

## **The Gospel of Mark - far more than a simple story.**

### **Synopsis**

The Gospel of Mark was once considered to be of less value to scholars and the reader alike because it was thought to be simply a condensed version of the Gospel of Matthew. Modern biblical criticism techniques as they became available at the turn of the last century have proven this opinion to be wrong and that Mark's Gospel is in fact far more than originally thought. It is now accepted that Mark's is the first of the Synoptic Gospels. More importantly, it is now understood to be a masterly intertwining of theological themes into a cleverly constructed narrative. While the narration is broadly chronological, it is far more than a simple story.

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Modern biblical criticism has done much to help "break open" the mystery and the message contained in the books of the Old and New Testaments. This is especially true of the Gospel of Mark which at one stage was not considered worthy of inclusion in the canon of scripture, those ancient books held as sacred in the tradition of the Catholic Church. Prior to this century, this Gospel was little read and even less studied and thought only to be a condensed version of Matthew's Gospel and hence of lesser value. How wrong this opinion has proven to be in both fact and in substance.

This perception changed dramatically at the turn of this century through work undertaken largely by protestant scripture scholars. The absence of scholarship in the Catholic church was due mainly to the heresy of "modernism" which prevailed within the Church in the opening decades of this century. Of particular note is the fact Pope St Pius X (1903-1914) forbade Catholic scripture scholars to use the new "scientific" methods of biblical criticism.

The first significant hypothesis (now accepted) that changed the perception of Mark's Gospel was that this Gospel was the first of the Synoptic Gospels to be written<sup>1</sup>. Mark's Gospel suddenly attracted a lot of attention as it was thought to be free from the theological "bias" found in both Matthew's and Luke's Gospels and was thus thought of as being a "clean witness"<sup>2</sup> for those who sought the historical Jesus (and his biography). Mark's Gospel was hence now thought of as a reliable historical record.

The hypothesis that Mark's Gospel was a simple historical record (or biography) was short lived however with the discovery of the "messianic secret", Mark's intentional revealing and hiding

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<sup>1</sup> A. Schweitzer, *The quest of the historical Jesus*. trans. W. Montgomery (Macmillan Co., New York), 1964 [1906]), p.121-136.

<sup>2</sup> Luke T. Johnson, *The writings of the New Testament - an interpretation*. (SCM Press, London), 1986, p.147.

the person of Jesus in his Gospel<sup>3</sup>; this discovery first highlighted the fact Mark was about more than providing an historical record and was here presenting a theology about who Jesus was. Other modern biblical analysis techniques, in particular:

- form criticism which dates back to the 1920's and seeks to analyse a text on the basis of linguistic forms (eg. parables, miracle stories, sayings, etc.)<sup>4</sup>, and
- redaction criticism, which dates back to the 1950's sees the author as a “collector”, “editor” or “traditionist” and seeks to discover the theological perspective of the author by analysing their editorial (redactional) and compositional techniques and interpretations employed by them in shaping and framing the written and/or oral traditions<sup>5</sup> at hand,

also lead to a further discounting of the hypothesis that Mark’s Gospel was a simple historical record.

One of the most significant sources of understanding of Mark’s Gospel however has come from the relatively recent application of modern literary and rhetorical analysis to this Gospel as a whole. In the light of this analysis, many scholars both biblical and literary alike now suggest this previously much-maligned author is not far short of being a literary genius.

Frank Matera<sup>6</sup> gives an excellent introduction to this analysis:

“Although the redaction critics of the 50's, 60's and 70's viewed Mark as an author and a theologian, they often read the Gospel in a piecemeal fashion by concentrating primarily on the evangelist’s additions and alterations to the traditions he received. Thus there was a hidden bias that Markan theology was to be found only in those portions of the Gospel that the evangelist edited.” (redaction criticism)

“The approach of literary and rhetorical critics is different. Such scholars do not focus on sources which lie behind the text. For them the text is a unity, no part being of more value than another merely because the evangelist may have edited it.... The world with which they are concerned is the world presented by the Gospel text. Thus their attention is upon the rhetorical techniques employed by the author to narrate the story”.

Using the tools of contemporary literary criticism, the biblical scholar analyses the text in terms of plot, characterisation and discourse in the same manner literary critics study novels. One of the

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<sup>3</sup> W. Wrede, *The messianic secret*, trans. J.C. Greig (James Clark, Cambridge), 1971 [1901].

<sup>4</sup> R.N. Soulen, *Handbook of biblical criticism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (John Knox Press, Atlanta), 1981, p.71-74.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.165-166.

<sup>6</sup> Frank J. Matera, *What are they saying about Mark* (Paulist Press, NY), 1987, p.76.

first analyses of this form was undertaken by Petersen<sup>7</sup> in 1978 who warns of “thinking of the text as if it were a direct representation of the real world”. You can discover something of the historical Jesus and the early Church in this Gospel but literary critics do not initially seek to do so. They look at the characters (here Jesus, the disciples, and Jesus’ adversaries) *as they live and exist in the world which the narrator has created*. An analogy might be the movie Titanic. The narrator presents a story through a screenplay that the audience becomes caught up in as they watch the movie. The viewer does not deny the historical facts of the event; most viewers however are not concerned about historical facts as they watch the drama unfold.

The reading of Mark’s Gospel as story is similar. Literary critics do not deny the historical setting of this Gospel; in undertaking their analysis however they are more interested in the literary “world” Mark creates. Questions like “who are the characters within this world? How do they interact? What conflicts allow the plot to develop? How are these resolved?” are asked and from this analysis we can learn what the text has to say about the historical Jesus and the early Church for which Mark wrote. Petersen writes<sup>8</sup>:

“The literary character of Mark’s narrative must be understood before its evidential value can be assessed. Literary criticism would thus be either a fundamental stage of historical criticism or a stage which in this respect must precede historical criticism”.

A more recent literary critical analysis was undertaken and presented in a book, *Mark as Story*, by David Rhoads (a New Testament scholar) and Donald Michie (an English scholar)<sup>9</sup>. They explain that every narrative can be viewed from two vantage points: “*how*” the story is told (rhetoric) and “*what*” the narrative is about (ie. events, characters and setting)<sup>10</sup>.

To begin with rhetoric, Rhoads and Michie tell us the single most important rhetorical device in Mark’s Gospel is the use of a narrator who knows the thoughts and feelings of the characters within the story. It is this unseen person that leads the reader through the story showing him or her what he wishes and thus the reader “comes to trust the narrator as a reliable guide in the world of the story”<sup>11</sup> and “to rely on the narrator to provide reliable commentary on the story”<sup>12</sup>. All narrators present an ideological point of view (a system of values). Our narrator is a reliable guide because his ideology is aligned with that of Jesus. So when the narrator informs the reader who Jesus is (the Son of God) and that his destiny is suffering and death, the reader can trust what is said (even if the characters do not).

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<sup>7</sup> Norman R. Petersen, *Literary criticism for New Testament critics* (Fortress, Philadelphia), 1978.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p.21.

<sup>9</sup> D. Rhoads, and D. Michie, *Mark as Story* (Fortress Press, Philadelphia), 1982.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p.4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p.38.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p.39.

The evangelist also uses many other literary devices to lead the reader through the story world; they include repetition, questions, placing episodes in concentric patterns, riddles and quotations from scripture but among the most important is Mark's use of irony, especially verbal irony "when a speaker self-consciously says one thing but means the opposite"<sup>13</sup>. "In the passion, the soldiers mock Jesus as a messianic fraud by reviling him as King of the Jews but through the reliable commentary of the narrator the reader knows that what the soldiers say in derision is true"<sup>14</sup>.

When Rhoads and Richie discuss *what* Mark's Gospel is about they talk about the setting, plot and characters. In the Gospel there are several settings against which the story develops but the principle one is the movement of Jesus through Galilee and his journey to Jerusalem. This journey "creates a funnelling effect for the whole story. In the first half of the story the movement ranges widely throughout all Galilee and beyond. Then the direction narrows in toward Jerusalem, finally ending there"<sup>15</sup>.

Rhoads and Richie go on to show how these settings provide a backdrop for the development of the plot which unfolds as a series of conflicts between Jesus and demons, nature, the religious leaders of the time and his disciples. The conflict with the religious leaders arises because Jesus has come to restore God's rule. It finishes with their putting Jesus to death which ironically coincides with God's will for Jesus and they unwittingly bring about God's destiny for his Messiah.

The conflict with the disciples is predominantly about survival; they discover who Jesus is and are glad but they subsequently refuse to accept His destiny in Jerusalem and finally abandon him in fear. This conflict is unresolved as the Gospel concludes with the women leaving the tomb and not telling the disciples about the resurrection.

Rhoads and Michie also show how Mark's depiction of the characters of the story again teach us something. Jesus and the disciples are depicted as "round" characters (characters with complex and unpredictable traits); the religious authorities are depicted as "flat" characters (characters who are more consistent and more predictable). Jesus is a "round" character with many traits (eg. authority, integrity, faith, selflessness) whereas his religious opponents have a few consistent traits which stand in opposition to God's rule. "They are self-serving, preoccupied with their own importance, afraid to lose their status and power, and willing to destroy to keep it"<sup>16</sup>. The disciples are "round" characters because of their conflicting traits. "On the one hand, they are loyal and courageous, with a capacity and enough fascination with Jesus to follow him"<sup>17</sup>. "On the other

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.59-60.

<sup>14</sup> Matera, What are they saying about Mark, p.89.

<sup>15</sup> Rhoads and Michie, Mark as story, p.89.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.117.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.117.

hand, they are afraid, self-centered and dense, preoccupied with their own status and power”<sup>18</sup>.

Matera<sup>19</sup> tells us the contribution of literary-critical study of Mark’s Gospel has had two major outcomes:

i. It has helped bible scholars (and now us) to view the Gospel as a unified story, a literary work instead of a collection of written and oral traditions, and

ii. It has made scholars and the reader aware of the rhetorical devices present in Mark’s Gospel.

“On first reading, the Gospel appears to be a simple, even clumsy story. But on closer examination it reveals a series of sophisticated rhetorical devices ranging from concentric patterns to a masterful use of irony”<sup>19</sup>.

These literary devices are used expressly to reveal and emphasise the evangelist’s theological themes. In the central section of his Gospel (8:22-10:52), Mark uses these devices effectively to assist in developing at least two important theological themes, Jesus’ true mission and what it means to be a disciple. In this section, Mark firstly uses repetition to reinforce his message that Jesus was meant to suffer and die through three repeated passion predictions (8:31, 9:31, 10:32-33). His message is built around these three-fold<sup>20</sup> predictions; Mark 8:31 is the first mention in his Gospel of Jesus’ true destiny. Mark also deliberately constructs this section around certain themes, in particular blindness. This central section of the Gospel is sandwiched<sup>21</sup> between the curing of the blind man at Bethsaida and concludes with the curing of the blind man Bartimaeus; these are the only two miracles in Mark’s Gospel where Jesus cures blindness. Early in the Gospel, Mark associates the disciples with blindness (“Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?” (Mark 8:17-18)) and in response to each of the passion predictions they are unable or unwilling to accept Jesus’ predictions; they fail. Frank Moloney<sup>22</sup> however notes that Jesus never fails the failing disciples and continues to instruct them in the way of discipleship, to take up their cross (8:34), to be open, receptive and humble (9:35-37), “because the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:45).

The central point of this section and indeed the whole Gospel is Jesus’ question to his disciples,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.123.

<sup>19</sup> Matera, What are they saying about Mark, p.91.

<sup>20</sup> See Luke T. Johnson, 1986. The writings of the New Testament - an interpretation. (SCM Press, London), 1986, p.151, for a discussion of Mark’s fondness for the use of three fold patterns.

<sup>21</sup> See Ibid, p.151-152 re Mark’s “framing” technique.

<sup>22</sup> Frank Moloney, The living voice of the Gospel (Collins, Dove), 1986, p.47.

“But who do you say I am?” (8:29). Peter on behalf of the disciples replies “you are the Christ”. Jesus tells them to tell no one (the Messianic secret of Mark’s Gospel) and goes onto explain how he must suffer, die and rise again. This is “true” sight. But Peter and the disciples are totally unwilling to accept Jesus as the suffering Messiah. Peter has partial blindness; he accepts Jesus as Son of Man but cannot accept his predicted passion and death. It is not a coincidence that in the first miracle of the blind man, the man initially only partially sees! The following discourse clearly tells the disciples and us that the cost of following Jesus is the Cross and in so doing we share in the resurrection. The two themes of suffering Messiah and discipleship are thus woven together in this Gospel and meet at the Cross.

So why did Mark write his Gospel? By very briefly reflecting on this question, we can see why the theological themes of the suffering Messiah and discipleship are central to Mark’s Gospel and that the Gospel is still grounded in history. Firstly, it is acknowledged that Mark wrote his Gospel for the Christian community to which he belonged (probably in Rome). It has been generally agreed that a Christological heresy existed in this community; it was said that Jesus was a “divine man” infused with the power of the Spirit<sup>23</sup>. Proponents of this Christology emphasised the miraculous and powerful aspects of Jesus’ ministry while minimising and even neglecting his humiliating death on the cross. Mark agreed with Jesus as Son of God (Mark has a gentile centurion tell us at the death of Jesus “this man truly was a Son of God” (15:39)) but he also understood the content of this title in quite a different way from his proponents. So “in order to give the Son of God title its proper interpretation, Mark juxtaposed it with a second title, Son of Man, which emphasised Jesus’ suffering and death as well as his future exultation (8:38, 13:26, 14:62)”<sup>24</sup>.

There is also a general belief that Mark’s community was struggling because of the persecution of Christians in Rome. Many died martyr’s deaths while others either betrayed their community or simply slipped away. It has been commonly postulated that Mark included the theological theme of discipleship to remind his community of the way of the disciple was the way of the Cross. He reminds them however that in sharing his Cross they also share in his resurrection.

There is still however considerable debate about whether these concerns actually prompted Mark to write his Gospel.

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<sup>23</sup> Matera, What are they saying about Mark, p.23.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.24.

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