The Gospel of Mark in recent study

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The Gospel of Mark is a major centre of vigorous and creative discussion among NT scholars. In the following pages, after some remarks about commentaries, I focus on major developments and trends in Marcan scholarship within approximately the last ten years (since 1978), as coverage of earlier work is readily available. Within each unit of this essay, I briefly discuss selected works that represent the particular development under consideration. The notes contain references to additional publications which space considerations do not allow me to address in the discussion.

1. Commentaries

Only one major English-language commentary has appeared in the last decade though several recent general-reader commentaries are available. There are also several large German commentaries of relatively recent vintage.

C. S. Mann’s Anchor Bible commentary on Mark advocates the ‘Griesbach hypothesis’ (Mark dependent upon Matthew and Luke), giving us the only major modern commentary on Mark built upon this premise. Mann proposes that Mark was written in two drafts: the first in Rome c. AD 55, and the final draft in Palestine c. AD 65, drawing upon and shortening Matthew and Luke. This 700-page study is, however, a disappointingly unremarkable analysis of the text of Mark that is particularly weak in awareness of the narrative design of the gospel.

Of the major German commentaries published around the early part of the period covered here, none really represents a major breakthrough. Pesch’s view of Mark as basically a passive redactor seems out of touch with the impressive recent demonstrations of strong Marcan authorial purposes, and looks backward rather than forward. Schmithals’ set is too idiosyncratic to be a reliable guide, and the works by Gnilka and Ernst are informed but uninspiring ‘safe’ discussions.

A thorough scholars’ commentary on Mark in English is a definite desideratum. But to meet the need fully, such a work will have to take fully into account the sort of wide-ranging and complex discussion illustrated in the following sections of this essay.

2. Marcan priority

A large part of the reason for the fervent investigation of Mark is the common conviction that it is the earliest surviving gospel. But Mann’s commentary is evidence that the two-source hypothesis involving the priority of Mark has been challenged by several scholars in recent decades. C. M. Tuckett’s analysis of the recent attempt to overthrow the theory of Marcan priority by advocates of the ‘Griesbach hypothesis’ shows cogently, however, that major characteristics of Mark fit more easily the basic two-source hypothesis, and that the case against it involves a number of fallacies and inaccuracies. In order for the Griesbach position to become a truly alternative theory, advocates will have to produce detailed studies of Mark that account for the text persuasively on the theory that it is a harmonization of Matthew and Luke.

3. Provenance

In the past few decades, the traditional view that Mark was composed in Rome was rejected by several influential scholars. For example, Marxsen and Kelber set Mark’s origin in Galilee, either near the beginning of the Jewish revolt (Marxsen), or just after this war (Kelber). Kee suggested that the setting of Mark was in southern Syria, sometime during the revolt but before the fall of Jerusalem.

This whole question has now been re-examined by M. Hengel, who argues for a Roman origin of Mark, probably in AD 69, the year of terror and confusion when three Emperors took power and were killed in quick succession. Hengel’s discussion of Mark 13 as indicating the situation of the Marcan church is particularly impressive. Hengel also insists that the ancient tradition is correct about Mark’s connection with tradition stemming from the apostle Peter.

The use of Marcan geographical references as evidence of the author’s setting by advocates of a Syro-Palestinian provenance has been criticized succinctly by E. S. Malbon as representing a kind of referential fallacy. Perhaps a similar sort of critique could be levelled against the tendencies of scholars, such as G. Theissen and Kee, to read out conclusions about the social and economic situation of Mark’s audience from details of the Marcan narratives about the itinerant ministry of Jesus and his first followers. Their approach seems to reflect a failure to reckon with the reasons religious groups preserve traditions even after social and economic situations change.

Donald Senior has drawn attention to the concern for a universal mission in Mark (e.g. 13:9-13) as reason to question the tendency among some to read Mark as occasioned purely by hypothetical intra-church polemics (e.g. Weeden, Kelber, et al.). Most scholars seem to remain convinced that Mark’s gospel was written (at least in part) to advance a particular understanding of Christ and of Christian life, perhaps over against alternative interpretations (those who ‘lead astray’ in 13:5-6, 21-22?). But Senior and others recently remind us that the author’s purposes and stimuli were probably more complex.
Koester has proposed the hypothesis that canonical Mark is a later edition of a text known as ‘secret Mark’, an intriguing but so far unpersuasive suggestion.17 Most scholars seem to have concluded that, if the fragments of ‘secret Mark’ are genuine, they probably derive from a secondary alteration of canonical Mark or from some other writing that may have been attributed to Mark.

4. Literary nature/setting
In the recent analysis of Mark, there have been two main types of literary-critical developments. One approach uses modern literary criticism (as practised, e.g., in English literature studies). The other approach attempts to set Mark’s gospel into the Greco-Roman literary and cultural environment, and emphasizes the conventions and aims of ancient literature.

Modern literary criticism and Mark
The analysis of Mark through the use of modern literary criticism is varied and fervent.18 J. G. Williams has drawn upon modern theories about narrative and parables to argue that Mark constitutes the attempt to overcome the ‘mysterious polyvalent quality of parables by placing them in a narrative context which limits the possibilities for interpretation.’19 However, this study may be too much controlled by assumptions arising from peculiarly modern hermeneutical issues and insufficiently based on inductive study of how such things as parables actually functioned in the ancient setting.

More general understanding of narratives and their components as developed in modern literary criticism is given in an article by D. Rhoads,20 who has also co-authored a book-length analysis of Mark informed by narrative criticism.21 Contemporary students of Mark are enabled to identify such matters as the Marcan ‘plot’, the ‘characters’ and their roles in the narrative, and the way in which the author has constructed the narrative to achieve his ends. The broad result of recent literary-critical studies has been to strengthen the view that Mark is a generally well-constructed narrative with evident and successfully-executed authorial purposes and emphases.22

A particular type of literary-critical investigation of Mark adapted from contemporary literary studies is represented by ‘reader-response’ analysis. Here the text is analysed in terms of how it would be construed by the careful reader.23 Fowler’s study of the two feeding accounts incorporates this approach.24 He argues that both these stories fit meaningfully within the narrative. His redaction-critical analysis leads him to conclude that Mark created the story in 6:30-44 in order to achieve his narrative purposes, a surprising but debatable suggestion.

Reader-response analysis has received a valuable corrective, however, from M. A. Beavis, who criticizes Fowler and other reader-response critics for working with an ‘ideal reader’ unrooted in time. She insists that with ancient texts such as Mark one should attempt to acquire as accurate a picture as possible of the nature of the ancient reader and the ancient reading process.25 Mark was probably written to be read out publicly before gathered Christians as a ‘reading performance’, and reader-response analysis should recognize the more complex process involved in the ancient reading/listening experience.26

Mark and ancient literature
Until recently the dominant view has been that the gospel (especially Mark) represented a significantly new Christian type of writing, and that comparison with Greco-Roman literature is not productive.27 However, this conventional view is being questioned in recent publications and a strong case has been made for a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between the NT gospels and their Greco-Roman literary background and conventions.28

There is C. H. Talbert’s 1977 comparison of the gospels with other examples of ancient bios literature.29 More recently, H. Cancik has argued for the relevance of Greco-Roman biographical writings in the study of Mark.30

V. K. Robbins has produced an analysis of the Marcan portrait of Jesus as a wandering, disciple-gathering teacher, drawing comparisons with motifs in Greco-Roman literature, and concluding that Mark’s Jesus was significantly compatible with ancient Mediterranean traditions.31 Robbins’ book is instructive, but his portrayal of Mark’s Christology is sometimes faulty, and in estimating the relationship of the Marcan Jesus to ancient traditions of virtuous suffering he has not reckoned adequately with the offensiveness to Greco-Roman tastes of Mark’s emphasis on the crucified Jesus.32

An interesting development in Marcan studies recently is the renewed analysis of Mark’s narrative in comparison with ancient dramatic conventions. In the late 70s several scholars independently released studies along this line: G. G. Bilezjian (1977), F. G. Lange (1977), and B. Standaert (1978).33 All these scholars have produced impressive parallels between the plotting and structure of Mark and Greek tragedies. Bilezjian argues for direct influence of dramatic plotting upon Mark’s arrangement of his story of Jesus. Standaert likewise sees the structure of Mark as influenced by ancient tragedy, but also sees the influence of other aspects of Greco-Roman culture as well, particularly rhetoric.

Further assistance to seeing Mark’s gospel in the Greco-Roman context is provided with M. A. Beavis’ recent Cambridge thesis.34 Particularly illuminating for NT scholars here is discussion of the way people with even elementary levels of education in Greco-Roman times were taught to write, read, and use texts. Beavis concludes that Mark shows familiarity with Greco-Roman literary and dramatic conventions, that the author was likely an early Christian missionary/teacher or ‘scribe’ in a Christian group that was not a closed sect but evangelistic in ethos, and offers her own original analysis of several key Marcan motifs and the design of the narrative.35

Failure to set Mark within a fully-informed view of the Greco-Roman world and its practices of writing, reading, and speaking is illustrated in W. Kelber’s The Oral and Written Gospel.36 His overly rigid stereotypes of ‘orality’ and ‘textuality’ cannot do justice to the complex and highly-developed cultural setting of the first-century Mediterranean world, in which features of ‘orality’ (e.g., rhetorical conventions) existed side by side with, influenced, and were influenced by, features of ‘textuality’. For example, conventions of oral communication influenced texts, which were usually prepared for oral delivery, and the actual reading out of texts could involve ad hoc expansions and other ‘fluid’ features that Kelber thinks pertain only to ‘oral tradition’.
Moreover, Kelber obscures the fact that Christianity was from its inception deeply immersed both in ‘orality’ and ‘textuality’. The earliest Christian theological reflection involved ‘Christo-centric’ exegesis of OT passages, and all evidence indicates that first-century Palestine was an avidly reading-and-writing setting.

His view of texts as static and fixed is not appropriate until after the printing press. Anyone familiar with the NT manuscript tradition (too much to expect of NT scholars nowadays) would have known how much more fluid and susceptible to alterations (sometimes considerable) ancient texts were when they had to be copied by hand. This is surely one reason why ancients preferred eye-witnesses and tended to distrust written accounts.

Kelber focuses on valid questions: Why did early Christians begin writing continuous narratives of the ministry of Jesus? And, if Mark’s gospel was the first such account, what sort of development did the appearance of this document constitute? But his attempt to deal with these questions only succeeds in demonstrating the need for a more historically controlled and genuinely critical endeavour.

5. Marcan style

The several investigations of Marcan style that have appeared in the last decade can be organized according to the basic questions that fuel them. The studies by Pryke, Dschulnig, and Peabody are mainly prompted by the question of whether Marcan redactional style can be distinguished from whatever source material he may have used. Their basic conclusion, that the style of the Gospel of Mark is consistent and pervasive throughout the writing, ought to make us more cautious about distinguishing Mark from his sources.

Peabody is somewhat distinctive in approach. His work does not presuppose a particular solution to the synoptic problem (he is a pupil of Farmer), and focuses on ‘recurrent phraseology’ in Mark as the means to provide ‘the isolation, analysis, and systematic display of the favourite or habitual expressions of the author of Mark’s gospel’.

It would be particularly worthwhile to have the work of Dschulnig and Peabody compared in detail, both as to approach and results. Both scholars give detailed analysis of particular features of Marcan style, and the degree to which they complement each other and cohere in results would be an important finding for future Marcan studies.

Other scholars have attempted to characterize Marcan style with a view to the question of whether it reflects the influence of Semitic languages (Aramaic or Hebrew). Both E. C. Maloney and M. Reiser have dealt with this question recently from different standpoints. Reiser investigated how Marcan style fits within the spectrum of popular Greek literature, whereas Maloney tried to determine how much Marcan style shows Semitic linguistic ‘interference’ (influence).

The problem is that these two studies seem to disagree, at least in emphasis. Maloney concludes that there is Semitic influence in Marcan syntax on ‘every page of the gospel’, while Reiser finds Mark largely free of Semitisms and essentially an example of popular-level Greek literary style of the Greco-Roman period. Both scholars could be correct, actually, but further analysis of this matter is necessary.

6. The ending of Mark

Perhaps the most well-known problem in Mark is the ending. There are really two major questions here. The text-critical question is whether we are able to determine the original ending of Mark and account for the variant endings in the textual tradition. On text-critical grounds it is likely that either the original ending was lost or else 16:8 is the Marcan ending. Increasingly, scholars seem to be working with the assumption that the original ending of Mark was 16:8. This view in turn generates the second question as to how to interpret this remarkable closure of the narrative.

In 1981, two complementary articles appeared in the same issue of JBL dealing with this passage. In the one article, T. Boomershine and G. Bartholomew show that the final words of 16:8 (‘for they were afraid’) form one of many Marcan examples of explanatory clauses, often at the end of individual stories, and argue that 16:8 is the original ending. In the other article, Boomershine studies 16:8 in the context of the passion account and concludes that this final description of the fearful women was intended to provoke the ‘audience’ (Boomershine properly emphasizes the originally oral delivery of the narrative before Christian groups) to reflect on their own responsibility to proclaim the gospel message in the face of opposition.

Some other scholars who take 16:8 as the original ending have seen in it a particularly striking christological emphasis that we might call a ‘christology of absence’. In this interpretation, 16:8 was intended to shift attention totally from resurrection appearances, and counter the beliefs of ‘enthusiasts’ in the wonder-working presence of the risen Christ with an understanding of Christ that focused on his pre-Easter ministry and viewed Christ as ‘absent’ in the present until the parousia. This basic view was defended by a 1976 collection of essays by a particular circle of American Marcan scholars, and has been elaborated and re-affirmed since by Crossan and Kelber particularly. Essentially a mutation of Weeden’s theory of a Marcan anti-Jerusalem polemic (with perhaps a dash of existentialism), this view comes under the same criticism of being an illogical construal of the plot of Mark as N. Petersen levelled against Weeden.

The most recent study of the short ending of Mark is by J. Magness. Drawing upon modern analysis of narrative closure, Magness argues (somewhat similarly to Boomershine and Petersen) that the overall narrative of Mark was planned to prepare readers to cope with concluding at 16:8, and that this abrupt ending was essentially a narrative device intended to involve the readers more thoroughly in the drama of the Marcan account of Jesus. It is unlikely, however, that Magness has had the last word.

Two other noteworthy studies have been devoted to the ‘long ending’ of Mark (16:9-20), a passage often ignored by Marcan scholars. J. Hug concludes that the passage was composed in the early second century and was not a compilation of material from the other gospels but an independent tradition of some historical significance. P. Mirecki’s analyses formal, redactional, and narrative features of the passage, arguing that the ‘core narrative’ was 16:9-15, 20a, to which was added vv. 16-19, 20b, with some provocative
proposals about the christological views reflected in these two bodies of material.

7. Christology and discipleship
Discussion of the contents of Mark has continued to concentrate on two main items: Mark's picture of Jesus and his treatment of the disciples/discipleship theme.58

Mark has been the centre of recent discussion about narrative as a 'mode' of christology.59 This discussion usually involves application of aspects of modern literary criticism and is concerned with Mark's (pioneering?) use of narrative as a means of advocating a particular christology.

The most substantial study of Mark's christology recently, by J. D. Kingsbury, however, is mainly concerned with resolving some long-standing issues among Marcan students.60 Building on several developments of recent research (e.g. the decline of earlier claims about the *theios aner* category and the apocalyptic 'Son of Man' title, and the employment of modern narrative analysis to discern the 'authoritative voice' in a narrative), Kingsbury's analysis is a significant advance. He rejects earlier 'corrective christology' interpretations of Mark and concludes that there are two basic aspects to the Marcan portrayal of Jesus: the inner secret of Jesus as the 'Davidic Messiah-King, the Son of God', and the outer or public disclosure of Jesus under the label 'the Son of Man'. Contrary to numerous earlier studies, these two aspects do not correct each other, but are complementary aspects of the Marcan portrait. I am not persuaded, however, that Kingsbury's emphasis upon Marcan christology as essentially 'Messianic' has done justice to Mark's emphasis upon the transcendent significance/nature of Jesus, the Son of God.

P. Davis' unpublished thesis is an original and significant study of Marcan christology that unfortunately is hardly known.61 He argues that Mark works with a fundamental God/human polarity, and that Jesus is presented as both reconciling this polarity and embodying it in his very self.62 Davis is certainly correct that the Marcan christology is by no means 'low' or 'adoptionist', and that the most crucial and immediate 'background' for interpreting Mark's christological language is early Christianity, rather than either Jewish messianism or pagan interest in 'divine men'.

A perennial matter connected with Mark's christology is the secrecy motif. There is now a useful anthology of studies on this topic which includes a helpful survey of research by C. Tuckett.63 F. Watson has argued that the secrecy motif has no connection with christology but is simply the rhetoric of early Christians who, though despised and rejected, viewed themselves as having elite status in the plan of God.64 However, Watson fails to deal with the fact that in Mark the secret of Jesus' person escapes both outsiders and insiders, Kingsbury's study includes a worthwhile discussion of Marcan secrecy.65

One of the key passages in considering the Marcan secrecy theme is chapter 4, the parables chapter, and in particular vv. 10-12. J. Marcus has offered a redaction-critical analysis of this chapter, but we have earlier noted the difficulties involved in such analysis of Mark.66 Beavis' thesis mentioned earlier includes an analysis of the secrecy crux in 4:10-12.

On Mark's treatment of the disciples and discipleship, Tannehill's 1977 study was influential in reframing Weeden's notion that Mark intended simply to discredit the Jerusalem apostles, and remains instructive.67 Best has contributed several worthwhile discussions of discipleship in Mark.68 And Donahue's study of this topic is perspicacious and recommended.69 Reflecting contemporary concerns about the status of women, there are also several studies dealing with Mark's treatment of women disciples.70 Via's discussion of Marcan ethics is heavily phenomenological and existentialist in mode.71

Conclusion
The last ten years of intense and varied work on the Gospel of Mark have included some significant re-examinations of major questions (e.g. provenance and christology) and the application and refinement of newer approaches (e.g. narrative criticism). There is growing recognition of Mark as a well-designed story of Jesus; and there is increased emphasis that Mark should be analysed in light of Jewish and pagan literary traditions of the Greco-Roman era.

For the investigation of practically any question concerning Jesus, the nature and origin of the gospels, and the development of early Christianity, the Gospel of Mark will continue to be a centre of activity.


6 The commentaries by R. Pesch, Das Markusevangelium I—II (Freiburg: Herder, 1976, 1977); W. Schmithals, Das Evangelium nach Markus I—II (Gütersloh: G. Mohn, 1979); J. Gnina, Das Evangelium nach Markus I—II (Zürich: Benziger; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1979); and J. Ernst, Das Evangelium nach Markus (Regensburg: Pustet, 1981), are discussed by F. Neirynck, Evangelische, Gospel studies — *Etudes d'évangile* (BETL 60; Louvain: Leuven Univ., 1982), pp. 491-564; U. Luz, *Markusforschung in der...
43 Ibid., p. 15.
46 Maloney, op. cit., p. 245.
47 See also the essay by Rüger in Markus-Philologie, ed. H. Cancik.
48 The most recent attempt to defend the originality of the 'long ending' (16:9-20) was by W. R. Farmer, The Last Twelve Verses of Mark (SNTSMS 25; Cambridge: CUP, 1974). Cf. e.g. B. M. Metzger, A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament (London/New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), pp. 122-126. See also the review of research in J. Magnes' book mentioned below (n. 55).

58 Cf. M. R. Mansfield's unpersuasive case that Mark was not primarily concerned with christology but with the Holy Spirit (Spirit and Gospel in Mark [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1987]).
60 J. D. Kingsbury, The Christology of Mark's Gospel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). See e.g. reviews in Int 38(1983), pp. 299-302; and JBL 104(1985), pp. 732-735. C. R. Kazmierski, Jesus, the Son of God: A Study of the Markan Tradition and its Redaction by the Evangelist (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1979), is devoted to the redaction-critical quest to distinguish Mark from his sources, an objective that has become more dubious within the last decade.
61 P. G. Davis, ' "Truly this Man was the Son of God": The Christological focus of the Markan Redaction', (Ph.D. thesis, McMaster Univ., 1979).
62 See also P. G. Davis, 'Mark's Christological Paradox', JSNT, forthcoming at the time of this writing.
71 D. O. Via, Jr., op. cit. (see above, n. 14).