

Introduction

Week in and week out churches in many North American denominations hear the reading of a Sunday lection from the Gospels. It has become so routine that we may not ever really think how much we owe this to the writer we Christians customarily call Mark. Mark's was the first Gospel with this now common designation. It was in all likelihood the first of the four written in the Bible. It even begins its narrative at 1:1 with a title calling attention to its purpose: "The beginning of the good news (*euaggelion* = gospel) of Jesus Christ, [Son of God]" (parentheses mine). Please notice the lowercase "g" on Mark's first reference to the term *gospel* or *good news*. Mark, it appears, was simply trying to show that his writing was a kind of narrative rendering of what by 70 c.e. or so was known as the basic core of the gospel, theologically understood as the death and resurrection of Christ.¹ With Mark's new narrative interpretation, the word *gospel* includes Jesus' ministry and proclamation of God's kingdom along with his death and resurrection. What is amazing, however, is that this narrative gospel of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection eventually becomes a quasi-literary genre in the church, Mark's *Gospel*—hence the capital G. For after Mark writes his "beginning of the gospel," others within a generation seem to take up the literary task along with him. Matthew and Luke evidence clear literary dependence on Mark, and later, in his own quite different way, so does John. We go about today blithely reading aloud a Gospel lection Sunday to Sunday, but it need not have been so. Somehow around 70 c.e. Mark lays a groundwork in the form of what biblical scholar Frances Moloney calls a theologically driven narrative² that causes others to write and still many other others to hear and expect a narrative rendering of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection.

Of course, we need to be careful about such generic statements. We today can call Mark the first of the Gospel genre all we like, but if we do we may just occlude some important truths. Genre is in actuality a literary term, not a theological one. And in literature there is no such thing as a genre *sui generis*. Whatever Mark is writing, theologically driven or not, is influenced profoundly by the literary and cultural context of his age. Moreover, Mark is also more generally a creature of his time and culture. Since he writes in the common

1. James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

2. Francis Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), xvii.

Koine Greek of his day and his text shows he seems to know a little bit about Aramaic (5:41; 7:34) and deals in the occasional Latinism, he must have been the beneficiary of some education. In all likelihood, this meant not only knowing languages, but how to communicate in them. Education in the Greco-Roman world meant some exposure to grammar and rhetoric and with it, practice exercises in imitating epic storytellers like Homer.³ It is one thing to note that Mark wrote a work that subsequently influenced the ways in which Christians and their lectionary committees later used the word *Gospel*; it is quite another thing to argue that Mark's Gospel somehow emerged *ex nihilo*. It did not.

For that matter, even the limited theological way that we wish to speak of these gospel developments must be qualified somewhat. The irony is that Mark's gospel, Mark's *theology* itself appears "unfinished." His title at 1:1 reads "the *beginning* of the gospel" (emphasis mine). By the time this work ends—and most scholars agree it is at 16:8—Mark's writing seems downright elliptical: "and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." What kind of ending is that? Many readers are left scratching their heads. To underline the point that this is not merely a modern problem, it is also helpful to note that ancient writers were likely no less satisfied with Mark's ending than we. Within a relatively short historical timespan there is an addition to Mark's text (16:9–20) as well as the writing of Matthew and Luke in the latter part of the first century. The latter two authors seem to use Mark's structure, but clearly correct his "unfinished" ending in a much less ambiguous way with very elaborate resurrection appearances. I write this to point out something important about the way we often think of the Bible, especially the New Testament. By virtue of our liturgical practice (some of us likely stand when a Gospel lection is read) and the unique theologies of which we are heirs, we are inclined to think of a writing like Mark's as vested with an authoritative perfection and completeness. Mark's ending bears witness to something different: an unfinished theology. As we shall see, I am convinced it is because Mark invites us to join in his gospel task not so much as indifferent spectators but as disciples who despite the narrative's failure hear also the promise that the risen Jesus is going ahead to Galilee.⁴ It may just be Mark's way of helping us so to lay hold of the promise that we theologically begin to put our own oar in the water.

3. Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 36–37.

4. Andrew Lincoln has identified this crucial issue of promise and failure around the ending of Mark as being key for interpreting several parts of the Markan narrative in "The promise and the failure: Mark 16:7,8," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108.2 (Summer 1989), 283–300.

But if we are to find our way through this unfinished Gospel, and attempt to preach its theologically unfinished gospel, we need to do more than a little homework first. We need to work our way back through the tradition. It is important for us to know the interpretive history in which we stand so we can hear Mark's own voice clearly. That done, then we need to come to some basic understandings about Mark, his historical context, the kind of writing he was producing (genre), its relation to other such writings, and its possible provenance. Once we do so, we will also take some time to consider Mark's characteristic ways of writing—his rhetorical and literary style as well as their relation to his apocalyptic mode and the theological worldview it evokes. These, too, will help us appreciate the unique character of Mark's Gospel before we begin. Along the way we will discover that Mark's Gospel is not just "unfinished," but bears with it a compelling sense of apocalyptic mystery and urgency. While these realities will complicate the preacher's task, they will at the same time also strengthen it.

MARK IN THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

The Revised Common Lectionary has been relatively kind to Mark. Yet with almost no exceptions (Easter Vigil A and C, for example), Mark is confined to Year B of the lectionary. Because of the shortness of Mark's Gospel relative to the others and its nearly exclusive treatment in this one lectionary cycle, the vast majority of the Gospel is in fact covered in Sunday readings. In fact, only 156 verses are not actually read aloud on a Sunday morning in Year B. That means that about 77 percent of the total of Mark will actually be heard at some point during that year. Yet at the same time, it is also important to know what is left out in the remaining unread 23 percent: two of Mark's most important parables (the Sower and the Wicked Tenants), the Gerasene Demoniac, the two great feeding miracles, and half of Jesus' eschatological discourse in chapter 13 among other things. The result of the decision to leave these texts out is that some significant parts of Mark's theological vision have been left out. The preacher will need to work at helping hearers understand this gospel "whole" given the relatively small yet nonetheless significant holes the lectionary has left in even this otherwise well covered Gospel.

It should also be noted that Mark has not always been so beloved in the history of interpretation. Already with Augustine it was assumed that Mark was actually just a Reader's Digest version of Matthew. The upshot of this was that Mark was not typically the object of much concern for preachers and scholars alike for much of its history in the canon. Over the centuries,

relatively few commentaries were written on Mark. In fact, it was not until the nineteenth century that scholars turned to Mark because of his seemingly simple, unadorned writing. Their thought was that Mark, in all of its primitive form or framework, was *more* likely to offer information of interest to someone looking for the Jesus of history and with less theological prejudice.⁵ The view that Mark was not as theologically invested in his subject matter went somewhat by the wayside with the publication of Wilhelm Wrede's *The Messianic Secret*. Wrede argued that Jesus' command to keep messianic claims quiet showed that Mark's messianic claims about him were a dogmatic invention of the church.⁶ Clearly Mark was viewed as having not just an agenda of historical remembrance, but a theological agenda. However, in the eyes of the church, even in this view Mark was seen as wanting compared to the more towering theological perspectives of Matthew, Luke, and John.

Nonetheless, even with the dismissal of Mark's "framework" as a window to the historical Jesus, studies in Mark's Gospel continued to multiply among scholars. One of the first and most prominent developments was the rise of source criticism. While the debate is ongoing, it has been for some time largely a matter of consensus among scholars that Mark, contra Augustine, is no mere abbreviation of Matthew, but is in fact a chief source for both Matthew and Luke. The implication of this, of course, is that Mark is by virtual consensus believed to be the earliest of the Gospels. Later form critics like Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Dibelius then turned to Mark and the other Gospels as a place where oral traditions about Jesus were brought together. It could be that Mark's rough style with its doublets (repeated stories) and occasional non-sequiturs is the result of working with prior traditions that had been preserved orally in Christian communities between Jesus' death on the cross and the writing of Mark's Gospel some thirty to forty years later. Redaction critics like Willi Marxsen continued to work with Mark, but tried to use the findings of the form critics as a way to identify Mark's theology. The idea was that Mark did not simply receive and compile oral traditions, but actually edited them and formed them into the Gospel of Mark.⁷

5. The argument is that Mark's Gospel manages to provide us with a basic "framework," a sound and reliable basis for reconstructing the life of Jesus. See H. J. Holtzmann, *Die synoptischen Evangelien: Ihr Ursprung und geschichtlicher Charakter* (Leipzig: Wilhelm Engelmann, 1863).

6. Wilhelm Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien: Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901).

7. Willi Marxsen, *Der Evangelist Markus: Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Evangeliums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956).

In the late twentieth century, Mark saw a resurgence of interest among narrative and literary critics. They found that as they read the Gospel “whole,” as a work of literature, they were able to account for more and more of the Gospel. Whereas earlier scholars had seen Mark and other Gospel writers as collectors or editors of traditions who put together, as Martin Kähler put it, “passion narratives with extended introductions,”⁸ these literary- and narrative-critics claimed to see something of a unity of the Markan vision. From stars of the literary-critical world like Frank Kermode to biblical scholars equipped with new interpretive approaches like David Rhoads (narrative), Mary Ann Tolbert (literary-historical), Robert Fowler (reader-response), and Tat-siong Benny Liew (postcolonial), Mark was now an important focus of attention.⁹ Although many of the old questions remain about history, sources, oral forms, and redaction, this new group’s interest in literary-critical questions has helped us peer ever more deeply into Mark’s unique Gospel.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

At the center of all this, however, is a key set of questions about the production of the Gospel of Mark. These are largely questions of history. Who was Mark? For whom was he writing? What were his sources for writing the Gospel? What is the genre of the Gospel of Mark, that is, how would ancient persons have understood this text? How does Mark’s Gospel relate to the others in the New Testament? Some of these questions cannot really be answered at present even as they can be profitably explored. Still, all of these questions are important to consider as we prepare to grasp the Gospel as a whole.

AUTHOR

The authorship of Mark is itself a great mystery. Some of the earliest written traditions offered by a bishop named Papias indicate that Mark helped Peter by writing down his memories of Jesus. Mark, he went on to say, did not write them down in order but in a way that suited him in his telling of the story. This

8. Martin Kähler, *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*, trans. C. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 80.

9. Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979); David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982); Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*; Robert Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); Tat-siong Benny Liew, *Politics of Parousia: Reading Mark Inter(con)textually* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

does not tell us a whole lot. In fact, there are even some ancient traditions that relate Mark's Gospel not to Peter but Paul! The upshot is that we cannot say much that is definitive about the author from external evidence.

The internal evidence is not any better. The writing that we now attribute to Mark has no references to a "Mark." The title that we are accustomed to seeing associated with this writing in our Bibles is not in our most ancient manuscripts. The phrase "according to Mark" does not appear until later in the manuscript tradition. In fact, it would not need to appear unless and until there were more "Gospels." This is to say, the need to identify a Gospel as "The Gospel according to Mark" likely emerges only when more than one Gospel is brought together in a collection.

Having said that, we can affirm some of what we have already noted about the author we customarily call "Mark." He wrote in Greek and knew something about Latin and Aramaic as well. As a literate person, he probably had the kind of education that meant he was familiar on some level with basic training and exercises in grammar and rhetoric. The fact that he begins his writing with the title about the good news of Jesus Christ indicates that he is a Christian. At the same time, his knowledge of Judaism and the Jewish Scriptures indicates some familiarity with Jewish traditions. A mistake many contemporary Christians make about the authors and first readers of New Testament texts is the assumption that they were like most of us: gentile Christians. Toward the end of the first century, when Mark and the other Gospels were being written, Christianity was not yet an independent religion. Both the subject matter of the Gospels and their authors or readers should be understood in relation to a Jewish context. As we consider Mark's authorship, it would be wise to remember that we ought not so quickly extract him from the Jewish context of his sources, language, and writing.

PROVENANCE

The place of writing and the community for which Mark wrote are no less easy to discern. There are, in fact, multiple theories. Many have associated the Gospel of Mark with Rome. The traditions from Papias that relate Mark's Gospel to the Petrine tradition would fit with this view. Some commentators argue that the Gospel was written in a time of persecution and that this might have coincided with Nero's treatment of Christians in Rome in the mid to late 60s of the first century.¹⁰ Some relate Mark to a Syrian provenance.¹¹ Here

10. Ben Witherington III offers an interesting and detailed case for this theory in *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 26–31.

we have a community reasonably close to the turmoil of the Jewish War in the late 60s and a context where gentile and Jewish worlds meet. Another view locates Mark's writing in Galilee itself.¹² The advantage here is that it gives us a meaningful context for many of the distressing events that Mark describes in Jesus' apocalyptic discourse of chapter 13. It naturally links the production of Mark's Gospel with the destruction of the Temple in 70 c.e. More recently, some have argued that the text of Mark was written for a more general audience. In this view, the lack of context has more to do with the dislocation of the Mediterranean world marked by what Mary Ann Tolbert has noted as its characteristic mobility and insecurity—a world in which a travelling, dislocated Messiah would help make sense of dislocated Greco-Roman lives.¹³ Others have argued that the circulation of the Gospel itself and its subsequent use by Matthew and Luke and the wider network of Christian communities itself bears witness to a broader audience than we would normally conceive.¹⁴

Again, however, the evidence in the text does not give us much to go on. In chapter 13 Mark appeals to the reader in an aside, but in no way reveals who he perceives the reader actually is. Mark's text emerges as the first of the Gospels, but without giving us too many cues that help us definitively discern its provenance.

SOURCES

The issue of Mark's sources probably should be understood in light of earlier discussion about the history of interpretation of Mark. The form critics set forth the idea that Mark gathered together oral traditions into his written Gospel, sometime around the 60s or 70s of the first century. Other scholars have posited other sources behind Mark. Helmut Koester, for example, has argued that our present version of Mark relied on pre-Markan traditions and evolved over several stages before developing into what we view as its canonical form in the second century.¹⁵ Other scholars, on the basis of the two-source hypothesis

11. Joel Marcus exemplifies this Syrian view in his *Mark 1-8* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 33–37

12. Ched Myers, *Binding the Strongman: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 41–42.

13. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 35–40.

14. Richard Bauckham, "For Whom Were Gospels Written?" in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. R. Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 12.

15. Helmut Koester, "History and Development of Mark's Gospel (From Mark to *Secret Mark* and "Canonical" Mark)" in *Colloquy on New Testament Studies: A Time for Reappraisal and Fresh Approaches*, ed. B. Corley (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983), 35–57.

of source criticism that we mentioned above, have argued that Mark in some instances may have drawn from “Q” (German for source, *Quelle*), a document that likely stands behind several other places where Matthew and Luke agree against Mark.¹⁶ While redaction criticism in general has built on the notion, at least in Markan studies, that they can see Mark’s editorial hand dealing with pre-Markan sources, these arguments have not really had a lot of traction. Mark may well be drawing on prior traditions, but how we determine them and how Mark may have “traditioned” them are not easy questions to sort out.

At the same time, it is clear that in the production of Mark there is a transition at work that must be noted. For whatever reason, the Gospel of Mark seems to represent for the first time a shift from oral to written gospel communication.¹⁷ While we must acknowledge the unique oral reality that lies behind our text, perhaps these reflections on sources should cause us to approach Mark’s Gospel with a view to understanding it precisely as a key change in the gospel. How might we become more aware of the ways in which the oral gospel continues to shape the new written Gospel Mark has produced?¹⁸ With this, however, we are already anticipating our concern with Mark’s oral and rhetorical force. Perhaps, as Luther said, the New Testament is not so much Scripture but preaching.¹⁹ The oral traditions that stand behind Mark’s newly minted written gospel still bear witness in the rhetorical force of Mark’s Gospel.

GENRE

This brings us now to the question of the genre of Mark’s Gospel. As we pointed out earlier, Mark’s writing happens in the context of a Greco-Roman literary world. He writes his Gospel in Greek and in light of that we have to be aware of what kinds of communicative signals Mark’s writing is sending. Genre, after all, is not merely a way of pigeonholing a text, a way of assigning

16. Harry Fleddermann, *Mark and Q: A Study of the Overlap Texts* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1995).

17. Werner Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 1–131.

18. Eugene Boring’s commentary on Mark pursues this idea in a very consistent way, advising commentary readers to read the Gospel aloud first before approaching the commentary, *Mark: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 1. New Testament scholar David Rhoads has produced a DVD in which he performs the Gospel of Mark from beginning to end, which runs through Mark’s sixteen chapters in about the time it takes to view today’s average movie. I am persuaded that a performance of Mark helps to explain both what we perceive as the relative crudeness of Mark’s “style” relative to the other Gospels as well as its rhetorical and apocalyptic power.

19. Philip Watson, *Let God Be God!: An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther* (London: Epworth, 1947), 149–50.

it a “category.” Instead, determining its genre is important because it helps us understand how it might have been read or heard. Thus, if I start with the words “I once knew a man from Nantucket,” you would likely not expect me to regale you with a story of a new friend I met in Massachusetts. Instead, you would probably anticipate from the cues of the meter and form that a bawdy limerick would follow where the next line and the final line would so cleverly rhyme with the word “Nantucket” that it would cause you to laugh or groan at the end. Genre is important in that it helps to frame a communication. It will be helpful for us to consider how Markan scholars have understood the genre of his Gospel.

One of the most common and perhaps even consensus ways to understand the Gospel of Mark is as a *bios*, an ancient biography. Ancient biographies clearly differ from modern ones in the ways in which they talk about the person’s life. Jesus, in this view, is revealed chiefly by what he says and does in the idealized form of the *bios*. The difficulty, of course, is that the text itself begins and ends in ways that make it hard to reconcile Mark’s Gospel with the genre of ancient biography. Mark’s Gospel begins by calling itself “The beginning of the *gospel* of Jesus Christ, [Son of God],” but when Jesus appears he does so “proclaiming the good news (*gospel*) of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’” (Mark 1:14b–15, emphasis and parentheses mine). At the end, we have a strange conclusion marked by the failure of the women to tell anyone of the promise he has given to his failed disciples—hardly an ideal conclusion. For this and other reasons, the *bios* remains to my mind a less than compelling choice.

Mark has generated advocates of still other perspectives. Mary Ann Tolbert has compared Mark to a biographical or historiographical variation on the ancient erotic novel, a roughly contemporaneous genre of popular literature that featured divinely guided (by Eros) travels and perils of the main characters along with the occasional crucifixion scene!²⁰ Still others argue Mark is a form of ancient historiography. Here the work of Adela Yarbro Collins stands out, in that she views Mark as form of *eschatological* historiography—a generic variation that allows her to account for Mark’s eschatological interest in connection with the genre.²¹ This mixed view of Mark’s helps her see a connection to

20. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 59–70.

21. Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 33–43. In an earlier work, Collins argues that Mark is a kind of historiography “in an apocalyptic mode,” *The Beginning of the Gospel: Probing of Mark in Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 37–38.

similar kinds of texts in intertestamental Jewish literature prior to and contemporaneous with Mark (e.g., parts of *1 Enoch*).

The struggle, to my mind, is to find a generic designation that accounts for the mixed way in which Mark pursues his writing. Clearly, Mark's work does not represent the high standards of elite literature. His language and his writing style belie this. Mark clearly has a theological agenda, so any generic designation would have to deal with that aspect of Markan subject matter that touches not only on Jesus' person ("The beginning of the gospel of *Jesus Christ, Son of God*," emphasis mine) but also its relation to the purposes of God whom Jesus himself proclaims ("the good news [gospel] of God," brackets mine). That there are biographical and historiographical elements cannot be denied. Yet Mark's apocalyptic mode and the worldview it evokes qualifies radically any such generic designation.

In light of these problems, others have tried to reconcile the unique subject matter of Mark's work with its performative impact. New Testament scholar Norman Perrin once called Mark an "apocalyptic drama."²² While this mixed view that accounts for Mark's effect is helpful, it is difficult to square with the fact that Mark ultimately *narrates* his Gospel, and doesn't merely dramatize it. Perhaps then it is best to agree with Eugene Boring that Mark's Gospel is a mixed genre whose performative force is a result both of the theological agenda of its author and the oral shape of the traditions that fund it: "a kerygmatic genre, expressed in narrative."²³ To Boring's proposal, I would wish to add that Mark does so in an apocalyptic mode, which borrows something of a worldview through apocalyptic type scenes and motifs in its execution.²⁴

22. Norman Perrin and Dennis Duling, *The New Testament: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 233–62.

23. Boring, *Mark*, 6–9.

24. Here I am using Alistair Fowler's genre theory, which argues that genres become mixed through the use of "modes," characteristic features of other genres that are incorporated to produce a hybrid variation on a genre. Thus, says Fowler, the heroic novel is a novel by genre, but incorporates elements of the epic (type scenes, motifs, etc.) by use of what he calls the heroic "mode." Two works of Fowler's elaborate on these ideas: "The Life and Death of Literary Forms," *New Literary History* 2 (1971): 199–216 and *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). For a view that questions the value of using "apocalypticism" as a way of reading Mark, see Richard Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 121–48. I view my project as understanding Mark from a literary-historical perspective, that is, the generic history that can explain the use of the apocalyptic mode in related literature, rather than positing the kind of hypostasized "apocalypticism" that Horsley critiques. Still, his point about how Mark often parodies or subverts the expectations of apocalypses or apocalypticism is a helpful one with which I often find myself in agreement as I read Mark through the

MARK'S NARRATIVE RHETORIC

This particular commentary presupposes that Mark, though working with prior oral traditions, is more than merely a collector of those traditions. He is also more than simply a redactor who discloses his theology by working around the edges of the material he redacts. Mark may not quite be beginning from scratch, but like any decent narrator he can decide how he orders his material, what he includes, what he omits, and whether he offers something new as well. One of the best ways to get a feel for this is to consider Mark's "narrative rhetoric," the way in which he tells his story, the perspectives with which he does it, and the style he uses to communicate.²⁵ Mark is more than a compiler or editor; he seeks to have an "effect" on his readers/hearers. This commentary will take some time to attend to the rhetorical impact of Mark's narration of the gospel of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that Mark does not always do so with the greatest grace and skill. For many reasons, including his occasional bad grammar or misuse of words, one can and probably should assume that Mark was not a likely candidate for the ancient world's equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize in literature. Some ancient traditions described Mark as "stumpy fingered."²⁶ When reading Mark as narrative art, the description may be apt as well. At the same time, by attending to the *purposes* of Mark's narrative rhetoric and to Mark's apocalyptic theology (below), we may see more than a simple lack of artistry in what Mark has wrought. By the end, we will see that Mark has an effect, a rhetorical force that actually gives his Gospel a unique gravity and power. We twenty-first-century readers and hearers will benefit from Mark's unique, if sometimes awkward, stumpy-fingered narrative-rhetorical theological vision.

apocalyptic mode. For a more detailed treatment of the way I use Fowler's genre theory as a means of reading apocalyptic texts in light of a Jewish literary matrix for the genre, see my *Preaching in the New Creation: The Promise of New Testament Apocalyptic Texts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999).

25. Some of the categories and terms I am using in this section come from my reading of Rhoads and Michie's *Mark as Story*, 32–62.

26. The reference is to the Anti-Marcionite Prologue, dated toward the end of the second century, as quoted in C. Clifton Black, *Mark: Images of an Apostolic Interpreter* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 119.

NARRATOR

One of the most important things to note about the rhetorical force of the Markan narrative is its relationship to the reader. Mark seems to be committed to giving the narratee information that characters in the Gospel do not possess, especially the disciples. From the very beginning of Mark, before the action even begins, Mark discloses something of his purpose to the reader: “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus, [Son of God].” Already with this title at the beginning the reader is being given privileged information: that is, the theological horizon of the narrative itself as the *beginning* of the gospel and something important about the main character, Jesus, whom we readers now know with the narrator to be “Son of God.” These crucial early disclosures are no small thing. The horizon of the gospel (*euaggelion*) reemerges at key moments in the story: 1:1, 14; 8:35; 10:29; 13:10; and 14:9. The disclosure that Jesus is Son of God is not perceived by all the characters, at points tragically misunderstood by the disciples, and in the end oddly confessed in the shadow of the cross by the Roman centurion! From the beginning, Mark brings readers and hearers into a privileged position—one that in many ways was even not fully enjoyed by the disciples themselves. This reality will also prove crucial at the point of Mark’s mysterious conclusion at 16:8, where the reader then becomes implicated in completing Mark’s unfinished gospel theology beyond the failure of the disciples and the otherwise faithful women at the tomb who flee the resurrection scene in silent fear.

On occasions, Mark ratchets up this insider/outsider relationship with readers and characters even more. Readers are privileged to learn information from divine voices that only Jesus himself hears (e.g., Jesus’ baptism in chapter 1) and from the omniscient narrator (say, about the hearts of the religious leaders) that help the reader digest the unfolding story and its conflicts. At one point, the narrator in a kind of spoken aside actually addresses the reader in the narrative to ensure that the reader understands a key apocalyptic warning in 13:14.

The overall effect of this is to make the Markan reader something of an insider in the process. This will prove crucial in understanding Mark’s overall purpose in communicating his Gospel.

POINT OF VIEW AND STANDARDS OF EVALUATION

Mark’s omniscient narrator is crucial for giving readers cues about how to evaluate a character or an action in the story. When, for example, in the baptism scene a heavenly voice discloses to Jesus that, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (1:11b), the reader is not only privileged to hear

information that Jesus knows and the other characters do not, but also is privy to a positive evaluation from God. It is these narrative means by which readers are given a standard for evaluating right or wrong judgments. When another such revelation scene happens in chapter 9 in the transfiguration story, the now repeated divine evaluation on the importance of Jesus as God's Son, the Beloved, is thus not so much for the readers' benefit, but to highlight the difficulty with which characters like the disciples fail to grasp the truth of Jesus. As a result, point of view and standards of evaluation do not only clue the reader into important truths. Indeed sometimes they highlight in Mark's case the obduracy of the disciples or even facilitate as well the ironic power of the words about Jesus uttered by religious authorities and Pilate at his trial. Conversely, the recognition of Jesus by demons in the exorcism stories also prepares the reader for evaluations of other characters. If demons of the old apocalyptic age know who Jesus is, then it is not so farfetched to call Peter "Satan" for not grasping the importance of suffering for Jesus' messiahship in his "old age" thinking at Caesarea Philippi in chapter 8. Just because Peter calls him Christ, does not mean that Peter has faith and will be faithful. Even demons can recognize something of the truth of who Jesus is—as we see in the Galilean ministry of the earlier chapters of Mark.

At other points, the standards of evaluation become important for other characters as well. Since the narrator is omniscient, the reader is given evaluative information about the motives of characters that is not disclosed to other characters in the story, or information that only Jesus and we readers know. Again, these standards of evaluation become important for the privileged role of the Markan reader in the purpose of the story. They represent an important narrative-rhetorical tool.

STYLE

The writer of Mark's Gospel uses a rather strange style to communicate the story. On the surface, the style seems downright primitive. Mark has the occasional grammatical error. He uses the historical present to speak of past events (instead of "Jesus went to X" Mark writes "Jesus *goes* to X"). Many sentences begin with the word *kai*, which means "and." Mark's language is Koine, common street Greek. It is not like the high-flown Attic style that Luke occasionally uses. If one were to read the Gospel without any pious preconceptions about biblical texts, one would probably have to conclude that Mark uses a kind of low-brow writing style more common to popular literature than the elite variety.

While these conclusions are warranted, I think the case can also be made that the style of Mark's writing is also "fitting" for what he writes—and this is in many ways the ultimate test for style. Mark's reliance on conjunctions like *kai* and other connecting phrases or even his frequent use of the word "immediately" give his work the impression of being "on the move." And indeed, Mark's Gospel moves quickly! After some brief introductory material in 1:1-15, Mark's running portrayal of Jesus' Galilean ministry of healings, exorcisms, teaching, and conflict stories leaves a reader downright breathless. The action continues apace as Jesus makes his way from the farthest point, Caesarea Philippi at the edge of the gentile world in chapter 8 to his arrival in Jerusalem in chapter 11. Only there, in Jerusalem, does the pace of the action slow down, giving the reader ample time to absorb all the ironic power of Jesus' final days in the shadow of the cross. It may be that Mark's style also matches his vigorous view of discipleship. Mark's Jesus is "on the way;" his disciples are called to follow in the same, breathless way. As if to underscore the point, the brief resurrection narrative at the end only reintroduces the fast-paced style one last time: "But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you" (16:7). Apparently, even in the resurrection Jesus expects his disciples to be on the move and to keep up with Jesus as he goes ahead.

One other element of Mark's style is important to understand. I mentioned earlier that the genre of Mark is hard to peg in part because of its oral style and feel. Mark, when read aloud, is full of voices speaking, crying, calling out, and confessing. Some theorize that Mark's Gospel was written to be read aloud, to be performed.²⁷ Even if that is not the case, one can at least agree with Werner Kelber that Mark's Gospel represents a transition from the world of orality to the world of literacy.²⁸ This may also help to explain why some Markan texts still give evidence of not being remembrances of Jesus from their settings, but rather prophetic oracles or stories of the risen Christ speaking to the church in prophecy. Thus, for example, the story of Jesus walking across the water to his storm-tossed disciples has often been viewed as a post-resurrection story set within a pre-resurrection part of Mark's narrative. Mark's oral style may at points also be a vestige of the more fluid view of revelation that is

27. Important examples of such scholarship are Whitney Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003); Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Hearing Mark: A Listener's Guide* (London: T&T Clark, 2002); and Richard Horsley, *Hearing*.

28. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*. While Kelber views Mark as subverting orality for the sake of textuality, I am more intrigued by the notion that the text may have oral vestiges even as it begins a process of writing Gospel.

presupposed when a community gathers expecting to hear the living words of its risen Lord in prophetic speech. This is the stylistic implication of viewing, with Boring, the genre of Mark as a “kerygmatic narrative” in which I see an “apocalyptic mode” as being operative. It means in part that Mark’s style intends not only a narrative “overhearing,” but occasionally a full-frontal, rhetorical hearing within a living community.

This, to my mind, makes Mark a more thoroughgoing example of what classicist George Kennedy calls radical rhetoric.²⁹ Mark is not interested in getting his hearers to be reasonably persuaded about this “gospel.” Instead, he narrates a story that shows Jesus healing, exorcising, confronting, and, above all, promising. Mark’s clumsy, oracular style is at one with this radical rhetoric. It calls the reader into a gospel proclamation that is at once Jesus Christ himself *and* the kingdom he proclaims as the gospel of God. It is not a thoroughgoing reflective piece.

Nonetheless, Mark is more than merely clumsy and insistent with his rhetoric. At points his Gospel reads quite mysteriously. There are sections where there seems to be a non sequitur between what one character says and what Jesus says, or where Jesus makes a prediction that we find ourselves still pondering. Mark may be more action than reflection, but his urgent kingdom rhetoric pushes the reader to the edge of apocalyptic mystery nonetheless—and that is also part of Mark’s appeal.

NARRATIVE PATTERNS

Mark’s narrative rhetoric also features the use of certain patterns that are helpful for a reader to grasp—especially insofar as they help reveal something of Mark’s purpose. Two narrative patterns are especially noteworthy with respect to their rhetorical effects. The first is Mark’s way of using doublets, or repeated stories, to make a point. Mark has two feeding stories, one where five thousand are fed and another with four thousand. Viewed independently, it appears once again Mark is an inept narrator. When one considers the repetition, however, in light of the disciples’ inability to understand Jesus and his ministry, the meaning becomes clearer. The reader senses that Jesus is making a rather clear point (and allies him or herself with the narrator and Jesus). The disciples, through this use of narrative rhetoric, seem to be becoming more and more “hard-hearted,” unable to see the truth that is dawning on us readers. Another narrative pattern

29. George Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 7.

typical for Mark is intercalation. Here, two stories are told in such a way as to be mutually interpretive. One important example in the Markan narrative is the contrast between the story of Jesus' hearing before the officials that is happening as Peter's predicted denial is unfolding. Both inside and outside a kind of hearing is taking place—Jesus is faithful; Peter falls short. Through the use of intercalation, Mark invites the reader to engage in such acts of comparison and contrast in light of the unfolding action. We will make note when Mark is using this narrative-rhetorical tool to help us explore his purpose for telling his Gospel about the gospel.

BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

Finally, it is important to understand the roles of beginnings and endings in narrative rhetoric. Somehow our reading of Mark's Gospel must make sense of the whole. We cannot "lose the forest for the trees"—especially since our goal is to help preachers move beyond the day's lection in antiseptic isolation so that Mark's whole gospel can, to paraphrase Donald Juel, be set "on the loose" once more in our midst. Being aware of beginnings and endings helps us do just that. Mark's Gospel, as we have noted, begins with a title about the beginning of the gospel and a kind of prologue that set the terms for what follows. While the theme of the gospel (*euaggelion*) returns from time to time, it receives special emphasis in the end when the women receive the good news of Jesus' resurrection and his going ahead to Galilee, the very site where his own gospel ministry began. Mark uses the beginning and ending of his Gospel, and sometimes even the beginning and ending of the episodes that make it up in such a way as to signal shifts, markers of opening and closure. In ancient rhetoric this was known as an *inclusio*. These oral markers of beginnings and endings help to orient the text for us and help us continually to hear Mark's Gospel whole. They are elements of Mark's narrative rhetoric that aid us in discerning Mark's gospel purpose from 1:1 to 16:8. This will help us read Mark's Gospel not just as one thing after another, but as a focused, meaningful discourse.

MARK'S APOCALYPTIC MODE

We would be mistaken, however, if we viewed Mark's Gospel as if it were just another clearly ordered piece of Hellenistic rhetoric, let alone a lucid example of high literature. While Mark is a somewhat educated writer with a purpose, he is

telling his kerygmatic narrative *in the apocalyptic mode*. The Bible features only a couple of true apocalypses: Daniel 7–12 in the Hebrew Bible and Revelation in the New Testament. While there are many other texts with apocalyptic themes, motifs, and forms, these two texts are our best canonical examples of what full-blown apocalypses look like. Neither of these texts reads like an everyday, realistic narrative. Moreover, when we twenty-first-century people try to read them, we do not find it easy to relate to the world we know. If Mark is indeed writing his kerygmatic narrative in an apocalyptic mode, we will need to do a bit of apocalyptic homework to understand why he writes as he does. In order to do this in way that connects clearly with Mark's Gospel, we will highlight ways in which the modal version of an apocalyptic genre becomes manifest in Mark's narrative world.

AS REVEALED IN MINOR CHARACTERS

One of the most consistent ways in which Mark summons the apocalyptic mode is with his use of characters. There are frequent stories about people, for example, whose lives are distorted by demons. The first few chapters of Mark feature several exorcisms, and if it is not the demoniacs who bear witness to Mark's apocalyptic worldview, it is the demons themselves who recognize Jesus for who he is. Mark's Jesus announces God's kingdom in 1:14, but his kingdom preaching and ministry are not the onward and upward vision of nineteenth-century liberalism as we sing in our twentieth-century Fosdick hymns; rather, it is about a battle between God's reign and Satan, who holds people and even their institutions in his grasp. Apocalypses are full of such demonic and angelic characters. Jesus through his preaching is on the front line in an apocalyptic battle. The question is how. That is where Jesus' story, for all its exorcisms and confrontations, takes a surprising and nonetheless apocalyptic turn at the end.

AS REVEALED IN FINAL SETTINGS

Mark's narrator wishes us to see much of the Jerusalem setting of the end of his Gospel in thoroughly apocalyptic terms: his cross and resurrection. Mark 13 is an important part of this setting. Here Jesus speaks before his death, in a form related to the genre apocalypse called a "testament," where he looks ahead and sees the apocalyptic difficulties that are to come.³⁰ Here Jesus not only

30. For some good examples of this in Jewish apocalyptic literature, see the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, which were likely written before or roughly contemporaneous with Mark's Gospel.

predicts the coming destruction of the temple, a topic of no doubt lively interest in Mark's own time between 65–75 ce, but also other apocalyptic concerns: persecutions, false messiahs, earthquakes, wars, famines, cosmic birth pangs, family division, the desolating sacrilege, darkened sun and moon, falling stars, the coming of the Son of the human (or "Son of Man") in the clouds, and the gathering of the elect.³¹ In typical apocalyptic fashion, Jesus asks his hearers to stay awake and to hold fast.

What is remarkable about this standard apocalyptic, testament-like speech, however, is the way that it continues to shape the unfolding narrative in Jerusalem. Jesus warns about being handed over by loved ones and delivered up to councils, when this is precisely what happens to him in the subsequent chapters. When Jesus is praying in the dark in Gethsemane, the disciples fail to stay awake despite Jesus' warnings at the end of chapter 13. When Jesus dies on the cross, the afternoon sun grows dark and darkness falls on the land. At the end, at a tomb of all places, an angel appears to announce apocalyptic resurrection news. In Jesus' trials, in his death, and in his resurrection, the apocalyptic world is dawning even now: for those with eyes to "watch" and "stay awake." Jesus undergoes these apocalyptic events already in his trial, crucifixion, and resurrection because of his gospel and knowing that these events will continue until that gospel is first preached to all nations (13:10). In this sense, the gospel of Jesus Christ "begins" already in his life, crucifixion, and resurrection.

Earlier in Mark's Gospel, other settings help us in seeing traces of Mark's apocalyptic mode. Jesus struggles with Satan in the wilderness during his temptation. When the cosmic forces of wind and wave seem arrayed against his disciples, Jesus walks out on the water and in another place even silences the wind as if it were a demon. In these settings, and programmatically in Jerusalem, the great cosmic apocalyptic battle is being fought against the forces that hold humanity and earth in a kind of slavery, from which Jesus has come to ransom humanity.

AS REVEALED IN THE IDENTIFICATIONS OF JESUS

Scholars have long wrestled with the various titles given to Jesus in Mark's Gospel. While it may be impossible to find a clear, consistent, propositionally

31. Here I use the term *Son of the human* in lieu of the traditional *Son of Man*. Because of the nuances of the phrase where it sometimes refers to humanity and other to a transcendent figure, as well as the greater inclusiveness of this translation, I am opting for the phrasing *Son of the human* for this commentary going forward.

oriented Christology of Mark's Gospel that makes sense of all those titles in a systematic way, a consideration of them in light of the apocalyptic worldview in its time can shed some light on how they hang together for Mark.³² One way we can deepen our reading is to see how Mark's interpretation of Jesus emerges in particular out of a Jewish context, one in which apocalyptic formulations of messiah, Son of the human, prophet, and teacher held meanings that are key for understanding Mark's apocalyptic gospel. While many of these terms will need to be explained as the commentary unfolds, some of the more apocalyptic influences can shed some useful light.

First, it must be said that the language around Christ or messiah is especially fluid in this period. Christians often talk about "the Jewish conception of messiah" as if it were merely a foil. Judaism is a very diverse phenomenon at this time—it is in fact big enough to include Christian movements within it, many of which are still within Jewish communities even toward the end of the first century. As an example of this diversity, one might consider the way the language of messiah is used in Qumran. There the term is used to speak not only of a royal messiah, but also a priestly messiah. In some apocalyptic literature of the time, there is also an emphasis on how these messianic conceptions also relate to teaching—in the case of the royal messiah this means in particular a connection with the revelation of secrets and wisdom (e.g., *1 Enoch's Book of Similitudes*).³³ This does not mean that other messianic conceptions are not in play, but it does help to broaden the way we typically use that language, especially as we deal with his apocalyptic Gospel as one marked by revelation and the disclosure of mysteries.

The language of the *Son of Man* or what I am calling *Son of the human* is also quite interesting in this period. While it is true that there are significant traditions about this that can be traced back to Daniel 7–12, the figure was something of an ongoing concern in intertestamental apocalyptic literature. In fact, as Adela Yarbro Collins points out, one can find an especially helpful development in the Similitudes of Enoch that provides a meaningful context for the use of the term in Mark: the "hidden Son of Man."³⁴ Since in apocalyptic

32. Scholars have long sought to develop a Christology from Mark. The problem is that Mark doesn't think systematically about Jesus' identity in any way remotely propositional. Some recent writers have tried to find a way of developing a "narrative Christology" that accounts for the fact that what Mark offers us is a narrative, not a propositional treatise. For a recent example of this, see Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Mark's Jesus: Characterization as Narrative Christology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009). For our purposes it is sufficient to see how traditions of interpreting Jesus in Mark help underline the Gospel's apocalyptic character.

33. Collins, *Mark*, 48, 66.

literature there is often a fusion of messianic language and this tradition, what we have in Mark is representative of some broader tendencies in Jewish apocalyptic writing in the period. Collins puts it this way:

A certain analogy between Mark and the Similitudes of Enoch suggests the theme of the secret identity of Jesus should be seen as the literary adaptation of an apocalyptic motif. . . . In any case the analogy is striking. The author of Mark seems to have adapted the tradition of the hidden Son of Man in composing an account of the earthly Jesus. Rather than being hidden in the presence of the Lord in heaven, Jesus, the secret Son of Man, walked the earth and revealed his identity to a chosen few.³⁵

Here we see how even the portrayal and identification of Jesus in Mark's Gospel takes on an apocalyptic hue. Jesus' hiddenness as Messiah and Son of the human is not about being coy, but is part of an important emphasis on hiddenness and revelation in the Jewish apocalyptic tradition.

*AS REVEALED IN DIVINE ACTS OF REVELATION
(BAPTISM, TRANSFIGURATION, CROSS)*

Ched Myers has offered an interesting thesis that has value both as an apocalyptic grid for reading Mark as well as providing clarity. In Myers's view, Mark has three "pillar stories" portrayed in an apocalyptic light. He sets them up with the following parallel elements:³⁶

BAPTISM	TRANSFIGURATION	CRUCIFIXION
heavens rent	garments turn white	sanctuary veil rent
dove descends	cloud descends	darkness spreads
voice from heaven	voice from cloud	Jesus' great voice
"You are my son, beloved"	"This is my son, beloved"	"Truly this man was son of God"
John the Baptist as Elijah	John appears with Elijah	"Is he calling Elijah?"

With Myers's structure, we can begin to see more deeply how the apocalyptic mode influences and even shapes Mark's Gospel. What makes his Gospel so

34. *Ibid.*, 60.

35. *Ibid.*, 70.

36. Myers, *Binding the Strongman*, 391.

interesting is precisely this apocalyptic take. For our purposes, its connection with the reader, who from the beginning is party to these limited revelations or disclosures, is really the key. The reader is there from the “beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ” through the cross and the dawning apocalyptic news of Jesus’ resurrection. It is precisely this that makes it for us readers a beginning as well.

PROSPECT: HE HAS GONE AHEAD TO GALILEE

Mark’s Gospel ends with a beginning as well. This is true on more than one level for the preacher. Within the text, the young man in his apocalyptic white robe tells the utterly frightened women the good news for Jesus’ failed disciples: “But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you” (16:7). He mentions Peter by name among all those failed disciples and offers them a promise. Then the narrative ends. Unlike Matthew, Luke, and John’s Gospels, we do not get to witness resurrection scenes and a commissioning by the risen Lord. We are only given an empty tomb and a promise in the midst of failure. It leaves us readers a bit at our wit’s end—except for one thing: the substance of the promise itself. Jesus goes ahead to Galilee—the place where it all *began* and thus invites readers and disciples to begin at the beginning of the gospel again. Mark gives us enough of a promise to keep us going with his Gospel of the gospel, but does so with an *unfinished narrative*.

He also gives us who preach these texts something of his unfinished theology. And this is where the preacher’s work really begins. Again, one thing we can surmise is that many of Mark’s first readers thought it unfinished as well. Matthew and Luke used Mark’s structure, but added some much more definitive resurrection endings. They also tried to clean up Mark’s occasional bad grammar and stumpy-fingered style. Luke postponed Mark’s eschatological edginess. Matthew rolled back some of the more categorical statements Mark made about torah. Whatever it was, his readers felt compelled to “finish” Mark’s theology, or at least to rework it. We preachers may need to do so as well from time to time. We live in an age where it is quite difficult to envision bodies of water inhabited by storm demons and where we are more likely to refer troubled persons to psychologists than to defer to exorcists. Yet, do we not sense in a very powerful way the intransigence of evil, and the way even our institutions seem to hold our humanity in their sway? On an ethical level, we too are painfully aware of our Christian church’s long history of anti-Semitism. Does this mean that we need to revisit some of Mark’s anti-Jewish

sentiments—especially since Christianity no longer is a minority sect in Judaism, but is in fact now so much more powerful? These, to my mind, are just a couple of ways in which we might ourselves take up Mark’s unfinished theological task when we preach. It means that understanding Mark on his terms is just the beginning. It means that we, too, take up the work as preachers and begin in startling and mysterious ways to name God into the world again.³⁷ Mark announced the good news of Jesus who himself came preaching good news of God. Perhaps Mark in all his apocalyptic edginess can nudge us out of our own closed systems to preach the gospel trusting in the promise that the risen crucified One has already gone ahead.

37. This phrase I got from my teacher, David G. Buttrick, who uses the idea of naming God into the world again in his landmark *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987). After all these years, I still find it a persuasive and compelling way of thinking about the unique task of preachers as homiletical theologians.