

# Introduction

Larger works have detailed discussions on what is usually known as “Introduction.” Consequently, we will provide only a sketch of where this commentary stands in relation to such matters.

## AUTHORSHIP

There is no explicit mention of who the author is in the text of the Second Gospel<sup>1</sup> but we believe him to be Mark. The case for this is based mainly on two considerations: the superscription and the external testimony.

### *Superscription*

In ancient times the author’s name is found usually in the superscription—something that precedes the actual work, and may be treated as the equivalent to the title page in modern books. The text proper seldom identifies the author.<sup>2</sup> All the available Greek manuscripts of this Gospel featuring a superscription unanimously name Mark as the author.<sup>3</sup> The earliest manuscripts that have this feature come from the fourth century.<sup>4</sup> Later manuscripts contain superscriptions in different forms, usually expanded from the simple *kata Markon*.<sup>5</sup> Some scholars use this to infer that all superscriptions are artificial, leading to the thesis that this Gospel circulated anonymously at the first until a couple of centuries later.<sup>6</sup> What remains significant, however, is that despite the varied forms, all of them consistently state that Mark is the author. Such consistency cannot be ignored.

1. “Second” here refers to the canonical order. We use this label in order not to pre-judge the issue of authorship.

2. Collins 2007: 2–3. She points out that in antiquity the giving and use of titles belonged more to the reception of a work than its production.

3. It is unfortunate that the earliest manuscript (P<sup>45</sup>, third century) is missing the superscription, as it is fragmentary.

4. Codex Sinaiticus (Ⲁ) and Codex Vaticanus (B).

5. Translated into English it means “according to Mark.”

6. Marcus 2000: 17; Pesch 1980: 4.

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Moreover, Mark is not the name of an apostle, or an important figure in the history of earliest Christianity. Why should a rather obscure name be passed off as the author of this important work, when there were better candidates? Indeed, the two-document hypothesis<sup>7</sup> adds strength to this argument, as it means our Gospel was significant enough to be utilized by both Matthew and Luke. If a name has to be fabricated to identify a significant anonymous work, we would not have expected “Mark.” The name “Mark” therefore carries with it a ring of authenticity.

Furthermore, written Gospels started circulating as early as the first century. We may use John’s Gospel as an illuminating example. This work was already being copied in Egypt by AD 125,<sup>8</sup> a mere thirty years or so after its composition, which is usually believed to be in Ephesus. Although we do not have similar evidence in the case of the Second Gospel, we may posit that it must have started circulating in the first century, since it was used by Matthew and Luke. Early circulation of Gospels necessitated some sort of labelling, so as to distinguish the one from the other.<sup>9</sup>

All the above observations mean that even if the Second Gospel was published anonymously, this anonymity would have disappeared almost from the very start, when it started circulating. In other words, even if we deem the superscriptions as secondary, we will still have to accept that they may very well have enshrined a truth. Significantly, there is only one name offered by them as the author: Mark.

### *Early Patristic Testimonies*

The earliest and most-discussed testimony comes from Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis in the early second century. His work, *Exegesis of the Lord’s Oracles*, was written around AD 110,<sup>10</sup> but it is now lost except for excerpts that are cited in Eusebius’s book, *Ecclesiastical History*, written in the fourth century. Papias testifies that Mark wrote the “oracles of the Lord,” dependent on Peter’s memories.<sup>11</sup> Of course, this does not necessarily mean that our current Gospel is being referred to. That said, it is clear that as early as the

7. The hypothesis that Mark and a source known as Q are the key sources used by Matthew and Luke.

8. The evidence of P<sup>52</sup>.

9. See Hengel 1985: 64–84, for a magisterial treatment of such issues.

10. Bauckham 2008: 13–14; Gundry 1993: 1027–29, thinks it is even earlier: AD 101–108.

11. Eusebius, *H.E.* 3:9:15.

beginning of the second century, Mark was connected with the writing of a compilation of Jesus' teachings.

Irenaeus supports Papias's testimony. Since Irenaeus is defending the authenticity of the four canonical Gospels as we now have them, it is important that he had a strong case, as otherwise his opponents could have easily destroyed it. He indicates clearly that Mark is the author of the Second Gospel, and that Peter is his source.<sup>12</sup> We do not have room to cite all the relevant testimonies from other early Church Fathers. Suffice it to say that their testimonies are consistent with what has been presented.

Some scholars have dismissed the significance of the consistency of these testimonies by arguing that they were all dependent on Papias. So the many and varied witnesses are reduced to only one. The onus of proof is really on them, and they have not clinched their case. Moreover, it is more reasonable to believe this united testimony as reliable than to think it has been fabricated or confusingly mentioned by someone prominent, and from henceforth became the stuff of influential tradition.

To draw the threads of our argument together: Papias testifies that Mark wrote the "oracles of the Lord." Patristic testimonies and the superscriptions in their varied forms speak with one voice: Mark wrote the Second Gospel. This Gospel was significant enough to be linked to Peter, and used by Matthew and Luke. That an important work is connected with an insignificant name indicates authenticity.

### *The Evangelist Mark*

Who exactly is this Mark? The early patristic testimony identifies him as someone closely associated with Peter. As no other descriptors of his identity is given, we may surmise that the brief datum was enough for early Christians to decipher his identity. If this consideration is correct, we are led to look for a Mark in the earliest accounts of the rise of the church. The NT books are key here.

The Acts of the Apostles mentions a certain John Mark was once a travelling companion of the apostle Paul, and left him later (Acts 12:12, 25; 13:5, 13; 15:37). This is probably the same person mentioned in the Pauline tradition (Col 4:10; 2 Tim 4:11; Phlm 24). All this testimony, if it refers to one person, puts Mark as someone associated with Paul. In 1 Peter 5:13, however, a certain Mark is expressly referred to as "son" by the writer of the letter. Early tradition does not cast any doubt that behind 1 Peter stands Peter the apostle. If all this evidence speaks of two or three well-known Marks,

12. Irenaeus, *A.H.* 3:2:2, c. AD 175.

we should have expected some sort of differentiation: either by assigning a title, or a toponym. Since there is no such attempt, it is reasonable to think that only one person is referred to: John Mark who was once the travelling companion of Paul but who became closely associated with Peter later on.

Can we know more about John Mark? Additional information may be found in the Anti-Marcionite Prologues (c. AD 180), that is if these enshrined an authentic traditions. In the relevant Prologue, Mark is described as stumpy-fingered. This datum might interest some readers but it adds nothing significant to our interpretation of his book.

What if our identification is wrong? Nothing substantial is affected in terms of exegesis if we are only concerned with unpacking the message of the book. Of course, if it is true that the book is written by John Mark, and that Peter was his source, the implication for historical reconstruction of earliest Christianity would certainly be significant.

## DATE

Many scholars date the composition of Mark's Gospel to a time before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.<sup>13</sup> One reason for this is that in chapter 13 Jesus is recorded as predicting the destruction of the Temple. Since Mark is fond of adding editorial comments (e.g., 7:3–4), we should expect a mention that this prophecy had been fulfilled if the book was written post-70. Furthermore, Josephus tells us that there was a great fire that destroyed the Temple. The fact that none of these is mentioned speaks for a pre-70 composition.

Is it possible to be more precise? The text offers little help here, except for 13:14, that is, if we can decipher its referent. In this verse Mark signals to the reader to take special note of what is said ("let the reader understand"). This suggests either the abomination of desolation has already been set up or the event is imminent. If we are right in identifying this as the occupation of the Temple by the Zealots and the forced appointment of Phanas as the High Priest (see the treatment of chapter 13), this brings us to the shadow of AD 67–68. However, the identification of the abomination of desolation is a highly contentious issue, and so we must look to other evidence.

We turn, once again, to early patristic testimony. When we compare the relevant statements of Papias and Irenaeus, an apparent discrepancy surfaces. Was Mark's Gospel written before or after Peter's death? Much hinges on how we interpret the term *exodos* in Irenaeus's testimony (i.e.,

13. E.g., Collins 2007: 14; and Guelich 1989: xxxi–xxxii. The prominent scholars who opt for a post-70 date are Pesch 1980: 14; and Evans 2001: lxiii.

whether it means a literal departure from a certain locality or a euphemism for death). That said, a case has been made that Irenaeus may, after all, be consistent with Papias.<sup>14</sup> Whatever the case may be, it does not contradict the proposed pre-70 date. Taking all this into consideration, the range AD 64–68 appears cogent.

What is of significance here is that these were turbulent years, occasioned by Nero's persecution of Christians in Rome (AD 64) and the Jewish conflict with Rome (AD 66–70), concluding in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. As Gaston observes, it is in this particular time span that all the motifs of Mark 13 would be operative to the fullest extent.<sup>15</sup>

## PROVENANCE AND AUDIENCE

The questions of provenance (i.e., where the document originated) and audience may be answered by looking at the evidence provided by early patristic testimony, and by the text itself.

To start with the former, the two best candidates are Rome and Egypt (probably Alexandria). Early and wide testimony supports Rome as the place of composition (the evidence is provided by Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and the Anti-Marcionite Prologues among many others). This is further supported by the presence of Latinisms in the Gospel (see especially Mark 7:26; 12:42; 15:16).<sup>16</sup> These are either Latin terms that have been transliterated into Greek, or terms that have a uniquely Roman flavor. Furthermore, Mark's text assumes a Gentile audience (cf. 7:3–4), especially one that was well-versed in the OT because he cites from it and alludes to it in many places. The Christian community at Rome fits this bill: Paul's letter to the Romans paints a picture of a Gentile community that knows its LXX well.

The other candidate attested in patristic writings is Egypt. The testimony is provided by one lonely voice: John Chrysostom (c. 347–407). Measured against the early and widely-attested Roman provenance,<sup>17</sup> the Egyptian provenance appears improbable. That said, there is a rich tradition that locates Mark in Alexandria, but this does not necessarily contradict the testimony that the Gospel was written in Rome. Eusebius mentions that

14. France 2002: 37.

15. Gaston 1970: 468.

16. For a complete listing, see Gundry 1993: 1043–45.

17. See Incigneri 2003. The whole monograph is devoted to demonstrating a Roman provenance.

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Mark was sent to Alexandria after he had written his Gospel in Rome.<sup>18</sup> Epiphanius's testimony supports this, with the additional detail that it was Peter who sent him there.<sup>19</sup>

Interestingly, a handful of scholars have argued that Mark was composed in Syria-Palestine.<sup>20</sup> However, no external testimony supports it. The case is derived from internal evidence, inferring from passages such as 7:31 and 15:21.

If the Gospel of Mark has a Roman provenance, we may presume Mark is writing for a Roman audience, particularly the church at Rome. Much of Markan scholarship then utilizes this assumption to reconstruct the profile of the community to which Mark is writing. He mentions some details such as the young man who fled naked (14:52), and Simon of Cyrene (15:51–52) who is also described as the father of Alexander and Rufus. These details would interest only a particular community.

There are, however, other considerations to bear in mind. Recently, Bauckham has argued that unlike the letters, the Gospels are meant for a wider circulation, and not just for one community.<sup>21</sup> The ably-argued case need not be rehearsed here. Consider the itineraries of the apostles, the frequent communication between churches, and the fact that we could not expect an elaborate work such as Mark's Gospel to be written only for a community of about fifty to one hundred Christians. That said, Bauckham's case must be balanced against the quaint details found in Mark. The resultant picture is that of a writing that has been shaped by a specific audience, but without limiting itself to that audience.<sup>22</sup> Mark certainly wrote for his immediate community but he also had in mind Christians all over the Empire who might find his writing beneficial and edifying.

### OCCASION AND PURPOSE

To answer the questions of occasion and purpose we must depend substantially on our reconstruction of the origin of the writing, especially the dating, the provenance, and the audience. But the text itself may also play a part.

It has frequently been observed that Mark's Gospel shows a heightened interest in discipleship, focusing especially on the suffering awaiting them,

18. *H.E.* 2: 16:1.

19. *Haer.* 6: 10.

20. Kee 1977: 100–105; Theissen 1991: 259; cf. Boring 2006: 17–19; and Marcus 2000: 33–37.

21. Bauckham 1998: 9–48.

22. Cf. Mitchell 2005: 36–79.

either in the form of repudiation or persecution. From this observation, it is often thought that Mark was written to an audience experiencing persecution from society or state. Thus Mark's Gospel would have the purpose of reaffirming the importance of the gospel to a beleaguered community, and helping them fall in line with the way of the Lord, especially during times of persecution. The way of the cross is the way of Jesus, and this is the way that would lead ultimately to glory. History tells us Nero began an intense persecution of Christians in Rome in AD 64. This might have been the impetus for Mark's Gospel to be written.<sup>23</sup>

The other possibility is that Mark intended to set in writing the oral apostolic tradition, especially Peter's, as the band of apostles was passing away. This serves the purpose of preserving the tradition for future generations. The evidence from Papias lends support to such a theory, for he implies that Mark wrote before Peter's death.

There is no need to choose between the two, as Mark could conceivably have had a few purposes in mind (including those not discussed earlier). Here it may be instructive to note the subtle difference, and yet inter-dependability, between occasion and purpose. The occasion which led to the writing may arguably have been the onset of persecution or the aging of the apostles. This might have triggered an intention to write a document to achieve not just one but a set of objectives.<sup>24</sup> Such objectives may have been pastoral in nature, didactic or polemical (i.e., Mark might be countering some false teaching),<sup>25</sup> or all of the above. So we need not come down firmly on a particular purpose.

## LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS

What sort of writing is the Gospel of Mark? Comparing it with the whole range of ancient literature, what comes closest to it is known as the *bios* or "Life."<sup>26</sup> This is an ancient form of biography, often written to encourage the audience to follow the example of the featured life. To be sure, Mark's writing would appear rather different from such *bioi* in that the focus is on the passion and death of his "hero." But what makes it different is the character not the genre. Mark wants his audience to know that his central character, Jesus of Nazareth, is unlike any other in the ancient world, indeed in the whole of

23. Guelich 1989: xl–xliii. Cf. Winn 2008: countering imperial propaganda post-70.

24. Cf. Collins 2007: 102; France 2002: 23.

25. E.g., Weeden 1968: 145–58 and Gundry 1993: countering errant Christology and staurology respectively.

26. Stanton 1974; Burridge 1992.

human history. This character's significance is intimately connected to his passion and death, and hence the nature of the focus. In this regard Mark is not inventing a new genre. Later on, others emulated his writing, and such writings became known as "Gospels" or churchly writings. It is only after this that one can speak of a new genre, or better, a sub-genre.

It may be claimed that Mark intended his writing to be read in the setting of worship (cf. Acts 2:42; 5:42; Col 4:15). Moreover, literacy rates were rather low in the ancient world.<sup>27</sup> Hence Mark would have designed his work not for self-study but to be read aloud to Christian communities gathered at worship. Certain features of Mark's text demonstrate this. His style is vivid (e.g., Mark 14:32–52; compare this with the parallel accounts in Matthew and Luke), and is often replete with dual expressions—a feature of oral communication and not formal writing. An example of this dual expression is found in Mark 1:32, where the time of the event is described as "evening, when the sun has set." This may appear tautologous to the trained eye of a good writer. But for oral communication, such dual expressions make the message memorable. Furthermore, repetitiveness is a feature (e.g., the threefold passion prediction: 8:31; 9:31; 10:33), which helps especially a listening audience, who would not have the document to refer to. All these stylistic devices are in keeping with a text written for oral presentation.<sup>28</sup>

Certain corollaries follow. First of all, it calls into question the many complicated and convoluted chiastic structures proposed by scholars.<sup>29</sup> How could a listener perceive such grand schemes and structures which are transparent only after sustained analysis? That said, this criticism must not be taken as rendering void all rhetorical studies of Mark's text. Rather, it is to say, secondly, that we should expect Mark to employ small-scale techniques, utilizing small chunks of text so that the listener might not be lost in a wealth of details. Indeed, Mark makes use of flashbacks, small-scale chiastic structures, the sandwich technique for relating one story to the other, suspense, paradox, and topical arrangements. Such techniques hold the listeners' interest, and help them to connect episodes or passages so that a profounder message may be perceived. Finally, it suggests that the structure of the book is straightforwardly simple and predominantly linear. Our proposed structure will take this into account. But before this is offered,

27. The best authorities estimate literacy of the Roman Empire at around 10 percent and that of Roman Palestine, around 3 percent. See Harris 1991: 22; and Hezser 2001: 25, 445–50, 496–500. Given the importance of learning Torah in Jewish culture, the estimates might possibly be higher for Jewish Palestine. See Millard 2000.

28. Bryan 1993: 72–81; cf. Hartvigsen 2012.

29. Cf. Van Iersel 1989: 19–26, 75–86, who proposes elaborate concentric structures.

we must consider an important datum often missed by scholars emphasizing that Mark's Gospel is written for oral presentation.

In Mark 13:14, Mark inserts his editorial remark "let the reader understand." This directive to the reader is important for our consideration of the kind of text Mark's Gospel is. If Mark were written merely for oral presentation, we should expect the remark to be "let the listener understand." The fact that the reader is alerted, without giving him explicit clues as to the meaning of the abomination of desolation, implies that this reader is no ordinary reader but someone who has been trained. He could then be expected to explain to the audience the meaning of v. 14. This certainly means he is also expected to explain or clarify Mark's teaching to the audience.

Moreover, Mark's text is too long for a one-sitting reading. A reader must know the appropriate points to stop his reading. He must be guided by the contents, rather than by length. Thus we should expect a clear structure to be found and clear indications of breaks in the text.

If the above conjectures are correct, an important rider must be added to the valid concept of the Gospel of Mark being written for oral presentation. It is a *bios*, written for oral presentation *by an informed or trained reader*, who has the duty to study his text so he knows where to stop the reading for the day, and so he can prepare himself to explain certain aspects of it to his audience. Therefore, we must allow for some sophistication to Mark's Gospel, even if the structure is straightforwardly simple.

We can now present a proposed structure for it. We argued earlier for a structure that is clear and simple. Two cues are provided at the beginning and at the end respectively. First, Mark has announced his primary subject matter right at the start—the gospel of Messiah Jesus—and this must guide us in our construal of the structure. The second is obtained by considering the sort of denouement Mark has adopted for his narrative. Scanning through the text, one observes that the Passion narrative takes on a prominent role. Moreover, Mark narrates only one trip of Jesus to Jerusalem, which is a climactic and fateful one. Of course, Jesus would have made many trips to that city, historically speaking. So Mark's narration of only one trip indicates to us where his narrative emphasis is, and what sort of structure he is adopting. It describes the progression of Jesus' gospel ministry, using a geographical approach that is easily remembered: beginning with Galilee and ending with Jerusalem.

## **THE STRUCTURE OF MARK**

### ***I. The Beginning of the Gospel (1:1–13)***

### ***II. The Gospel in Galilee: The Mighty Acts of the Messiah (1:14—8:21)***

- 1:14–15 Jesus' Inaugural Gospel Message
- 1:16–45 Typical Activities of Jesus' Ministry
- 2:1—3:6 Conflict with Religious Authorities
- 3:7–12 Summary of Jesus' Deeds
- 3:13–35 New People of God and Jesus' True Family
- 4:1–34 Kingdom in Parables
- 4:35–41 Stilling of the Storm and Unveiling of Jesus' Identity
- 5:1–20 Healing of the Demoniac of Gerasenes
- 5:21–43 Jairus's Daughter and the Woman with Chronic Bleeding
- 6:1–6a Rejection at Nazareth
- 6:6b–30 Mission Extended and Martyrdom Foreshadowed
- 6:31–56 Miracles Around the Lake
- 7:1–23 Redefining the Unclean
- 7:24–36 Extension of Jesus' Ministry to the Gentiles
- 8:1–10 Feeding of the 4,000
- 8:11–21 Demand for a Sign and the Yeast of the Pharisees and Herod

### ***III. On the Road to Jerusalem: The Gospel and the Suffering Messiah (8:22—10:52)***

- 8:22–30 Stuttering Beginnings of a True Perception
- 8:31—9:1 Messiah Must Suffer
- 9:2–13 Transfiguration and Transformation of Expectations
- 9:14–29 Boy with an Unclean Spirit
- 9:30–50 "The Messiah Must Suffer" and Sundry Lessons on Discipleship

- 10:1–31 More Revolutionary Values for Disciples
- 10:32–45 Following the Messiah in Service
- 10:46–52 Restoring Bartimaeus's Sight

***IV. The Climax of the Gospel: The Messiah and Jerusalem***  
***(11:1—16:8)***

- 11:1–25 Challenge in Jerusalem: Symbols of Fulfillment and Judgment
- 11:27–33 Jesus' Authority Questioned
- 12:1–44 Further Controversies
- 13:1–37 Eschatological Discourse on the Mount of Olives
- 14:1–11 Anointing at Bethany
- 14:12–31 Last Supper
- 14:32–52 Gethsemane and the arrest of Jesus
- 14:53–72 Hearing by the Sanhedrin
- 15:1–20 Roman Trial
- 15:21–41 Crucifixion and Death of Jesus
- 15:42–47 Burial of Jesus
- 16:1–8 Resurrection

Within each phase two entities stand out: the Messiah and his people/disciples. What connects the Messiah and his people is the gospel that is preached, enacted through mighty acts, and embodied through suffering obedience.