

PART  
TWO

THE GOSPELS  
AND ACTS

# Prologue to Part Two

## Getting Started

---

The New Testament begins with four stories of Jesus' life: the Gospels. In the canonical arrangement, the Acts of the Apostles comes after the Fourth Gospel, John. It is apparent, however, that the author of Luke also wrote Acts and that the two volumes constitute a genuine narrative unity. For that reason, I will treat Luke-Acts as a single, two-volume work. I will also begin with Mark rather than Matthew, simply because I find a study of Mark helpful in dispelling preconceptions.

Each chapter begins with a brief consideration of questions concerning authorship and the date and place of composition, followed by a list of "points to look for" when reading the writing in question. Then follows a reader-response treatment of that work. To illustrate the reader-response method, I will give a detailed reading of Mark and John, but I will confine myself to abbreviated treatments of Matthew and Luke-Acts.

## Entering the Story Worlds

---

In dealing with the precanonical levels of tradition, we intentionally took passages out of their present contexts in order to understand what they meant to the earliest followers of Jesus. Now we are going to read the canonical books as they stand—as whole, integrated literary works. Passages that meant one thing when read in light of the pre-Easter or the early church situation may mean something quite different within the context of a Gospel narrative.

To read the Gospels and Acts in this way, we must let each writing establish its own "story world." We will have no interest in whether the events described in any of these stories "really happened." Our only concern will be for the story each narrative tells—how it attempts to engage the reader in reflection upon the meaning of Jesus' life.

It may at some points be difficult to maintain this perspective. Perhaps the hardest task is to remember to treat the characters in the story *as characters* and not make an unconscious leap to actual human beings who once lived. If Jesus does something puzzling in the story (as he will often do in Mark), we must not ask why the historical person Jesus would have done that. The appropriate question is why, in the context of the story world, the *character* Jesus did that.

The other half of the matter is that the Gospel writers present their stories as interpretations of a person who actually lived and died. In this regard, what they did in constructing their story worlds is not fundamentally different from what Jesus' earliest followers did in passing on the original stories of what he said and did. For the pre-Gospel Jesus tradition was itself *interpretation* of Jesus.

It is also important to grant each Gospel its unique perspective and not read into it the perspective of another. We have no right, for example, to import into Luke the particular form of incarnation theology, based largely upon the Gospel of John, that made its way into the orthodox creeds. Only when we allow each writing its own way of depicting Jesus will we be able to understand what each has to say about the meaning of his life.

## The “Narrator,” the “Reader,” and the Reading Process

---

The various schools of literary criticism necessarily employ particular technical vocabularies. I have sought to reduce such terminology to a bare minimum by limiting myself to two technical terms, *the narrator* and *the reader*. In explaining my use of these two terms, I will also define more precisely the reader-response approach I will employ.<sup>1</sup>

### The Narrator

By “the narrator,” literary critics do not mean the author, the actual person who wrote the story. They mean the “voice” that tells the story. In some literary works, the narrator is one of the characters in the story. More frequently, the narrator is anonymous. All four Gospels employ an anonymous narrator, although in a few passages in Acts, which are told in the first person plural, the narrator appears to be an unidentified character in the story.

Narrators, as Mark Allan Powell puts the matter, “vary as to how much they know and how much they choose to tell.” When narrators are characters, their knowledge will probably be limited to what such characters would reasonably know. The narrators in the Gospels, however, fall near the other end of the spectrum. Powell describes them as “highly knowledgeable,” noting that they know “the inner thoughts and motivations of the characters they describe.” But, at least in the case of the Synoptic Gospels, they show some limitations. They neither offer “descriptions of heaven and hell” nor “presume to speak directly for God,” as Jesus does.<sup>2</sup>

### The Reader

*The reader* might seem to be a self-explanatory term, but it is easily misunderstood. When reader-oriented critics refer to the reader, they are not speaking of some actual person but to a construct of their own devising, designed as an aid to interpretation. T e critic, in other words, tries to imagine how a reader who follows the narrator's leads would read the story. By intentionally taking up the stance of this hypothetical reader, the critic sharpens her or his perceptions and approaches the narrative in a focused and systematic way.

T e various schools of literary interpretation vary somewhat in their def nitions of the reader. Narrative criticism tends to think of the reader as someone who knows the entire story very well, who has read it before and is therefore able to perceive all sorts of relationships between the various parts of the story.<sup>3</sup> T e advantage of def ning the reader this way is that it allows the critic great freedom in noting such relationships.

Reader-response criticism, by contrast, tends to posit a f rst-time reader, who does not know the ultimate outcome of the story. Such a reader may make guesses about what is to happen next, but may in fact be surprised as the story unfolds. T e advantage of this approach is that it helps to preserve the sequential nature of the narrative. In taking up the perspective of the reader who is naive regarding what is to come, the critic is able to imagine that reader's questions, remembrances, and feelings, such as disappointment, confusion, or amazement.

Neither of these schools of criticism is primarily interested in who the actual f rst readers of the work were. But many representatives of both camps recognize that the critic's historical knowledge is often essential, precisely because the text itself sometimes implies a reader who has such knowledge. T e Gospels, for example, presuppose readers who are familiar with the Jewish Scriptures. To the extent that critics stress the importance of identifying presupposed knowledge, they are attempting to endow their hypothetical readers with some of the qualities of actual readers.

### The Reading Process

A reader-response approach requires some def nition of what happens in the reading process. When actual readers read a story, they remember a good bit of what has happened before, and they anticipate what is to come. T ey form opinions about the characters, becoming attached to some and repelled by others, and they hope for certain turns of events and build up dreads about others. In doing all this, they are active participants in the story.

But their participation goes even further. A story cannot tell everything. It always leaves something to its readers' imaginative powers. So readers must make concrete what the narrator

leaves in general terms, and they must even fill in gaps in the plot and in the development of characters. In the end, they try to understand the story as a coherent whole and often assign some specific meaning to what they have read. And they sometimes come away with insights regarding life in general or their own lives. Readers do not write their own stories, but they do participate in making narrators' stories complete and in bringing them to life.

Readers also move "in" and "out" of the story, sometimes utterly caught up in it but at other times disengaging themselves in order to reflect on ideas and even to assess their own reactions. Sometimes readers finish a story with a keen sense of satisfaction. But they must often revise their judgments and expectations along the way, and sometimes they must acknowledge that their hopes were dashed by the development of the story.

Because actual readers perform all these actions, reader-response critics try to bring to expression some of the key thoughts and feelings that a reader focused intently on the narrator's clues might reasonably have. There is, of course, subjectivity in this method of criticism, since it involves the critic's own imagination. And the possibilities for a reader's actions are far broader than any critic could begin to "record"! But the value of this approach is that, by focusing on the reading process, it can help actual readers with their own task of truly encountering the text.

### **The Approach of the Present Text**

In the initial approach to each of our four narratives, I will assume the role of the reader-response critic, which means trying to take up the perspective of "the reader." In doing so, I will posit a first-time reader who does not know the ultimate outcome of the story but who is able to remember in perfect detail everything that has gone before. In terms of more specific knowledge, my reader also knows the Jewish Scriptures in Greek (the Septuagint) and shares the broad outlines of the common knowledge of the Hellenistic culture.

I will, of necessity, be selective in actions I assign to this reader. But I will always seek to focus on lines of thinking and feeling that are in fact invited by the narrator's voice.

My attempt at "objectivity" cannot, however, assure the reader of *this* text that the reader I posit is approaching these stories in a valid way. The point of the critic's observations is to assist others in doing their own reading and evaluation. I should also say that I do not assume that my reader's responses are the only possible, or only valid, ones. I present them as specific "performances" of the texts, which are not intended to rule out other, perhaps quite different, ways in which one might find meaning in them.

One final note on terminology: When I want to indicate the actual author of a New Testament writing, I will say so explicitly. For example, I will refer to "the author" or "the author of Mark." I have reserved the names Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to refer to the writings themselves.

## What Is a Gospel?

---

The English word *gospel*, derived from the Anglo-Saxon *godspel*, translates the Greek *euangelion*: the meaning, in each case, is “good news.” The Gospel of Mark begins with an indication that the story of Jesus is to be understood as precisely that: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.” In designating the four stories of Jesus’ life as “Gospels” and placing them together at the head of the canon, church tradition does more than recognize the literary similarities among these works. It indicates the centrality of the Jesus story in Christian faith, and it characterizes that story precisely as did the author of Mark: “good news” for humankind.

This fact in itself should tell us something about the nature of these writings. Scholars have long debated whether and in what sense they are to be understood as “biographies” of Jesus. Some have argued that the Gospels constitute a unique literary genre in the ancient world, while others have found significant ways in which they parallel ancient biographies. This debate need not concern us here. The important point is that the Gospel writers—sometimes called “the evangelists” (those who announced the good news)—wrote with the explicit intention of engendering or nurturing Christian faith. Their purpose, we should remember, was not to report factual material in a neutral way but to convince those for whom they wrote of the truth of their witness to the meaning of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

### NOTES

---

1. For a fuller statement of the approach that has most influenced my own, see John A. Darr, *On Character Building: The Reader and the Rhetoric of Characterization in Luke-Acts* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1992), ch. 1. Darr’s views are presented in more detail in his doctoral dissertation (Vanderbilt, 1987), “Glorified in the Presence of Kings’: A Literary-Critical Study of Herod the Tetrarch in Luke-Acts.”
2. Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 25–26.
3. *Ibid.*, 19–21.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

---

1. Explain the terms *narrator* and *reader* as used in reader-response criticism.
2. Explain the difference between reader-response criticism and narrative criticism.
3. Are the Gospels written from an “objective” point of view? Should they be?

### FOR FURTHER READING

---

Burridge, Richard A. *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with the Graeco-Roman Biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.





FIG. 5.1 Map of Palestine in the time of Jesus.



# Mark

5

## Authorship, Date, and Place of Composition

---

Second-century tradition attributes the Gospel of Mark to someone named Mark, who supposedly received his information from Peter. It is often assumed that this is the John Mark who appears as a companion of Paul in Acts and the Mark to whom Paul refers in his letters. Mark was a common name, however, so that even if a Mark was the author, we cannot be certain about these connections. In any case, the evidence of a long period of oral tradition preceding the written Gospels makes the claim regarding Peter suspect.

Chapter 13, with its description of a tumultuous situation and its prediction of the destruction of the temple, leads most scholars to think Mark was written around 70 c.e., either in the midst of the Jewish war against Rome or soon after it. Early traditions place the writing in Rome, and some scholars accept this as fact. Others, however, favor Galilee or Syria, partly because these regions are prominent places in the narrative. Wherever the Gospel was composed, most interpreters believe that the author wrote for a community of believers who faced grave danger because of their allegiance to Jesus.

## Points to Look For in Mark

---

- The theme of secrecy (Jesus keeping his identity hidden)

- The role of the two giving-of-sight stories, which bracket the three predictions of Jesus' death and resurrection, in interpreting this secrecy
- The role played by the parable of the Soils in the narrative as a whole
- The failure of the disciples
- The emphasis on the suffering of Jesus and its implications for the disciples
- The meaning of the strange ending
- The author's use of paradox and irony

## Mark's Story of Jesus: A Reading

---

### 1:1-13

In the first sentence, the narrator indicates that what is to follow is “good news” and concerns Jesus, the Messiah (Christ) and Son of God. The reader is therefore prepared to hear a story about God's fulfillment of the ancient promises to Israel and will identify either Jesus or John the Baptizer, who appears in verse 4, as the figure mentioned in the quotation from the Jewish Scriptures: the “voice of one crying out in the wilderness,” sent to “prepare the way of the Lord.”<sup>1</sup>

When John appears, he preaches baptism, forgiveness, and repentance. His message suggests both renewal and fulfillment, as does the place of his activity: the river Jordan, scene of the Hebrews' entrance into the promised land. The announcement that someone else is to come, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit, is another sign of fulfillment, since many Jews believed that the Spirit had departed Israel and would return only in the new age. It will also be clear that the reference is to Jesus, who comes on the scene and is baptized (1:9).

By treating the reader to Jesus' vision of the Holy Spirit and audition of the voice of God, the narrator establishes credibility regarding the earlier proclamation of who Jesus is and reinforces the term used earlier: *Son of God*. When the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness, we begin to sense a “cosmic” conflict. Satan tempts Jesus, seeking to subvert his mission, and the wild beasts suggest danger. But the ministering angels signify God's presence with Jesus and approval of his mission.

### 1:14—3:6

A turn in the plot comes in 1:14-15, with John's arrest and the beginning of Jesus' proclamation, in Galilee, of the rule of God. The immediate response of the Galilean fishermen to Jesus' invitation to discipleship creates a sense of rapid movement: the mission is under way.

When Jesus begins to teach in a synagogue (1:21), the narrator signals a rift between Jesus and the religious authorities by observing that

the people contrast his authoritative words to the teachings of the scribes (1:22). And Jesus' exorcism of a demon not only demonstrates his power but also introduces a theme of secrecy. In 1:25, he silences the demon, and in 1:34, after a report of many healings and exorcisms, we read that "he would not permit the demons to speak, *because they knew him.*" After healing a man with leprosy, Jesus warns him to "say nothing to anyone."

In the stories in 2:1—3:6, the theme of conflict with the religious authorities becomes explicit. Scribes and Pharisees criticize Jesus for pronouncing a man's sins forgiven, for eating with "tax collectors and sinners," and for violating the Sabbath. In each story, Jesus in some way bests his opponents, quoting scriptural precedent or uttering a saying that presumably silences them. He also makes oblique references to his own status, speaking of the "Son of Man" and of the "bridegroom" who will soon be "taken away."

The saying on new wine and old wineskins in 2:22 indicates that Jesus in some way signals a new beginning. But the expected rule of God is dawning in the midst of conflict, a point underscored by the conclusion to the series of stories: the Pharisees begin to hatch a plot "to destroy him" (3:6).

### 3:7—5:43

In 3:7-12, the narrator shifts the scene and again summarizes Jesus' activity. Demons continue to recognize Jesus, who explicitly forbids them to make his identity known.

Then at 3:13, Jesus withdraws to a mountain, where he appoints twelve disciples as an inner circle, gives them authority to preach and cast out demons, and gives the nickname "Peter" to Simon. The reader will assume that these chosen ones will have a significant and positive role to play in the drama.

An unexpected twist to the conflict develops at 3:21: Jesus' own family members try to stop his activity, as the scribes contend that he is demonically possessed. Jesus' reply to the scribes in the debate in 3:22-27 shows that he is in mortal combat with Satan (the "strong man" of 3:27). And by casting out demons, he is binding Satan in order to plunder his house, that is, to break the demonic hold upon the world. A few verses later, Jesus declares that those who do God's will are his true family (3:33-35), which indicates that all who hear him must make a decision that may wrench them away from prior commitments—even those to their own families. The implication is that to reject Jesus' mission is to side with the demonic.

In chapter 4, where Jesus begins to teach beside the sea (of Galilee), we learn something of the specific content of his teaching. But here things get more complex and confusing. When the disciples ask for an explanation of the parable of the Soils, Jesus comments that the parables are intended to keep those "outside" from getting the point, while the disciples have been given the "secret" of God's rule. Then, disheartened at the disciples' dullness, he chastises them for not understanding but gives an allegorical explanation of the parable (4:13-20).

The reader will try to identify the various types of soil in the parable and explanation with varying responses to Jesus' own preaching (sowing), and it is already apparent that the Jewish authorities constitute the first type, in which the word takes no root at all. But Jesus' question and statement at 4:21-22 speak directly to the reader's own life: those who desire to be good soil must bear fruit by preaching the word themselves. After some additional parables and sayings, the narrator makes the summary statement that Jesus taught in parables "as they were able to hear it" (4:33).

The narrator also notes that Jesus explains things privately to his disciples (4:34), which gives the impression that they are beginning to understand. The story in 4:35-41, however, dispels this notion. Caught in a storm in their little boat, the disciples are terror-stricken. When Jesus miraculously calms the storm but rebukes the disciples for their lack of faith, two themes reach a higher pitch. Jesus' awesome power extends now even to nature itself, but the disciples cannot grasp what is happening. "Who is this?" they ask. The irony is apparent. Although given the secret of God's rule, those closest to Jesus seem to resemble the good soil



FIG. 5.2 The Great Temple of Artemis in Gerasa, Jordan. Photo © Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

less than they do the rocky soil—which starts well but ends in failure!

The heightening of Jesus’ powers continues. Across the lake, in Gentile territory, which is unclean in Jewish eyes, he heals a demoniac possessed by a “legion” of demons and sends them away in a dramatic fashion (5:1-13). But in sharp contrast to his practice in Galilee, Jesus commands the man to tell what has been done for him. And the man does so, exemplifying the good soil of the parable far better than do the disciples.

Back in Jewish territory, Jesus performs two feats that are even more astonishing. A woman is healed merely by touching his garment, and he raises a twelve-year-old girl from the dead. Then the note of secrecy reemerges: Jesus insists that no one should know of this deed (5:43). Thus, a certain paradox cannot escape the reader. In his conflict with Satan, Jesus is exercising enormous power, dem-

onstrating his status as Son of God. Yet his identity and mission are cloaked in an air of secrecy and mystery. Why?

### 6:1—8:26

Following these dramatic events, Jesus returns to his home area, only to be met with rejection. His saying on a prophet’s lack of honor among his own people (6:4) recalls the earlier conflict with his family, just as his surprise at the unbelief he now encounters is reminiscent of his reaction to the disciples’ dullness. Jesus thus appears as powerful but not omniscient or all-powerful. His ability to perform miracles depends on the faith of those to whom he ministers.

Jesus now sends his disciples on a mission, giving them “authority over the unclean spirits” (6:7), which creates the impression that

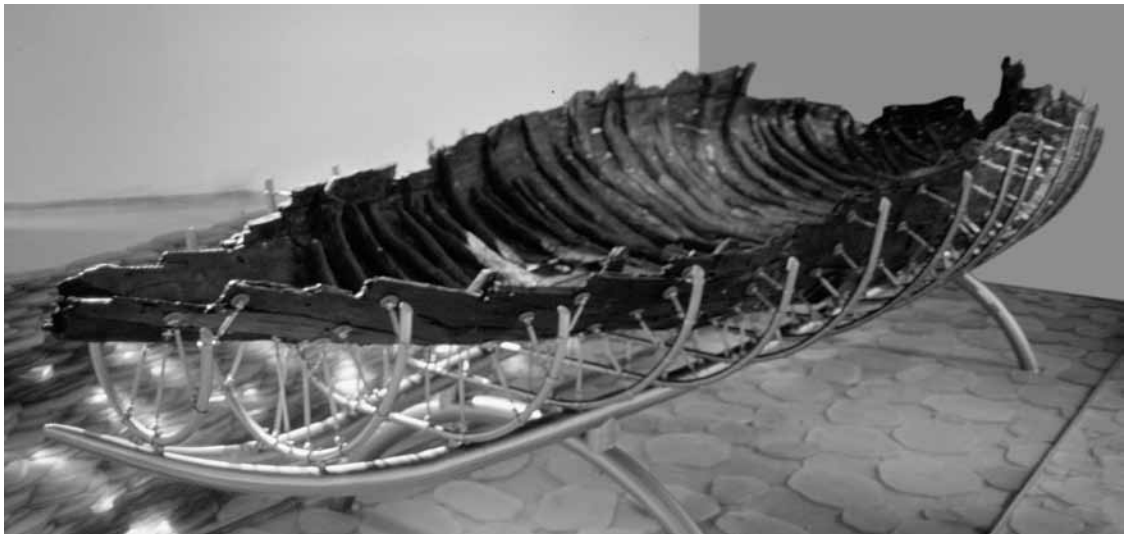


FIG. 5.3 The so-called “Galilee-Boat” was discovered in 1986 in the Sea of Galilee and is located now in Ginosar, Israel.

Photo © Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

they are at last realizing their potential. They are successful both in healings and in exorcisms, the very works Jesus himself has performed. But will this impression hold?

The speculation about Jesus at 6:14-16 raises the issue of his true identity. And the flashback revealing Herod's murder of John the Baptizer at 6:17-29 keeps the motif of conflict alive as a series of accounts dramatizes Jesus' power. Highlighted by a miraculous feeding (6:30-44) and an eerie scene on the sea, the series ends with a description of the masses flocking to Jesus for healing (6:56). We thus get the impression that Jesus is having success in his mission. But along the way, the positive view of the disciples has been undermined by descriptions of their obtuseness in the feeding story (6:37) and their display of fear on the sea (6:49), but most of all by the narrator's comment at 6:52 that "their hearts were hardened."

The note of success at 6:56 creates a contrast between the people's reaction and that of the Pharisees in the ensuing material, as the conflict with them reemerges. A dispute over "the tradition of the elders" regarding ritual law (7:1-16) gives Jesus the opportunity to brand the Pharisees hypocrites who neglect human need and place human tradition above God's commandments. Intruding at 7:19 to point out that Jesus' words abolish the dietary regulations, the narrator invites the conclusion that Jesus is breaking sharply with established tradition—but precisely in order to honor God's command.

At 7:24, Jesus once again travels into Gentile territory, where he is bested by a Syro-

phoenician woman in a verbal encounter regarding the "rights" of Gentiles to his ministry. The story encourages reflection on the place of Gentiles in Jesus' mission, and the Gentile woman's faith once again creates a contrast with the response of the Pharisees. When, after another miraculous feeding, the Pharisees approach Jesus (8:11-13), their hypocrisy is evident. They converse with him only to test him, asking for a sign on the heels of awesome deeds of power!

Jesus' warning to the disciples at 8:15 reinforces the negative view of the Pharisees, but the conversation that follows reemphasizes the disciples' own inadequacies. They take Jesus' symbolic statement about yeast in a crudely literal fashion. And his displeasure is evident in the question he poses regarding the significance of the twelve and seven baskets of bread left over from the feedings: "Do you not yet understand?" The implication is that they do not. The seven and the twelve seem to have significance, but it remains unexplained.

The note of mystery and secrecy thus reasserts itself, and it continues in 8:12-26. Jesus heals a blind man—halfway! Has Jesus failed? He tries again, and the man sees clearly. What does this strange story mean?

### 8:27—10:45

At 8:27, Jesus, again in Gentile territory, confronts the disciples, for the first time, with the question of his identity. Given all the evidence for Jesus' status that the story has brought forth, Peter's answer will seem correct: "You



are the Messiah.” But Jesus’ reply is puzzling. Employing the same Greek verb (*epitimao*) with which he earlier silenced demons, he rebukes (nr sv: “sternly ordered”) the disciples “not to tell anyone about him.” Has he accepted Peter’s confession that he is the Messiah? Has he rejected it?

We do not get a direct answer to these questions. Jesus immediately begins to teach the disciples privately, telling them “quite openly” about the coming death and resurrection of the Son of Man, whom the reader will identify with Jesus himself. But Peter now rebukes (*epitimao*) Jesus, indicating his unwillingness for Jesus to die. In the harshest terms, Jesus again rebukes Peter, calling him “Satan”! Then he speaks to the crowd and the disciples, linking the role of discipleship to his own coming fate.

The contrast between Jesus’ present openness and his earlier secrecy is unmistakable. At least part of what has been hidden, and must remain hidden to outsiders, is that Jesus, to fulfill his mission, must die. And to follow Jesus means to bear one’s own cross. Hiddenness and mystery thus give rise to paradox and irony. One must lose one’s life to find it (8:35). Was this what Peter could not—would not—understand? We can sympathize with Peter’s reaction. Impressed with the awesome power of the Son of God, the reader will find Jesus’ talk of death and denial abrasive and must wrestle with the paradox.

When in 9:2 Jesus takes the disciples to a mountaintop and is transfigured before them, there is additional, dramatic testimony to his status: the appearances of Moses and Elijah

and once again the voice from heaven proclaiming him Son of God. But the disciples are bewildered. Peter does not know what to say, and all the disciples are afraid and cannot understand Jesus’ reference to his coming resurrection. Then, at the foot of the mountain, Jesus finds that those left behind have failed in an attempt to cast out a demon. He performs the exorcism, but not before he has accused the disciples: “You faithless generation.”

Noting at 9:30-32 that Jesus is traveling *secretly* through Galilee and speaking for a second time about his coming death, the narrator calls attention yet again to the disciples’ fear and lack of comprehension. Then at 9:34, it becomes clear that the disciples have been haggling over who among them is the greatest. Could any conversation be less appropriate to the situation? The pattern following the first prediction is repeated: again Jesus teaches about discipleship. But the disciples do not really understand him and are not prepared for the kind of discipleship he demands.

At 10:1, the scene shifts, and Jesus is in a public setting, where he continues his teaching by addressing specific areas of ethical concern. When Jesus reprimands the man who calls him “good” (10:17-18), noting that God alone deserves such praise, he makes a distinction between God and himself as the one who proclaims God’s rule. And in directing the inquirer to God’s commandments (10:19), Jesus begins a characterization of that rule that continues into the material that follows (10:23-31). The radical character of this teaching—evident, for example, in the demand he makes on the inquirer at 10:21—



invites reflection on life in the new age. And Jesus' promise of goods and families "now in this age" (10:30) suggests that the community he is gathering is called to manifest God's rule in the here and now. We thus get a glimpse of life, as it should be, in the postresurrection community. Like the call to discipleship, it is riddled with paradox: one leaves everything but gains more—"with persecutions" (10:30)!

At 10:32-34, Jesus informs his followers that they are headed to Jerusalem, where he will die. This account of Jesus' third prediction of his death and resurrection reemphasizes the aura of terror and mystery and also repeats the familiar pattern linking Jesus' suffering and death with discipleship. The paradoxes of 10:43—great among you/your servant; first among you/slave of all—are powerful reminders of the irony of losing one's life to find it. But the narrator now provides a new element, Jesus' statement on the meaning of his death: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." Somehow, in a way that is not elaborated but only suggested through the metaphor of "ransom," Jesus' death and resurrection will set human beings free.

The reader has thus gained some insight into the secrecy that has shrouded the narrator's tale from the beginning. Jesus is not a triumphant Messiah, but one who must suffer, and those who follow him must be prepared to suffer also. This insight is couched in paradoxical form, however, and central characters in the drama do not grasp it. The air of mystery prevails. Nevertheless, the theme of prediction, linked to the narrator's use of

the Jewish Scriptures, keeps alive the impression that God is active in all that is happening. Jesus knows what is to come.

#### 10:46—12:44

When Jesus and his followers come to Jericho, which lies at the base of the mountain atop which Jerusalem is set, it becomes clear that this is the last leg of the fateful journey. And the incident that occurs here directs attention forward to Jerusalem. A man who is blind addresses Jesus as "Son of David," that is to say, as Messiah-King, and Jesus heals him without a word of rebuke. Jewish monarchs reign from Jerusalem; will Jesus claim his crown when he arrives? No, because at 10:32, Jesus said that he will die in Jerusalem. But what, then, of the messianic title?

The incident at Jericho also points backward to the earlier story of a blind man, the odd two-stage healing that preceded the three instances in which Jesus predicted his death and linked it to discipleship. Together the two stories bracket these predictions and invite the reader to reconsider them in light of the metaphors of blindness and sight and of the distinction between partial "seeing" and full "seeing." It is already apparent that Jesus' mission involves his death and that discipleship means bearing one's cross. What the metaphor of stages of sight adds is a confirmation that acceptance of Jesus' suffering, and of one's own as a disciple, represents a deeper level of understanding than is possessed by those who expect a more visible, less paradoxical victory

of their Messiah. But how does one reconcile the notion of a suffering Messiah and suffering disciples with the expectation of a messianic king who would establish peace and justice?

There is no immediate answer to this question. And it is surprising that we now witness a scene in which Jesus appears as a quite public and apparently triumphant Messiah: his entrance into Jerusalem (11:1-11). Not only do the crowd's accolades imply his status as Davidic king, but the colt on which he rides conjures up the image of the "messianic" procession in Zechariah 9:9.

It is thus clear that Jesus is wielding messianic authority when, on a second incursion into the city, he carries out a brief "occupation" of the temple and condemns both the commerce in the court and the exclusiveness of the temple worship. His citation of a scriptural passage that designates the temple "a house of prayer for all the nations" (11:17) calls to mind that he earlier extended his ministry into Gentile territory and abolished the system of clean and unclean foods. Apparently, Jesus is in some way opening God's rule to the Gentiles.

The connection between the temple incident and the story that frames it (the strange account of the cursing of the fig tree in 11:12-14, 20-25) will be difficult to grasp at this point. But the contrast between the unfruitful tree and the promise Jesus gives in verses 22-25 suggests that while faithlessness bears no fruit, faith can move mountains!

The statement in 11:18 that the chief priests and scribes set out to kill Jesus suggests

that his interchanges with the Jewish leaders in 11:27—12:44 signify an irreparable breach between the two opposing camps. In addition, the narrator's comment at 12:12 ensures that the reader will interpret the preceding parable as a condemnation of Jesus' opponents. And the story of the poor widow, who gave "everything she had," creates a sharp distinction between those of sincere faith, who stand for love of God and neighbor (12:28-34), and those who pretend faith but "devour widows' houses" (12:40). The Jesus now on his way to his death is also the compassionate friend of the poor and the one who truly understands the nature of God's coming rule.

Less clear at this point are the implications of Jesus' rejection of the scribes' identification of the Messiah as Son of David (12:35-37), arguing that the Messiah is in fact David's Lord! Jesus has already passed up two opportunities to disclaim the title Son of David, if that were his intention. The movement of the plot, however, is clear. Jesus is on his way to his death, which is very near.

### 13:1—15:47

#### 13:1-37

Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple in 13:1-2 directs attention to the future. Then the disciples' question, put to him as Jesus sits "on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple" (13:3), raises the expectation of information about the end of the age. The first part of Jesus' answer—predictions of tumultuous events and the persecution of his

followers, qualified by the disclaimer “but the end is still to come” (13:7)—disconnects the events surrounding the temple’s destruction from the actual end of the age. And the narrator’s “aside” in 13:14 (“let the reader understand”) suggests that the “desolating sacrilege” (an event predicted in Dan 9:2) will be fulfilled in the reader’s own time. The point is that Jesus’ followers after his death should not be led astray by false prophets and false christos who interpret contemporary events as the actual end of the age.

Jesus’ words give not only information, but also encouragement. For he promises that those who endure the trials to come will “be saved” (13:13) and reinforces the point with the reminder, “I have already told you everything” (13:23). Knowledge thus has the function of supporting courage and faithfulness in a time of crisis.

Having made clear that the destruction of the temple is only the prelude to the end of the age, Jesus can now (13:24–28) speak of the actual end: the whole cosmos will be disrupted, but then the Son of Man will return. In light of Jesus’ predictions of his death and resurrection, it is clear that he will return in glory at the end of the age. His followers can therefore endure the sufferings ahead in confidence of the final deliverance of those who remain faithful.

The saying about the fig tree (13:28–31) continues the hopeful mood, making clear that the signs just elaborated will indicate the nearness of Jesus’ return. The positive image of the tree nevertheless calls back the negative image of the tree Jesus cursed at 11:14, and the

connection between that tree and the temple becomes clear. Like the fig tree, the temple, which was not bearing fruit, had to die!

Jesus has asked his disciples to read the signs of the time and take heart. But immediately there comes a disclaimer. No one, not even the Son, knows the time of the end (13:32). The note of hope thus leads into a solemn injunction to “watchfulness” (13:33–36).

The discourse in chapter 13 combines with Jesus’ earlier predictions to “explain” the paradox by referring to his eventual return as the triumphant Son of Man. Yet the disciples’ inability to grasp the matter and Jesus’ ominous words about the persecution of his followers keep the themes of mystery, paradox, and irony alive. The reader has only a promise, qualified by warnings of grave difficulties that lie ahead. In the present, one must still follow a suffering Messiah by taking up one’s cross. No intellectual clarification can unravel the inherent irony of such a proclamation of “good news.” But there is that promise by Jesus, whom the narrator has encouraged the reader to accept as Son of God.

#### *14:1—15:47*

A reference to the plot of the chief priests and scribes (14:1–2) and the story of the woman who anoints Jesus (14:3–9) bring the focus back to his death. As events unfold and Jesus’ death draws near, the theme of the disciples’ failure comes to a head. Judas, one of the Twelve, gives the chief priests the opportunity to carry out their intentions (14:20–11), and during the Passover meal, Jesus predicts that they will “all become deserters” (14:27).

Quickly, events bear him out: the disciples sleep while he prays (14:32-42) and then flee when he is arrested (14:50), and Peter denies him three times (14:66-72).

The crowds of people also fail Jesus in the end, in effect pronouncing his death sentence (15:1-15). But there are minor characters who appear momentarily to minister to Jesus and share his suffering: Simon the leper, who has him to dinner (14:3); the woman who anoints him; Simon of Cyrene, who carries his cross (15:21); a group of women among his followers, some of whom had “provided for him” in Galilee, who watch his crucifixion “from a distance” (15:40-41); and Joseph of Arimathea, who provides a tomb (15:46). Their actions appear as examples of “faith, being least, being a servant”<sup>2</sup>—that is, as models of discipleship. And they contrast sharply with the conduct of the Twelve and the crowds, who neither took up their crosses nor followed Jesus. The actions of those around Jesus during his final days thus serve as positive and negative paradigms for action in the postresurrection situation.

The harshest judgment must fall upon the various “authorities.” They are cowardly types who fear the reaction of the masses and must arrest Jesus secretly and convict him by false witnesses. Utterly unable to comprehend Jesus’ message, they are outright opponents of all that he stands for. Pilate, it is true, makes an attempt to release Jesus. But in the end, he acquiesces to the crowds out of fear (15:14-15). The authorities involved in the arrest, trial, and crucifixion are thus of a piece with the earlier Jewish leaders whose intention in

questioning him was always to entrap him, never really to hear him.

The Jesus depicted in these final scenes is in many ways a figure who contrasts with the powerful wonder-worker of the early chapters. He admits to intense agony and prays for deliverance from his fate (14:34-36); he utters a cry of despair from the cross and dies with a cry of pain (15:34, 37). Yet he is resolute and obedient to God’s will. He has the strength of silence in the face of false accusations, and he at last makes the open claim to messiahship that leads directly to his condemnation (14:62). In everything, he carries out the intention of God. As he has predicted many things before, now he predicts his disciples’ failure but also a reunion with them in Galilee after his resurrection (14:27-28). As he had spoken of his death as a “ransom,” at the Passover meal he interprets it in terms of the renewal of the covenant and points ahead to the new community and the rule of God (14:24-25). Even his cry of despair from the cross (15:34) is a quotation from the Jewish Scriptures (Ps 22:1).

Here again, we encounter the irony that has pervaded the story. Jesus, the powerful wonder-worker, suffers a humiliating death, yet he wins a moral victory in facing it courageously, fulfilling his mandate from God. The Roman centurion’s words at the cross, in fact, provide a confirmation of the victory: “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (15:39).

We should not, however, miss the paradox and irony in the centurion’s declaration. Just when Jesus’ weakness and helplessness become most apparent, someone is finally able

to understand fully who he is. He has suffered humiliation and death, and we quickly learn that he is buried (15:46), so the note of tragedy is real. Yet Jesus has predicted his resurrection and triumphant return, and the reader has learned to trust his predictions. At his death, moreover, there are signs of God's reading of this tragic event: the darkness covering the land and the rending of the temple veil (15:33, 38), which suggests the renewal of the covenant to include Gentiles. Despite the solemnity of the moment, one can read on in the hope that Jesus' victory is more than the *merely* moral victory of the one who dies nobly in an ultimately lost cause. The paradox must be unraveled, the ambiguity dispelled.

## 16:1-8

The reader's hopes are immediately raised. The women come early Sunday morning to anoint the body that was buried Friday afternoon. But the tomb is empty! And a mysterious young man in white proclaims Jesus' resurrection, reminding the women of Jesus' promise that he will "go ahead of" his followers to Galilee. However, the women flee in astonishment and, ignoring the command of the mysterious figure, tell no one about what has happened, "for they were afraid." On this ambiguous note, the Gospel ends abruptly.<sup>3</sup> Where *now* does the reader stand?

The implication is that Jesus has in fact

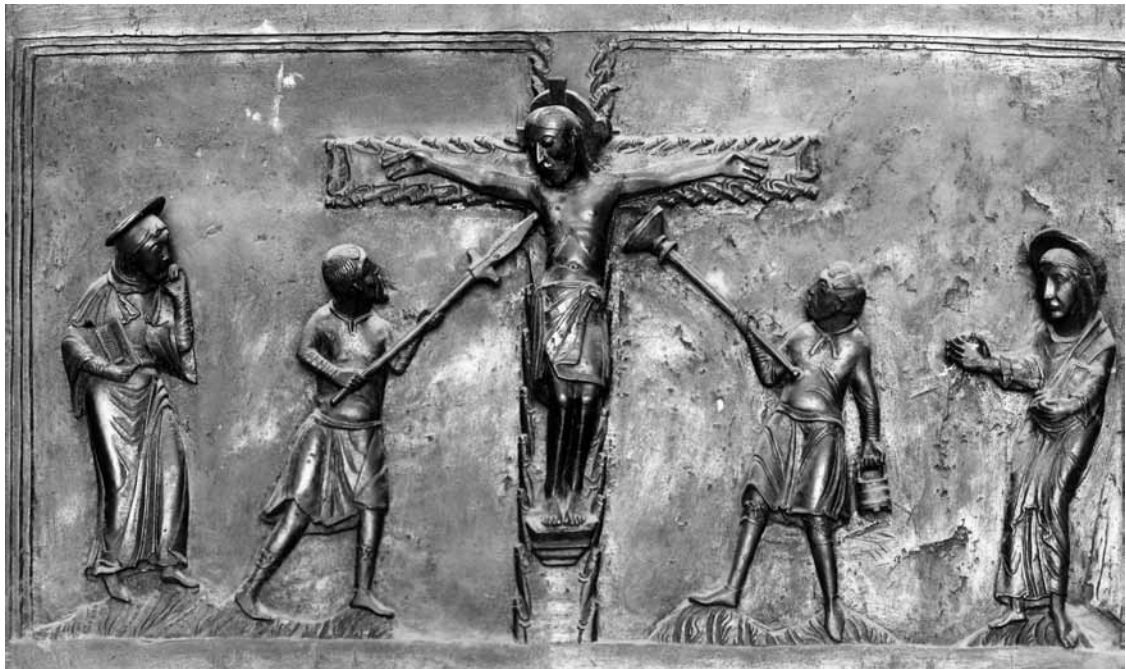


FIG. 5.4 Crucifixion scene from the bronze doors of St. Mary's Cathedral in Hildesheim, Germany. Photo © Foto Marburg / Art Resource, NY.

been raised. But there are no resurrection appearances, and we hear nothing about the establishment of the postresurrection community. The Twelve have vanished from the story, and the last accounts we had of them involved their desertion or betrayal of him. Only the women among his followers stood by him, and it is appropriate that they witness the empty tomb. But in the end, they were too fearful to carry out their task.

Ultimately, the reader stands in ambiguity, caught between hope and fear—precisely where human beings often find themselves as they struggle in the midst of life’s difficulties. This ambiguity, however, is not a void. Jesus has made promises, and the reader has “heard” them. He has performed wonders, and the reader has “seen” them.

True, the story has involved dashed hopes and stark tragedy. But it has also given encouragement, through the story of how Jesus met his own fate, for choosing hope rather than fear in the face of difficult circumstances. In the ambiguity that prevails at the end, one can now think back to the theme of secrecy at the beginning of the story. In the context of his powerful deeds, Jesus commands secrecy about his messiahship. Facing death, however, he openly asserts his identity, and at his death, the centurion recognizes him as Son of God. We are thus invited to apprehend Jesus’ identity in a paradoxical way—to see in his “weakness” the power of God, to see in his “failure” God’s way of ransoming the world, and to see in the ambiguous witness of the empty tomb a sign of ultimate victory. Jesus kept his identity secret in the beginning because it was only in

light of his death that the meaning of his messiahship could be rightly understood.

A question remains, however. If even the women who witness the empty tomb do not pick up the task of witnessing, then is there anyone else equipped to do so? “Of course there is,” Mary Ann Tolbert comments: “the audience itself.”<sup>24</sup> The narrator’s abrupt ending thus contains an implicit demand upon those who read it, a call to tell again the story that has just been read—that is, to be themselves the “good soil” in which the gospel message takes root.

### Summary

In the early chapters of Mark, Jesus appears as the powerful, miracle-working Son of God who heals illnesses, casts out demons, manifests sovereignty over nature, and even raises the dead. Strangely, however, he seeks to keep his identity secret. He silences demons who identify him and tells obscure parables so that outsiders will not understand. However, he also gathers disciples, trying to teach them “the secret of the kingdom of God” (4:11), and reveals to them the meaning of both his messiahship and the discipleship: both entail suffering, rather than the triumph that might be suggested by his powerful deeds. But in the end, they desert him in his hour of need, and the Gospel ends with the ambiguous story of the empty tomb and the failure of the women to tell the story of his resurrection. Still, the reader has witnessed Jesus’ deeds and heard his words of promise. And in contrast to the



failed disciples, positive models of courageous witness have appeared along the way—Jesus himself, the earlier actions of the women, and the “little people” who served Jesus in his hour of need. So the challenge is this: Will those who read the story be willing to follow a Messiah who walks the way of the cross?

## Mark and Liberation

In a feminist evaluation of Mark, Joanna Dewey begins by noting that Mark is, “like other Christian writings,” a male-centered text. The male disciples are the center of focus throughout the story, and it is only toward the end that we learn “that there were women who had traveled with Jesus in Galilee, who had followed and ministered, and who had come to Jerusalem with him; that is, that there were women disciples.” And this belated introduction of the women, she argues, is “too little and too late to modify our imaginative reconstructions.”<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, Dewey describes Mark as “perhaps the most liberating gospel in the Christian Testament for any oppressed or marginalized group”:

[It] presents a nonhierarchical, non-authoritarian, egalitarian view of community. Women are understood as people in their own right. Children, the weakest in society, are at the center of God’s realm. Those with more power in the world are called to serve

rather than rule over those with less power and status. Wealth is viewed as a hindrance to entering God’s realm.

In addition, Jesus’ habit of ignoring purity regulations “wipes out the discrimination against women that was based on purity codes.”<sup>6</sup>

Several scholars find the Gospel of Mark particularly amenable to interpretation through sociopolitical categories. Ched Myers argues that the story of Jesus in Mark presents a call to discipleship that explicitly embraces the social, economic, and political aspects of life.<sup>7</sup> He describes Mark as a “subversive” document that presents an alternative to the existing societal structures. And he finds a challenge to Roman power in the designation of the story in 1:1 as *euangelion*—“gospel,” or “good news.” Because this term was used in relation to military victories, its application to the story of Jesus challenges the sovereignty of the empire. And the story of the exorcism at 5:1-13 symbolizes the downfall of Roman power. To call the demons “Legion” is to associate them with the legions of Roman soldiers that imprisoned the land, and to have them drowned in the sea is to suggest their destruction in a new exodus. Even the Markan metaphor for discipleship—to take up one’s cross—has, in light of the corpses of rebels that hung from Roman crosses along the Palestinian roadsides, a political thrust.

According to Myers, Mark’s subversiveness extends to the Jewish establishment. Jesus’ activities in Galilee challenge the system of ritual purity and the authority of the leadership, and the parable in 12:1-11 condemns



the ruling class in the guise of the evil tenants of the landowner's vineyard. Economic concerns also are evident. Jesus criticizes the scribes at 12:40 because they "devour widows' houses" and condemns the temple in 11:17 because it has become "a den of robbers." Also, over against the exploitative economics of the existing system, Mark presents an alternative economic order based on sharing. *T* is, according to Myers, is the meaning of the promise of the reception of houses, lands, and families at 10:29-31. *T* is new order will not come through military endeavor, however, nor will it simply appear out of nowhere. It will grow slowly, like the seeds at 4:26-32, from a small beginning. It is a revolution from below—nonviolent but thoroughly subversive of the present order.

### Free Will, Determinism, and the Power of God

---

Mark presents Jesus' death as in accordance with God's will, and the notations that the events in the story are fulfillment of scripture lend a predestinarian air to the whole drama. *T* e secrecy theme reinforces this aspect of the story; the fact that Jesus teaches in parables to prevent outsiders from understanding suggests that the course of events is foreordained. Nevertheless, the story has elements that make no sense apart from the assumption of contingency. When Jesus is surprised by his disciples' misunderstanding, the implication

is that he is genuinely trying to communicate with them and that their response is not predetermined. Similarly, the condemnation of Judas for his betrayal implies his freedom to have acted otherwise (14:21)—although it is said in the same breath that Jesus' death is predicted in scripture!

In addition, the story loses its dramatic punch if the actions of the characters have been totally programmed in the mind of God ahead of time. Jesus' struggles with the authorities, the faith of the people who ask for healing, the wavering attitude of the crowds—none of these crucial elements in the action carries any real weight apart from the assumption of contingency. Nor indeed does the pivotal scene in Gethsemane, which implies that Jesus could have acted other than as he did and even suggests that *God* might have acted otherwise, by coming up with an alternative plan.

From a strictly literary point of view, it may be satisfactory to say that Mark is finally paradoxical, combining contingency and predestination in a way that defies logic. *T* e Bible is in fact full of paradoxes such as this, and they probably presented no problem to ancient readers. Twenty-first-century Western readers bring a different world picture to their reading, however, and some interpreters influenced by process thought have suggested we need to bring the ancient world picture into conversation with it if we want to render Mark intelligible and meaningful in our own reflections on reality. Because a sense of free will is an important aspect of our contemporary self-understanding, it might be helpful to ask

which is finally more important in Mark: the predestination or the contingency. If we opt for the latter, they argue, we can read Mark as saying not that Jesus' death was predestined but that it became necessary under the circumstances of his rejection.<sup>8</sup>

The theme of predestination overlaps with the problem of God's power. Predestination assumes that God wields power unilaterally, while contingency implies that God's power is "relational"—that it is not utterly coercive, does not utterly control other beings. Cer-

tainly, Mark presents God as being in some sense in control of the drama that is Jesus' life. Yet for the most part, God acts only through Jesus and, at the crucial point, not through Jesus' power but through his weakness. In the end, God raises Jesus from the dead, but strictly speaking, this is not a unilateral act, since it was contingent upon Jesus' obedience. Thus, Mark can lead to critical reflection upon the question of God's power as presented in scripture.

## NOTES

1. See Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 239–48. In both Matthew and Luke, this scripture is applied to John the Baptist. But in Mark the passage occurs before John's appearance, so it may refer to Jesus.
2. David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 29–30.
3. Some ancient manuscripts contain additional verses that bring Mark's ending into closer conformity with those of Matthew and Luke by depicting Jesus' appearances to various followers. The scholarly consensus, however, is that none of the longer endings belongs to the original versions; they represent the attempts of later copyists to provide a more "suitable" conclusion.
4. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 297.
5. Joanna Dewey, "The Gospel of Mark," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 470.
6. *Ibid.*, 470–71.
7. Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990).
8. William A. Beardslee, John B. Cobb Jr., David J. Lull, Russell Pregeant, Theodore J. Weeden Sr., and Barry Woodbridge, *Biblical Preaching on the Death of Jesus* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), chs. 4–5.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

---

1. How does the narrator try to convince the reader of Jesus' identity in Mark 1–5? Describe Jesus' ministry in these chapters. What is the “strange tension” that develops as he carries out this ministry?
2. What is the meaning of the “strong man” story in 3:21–30?
3. Why, according to Mark, does Jesus tell parables?
4. Does Jesus accept Peter's profession of faith in Mark 8? Explain your answer.
5. What distinctive themes hold the section 8:27—10:45 together? What is the specific role and meaning of the two stories of healing the blind?
6. What questions does Mark 13 answer, and what effects might it have on the reader?
7. Where does the ending of Mark leave the reader? Explain why you do or do not think this ending is effective.
8. Evaluate the approaches to Mark discussed in the sections “Mark and Liberation” and “Free Will, Determinism, and the Power of God.”

## FOR FURTHER READING

---

- Kelber, Werner H. *Mark's Story of Jesus*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979.
- Kingsbury, Jack Dean. *Conflict in Mark: Jesus, Authorities, Disciples*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989.
- Myers, Ched. *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990.
- Rhoads, David, and Donald Michie. *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982.
- Robbins, Vernon K. *Jesus the Teacher: A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation of Mark*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.
- Tolbert, Mary Ann. *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989.