have been acutely aware of the war in Judea, and their proximity to the cataclysmic events taking place in the Holy Land might well have given rise to the apocalyptic prophecies of Mark 13. Indeed, much of the internal evidence cited above could be marshaled to support Syrian or even Palestinian provenance, with the important exception of the author’s many explanations of Aramaic words and phrases, which would be needless in an area (like Syria or Galilee) where Aramaic was widely spoken (see Mac-Mullen 1966, 4–5). However, unlike the Roman hypothesis, the only ancient traditions that link the Gospel with the Eastern Empire are the surmise that “Mark” was John Mark of Jerusalem and the association of the evangelist with Alexandria. Thus, while the weight of the evidence tips the balance in favor of Roman (or at least Western) provenance, it is not compelling enough to assign Mark to Rome or any other location, although the fact that most early Christian communities were founded in cities makes an urban setting likely. The dating of the Gospel is less difficult. The reference to the Jewish rebellion (13:14–23)—and possibly to the destruction of the temple (13:2; cf. 11:11–23; 13:14)—points to a date near the Roman defeat of Jerusalem (AD 70).

Audience

Since the 1980s, a number of scholars have applied methods from literary criticism that focus more on the reader or audience of Mark than on the author (e.g., Fowler 1981; 1991; 1992; Beavis 1987; 1989; Tolbert 1989; Heil 1992; Hester 1995; Dowd 2000; Bolt 2003; Driggers 2007). As illustrated above,
more information about the audience of the Gospel can be inferred from its 
content than about its author. The term “audience” is used here in preference 
to the term “reader” because in antiquity the written word was meant to be 
read aloud and heard, not read silently for the edification of the individual 
reader (Beavis 1989, 19). Thus the “reader” of a document like Mark would 
have been a literate person with the ability to declaim the Gospel aloud to the 
audience, “the intermediary between the written and the spoken word, text 
and audience” (Beavis 1989, 19). The ancient rhetorician Quintilian describes 
the benefits of experiencing an oral performance:

The advantages conferred by reading and listening are not identical. The speaker 
stimulates us by the animation of his delivery, and kindles the imagination, 
not by presenting us with an elaborate picture, but by bringing us into actual 
touch with the things themselves. Then all is life and movement, and we receive 
the new-born offspring of his imagination with enthusiastic approval. We are 
moved not merely by the actual issue . . . , but by all that the orator himself 
has at stake. Moreover his voice, the grace of his gestures, the adaptation of 
his delivery (which is of supreme importance in oratory), and, in a word, all 
his excellences in combination, have their educative effect. (Institutio oratoria 
10.1.16–17a, trans. Butler 1933)

In this sense, the first “reader” or oral performer of the Gospel was probably 
the evangelist himself, presenting his work to the members of his community, 
perhaps adding explanations and even answering questions as he went along 

The audience presupposed by Mark already has some knowledge of the 
story they are about to hear. The God they worship is the God of the Jew-

ish scriptures, attested to by prophets like Isaiah (Mark 1:2; 7:6) and Elijah 
(6:15; 8:28; 9:4–5, 11–13; 15:35–36). They are familiar with the law of Moses 
(1:44; 7:10; 9:4–5; 10:3–5; 12:19, 26), and they know who King David was 
and that the messiah is believed to be his descendant (2:25; 10:47–48; 11:10; 
12:35–37). They respect the Jewish scriptures (12:10, 24; 14:49) and believe in 
They know what synagogues are (1:21, 23, 29, 39; 3:1; 5:22, 35–38; 6:2; 12:39) 
and may have occasion to enter them (13:9). They are familiar with Jewish 
Sabbath observance (1:1; 2:23–24, 27–28; 3:2, 4; 6:2; 16:1), and they know 
of Jerusalem and its temple, at least by reputation (1:5; 3:8, 22; 7:1; 10:32; 
11:1, 11–16, 27; 12:35, 41; 13:1, 3; 14:58; 15:29, 38, 41). However, they need 
explanations for Aramaic expressions (5:41; 7:11, 34; 14:36; 15:22, 34) and 
certain Jewish practices and beliefs, especially those pertaining to Palestinian 
groups like Pharisees and Sadducees (e.g., 7:3–4, 11; 12:18; 14:12; 15:42). This 
does not necessarily rule out the possibility that some members of the Mar-

kan community were of Jewish ethnicity, since Greek-speaking Jews would 
not necessarily understand Aramaic or be familiar with the Jewish sects of
Jesus’s time, some thirty years earlier. The members of Mark’s audience anticipated a worldwide mission (13:10a; 14:9), and some of them were probably missionaries who feared persecution and even martyrdom (13:9–13; cf. 4:17). They had a vivid apocalyptic hope and expected the decisive manifestation of the kingdom of God imminently (9:1; 13:30).

The use of reader/audience response provides the interpreter with a helpful repertoire of perspectives on the Gospel. On the literary plane, they help us to distinguish between the various “audiences” that figure in and behind the text. At one level, the author of Mark, the narrator of the Gospel, addresses an audience made up of members of his church community. He does this not only directly, through explanations and addresses to “the reader” (13:14) or to “all” (13:37; cf. 4:9, 23–24), but also through the characters in the story: through Jesus, whose words are always reliable, and through the disciples and other characters, who, like the different kinds of soil in the parable of the sower (4:3–8, 14–20), “hear the word” in more or less satisfactory ways. The focus on the reader/audience also raises the question of what kinds of expectations the first-century hearers would have brought to bear on the Gospel—what kind of a book is it, and how would this affect the way it was heard and interpreted?

Genre

Although Christians have long referred to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as “Gospels,” this designation for writings about the words and deeds of Jesus was not current until the second century, when the term euangelion began to be used in the plural (euangelia, “Gospels”) (2 Clem. 8.5; Justin Martyr, 1 Apol. 66.3; Dial. 10.2; 100.1). Mark, like Paul, uses the term euangelion to refer to
the proclamation of God’s saving work (1:14–15; 8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9; Bryan 1993, 33). Thus Mark’s superscription, which refers to the “gospel” of Jesus Christ, Son of God (1:1), does not refer to the genre of the book but to its content, the saving message (“good news”) of the reign of God. Although Mark did not consciously set out to create a distinctive genre of writings about the life and works of Jesus, he did set a literary precedent followed by the other NT evangelists. As France (2002, 5) observes,

Once the term had become established as a designation for the four canonical versions of the one εὐαγγέλιον (so that τὸ εὐαγγέλιον κατὰ Μᾶρκον is properly translated not “the gospel[-book] by Mark” but “the [one] gospel in Mark’s version”) it became available as a literary label for other works about Jesus which came to be written from the second century onwards, however different in character they may have been from the narrative “gospels” of the first century. Hence the Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Peter, Gospel of Philip, Gospel of Truth, Gospel according to the Hebrews, and the like. The term which for Mark had designated the (hitherto oral) message of the first-century churches had thus come to mean something like “a church book about Jesus.”

Thus Mark holds a distinguished place in the history of Christian literature, and of Western literature as a whole (see also my comments on Mark 1:1). Although the evangelist did not regard his book as belonging to the literary genre of “gospel,” for ease of expression, it will be referred to as such throughout this commentary.

If Mark did not set out to create a new “gospel” genre (for scholars who have taken this view, see the discussion in Collins 2007, 19–22; see also Beavis 1989, 38), what kind of a book did he intend to write? This question has important implications for interpretation. If Mark was written as history or biography, for example, we would understand it very differently than if it were meant to be fiction or poetry. Several Greco-Roman literary genres have been proposed as the models for the Gospel. Mark has obvious affinities with Hellenistic biography (bios, vita), a classification made as early as the second century, when Justin Martyr (1 Apol. 66–67) called the Gospels the apomnēmoneumata (“memorabilia”) of the apostles. Many contemporary scholars have interpreted Mark as having been influenced by Hellenistic bios (“life”) literature (e.g., Talbert 1970; Standaert 1978, 433–40; Shuler 1982; Robbins 1984; Beavis 1989, 37–39; Bryan 1993; Burridge 2004). Charles Talbert’s (1970, 17) description of ancient biography—“prose narrative about a person’s life, presenting supposedly historical facts which are selected to reveal the character or essence of the individual, often with the purpose of affecting the behavior of the reader”—approximates the contents and purpose of the Gospel well enough to justify imagining that its first-century hearers would have understood it as a kind of “life” of Jesus. The range of Greco-Roman biographies of philosophers (Diogenes Laertius), sophists (Philostratus),
religious figures and miracle workers (Philo, Philostratus), and public figures
(Plutarch, Suetonius), some written for apologetic purposes (Xenophon of
Ephesus, Philodemus, Philostratus, Porphyry), is diverse enough to allow an
identification of Mark as an early Christian biographical narrative about Jesus
(cf. Beavis 1989, 39). Among other ancient genres suggested as influences on
Mark are the Hellenistic novel (e.g., Tolbert 1989), the Homeric epic (e.g.,
MacDonald 2000), and what Adela Yarbrough Collins (2007, 42–52) calls the
“eschatological historical monograph.” Many scholars have seen similarities
between Mark and ancient drama—a topic to which I will return below.

One eminently plausible suggestion regarding the genre of Mark is the
observation that the Gospel is most at home in the domain of biblical narra-
tive: “Both in its simple but vivid language and in its style of rapid narrative
with frequent changes of scene it resonates with the Old Testament cycles of
prophetic narratives and with the stories of the lives of biblical heroes like
Moses and David. . . . Mark’s ‘pre-texts’ are the Jewish Scriptures, which he
generally cites in Greek” (Donahue and Harrington 2002, 16). Mark’s Jesus
functions within a narrative world ruled by the God of Israel, where prophets
like John the Baptist, Isaiah, and Elijah are revered; angels appear to minister
to the Son of God (1:13); figures like Moses, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (12:26),
David, and Abiathar (2:25–26) are respected; miracles and exorcisms are pos-
sible; and prophecy is fulfilled. If Mark modeled the Gospel on the Jewish
scriptures, an intriguing question is whether this means that he meant to write
Scripture. In Mark’s time, although there was a concept of sacred, Authoritative
writings generally classed as Law, Prophets, and Writings (see the prologue to
Sirach), there was no closed Jewish “canon” of Scripture. Hellenistic Jewish
writings include many works modeled on the ancient scriptures (see OTP),
which were probably regarded as quasi-scriptural by some ancient Jews. Some
of these books—such as Sirach, the Wisdom of Solomon, 1–2 Maccabees,
Judith, Tobit, and even (for Ethiopia and Eritrea) 1 Enoch—are included in
Catholic and Orthodox Christian Bibles. Possibly Mark was familiar with
such writings and composed his book about Jesus in this tradition.

A generic influence on Mark that may seem much more far-fetched to the
modern reader is the suggestion that the Gospel resembles a Greek tragedy.
Nonetheless, as noted above, many contemporary scholars see Mark as mod-
elled on ancient drama (e.g., Bilezikian 1977; Standaert 1978; Stock 1982, 16–30;
Beavis 1989, 31–35; S. Smith 1995; Lescow 2005). Many others describe the
Gospel more generally as having a dramatic quality (e.g., Perrin and Duling
Collins 2007, 91–93; for further references, see Beavis 1989, 192n134). Since
Greek tragedy was very much a part of Greco-Roman education in the first
century, it is plausible that Mark and the educated members of his audience
would have had some familiarity with dramatic works, even if they had never
attended a play, although attending theater was not confined to the upper
classes in antiquity. Moreover, in Mark’s time the “closet drama,” a play written for private presentation rather than for public performance, was popular, at least among the social elite: all of the plays of Seneca belong to this genre. As Stephen H. Smith (1995, 229) remarks, “Mark’s Gospel was written with just this kind of situation in mind—to be read expressively by a lector before a closed circle of Christians in the setting of a private house” (cf. Beavis 1989, 33–35). As I have noted elsewhere,

If the author were a Jewish-Christian from Palestine, as the tradition asserts, there is no reason to rule out the influence of the theatre; Herod the Great built theatres in Jerusalem, Caesarea Maritima, Sepphoris, Damascus, and Sidon. There are records of Roman Jewish actors, and hellenistic Jews, like their Gentile neighbours, were avid theatre-goers. It has been argued that Job, Judith, 4 Maccabees, and the Apocalypse were modelled on Greek tragedy; the Alexandrian Jewish dramatist Ezekiel wrote a play based on the Exodus story. (Beavis 1989, 35)

In fact, Ezekiel the Tragedian’s Exagōgē, a drama about the Exodus written sometime between the second century BC and the first century AD by an Egyptian Jew, is the most complete surviving example of a Hellenistic tragedy (R. Robinson 1985, 805). Unlike the Exagōgē, Mark is not a play, but a Scripture-like narrative; however, as Collins (2007, 91) puts it, Mark is “written in the tragic mode,” and the Gospel’s plotting and structure show dramatic influence (see the section on structure below).

**Literary Features**

Mark’s Greek style is not polished but resembles the language of a Hellenistic popular novel (see Tolbert 1989, 59–78; Beavis 1989, 33–37). Despite its lack of literary sophistication, the Gospel is noted for its vivid and engaging quality. Mark’s usual way of constructing sentences is to connect clauses with the Greek conjunction ἄν (”and”), a device characteristic of popular literature and reminiscent of Jewish scriptural narratives (see Donahue and Harrington 2002, 17). This is combined with the frequent use of the adverb εὐθὺς (”immediately,” 42x), lending a quality of breathless urgency to the narrative, as here:

John appeared in the desert baptizing and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And there went out to him all the country of Judea and all the Jerusalemites, and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins. And John was clothed in camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist and was eating locusts and wild honey. And he preached saying, “The man stronger than I comes after me, of whom I am not worthy to loosen
the straps of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:4–8)

Mark’s frequent use of the historic present—using the present tense of verbs to refer to past events—adds to the immediacy and excitement of the story: for example, “And passing by he saw Levi, son of Alphæus, sitting by the toll office, and he says to him, ‘Follow me!’” (2:14). Mark often uses hyperbole (exaggeration) to emphasize the impact of the events he relates, and he repeats words and phrases to add to the drama of the scene: “In the evening, when the sun set, they were bringing to him all those having illnesses and possessed by demons. And the whole city was gathering at the door” (1:32–33). Like a Greek play, the Gospel is punctuated by choral outbursts in which groups of characters comment on the events they are witnessing in unison: “and they marveled exceedingly, saying, ‘He has done all things well; he both makes the deaf hear and the mute speak!’” (7:37b). Mark often uses colorful details to bring the story to life: in the feeding of the five thousand, the crowd is instructed to sit down on the “green grass”; in the tale of the blessing of the children, Jesus takes one of the children in his arms (9:36; cf. 10:13–16); in the story of the stilling of the storm, Jesus is asleep on a cushion as the wind and the waves

The Greek Novel

As noted in the main text, the Greco-Roman novel or “romance” has been suggested as a possible literary influence on Mark (e.g., Tolbert 1989, 59–83; Beavis 1989, 35–37). Many extant ancient novels are popular fiction, melodramatic stories about the adventures of two young lovers who are separated, undergo thrilling trials and tribulations, and are happily reunited in the end, as in Chariton’s Chaereas and Callirhoe, Xenophon of Ephesus’s Ephesian Tale, Longus’s Daphnis and Chloe, Achilles Tatius’s Leucippe and Clitophon, and Heliodorus’s Ethiopian Tale (Aethiopica). A famous example of a comic novel by a Latin author is Apuleius’s The Golden Ass (Metamorphoses), where the hero is turned into a donkey and, after a series of embarrassing exploits, is restored by the goddess Isis. Some novels focus on the career of a famous person, such as Xenophon of Athens’s The Education of Cyrus and the anonymous Alexander Romance. Many early Jewish and Christian writings resembling romance literature in vocabulary, style, and plotting survive, such as Joseph and Aseneth, 3 Maccabees, Acts of Paul and Thecla (see Wills 1994, 223–38; Pervo 1994, 239–54). Some of these are considered Scripture (e.g., Dan. 1–6, Esther, Tobit, Judith). Richard Pervo (1987) has argued that the NT book of Acts shows strong parallels with the ancient novel. This is to say not that books like Acts or the Gospel of Mark were written as novels but that their authors composed them in a way that would be entertaining and appealing to their audiences, much as contemporary religious leaders use popular media to convey their message.
beat on the boat (4:38). Similarly, the explanations of Aramaic expressions add a touch of local flavor for the Greek-speaking audience of the Gospel.

Mark is famous for the use of intercalation, the sandwiching of one story within another (e.g., 3:20–35; 4:1–20; 5:21–43; 6:7–30; 11:12–21; 14:1–11; 14:17–31; 14:53–72; 15:40–16:8). This device signals the reader/audience that the intercalated stories are related in some way. Thus the story of Peter’s denial (14:53–54, 66–72) frames the account of the trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin (14:55–65), adding a layer of bitter irony to the Passion Narrative: as Jesus is being interrogated and abused, Peter is comfortably warming himself by the fire (14:54) and disavowing any relationship to Jesus, despite the disciple’s oath that he would rather die than defect (14:31). The story of the mission of the Twelve (6:7–13, 30) brackets the account of the execution of John the Baptist (6:14–29), both informing the reader/audience of the death of John and offering a chilling vignette of the cost of discipleship. On a larger scale, Mark often repeats similar stories in order to underline important themes: Mark contains two stories of the healing of blind men (8:22–26; 10:46–52) and two stories about the healing of the deaf (7:32–37; 9:14–27), which relate to metaphorical blindness and deafness of the various characters in the narrative. The two feeding narratives (6:30–44; 8:1–10) take place respectively in Jewish and gentile territory, reflecting Jesus’s mission to both Jews and gentiles. The theme of the disciples’ misunderstanding of the significance of Jesus’s words and deeds is highlighted in three scenes that take place in a boat on the Sea of Galilee (4:35–41; 6:45–51; 8:14–21), where Jesus rebukes the disciples for their incomprehension and lack of faith. Mark contains three Passion predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34) and three parousia predictions (8:38–9:1; 13:26–27; 14:62), which relate to both the suffering and vindication of Jesus, the son of man. The theme of discipleship is emphasized by three calls/commissionings of the disciples (1:16–20; 3:13–19; 6:7–13). Mark’s use of the “rule of three”—the propensity of storytellers to build narratives around groups of three (see Booker 2004, 229–35)—also surfaces in individual pericopes: Bartimaeus’s sight is restored after his third request (10:46–52); Jesus finds the disciples sleeping in Gethsemane three times (14:32–42); Peter famously denies Jesus thrice before the rooster crows twice (14:66–72).

Mark is an omniscient narrator, who has full knowledge of the events he relates and even of the thoughts and internal dispositions of the various characters, including Jesus. From his all-knowing perspective, he can describe events happening simultaneously in different places (e.g., 6:7–16; 14:53–72). Mark tantalizes the reader/audience by foreshadowing significant events that will happen later in the story; he briefly refers to the plot to kill Jesus in the first main section of the Gospel (3:6; cf. 6:29). Throughout the Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as a prophet with the ability to read the thoughts of others and to discern the truth (e.g., 2:8; 6:30, 39), and whose prophecies consistently come to pass (e.g., 8:31; 9:31; 10:31–32), thus establishing the reliability of
his words, even when he prophesies events outside the narrative of the Gospel (e.g., 13:4–37; 14:62). The omniscient perspective of the author is authenticated by divine utterances: “and a voice came out of the heavens, ‘You are my son the beloved; in you I am delighted’” (1:11; cf. 9:7). God’s presence behind events is often indicated by the use of the divine passive: “Child, your sins are forgiven [by God]” (2:5); “You seek Jesus the Nazarene who was crucified; he has been raised [by God]; he isn’t here” (16:6). As Ira Brent Driggers (2007, 11) has perceptively noted, while Jesus is the main character of the Gospel, God is the main actor. Although Jesus is the character in Mark who aligns most closely with the will of God (3:35), even he finds the demands placed on him by divine destiny hard to bear (e.g., 14:35–36).

In addition to Jesus and God, Mark’s dramatic narrative features a host of characters, both individual and collective. Most of these belong to the latter category: groups of characters who stand in different kinds of relationship to Jesus and his mission. In addition to the Twelve, who are appointed specifically to participate in Jesus’s mission (3:13–19; 6:7–13, 30), the evangelist portrays Jesus as accompanied by a larger group of disciples (e.g., 2:13–14; 4:10; 15:40–41). Of the Twelve, Jesus singles out Peter, James, and John as an “inner circle” of followers who accompany him at significant points in the story (5:37; 9:2; 14:33; cf. 13:3). Simon Peter, the first disciple to heed the call of Jesus (1:16–18), is listed first among the Twelve (3:16); he is the first human character to recognize that Jesus is the messiah (8:29). Despite his prominence, he is a flawed and fickle disciple, who rebukes Jesus when he begins to speak of suffering (8:32), speaks out foolishly at the transfiguration (9:5–6), falls asleep at Gethsemane (14:37), and cannot live up to his promise never to desert Jesus (14:29–31, 66–72). Of the Twelve, the only other named disciple of prominence is Judas, who hands Jesus over to his enemies after greeting him with a kiss (3:19; 14:10, 43, 45).

Other collective characters who appear in the narrative are the throngs of people who pursue Jesus so he can teach, heal, and exorcize them; the demons (“unclean spirits”), who dread Jesus’s powers to expel them; Jewish authority figures, who generally test and oppose Jesus (Pharisees, Herodians, scribes, Sadducees, chief priests); and members of Jesus’s family, who fail to honor his calling (3:21, 31–35; cf. 6:1–4). Some prominent religious and political figures are named: John “the baptizer,” who heralds the arrival of Jesus; Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue (5:22); Herod Antipas, responsible for the execution of the prophet; Pilate, the Roman official who sentences Jesus to death. Most of the characters who interact positively with Jesus are not named but are designated by their afflictions (a leper; a blind man; a deaf man; the demoniac “Legion, for we are many”; a woman with a hemorrhage; a centurion), their relationships to others (Peter’s mother-in-law, the daughter of Jairus, the son of a man in the crowd), their ethnicity (a Syro-Phoenician woman), or their socioreligious status (a rich man, a scribe). An exception is
Bartimaeus, “the son of Timaeus,” whose faith is rewarded by the restoration of his vision (10:46–52); yet so is Barabbas, the brigand set free by Pilate at the demand of the crowd (cf. 6:3; 14:3; 15:21, 43). Whether named or unnamed, individual or collective, Mark’s characters usually function as “types” who display varying levels of comprehension of Jesus’s identity and mission. The two figures who meet with the Markan Jesus’s unqualified approval are anonymous: a poor widow (12:41–44) and the woman who prophetically anoints Jesus for burial (14:1–9).

In Mark, Jesus’s journey from the baptism to the cross begins at the Jordan, where the Israelites crossed into the land of promise in the time of Joshua; goes to Galilee, where he carries on the bulk of his ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing; and then to Judea and Jerusalem, where he meets his destiny. His mission is not confined to Jewish regions but fans out into gentile territory: the Decapolis (5:1–20; 7:31); the region of Tyre and Sidon (7:24–30); the villages of Caesarea Philippi (8:27–30). His reputation attracts people from afar: “from Jerusalem and from Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and the region of Tyre and Sidon” (3:8). On a smaller scale, some of Mark’s physical settings have special significance. Donahue and Harrington (2002, 22) note that “the house” (e.g., 1:29; 2:15; 3:19–20; 5:19; 7:17; 9:33; 14:3, 14–15; cf. 4:10–12) contrasts with the synagogue, where Jesus “most often meets opposition, reflecting perhaps the emerging conflict between the Markan ‘house churches’ and the synagogues” (1:21, 28, 29, 39; 3:1; 12:39; 13:9). Similarly, Mark contains several scenes where Jesus has significant

Notes on Translation

This commentary is based on my own translation of the Greek text of Mark from NA27. In general, I have tried to capture the colloquial and vivid quality of Mark’s style, rather than smoothing over the rough spots. I have departed from the familiar translation of terms like “kingdom of God” (basileia tou theou) because the noun basileia has the dynamic sense of “rule” or “reign” as well as the territorial sense of “kingdom” or “realm.” Similarly, euangelion, often translated as “gospel,” is rendered in its ancient Greco-Roman sense as “good news.” However, I have translated the phrase ho huios tou anthrōpou conventionally as “the son of man,” which in English sounds like a christological title. Yet, to the hearers of Mark, it would have meant something more like “human one” or “human being.” I have used gender-inclusive language as often as the context allows; readers should remember that Mark’s references to groups of people, including disciples, usually include both women and men. Although the Greek word used for “God” (theos) is masculine, the Gospel seldom refers to God as “he,” preferring to repeat the substantive (e.g., “With human beings it is not possible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God,” 10:27). Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations from books other than Mark are based on the NRSV.
exchanges with the disciples in a boat (4:35–41; 6:45–51; 8:14–21; cf. 4:1),
an ancient symbol of the church (Daniélou 1961, 58–70; Goodenough 1958, 159). The Gospel begins with the prophetic announcement of the “way of
the Lord” (1:2–3), and the motif of the way (hodos) to Jerusalem dominates
the Gospel from the recognition scene at Caesarea Philippi (8:27–30) to the
“triumphal entry” (11:1–10). The temple, Jesus’s first destination on entering
Jerusalem, meets with his most vigorous prophetic condemnation (11:12–23;

Major Themes
Mark is a complex document, containing a multitude of characters, themes,
and messages. It is not possible to reduce the “message of Mark” to one over-
arching concern, but several stand out. As stated above, Jesus is the predomi-
nant figure in the narrative, designated by a variety of titles, most prominently:
messiah (christos; 1:1; 8:29; 9:41; 14:61; 15:32; cf. 12:35–37; 10:46–52); Son of
cf. 1:24). Jesus’s preferred self-designation is “son of man” or “human one”
(ho huios tou anthrōpou; cf. 2:10, 28), with connotations of suffering (8:31;
9:31; 10:33–34; cf. 9:9, 12), service (10:45), and eschatological judgment (8:38;
13:26; 14:62; cf. 14:21, 41; Dan. 7:13–14). However, Mark’s Jesus is revealed
as much or more by the way his character is portrayed throughout the Gos-
pel narrative: in his words, deeds, and relationships. In Mark, Jesus does not
proclaim a message about himself, but about God (1:14; 3:35; 7:8–9, 13; 8:33;
10:6, 9, 27; 11:22; 12:17, 24–27, 28–34; 13:19; cf. 15:39) and the reign of God
has prophetic and miraculous powers, Mark’s Jesus is a very human figure,
capable of intense emotions of anger (1:41; 11:15–18), compassion (6:34; 8:2),
love (10:21), and anguish (14:34; 15:34, 37). The essence of his preaching,
as summarized in 1:14–15, is “the good news of God”; the family of Jesus
consists of those who do the will of God (3:35); his prayer in Gethsemane is
“not my will, but yours” (14:36).

Mark’s portrait of the disciples—especially the Twelve—is paradoxical.
On the one hand, they are called by Jesus to accompany him and to share
in his work (3:13–19; 6:7–13, 30). They respond enthusiastically to his call
(1:16–20; cf. 2:14); the women follow and care for him to the very end (15:40–41;
15:47–16:8). It is Peter who recognizes that Jesus is the messiah (8:29). On
the other hand, throughout the Gospel, the disciples—especially members of
the Twelve—frequently fail to understand the words and deeds of Jesus (e.g.,
4:13, 40; 6:50–52; 7:18; 8:14–21; 10:13–14, 35–45), even though he offers them
Ultimately they all desert him (14:50; 14:72; cf. 16:8). The readers/audience,
like the disciples, are left with the question of whether they can live up to the demands of doing the will of God (3:35; 14:36).

Mark’s depiction of Jews and Judaism is similarly nuanced. Although Mark’s Jesus occasionally visits non-Jewish regions, he is a Jew among Jews; his mission is focused on Galilee and Judea, where he attends synagogues on the Sabbath (1:21–29; 3:1–5; 6:2), visits the temple (11:11, 15–17, 27–33; 12:1–44), and celebrates Passover (14:12–26). His disagreements with scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees question not the authority of the Jewish law (Torah) but rather its interpretation and application (e.g., 2:1–12, 15–17, 18–22, 23–28; 3:1–6; 7:1–22; 10:1–12; 12:13–40). Jesus’s critique of the temple concerns the shortcomings of its human administrators not of the institution itself (11:15–18; 12:1–11), and his warning against “the scribes” (12:38–40) is not a blanket condemnation (cf. 12:28–34) but a censure of the hypocrites among them. Likewise, individual members of “authority” groups—Jairus, a synagogue ruler; the “good scribe”; Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin—are portrayed sympathetically.

Mark’s portrayal of the Jewish authorities (scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, chief priests) belongs to the larger theme of response to Jesus and his prophetic message. Mark’s Jesus speaks in parables, and all things come to pass “in parables” (4:11, 33–34a). The “mystery of God’s reign” is “given” to the disciples, but the parables veil the significance of the words and deeds of Jesus from outsiders: “in order that ‘Seeing they might see and not perceive, hearing they might hear and not understand, lest they repent and be forgiven’” (4:12; cf. Isa 6:9–10). Ironically, those who should be most receptive—religious authorities, disciples, even Jesus’s family and neighbors (3:21, 31–35; 6:1–6)—respond with varying degrees of incomprehension and even hostility (however, cf. 5:22; 10:17–22; 12:28–34; 15:43). Marginal figures—a frightened woman (5:25–34), an insistent blind man (10:46–52), a persistent gentile mother (7:24–30)—do much better. Mark is permeated with the language of seeing, hearing, perceiving, and understanding, both literal and metaphorical (e.g., 4:1–34; 8:14–21; 13:3–37; 7:31–37; 8:22–26; 10:46–52; 9:25). Faith, not fear or unbelief, is the key to insight, healing, and miraculous power (1:15; 2:5; 4:40; 5:35–36; 9:24; 10:52; 11:22–24). Even Jesus requires those around him to have faith in God’s power to work through him (6:3–6; cf. 9:14–27). The vision imparted by faith constitutes a sort of “apocalyptic epistemology”—a special way of knowing about the true meaning of events through divine revelation—that Markan characters display to varying degrees (Marcus 1984; Garrett 1998, 63–66).

The theme of suffering looms large in the second half of the Gospel, introduced by the first Passion prediction: “And he began to teach them that it was necessary for the son of man to suffer many things and to be rejected by the elders and by the scribes and by the chief priests and to be killed and after three days to rise up” (8:31). The notion of a suffering messiah would
have seemed strange to Jewish members of Mark’s audience, and the pros-
pect of a crucified hero would have been shocking to any ancient listener,
since crucifixion was a form of execution reserved for those considered to
be the lowest of criminals; as Paul observed, “Christ crucified” was “a stum-
bling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23). Modern-day
readers are invited to consider how joining a sect that worshiped a recently
executed criminal from an obscure corner of the globe would strike family
and friends—even with the convert’s sincere belief that the “savior” had been
raised from the dead! While suffering heroes are not absent from the Greek
tradition (see MacDonald 2000, 15–19, 135–47), Mark’s primary archetypes
for Jesus are Jewish: the righteous sufferer (e.g., Job [12:2–3; 16:20; 19:14],
Jeremiah [20:6–11], the psalmist [Pss. 27:11–12; 31:21–22]; the Servant [Isa.
52:13–53:12]); the Maccabean martyrs (2 Macc. 6:10–11, 18–31; 7:1–42); the
rejected prophet (cf. Mark 6:4; cf. 12:1–11). The motif of divine vindication
of the suffering one is integral to these traditions: “The stone that the builders
rejected has become the cornerstone; this is from the Lord, and it is marvelous
in our eyes” (Mark 12:10–11; cf. Ps. 118:22–23). In Mark, Jesus models not just
his own suffering and vindication but also that of his followers—including the
disciples of Mark’s time, who must take up their own cross and risk their own
lives for the sake of the good news if they want to share in his resurrection
(8:34–35; cf. 13:9–13). The one who endures to the end will be saved (13:13).

As stated above, one of Mark’s primary literary models is the Jewish scrip-
tures, which are used in many ways throughout the Gospel. The prologue begins
with a citation of “Isaiah the prophet” (1:2–3), whose words are fulfilled in
the appearance of John and, more important, Jesus. Throughout Mark, the
Scriptures are fulfilled in the words, deeds, and mission of Jesus (e.g., 4:11–12;
prophets, especially Elijah and Elisha, inform the portrayal of John and Jesus
e.g., 1:6; cf. 2 Kings 1:8; Mark 6:15; 8:28; 9:11–13; cf. 15:35–36). Jesus com-
muines on the mountain with the great prophets Moses and Elijah (9:2–8); he
speaks of himself as a prophet, and others identify him as such (6:4, 15; 8:28).
Jesus engages with other Jewish scripture experts on points of interpretation
(e.g., 7:5–13; 9:10–13; 10:2–9; 12:18–27, 28–33, 35–37) and uses a scriptural
precedent to defend his disciples’ unorthodox praxis (2:25–26). His teachings
are bolstered by scriptural references: the cleansing of the temple is accompanied
by prophetic quotations: “‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the
nations,’ but you have made it into ‘a cave of bandits’” (11:17; cf. Isa. 56:7; Jer.
7:11). The parable of the tenants is followed by a quotation of Ps. 118:22–23:
“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this is from
the Lord and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Mark 12:10). Mark’s Passion Nar-
rative is so dense with scriptural allusions that it has been called “prophecy
historicized” (Crossan 1995; cf. Goodacre 2006; see the sidebar “Prophecy
Historicized or History Remembered?” in the chapter on Mark 14:1–15:47).
Structure

Nearly twenty years ago, Joanna Dewey (1991, 221) quipped that “of making outlines of the Gospel of Mark there is no end, nor do scholars seem to be wearying of it.” The situation remains similar today, although most contemporary commentators concur that the Gospel is divided into a Galilean section (1:1–8:21) and a Jerusalem section, including the Passion Narrative (11:1–16:8), which frame a journey to Jerusalem that features three Passion predictions (8:22–10:51; cf. Donahue and Harrington 2002, 47). Dewey’s own proposal takes seriously the insight that the Gospel was composed for oral performance. Thus she denies that Mark has a clear linear structure but says rather that it “consists of forecasts and echoes, variation within repetition, for a listening audience” (Dewey 1991, 234). Dewey’s approach is a useful reminder that the evangelist probably did not sit down and map out an elaborate outline into which he slotted the traditional materials he wanted to present. He may not have “written” the Gospel at all but, like Paul, dictated his book to a scribe (cf. Rom. 16:22; cf. 1 Cor. 16:21; 2 Thess. 3:17; Col. 4:18), a common practice in antiquity. Also similarly to Paul, Mark intended his book to be read aloud to an audience.

My proposal regarding the structure of Mark distinguishes between Mark’s plotting, which reflects the plot structure of ancient dramas, and the physical structure of the book, which—despite the Gospel’s complex interplay of incidents, themes, foreshadowings, and retrospections—is quite simple: Mark repeatedly alternates between lengthy narrative sections and major blocks of teaching material. Like an ancient drama, Mark begins and ends with a well-defined prologue (1:1–13) and epilogue (16:1–8). The first half of the narrative corresponds to the desis (“complication”) of a Greek tragedy, “the part from the beginning up to the point which immediately preceded the occurrence of a change from bad to good fortune or from good fortune to bad” (Aristotle, Poet. 18.2, trans. Halliwell 1927). In Mark, this corresponds with the Galilean mission (1:14–8:26), where Jesus teaches, preaches, and performs healings, miracles, and exorcisms with great success. This section of the Gospel is punctuated by choral outbursts from the crowds and the disciples, such as “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He even commands the unclean spirits, and they obey him!” (1:27; 2:12b; 4:41; 7:37). Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi (8:27–29) is a classic recognition scene (anagnōrisis), the discovery of an identity previously concealed—Jesus is the messiah (see Aristotle, Poet. 11, 16). This incident marks a “change of fortune” (“reversal,” peripeteia); immediately after Peter’s confession, for the first time, Jesus prophesies the suffering, death, and resurrection of the son of man (8:31–33). According to Aristotle, a recognition scene “is most effective when it coincides with reversals, such as that involved by the discovery [that the hero has inadvertently killed his father and married his own mother] in the Oedipus” (Poet. 10.5). The Markan
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denouement (lysis, “unraveling”), “from the beginning of the change down to the end” (Poet. 18.3), comprises the second half of the Gospel: the journey to Jerusalem, where Jesus continues to prophesy his fate (9:31; 10:33–34) as he teaches his disciples on the way (9:30–10:52); his miraculous activity declines, he passes judgment on Jerusalem, and his prophecies are fulfilled. Mark’s plot structure can thus be summarized as follows:

Complication (desis, 1:1–8:26)
Recognition (anagnorisis, 8:27–30)
Reversal (peripeteia, 8:31–33)
Denouement (lysis, 9:1–16:8)

Within this plot structure, Mark organizes his material in alternating sections of narrative and teaching material, bracketed by a prologue and an epilogue:

Prologue: Jesus is heralded by John the Baptist and proclaimed Son of God (1:1–13)
Transition: Summary of the good news (1:14–15)
Narrative: Jesus preaches, teaches, and performs miracles in Galilee (1:16–3:35)
Teaching: Parables discourse (4:1–34)
Narrative: Jesus’s ministry continues in and beyond Galilee (4:35–6:56)
Teaching: Jesus teaches on matters of ritual and moral purity (7:1–23)
Narrative: Jesus's ministry continues in gentile regions; Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi marks a reversal in the plot (7:24–9:29)
Teaching: Jesus teaches the disciples on the way to Jerusalem (9:30–10:52)
Narrative: Jesus prophesies against the temple and meets with opposition in Jerusalem (11:1–12:44)
Teaching: Apocalyptic discourse (13:1–37)
Narrative: Passion Narrative (14:1–15:47)
Epilogue: Women at the empty tomb (16:1–8)

In the accompanying outline of the book as a whole, the central narrative sections are labeled Act 1, Act 2, and so on; the intervening sections of teaching material are called interludes. The first and last teaching sections, Mark’s “parables discourse” (4:1–34) and the “apocalyptic discourse” (13:1–37), underlie two important Markan themes: listening/understanding (4:3, 12, 15, 18, 20, 23, 24, 33) and seeing/keeping alert (13:5, 9, 14, 21, 23, 26, 33, 35, 37). As I have noted elsewhere, whether the author intended it or not, the physical layout of the Gospel “resembles that of a five-act Hellenistic play, with the place of the four choruses taken by teaching scenes” (Beavis 1989, 163). This
An Outline of Mark

Prologue: John and Jesus (1:1–13)
- The beginning of the good news (1:1)
- John the messenger (1:2–8)
- Jesus the Son (1:9–13)

Transition: Summary of the good news (1:14–15)

Act 1: Jesus in Galilee (1:16–3:35)
- The first disciples called (1:16–20)
- First synagogue visit: Teaching and an exorcism (1:21–28)
- Simon's mother-in-law and others healed (1:29–34)
- Retreat and continuing ministry (1:35–39)
- A man with leprosy cleansed (1:40–45)
- Controversy stories (2:1–3:6)
- The spread of Jesus's fame (3:7–12)
- The appointment of the Twelve (3:13–19)
- Postscript and transition (3:20–35)

Interlude: Teaching in parables (4:1–34)
- Introduction (4:1–2)
- The parable of the sower (4:3–9)
- Why parables? (4:10–13)
- Interpreting the parable of the sower (4:14–20)
- Additional sayings and parables (4:21–32)
- Conclusion (4:33–34)

Act 2: Beyond Galilee (4:35–6:56)
- Jesus calms the wind and the waves (4:35–41)
- Jesus exorcises the Gerasene demoniac (5:1–20)
- A dead girl is raised, a hemorrhage stopped (5:21–43)

Interlude: Teaching on the way to Jerusalem (9:30–10:52)
- Teaching in Galilee (9:30–50)
- Teaching in Judea (10:1–45)
- Transition to Jerusalem: A blind man at Jericho (10:46–52)
commentary follows the outline suggested above; more-detailed suggested outlines of each section are included under Introductory Matters.

About This Commentary

As part of the Paideia series, this commentary is meant to address the needs of scholars and pastors, but above all, of undergraduate and graduate students in religious studies programs, theological colleges, and seminaries. With this in mind, I have used my experience as a teacher and as a student as one of the resources brought to bear on the task; I have tried to include information and perspectives of pedagogical interest and value. The focus of the commentary is on the text in its current form, rather than on the prehistory of the Gospel, the history of the text, or the historical Jesus, although I may briefly comment on such matters if they are of particular interest or relevance to the understanding of the text. It does not presuppose any particular set of doctrines or denominational milieu but recognizes that many of its readers will be interested
in theological as well as historical-critical and literary questions. The methodology is eclectic but uses elements from several of the subdisciplines of NT studies (e.g., source, form, redaction, reader/audience response, rhetorical, social scientific, feminist) in order to illumine some of the many facets of the Gospel. While I have benefited enormously from the wealth of commentaries and other secondary resources on Mark and engage with them frequently on the following pages, the primary focus is on the Gospel and what it meant to its earliest hearers. (Two recent commentaries that were unavailable to me until very late in the writing of this volume are Culpepper 2007 and Marcus 2009; both are listed in the bibliography.) Like other commentaries, this one reflects my own contextual, exegetical, and theological choices, preferences, and biases—as Canadian, academic, Anglican, liberal, feminist, social-justice oriented—both consciously and unconsciously. Above all, it is an invitation for present-day readers to appreciate the many messages, challenges, and rewards of reading and interpreting Mark today as they undertake their own effort to see, hear, and understand the Gospel.

**Mark and Modern Drama**

Biblical scholars are not the only ones to have noticed the dramatic quality of Mark. In 1977, the British actor Alec McCowen first performed *St. Mark’s Gospel* as a one-man play, based on the King James Version of Mark, in a church basement in Newcastle, England. This production was performed to much acclaim soon afterward in major venues in London and New York. A video version was recorded in 1990. The NT scholar David Rhoads has also performed a “Dramatic Presentation of the Gospel of Mark,” likewise available on video (for other recordings, see Malbon 2002, 107–9; Shiner 2003, 9n6). A postmodern spin on the Gospel tradition is *The Gospel at Colonus*, a recasting of the tragedy by Sophocles in African-American gospel style, first performed in Philadelphia in 1985 and available on DVD (New Video NYC, 2008).
Mark 1:1–13

Prologue: John and Jesus

Introductory Matters

Mark 1:1–13 is often described as Mark’s prologue. In Greek literature, a *prologos* is the part of a play before the entry of the chorus, often in the form of a monologue narrating facts that introduce the main action (see, e.g., Aristotle, *Poet.* 12.4). For example, in Euripides’s *Hecuba* (fifth cent. BC), the phantom of Polydorus, the son of Priam of Troy, recaps the events of the Trojan War that led to the captivity of his mother, Hecuba, and the other women of the city. After this, Hecuba and the chorus of Trojan women enter, and the narrative proper begins. According to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, other cultural forms, including speeches and musical compositions, should begin with introductions (*prooimia*) or preludes (*proaulia*) corresponding to the dramatic prologue (*Rhet.* 3.14).

Biblical authors other than Mark make use of prologues. The deuterocanonical book of Sirach, for instance, contains a prologue written by the grandson of the sage after whom the book is named, explaining the history of the text before its translation into Greek in Egypt. The Gospel of John’s famous prologue (John 1:1–18) describes Jesus as the preexistent Word (*logos*) of God testified to by the Jewish scriptures and by John the Baptist (see Perkins 1990, 951–52). Mark 1:1–13 functions like the *prologoi* of many ancient plays and other literary works by informing the reader/audience of the events leading up to the ministry of Jesus. The omniscient narrator cites a prophetic witness to the events that are about to be related, summarizes the career of John the Baptist, and introduces Jesus as the “man more powerful” than the...
prophet. Mark recounts how Jesus was baptized and experienced a heavenly vision, then was driven by the Spirit into the desert, tested by Satan for forty days, and sustained by angels. Up to this point in the narrative, Jesus does not speak—he is only spoken about.

The prologue shows many characteristics of Mark’s style: kai parataxis, or the sequential linking of sentences and clauses with the conjunction “and” (kai; this word appears fourteen times in 1:4–13); the use of the adverb euthys (“immediately”; vv. 10, 12—a word that appears forty-two times in the Gospel). The passage is packed with the kinds of Markan “traits of vivid detail” noted by Westcott (1860, 366), such as the description of John’s attire and diet (v. 5), the prophet’s assertion that he is unfit to loosen the straps of Jesus’s sandals (v. 7), the description of Jesus’s vision of the heavens being torn apart and the Spirit descending “like a dove” (v. 10). The evangelist’s notice that “all the country of Judea and all the Jerusalemites” (v. 5) went out to John is a typical Markan exaggeration that lends the narrative a sense of vividness and excitement. The terse narration, with its hurried pace and intriguing details, gives the prologue a vibrant and dramatic quality.

Scholarly opinion is divided as to the extent of Mark’s prologue. Frank J. Matera (1988, 4) notes that at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was common to assume that the prologue ended at 1:8 since John the Baptist’s preaching was the prelude to Jesus’s ministry (e.g., the Westcott-Hort text of the Greek NT [1881] placed v. 8 at the end of the first paragraph). In midcentury, Robert H. Lightfoot (1950, 15–20) influentially argued that the prologue was comprised of Mark 1:1–13 since vv. 9–13 supply the vital background information that Jesus is from Nazareth in Galilee and that he is the unique Son of God. In 1965–66, Leander E. Keck argued that the prologue should also include vv. 14–15 since the use of the term euangelion (“gospel”) in vv. 1 and 15 forms an inclusio (the use of the same or similar words at the beginning and the end of a sense unit): “vv. 14f. are a climactic statement that fulfills the word of John about Jesus, while at the same time it rounds out the over-arching interest in εὐαγγέλιον” (Keck 1965–66, 361). Today commentators remain divided as to whether the prologue ends at v. 13 or v. 15 (for ending at v. 13, e.g., see Hooker 1997, 1–22; Moloney 2002, 27–30; Donahue and Harrington 2002, 59–69; for ending at v. 15, e.g., see Mann 1986, 193–94; Harrington 1990, 598–99; Boring 1991). Matera’s (1988, 5) reasons for preferring v. 13 for the prologue’s end are persuasive:

1. 1:1–13 is set apart from the following verses by its location in the desert and by its references to the Spirit (vv. 8, 10, 12), which plays a relatively minor role elsewhere in the Gospel (cf. 3:29; 12:36; 13:11).
2. John’s preaching refers to something that will happen in the future, while Jesus’s preaching (1:14–15) refers to something that has happened.
3. In 1:1–13, the narrator imparts privileged and vital information to the reader/audience: “that John the Baptist is to be understood in the light of the quotation attributed to Isaiah (1:2–3), that the Spirit has come upon Jesus (1:10), that the Father identifies Jesus as his beloved Son (1:11), and that Jesus has confronted Satan in the wilderness (1:12–13)” (Matera 1988, 5).

To these observations, it should be added that only John and the voice from heaven speak in this section; Jesus, whose words predominate in the remainder of the Gospel, does not speak until vv. 14–15, marking off these verses as distinct from the prologue.

Tracing the Narrative Flow

*The Beginning of the Good News (1:1)*

Strictly speaking, Mark 1:1 (Beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God) is a sense unit in itself, since scholars often describe it as a title or superscription to the Gospel or even as a scribal gloss (Croy 2001). For this reason, it could be treated as distinct from the prologue. However, since the mandate of this commentary is to interpret the text as it stands, this initial verse will be considered as integral both to the prologue and to the Gospel.

Although the Greek text of v. 1 contains only seven words (archē tou evange- liou Iēsou Christou huiou theou), it is extremely important both for the interpretation of Mark and for the history of Western literature. It contains one of seven usages of the term *euangelion* (“gospel” or “good news”) in Mark (1:14, 15; 8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9; cf. 16:15). By way of comparison, the noun occurs “only four times in Matthew (never absolutely, though always so in Mark except for the title), never in Q, M, L, or John” (Boring 1990, 66; however, cf. Mark 1:14, where the phrase the good news of God is a nonabsolute usage). Apart from Paul, for whom “gospel” refers to missionary preaching, the word seldom appears in the NT (see Carrington 1960, 31–32). Willi Marxsen argues that Mark both introduced the Pauline term *euangelion* into the Synoptic tradition and that he deliberately applied it to his entire book (1969, 125). In Mark, he asserts, Jesus is made present in the Gospel, and at the same time the proclaimed Gospel represents Jesus (128–29).

In Mark 1:1, the *euangelion* is the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God. The question whether this phrase is objective or subjective—does it refer
to the message about Jesus Christ or about belonging to Jesus Christ—is moot; the evangelist does not distinguish between the preaching of Jesus and that of the early church. From the beginning (archē), the evangelist reveals to the reader/audience what many of them already know: that Jesus is messiah (here the designation Jesus Christ is used almost as a proper name, a usage familiar to early Christians). While it should be noted that the phrase Son of God is missing from some ancient manuscripts of Mark and may be the result of scribal expansion (Metzger 1994, 62; 1975, 73; for a complete list of the nine variants of this verse, see Croy 2001, 107–8), in the canonical text it foreshadows three proclamations of Jesus’s divine sonship that punctuate the Gospel at significant points: Jesus’s baptism, transfiguration, and death (1:11; 9:7; 15:39). Like Christ, “Son of God” is a title that early Christians would have been accustomed to hearing applied to Jesus.

As mentioned earlier, v. 1 is viewed by most scholars as a title—or an encapsulation of the content—of the entire Gospel. This does not mean that Mark used evangelion to describe a literary genre of works that tell the story of Jesus’s life and teachings, as the term is often used today. The term evangelion applies to the purpose of the Gospel—the proclamation of the good news—not to its literary genre (cf. Phil. 4:15). However, the custom of designating literary narratives of the life of Jesus as Gospels has been traced back as early as the second century (see Gundry 1996). This makes Mark’s titular use of the term a significant event not just for Christianity but also for literary history.

John the Messenger (1:2–8)

If Mark 1:1 designates the contents of the entire document, then the prologue proper is made up of vv. 2–13. As discussed above, the prologue is, as Dennis Nineham (1963, 55) put it, “a sort of curtain-raiser, in which the reader is made aware of the true theological situation.” However, several scholars have argued that the prologue does not simply supply background information but also functions as an “interpretive key” to the entire Gospel (Matera 1988; Boring 1990; Hooker 1997). It opens with a formula citation of Isaiah the prophet (vv. 2–3), actually made up of phrases from Exod. 23:20; Mal. 3:1; and Isa. 40:3 (an “error” corrected by both Matthew and Luke; see Matt. 3:3; Luke 3:3–6). Whether or not the evangelist knew this was a mixed citation, it conveys to the reader/audience some very important information about three of the main characters of the Gospel: God, John, and Jesus. God is the invisible actor who sends his messenger (angelos) before your face. The messenger referred to in Exod. 23:20 is an angel whom God will send to guard Israel on the way to the promised land; in Mark, the angelos is the messenger John the Baptist, and the “you” addressed by God is Jesus. In its original context, Mal. 3:1 refers to an eschatological “messenger” whom God will send to prepare for the day of God’s own arrival in judgment; in Mark, the messenger is sent to prepare the way for Jesus, whom God addresses in the prophecy with the...

Mary Ann Beavis, Mark
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second-person pronoun (who shall prepare your way, not “my way” as in Malachi). The quotation of Isa. 40:3 (A voice crying in the desert, Prepare the way of the Lord, Make straight his paths) originally referred to the “new exodus” of Israel from Babylonian exile back to Judea; in Mark, the voice is John’s, and the Lord of the verse is not God but the Messiah Jesus (cf. Mark 12:36–37), for whom the prophet is divinely commissioned to pave the way. The prophetic citation both grounds John and Jesus within the sacred history of Israel and places them in an eschatological framework—the promises of the ancient scriptures are about to be fulfilled; the arrival of the Lord-Messiah is imminent. The repetition of terms that describe the function of the messenger as one who prepares (kataskeuasei, betoimasete, eutheias poieite) for the arrival of the Lord makes it clear that John is a significant but secondary figure: the emphasis is on Jesus. Similarly, the repetition of terms referring to the road/way/paths (hodos, tribous) points to the theme of “the way” in the Gospel (2:23; 4:4, 15; 6:8; 8:27; 9:33; 10:52), especially as it pertains to discipleship: “Jesus is about to go ‘on the way’ which is prepared by John the Baptist and which ends in Jerusalem. His disciples are to follow him in this ‘way’” (Best 1981, 15–16).

Following the just as it is written (kathōs gegraptai) that introduces the prophecy, 1:4–8 demonstrate its fulfillment in the appearance of the messenger, John, baptizing and preaching in the desert, and in the arrival of Jesus, the Lord (kyrios) of the prophecy (vv. 9–11). John is dressed like Elijah (2 Kings 1:8; cf. Zech. 13:4), clothed in camel’s hair and a belt around his waist (Mark 1:6; in Mal. 4:5 [3:23 MT], the “angel” of the prophecy quoted in Mark 1:2 is specified as Elijah), an identification of John that is made explicit in 9:13. Matera notes that in rabbinc exegesis, Exod. 23:20 and Mal. 3:1 identified the coming “messenger” with Elijah (Matera 1988, 7; citing Str-B 1:591), an association that Mark also makes. The baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins is akin to the ritual bath (miqveh/miqweh) required of gentile coverts to Judaism; in John’s ritual, the miqveh has become a sign of repentance not for outsiders but for Jews (Stookey 2000, 147). The location of the baptism at the Jordan River is loaded with significance in the sacred history: it is the site of Israel’s crossing from the wilderness into the promised land (Josh. 3:14–17; 4:23–24; cf. Ps. 114:3, 5; Deut. 4:22), and where Elijah was translated into heaven (2 Kings 2:7–12). Mark’s notice that all Judea and all the Jerusalemites went out to John is, as John Drury (1973, 31) perceptively observed, a sort of running of Israel’s history backward: the people of Judea flock back to the river where they had crossed into the promised land in the time of Joshua. For Mark, the baptism offered by John is a new turning point for Israel, an event as portentous as the crossing of the Jordan.

If John is the eschatological Elijah, then the reader/audience is primed to expect that the stronger man (bo ischyroteros) whose sandal straps John is unworthy to untie will share some characteristics with Elijah’s disciple and...
successor Elisha, who received a “double share” of the Spirit of his predecessor (2 Kings 2:9).

According to Jewish tradition, Elisha’s double share of Elijah’s spirit gave him double the miracle-working power of Elijah (R. Brown 1971, 89; Ginzberg 1913, 239). In an important article, Raymond E. Brown enumerates many similarities in the Gospels’ portrayal of Jesus and the pattern of Elisha’s career: like Jesus, Elisha is a prophet who moves among the people, helping the poor and needy; Elisha travels around locations in Northern Israel (Shunem, Gilgal, Jericho, Dothan) as Jesus travels around Galilee; Elisha and Jesus are prodigious wonder-workers, even to the extent that after Elisha dies, a dead man is revived when his corpse touches the prophet’s bones (2 Kings 13:20–21; Brown 1971, 89–90). In the book of Sirach, Elisha is remembered as a supremely powerful prophet: “He performed twice as many signs, and marvels with every utterance of his mouth. Never in his lifetime did he tremble before any ruler, nor could anyone intimidate him at all. Nothing was too hard for him, and when he was dead, his body prophesied. In his life he did wonders, and in death his deeds were marvelous” (Sir. 48:12b–14). The Baptist’s proclamation that the coming one will baptize you with Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8) echoes the tradition that Elisha inherited double the prophetic spirit (2 Kings 2:9). However, in the light of the Malachi prophecy, which anticipates the coming of the day of the Lord in the wake of the eschatological Elijah, Mark’s emphasis on the vast superiority of John’s successor exceeds any known Jewish traditions about even Elisha; the one who comes after John will be a mighty agent of God who will inaugurate the end times.
Jesus the Son (1:9–13)

The first usage in Mark of the phrase kai egeneto—translated in the KJV as “and it came to pass”—immediately precedes the appearance of Jesus. This formula occurs only a few times in the Gospel (Mark 2:15, 23; 4:4), but it appears hundreds of times in the Jewish scriptures. Here, in combination with the similarly portentous in those days, the arrival on the scene of the Lord (cf. Mark 1:3) is cast in deliberately scriptural-sounding language, conveying the impression to the reader/audience that Jesus is a figure of “biblical” significance (cf. Donahue and Harrington 2002, 16, 64; Moloney 2002, 36). He comes from Nazareth of Galilee, a regional origin that sets him apart from the Judeans who flock to John for baptism (v. 5). However, even Jesus is baptized in the Jordan by John (v. 9), implying metanoia (“repentance” or “conversion”) on his part (the other evangelists revise this scene to mitigate the embarrassment of a repentant Jesus; Matt. 3:13–15; Luke 3:21; cf. John 1:29–34; 3:22–23). Jesus’s vision of the heavens being split apart and the Spirit descending on him like a dove as he is coming out of the water (Mark 1:10) is reminiscent of mystical narratives where the heavens open up to impart a great revelation to an exalted seer (e.g., Acts 7:56; 10:11; T. Levi 2.6; 5.1; 18.6; T. Jud. 24.2; 2 Bar. 22.1; cf. Rev. 4:1). Again, the influence of 2 Kings 2:9–12 is apparent, with the association of a prophetic succession, a heavenly vision, and the descent of the spirit (cf. 2 Kings 2:15). In Jewish apocalyptic literature, the coming of the spirit is associated with the messianic age (1 En. 49.3; 62.2; Pss. Sol. 17.42; T. Levi 18.7; T. Jud. 24.2).

It is difficult to identify the source of the scriptural allusion in the utterance of the heavenly voice, You are my Son the beloved; in you I am delighted (Mark 1:11). As Matera (1988, 18n31) observes, “The text can allude to Genesis 22:2, Psalm 2:7, or Isaiah 42:1. The choice made here is crucial since it can result in understanding Jesus’s sonship in terms of Isaac imagery (Gen. 22:2), royal imagery (Ps. 2:7), or servant imagery (Isa. 42:1).” He judiciously concedes that the evangelist may expect the reader/audience to recognize all of these allusions: “Jesus is the royal Son of God who comes as the Lord’s Servant to surrender his life” (Matera 1988, 18n31). The likening of the spirit to a dove (hōs peristeran) is notoriously obscure (Gero 1976, 17; Mann 1986, 200). It may intensify the royal dimension of the imagery since the descent of a dove or other bird upon an elect person is a feature of ancient Near Eastern legend (Gero 1976, 19); Ps. 2:7 is an enthronement psalm, where God’s anointed king is elected to rule over the nations: “You are my son; today I have begotten you.” The dove image may also reflect the ancient interpretation of the dove as a soul-bird, closely associated with divine presence and protection (Goodenough 1958, 30–31); Philo of Alexandria (Spec. Laws 4.22 §117) identified the dove with divine Wisdom (Sophia). Mark 1:11 is sometimes offered as evidence of Mark’s “adoptionist Christology” since it implies that Jesus first becomes Son of God with the descent of the God’s Spirit and divine ratification (see
Figure 2. Geography of Palestine in the Time of Jesus.
Dunn 1980, 47)—an implication that the other evangelists address at the very beginning of their Gospels, pressing back Jesus’s divine sonship to his birth (Matt. 1–2; Luke 1–2) or to the dawn of creation (John 1:1–18). The term translated here as “beloved” (agapētos) may have the nuance of “only” since it is often used to translate the Hebrew yāhîd in the Septuagint (Donahue 1988, 592, citing V. Taylor 1966, 161–62). This usage should not be confused with the Johannine “only-begotten Son” (huios monogenēs of John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18). The translation “dearest” or “darling” may come closest to the sense of the adjective as it applies to Mark’s Jesus.

The descent of the Spirit upon Jesus carries through the Elijah-Elisha typology at work in the narrative (cf. 2 Kings 2:9, 15). However, in the OT succession narrative (Carroll 1969), Elijah is the “Father” to his disciple Elisha (2 Kings 2:12), whereas in Mark, Jesus is proclaimed as beloved Son of God, elsewhere in Mark referred to as Father (patēr; cf. Mark 11:25; 13:32; 14:36), signaling the superiority of the disciple (Jesus) to the master (John). The Father-Son relationship between God and Jesus established here also entails filial obedience, for, as Morna Hooker (1997, 16) observes, in the first century AD, sons were expected to be obedient to their fathers: “since Jesus is well-pleasing to God, we know that he is in fact obedient to him.” The implication from the outset is that Jesus’s relationship with God is intimate, yet subordinate.

The obedience implied by the filial relationship between Jesus and God is illustrated by the conclusion of the prologue (1:12–13): And immediately the Spirit cast him out into the desert. And he was in the desert forty days, being tested by the Adversary, and he was with the beasts, and the angels were serving him. Here, language of the Spirit of God “casting” (ektallei) Jesus into the desert seems to contradict Christopher S. Mann’s (1986, 200) assertion that the Spirit’s descent “into” Jesus (eis auton) should not be taken to mean that “his subsequent ministry was simply the result of interior compulsion.” However, apart from propelling him into the desert, the Spirit does not figure actively in the brief account of Jesus’s “temptation,” or “testing” (peirazō; cf. 8:11; 10:2), where Jesus withstands forty days with ho satana, here translated literally as the Adversary rather than the more usual “Satan,” in order to avoid the lavish postbiblical Christian demonology that the proper name invokes (see H. Kelly 2006; Wray and Mobley 2005). Throughout Mark, references to “the Satan” can be interpreted consistently with the OT view of hasatan (Hebrew) as one who tests and obstructs the mission of Jesus (Job 1–2; 1 Chron. 21:1; Zech. 3:1–2; Mark 3:23, 26; 4:15; 8:33; see H. Kelly 2006, 13–31, 80–84). Jesus’s ability to resist the Adversary establishes his faithfulness to God and demonstrates that he is worthy of divine approval.

The forty days of testing are a conventional symbol of times of trial (e.g., the forty years of Israel’s wilderness wandering; the forty days and forty nights of the flood; Elijah’s forty-day flight to Mount Horeb [1 Kings 19:8]). The number forty is also associated with the beginning of new epochs in salvation history,
such as the covenant with Noah (Gen. 7:17; 8:6; 9:8–17), Moses’s sojourn on Mount Sinai (Exod. 24:18; 34:28), the entry into the promised land (16:35), and Jesus’s appearances after the resurrection (Acts 1:3; Gunner 1962, 845). In the light of the Elijah-Elisha typology, Jesus’s desert sojourn especially echoes Elijah’s journey to Horeb, with the shared motifs of forty days, the wilderness, and the angelic ministry to the prophet (1 Kings 19:1–18; cf. 19:19–21, where the call of Elisha immediately follows the theophany at Horeb). The note that Jesus was with the beasts (thēria) has been interpreted either as the portrayal of Christ as a “new Adam” living in Edenic harmony with wild animals (e.g., Bauckham 1994b), or as part of the “menacing wilderness” associated with the testing motif (Heil 2006). In view of the range of meanings of the word thērion, which can mean “any living creature, excluding humans” (BDAG 455), there may be an echo of the story of the ministry of the ravens to Elijah in 1 Kings 17:2–6 (though the meaning of the term thēria [animals] does not usually extend to birds).

Although there are discernable parallels between Elijah’s wilderness sojourn and Jesus’s forty days in the desert, there are significant contrasts. Elijah flees in fear from the fury of Jezebel, but Jesus is prompted by the Spirit of God. Elijah is despondent and prays for death; Jesus withstands the tests of the Adversary, witnessing to his superiority to the first Elijah, as well as to the second (Mark 1:7–8). Elijah is succeeded by Elisha, but it is Jesus who is the mighty successor to John, the hoped-for eschatological Elijah. The reference to angels in v. 13 not only reinforces the typology (cf. 1 Kings 19:5, 7), but it also forms an inclusio with the quotation of Mal. 3:1 in Mark 1:2, where the word angelos also occurs, a framing that further defines vv. 2–13 as a prologue.

As noticed earlier, several scholars have suggested that the Markan prologue not only supplies the readers/audience with vital background information but also functions as an “interpretative key” to the entire Gospel (Matera 1988; Boring 1990). Matera asserts that the prologue introduces the Markan themes of the messiahship of Jesus (1:14–8:30); the necessity of listening to the beloved Son, even when he speaks of his suffering (8:31–10:52); the “testing” of Jesus in Jerusalem (11:1–13:37); and the recognition that Jesus is the Son of God (14:1–16:8; Matera 1988, 9–15). Boring (1990, 63–68) finds five main Gospel themes in the prologue:

1. The power of the Christ as a manifestation of God’s power.
2. The story of the Christ as the key to God’s mighty acts in history.
3. The weakness of the Christ, which represents “the weakness and victimization of humanity, and is thus the true power of God.”
4. The secrecy of the Christ as a literary-theological device that ties together human weakness and divine power.
5. The disciples of the Christ as God’s messianic people.
All these themes certainly are found in Mark, but it is questionable whether the prologue was designed by the evangelist to be as programmatic as these modern scholars suggest. However, modern readers with “eyes to see and ears to hear” (cf. Mark 4:11–12) will find echoes of the prologue throughout the Gospel, especially the theme of the way (path, journey, road, roadside, all translating the Greek hodos, which occurs sixteen times; Boring 1990, 66), the issue of the identity of Jesus, his relationship with God, and his faithfulness in times of testing.

Theological Issues

The word archē that abruptly announces the beginning of Mark, has a range of meanings that include “first cause,” “ruler,” and “rule” in the abstract sense of office and function: “If 1:1 is a title for the whole document, then the whole document ought to be considered the ἀρχή” (Boring 1990, 53). This statement points to the great significance of Mark for Christian belief and practice. As the oldest Gospel, it is not only the foundation and model for the other Synoptic Gospels (and possibly for John; see D. Smith 1992); it is also the source of much of our knowledge of Jesus’s life. For example, without Mark, we might not know that Jesus was a Galilean, that his mother’s name was Mary, that he was an artisan, and that he had sisters as well as brothers (6:3). Jesus’s relationship with John the Baptist would not be documented, and we would not know the names of the Twelve or of Mary Magdalene. Jesus’s teaching in parables, the stories of miracles and exorcisms, the trial and execution narratives, are all part of Mark’s legacy to the church and to the world. In a very significant way, Mark is the archē of the “fourfold Gospel” of the church (Irenaeus, Haer. 3.11.8).

Although the identity of Jesus—in technical terms, Christology—is very much an issue throughout Mark, theology in the strict sense of understanding God is at the heart of the Gospel (Donahue 1988). In Mark, Jesus does not typically preach about himself, or about his identity as messiah, but proclaims God and the reign of God (hē basileia tou theou). As Francis Moloney (2002, 30) observes, the theocentrism of the Gospel is apparent throughout the prologue:

God dominates this prologue, mentioned by name in 1:1 and present in direct speech in vv. 2–3. In vv. 4–5 and 6–8 the Baptist is the subject of most of the verbs, but his activity fulfills what God had promised in vv. 2–3. . . . God and the Spirit are the main actors in Jesus’s initial experiences until, at the close of vv. 1–13, Jesus is with the wild beasts and served by the angels. This prologue establishes an important truth for the reader: the chief agent in the action that follows is God.

The stage is set for Jesus’s initial proclamation of the good news of God in 1:14–15.
In contemporary Christian proclamation, Mark 1:1–8 is a lectionary reading for the second Sunday in Advent. Mark’s portrayal of John the Baptist as the messenger sent by God to “prepare the way” for Jesus reminds us of the deep roots of Christian faith in Judaism and the Jewish scriptures. John is a Jewish prophet who fulfills the Jewish scriptures, the eschatological Elijah who “prepared the way” for the messiah. While Mark assumes continuity between the ministries of John and Jesus, and clearly portrays Jesus as a figure of greater stature than John in salvation history, John is not portrayed as a disciple of Jesus. Rather, Jesus heeds John’s preaching of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (1:4, 9) and strikes out on his own ministry (1:14–15). Mark’s depiction of a human Jesus who seeks baptism and is proclaimed the dearest Son of God, so much at variance with Christian expectations of a flawless Christ (cf. Heb. 4:15; 2 Cor. 5:21), illustrates that this Gospel, like the other NT Scriptures, embodies “Christology in the making” (Dunn 1980) and invites reflection on the relationship between the NT Scriptures and the classic christological doctrines of Nicaea and Chalcedon, taken for granted by Christians today.

Nicaea and Chalcedon

The Council of Nicaea (AD 325), the first ecumenical council of the church, promulgated the doctrine that Christ is “of the same being” (homoousios) with God the Father—not a creature, as Arius believed, and not merely “of similar being” (homoiousios), as some later fourth-century figures proposed. The Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), the fourth ecumenical council, promulgated a definition regarding the unity of the divine and human natures of Christ (the Chalcedonian Decree) as “truly God and truly [hu]man, . . . acknowledged in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation” (WDCH 176). These trinitarian and christological doctrines are ultimately based on the Christian Scriptures, but it would be anachronistic to claim that they inform NT understandings of Jesus.