The Gospel of Mark

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In order to accurately understand any Christian writing, readers must keep in mind different factors that influence, frame, and even alter the meaning. A prime example of this is the Gospel of Mark. As with any of the Gospels, authorship, date of publication, audience, and, of course, theological standpoints are principal aspects to take into account. Then, and only then, can readers fully understand the real purpose, meaning, and importance of such texts.

Mark, the shortest of the four Gospels (according to the results of the Jesus Seminar), is thought to be the earliest dating canonical Gospel from 65-70 C.E., during the Jewish revolt against Rome (Harris 118). It is implied in *The New Testament: A Student's Introduction* that the Gospel of Mark was written after the death of Peter (traditionally set in Rome c. 65). Matthew, Mark, and Luke, known collectively as the Synoptic Gospels, are closely alike. It is commonly thought that Mark is the basis for both Matthew and Luke. Much evidence indicates potential arguments that Mark was the first Gospel recorded. For instance, it appears as if Mark's time scheme for Jesus' life has been accepted as the foundation for Matthew and Luke (119). In addition, they seem to consistently improve both Mark's literary style and his theological approach (Barclay 88). Still, there is no actual evidence within the Bible as to the date of publication, but there are many indications as to when it *may* have been written. Scholars have attempted to date it after the destruction of Jerusalem based on evidence within the text. It is assumed that the reference "the desolating sacrilege" (Mark 13.14) is an allusion to either Titus' destruction or a pagan desecration of the temple (Harris 119). *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary* concludes that "the civil disturbances and intensity of persecution in

Mark 13, the longest and possibly most important chapter for Mark's intended audience, may have been possible reflections of both the Neronian persecution, beginning in 64 C.E. and the Jewish revolt against Imperial Rome from 67-70 C.E." (901). Also, it is noted that the trials and persecution of Jesus' followers, the call to preach the gospel, and the prediction that families would turn against one another mirror the dreadful tragedies that took place during the siege of Jerusalem (New Revised Standard Version, Mark 13.9-13). These historical allusions and the imminent sense of tribulation for Mark's Christian audience place 70 C.E. as the best date for Mark's publication (902).

The Gospel of Mark is anonymous. There is no internal direct evidence for its authorship. Only sometime during the second century was the title, "According to Mark" or "The Gospel According to Mark" affixed to the work, in order to distinguish it from the other gospels, which in itself counts as external evidence that Mark wrote it (Barclay 88). There is, however, indirect evidence within the text to consider. This data consists of certain characteristics of the gospel from which readers can infer something about the identity of the evangelist. The author of the Gospel of Mark was not an eyewitness to the events he recounted, nor was he the first Christian writer (Harris 118). In fact, approximately twenty years prior, the Apostle Paul began composing his first epistle to Thessalonica (Mays 901). Stephen L. Harris states that "the first editions of the Gospel of Thomas and the enigmatic source identified as Q were most likely in circulation when Mark was written. Also, he recognizes that the earliest reference to Mark's Gospel comes from Papias, an early Christian, who was bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor about 130-140 C.E." (118). Eusebius, a prominent fourth century church historian, preserves Papias' quotations in his *Ecclesiastical History* (Barclay 119). Here, Mark is noted as a disciple

of the apostle of Peter in Rome. This belief suggests that the Gospel is a biased account based on Peter's memories of Christ. Papias concludes that Mark was indeed *not* an eyewitness; he relied on oral tradition from his very own community. He also records Mark's sequential version of Jesus' life as not being in precise chronological order. Christian tradition has assigned the writer to John Mark, the disciple and interpreter for Peter in Rome as indicated in 1 Peter 5.13, which says "Your sister church in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark." (119). Markan authorship has also been connected with the character located in several letters of the New Testament. For example, Paul writes to Timothy, "Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry" (2 Tim 4.11). Nevertheless, the author is not verified anyplace in Mark, directing modern scholars to challenge early Church tradition. Most therefore regard the Gospel as anonymous.

Mark's audience has been recently located in Galilee or southern Syria because of the highlighting in the Gospel on Galilee as the place of the first and expected revelation of Jesus (Mays 901). However, the final composition of Mark is situated in Rome. Latinisms such as Roman currency, words such as "legion," and teachings on divorce evoke the idea of a Roman audience. Mark often makes strong attacks on Jewish laws and institutions (901). Certain verses indicate that Mark had a mission to the Gentiles (7.1-23; 11.15-19). For example, he explains that "defiled hands" are unwashed hands (Mark 7.1-4). He says that Jews do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus clarifying this Jewish custom and many others throughout the Gospel. The evangelist interprets several Semitic phrases as well (902). Mark's writer seemed to lack firsthand knowledge of the geography of Palestine as evidenced in Mark 7.31 (901). The author

says, “Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by the way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.” The footnote of the HarperCollins Study Bible reads “the route is bizarre; the city of Sidon was twenty miles north of Tyre.” This unfamiliarity of the region reflects a setting in Rome. In fact, of all the places suggested, Rome has been by far the most popular. Hence the Gospel was evidently intended for an essentially Gentile Christian group suffering persecution for faith. The community to which Mark addressed his writing is entirely fundamental in understanding the significance of this Gospel.

The Gospel of Mark is not an equitable historical account nor is it a biography of Jesus Christ. Certain happenings from this era are accentuated at the expense of others. Each of the four gospels has a theological stance. In other words, each gospel has a priority or even an editorial slant. Moreover, there seems to be two different views about the theology of Mark’s Gospel (Barclay 132). To many readers, Mark is perceived as the simplest of all the gospels. William Barclay concludes that “the purpose of the writer appears to be mainly just to tell what he knows about Jesus.” Mark is a simplistic and comprehensible sketch of Jesus’ ministry. Due to this fact, many scholars believe that Mark offers the most factual account of the historical Christ. In contrast, the second view of Mark is vastly dissimilar; that is, Mark is an unmistakably theological document (Barclay 131). “Barclay adds that the very opening sentence of Mark is a highly theological statement: a sweeping theological presupposition and implication” (131). Mark 1.1 begins saying, “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God.” Here Christ, the Greek word for Messiah, proposes to readers at the very start that Jesus is indeed the actual Davidic Messiah. W.R. Telford suggests that the extensive theology

of the Second Gospel "consists mainly of the nature and significance of Markan Christology, the message and mission of Jesus" (30-36). Mark identifies Jesus as both the "Son of Man" and the "Son of God." From Mark's opening verse, there is a strong urgency for readers to learn of Jesus' relationship with God. Because Mark contains no reference to the virgin birth, many scholars assume the evangelist considers Jesus as God's son by adoption (Harris 127). Hence, telling about Jesus and who he really was is an imperative and frequently emphasized component of the Gospel of Mark. The Messianic Secret, an ironic portrayal of Jesus. He seems to not want others to know that he is the Son of God. An example of this was after Peter declared him as the Messiah. Mark 8.30 reads "And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him." The chief theological purpose of Mark, however, was to endorse the Parousia, the Second Coming or appearance of the Eschatological Christ and to advise and encourage the followers of Jesus (Harris 119).The necessity for watchfulness, or in other words, Mark's urgency for Christians to prepare for Jesus' return, appears in Mark 13.32-37, "you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake!" But until then, Mark wanted his audience to keep in mind that Christ suffered and died at the hands of the Romans and they would do the same.

> As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given to you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. (Mark 13.9-13).

Forty years following the Crucifixion, with Roman persecution approaching, the author of Mark made every effort to provide direction, comfort, and encouragement for the disheartened Christians of his community.

In conclusion, readers have to be aware that the Gospel of Mark is not a historical report or biography (Broadhead 140). On the contrary, it is a very selective narrative account of Jesus' ministry and death. It is necessary to keep in mind the time period, setting, and historical factors which influenced Mark so as to realize its significance and purpose, as well as its meaning to the first readers (141). To modern readers, Mark is a text packed with potential meaning and significance. By recognizing this writing's underlying theological viewpoints, readers today can learn even more from its already crucial teachings.

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