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CHAPTER I

The historical setting of the Gospel of Mark

INTRODUCTION

The words ‘The Theology of the Gospel of Mark’, in the title of this book are deceptively simple. The three major expressions of which the title is composed, however, are far from straightforward. They beg a number of important questions. Firstly, what do we mean by the word ‘Theology’ in connection with the Gospel of Mark? In focusing upon Mark as ‘theology’ rather than as ‘history’ or as ‘literature’, what aspects of the Gospel have we in mind? Secondly, what is intended by the use of the term ‘Gospel’ as applied to this first century text? What does the word mean, and how appropriate a description is it from a historical, literary or theological point of view? Thirdly, who is meant or what indeed is conveyed by the traditional attribution ‘Mark’? Was the Gospel written by the John Mark of the New Testament, as tradition claims, or is this a fiction? Where the theology of the Gospel is concerned, does it matter?

An act of literary communication involves, in essence, an author, a text and a reader, and the process of interpreting that text must take into account all three. What then do we mean in overall terms by ‘The Theology of the Gospel of Mark’? Do we mean the theology of the *author* – in other words, the religious ideas, the philosophical perspective, the theological convictions, in short, the ideology which motivated the evangelist to write, which was a product of his own age, culture and tradition, and which influenced the treatment of his sources? Do we mean the theology of the *text* itself, considered as a whole – in other words, the religious message which it conveys, irrespective of its

historical context, of the sources it draws upon or of the intention of its original author? Is 'The Theology of the Gospel of Mark' a theology constructed by the *reader* (or the 'interpretative community') from the text – in other words, a product of 'engagement' between the reader and the text, a religious dialogue or 'revelation' engendered by the interaction of the text with the reader's experience past or present?

Given the Gospel's use of sources, we might even ask, furthermore, whether the Gospel of Mark has a unified theology at all! One relatively conservative critic issues the following warning:

If Mark has preserved material which does not fully correspond to the view which he himself holds then are we at liberty to speak of a theology of the Gospel of Mark? Must we not rather speak of Mark's theology? If a valid distinction can be drawn between these two then it may be that we should not look for a coherent and consistent theology in the Gospel but be prepared to find unevenness since he laid his theology over an existing theology, or theologies, in the tradition he received.¹

If, on the other hand, there is a consistent theology in the Gospel – and a considerable body of recent Markan scholarship, one notes, is now highlighting the literary and theological features which integrate the Markan text² – the question remains as to how we might gain access to 'The Theology of the Gospel of Mark'? If the theology resides in the mind of the evangelist, then is it to be recovered, as many insist, by using the historical-critical tools of source, form and redaction criti-

¹ E. Best, 'Mark's Preservation of the Tradition' in W. R. Telford (ed.), *The Interpretation of Mark* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), pp. 163–4.

² E.g. T. J. Geddert, *Watchwords. Mark 13 in Markan Eschatology* (JSNTSS 26; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989); J. D. Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark's Gospel* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1983); J. D. Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark. Jesus, Authorities, Disciples* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1989); B. L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence. Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1988); C. D. Marshall, *Faith as a Theme in Mark's Narrative* (SNTSMS, 64; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); D. Rhoads and D. Michie, *Mark as Story. An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1982); J. Sergeant, *Lion let Loose. The Structure and Meaning of St Mark's Gospel* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1988); M. R. Thompson, *The Role of Disbelief in Mark. A New Approach to the Second Gospel* (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989); M. A. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989).

cism, that is, by separating tradition and redaction and so determining Mark's contribution to the developing Jesus tradition?³ If the theology is rooted in the text as a whole, then is it best approached, as others argue, by holistic methods such as narrative criticism (and its sister discipline narrative theology)?⁴ If the theology, on the other hand, is a construct arising out of the reader's engagement with the text, then should not other literary approaches such as reader-response criticism be employed to illuminate this process?⁵

So much for some of the questions raised by our title. It is time now to offer some answers, or at least to indicate what I myself understand by 'The Theology of the Gospel of Mark', what aspects of the subject I plan to cover in this book, and what approach I shall be taking to it. The term 'theology' comes from two Greek words, *theos* meaning 'God' and *logos* meaning 'word', or, by extension, 'rational discourse'. In its narrow sense, 'theology' means 'rational discourse about God'. In its broader sense, it refers to a complex of related subjects in Christian doctrine, subsuming such topics as Christology (from *Christos* meaning 'Christ' or 'Messiah'; and hence doctrine or understanding concerning the person or nature of Christ), soteriology (from *sōtēria* meaning 'salvation'; and hence doctrine or understanding concerning the work of Christ), pneumatology (from *pneuma* meaning 'spirit'; and hence doctrine or understanding concerning the Holy Spirit), cosmology (from *kosmos* meaning 'world' or 'universe'; and hence doctrine or

³ For these methods, see C. E. Carlston, 'Form Criticism, NT' in *IDB(S)*, pp. 345–8; R. T. Fortna, 'Redaction Criticism, NT' in *IDB(S)*, pp. 733–5; K. Grobel, 'Form Criticism' in *IDB*, pp. 320–1; J. Muddiman, 'Form Criticism' in *DBI*, pp. 240–3; E. P. Sanders and M. Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1989), pp. 51–223; S. S. Smalley, 'Redaction Criticism' in I. H. Marshall (ed.), *New Testament Interpretation* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1977), pp. 181–95; W. R. Telford, *Mark* (New Testament Guides; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 37–85; S. H. Travis, 'Form Criticism' in Marshall (ed.), *Interpretation*, pp. 153–64; C. M. Tuckett, *Reading the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1987), pp. 78–135; C. M. Tuckett, 'Redaction Criticism' in *DBI*, pp. 580–2; C. M. Tuckett, 'Source Criticism (NT)', in *DBI*, pp. 646–8; D. Wenham, 'Source Criticism' in Marshall (ed.), *Interpretation*, pp. 139–52.

⁴ See D. F. Ford, 'Narrative Theology' in *DBI*, pp. 489–91; R. C. Tannehill, 'Narrative Criticism' in *DBI*, pp. 488–9; Telford, *Mark*, pp. 90–2.

⁵ See M. Davies, 'Reader-Response Criticism' in *DBI*, pp. 578–80; Telford, *Mark*, pp. 92–3.

understanding concerning the world), eschatology (from *eschatos* meaning ‘last’ or ‘final’; and hence doctrine or understanding concerning the end of the world or final matters), anthropology (from *anthrōpos* meaning ‘man’; and hence doctrine or understanding concerning the nature of man), ecclesiology (from *ekklēsia* meaning ‘assembly’ or ‘church’; and hence doctrine or understanding concerning the church or believing community) and ethics (from *ethos* meaning ‘custom’ or ‘usage’; and hence doctrine or understanding concerning the moral behaviour governing the relationship between the Christian believer, the believing community and the world).

Although these categories belong to the vocabulary of Christian doctrine in its later and more developed state, and are hence familiar to those steeped in systematic theology, they are nevertheless convenient to some extent for the analysis of first-century Christian texts like the Gospel of Mark provided they are used with caution. The Gospel of Mark reflects Christian tradition at an early stage of development and does not present us with anything approaching a systematic theology. The ‘Theology’ of the Gospel of Mark (as I intend to use the term) refers in a broad sense to the religious understanding, ideas and beliefs entertained by this ancient writer concerning the nature of God, the person and work of Jesus, the role of the Spirit, the nature of man and the world, the end of that world and so on. A major emphasis in this book therefore will be on theology as ‘religious ideology’, that is, on what was believed by the evangelist, as reflected in his narrative, and, in particular, to what extent these beliefs were a product of, a development from or even a challenge to the religious culture and tradition to which he was indebted.

Our second term ‘Gospel’ also requires some comment. The word (Old English, *godspel*) is a literal translation of the Greek term *euangelion*, which in ordinary usage meant ‘good news’, such as that announced when a battle was won or a Roman ruler was enthroned.⁶ The expression is a favourite one of the evangelist, and is used by him to describe Jesus’ teaching

⁶ R. P. Martin, *Mark – Evangelist and Theologian* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1979), p. 22.

(1.14–15; 8.35; 10.29; 13.10; 14.9) without, however, specifying its precise content. The text actually begins with the word (1.1 ‘The beginning of the *gospel* of Jesus Christ’) but it is not clear whether it is used in Mark with its usual connotation of ‘good news’ or as a technical term for the religious or doctrinal content of the message preached by (or perhaps about) Jesus (see Rom. 1.1–4).⁷ It has been suggested, although this is less likely, that in 1.1 it may even refer to the literary genre in which that oral proclamation is contained. What is clear, however, is that the term ‘Gospel’ was being used in a generic sense by Christians in the second century, the earliest datable example of its functioning as a literary type occurring in the writings of Justin Martyr.⁸ In a similar way perhaps to the process by which the term ‘apocalypse’, which occurs in Revelation 1.1, came to be transferred to other texts bearing the characteristic features of the Revelation of John, the term ‘Gospel’ was derived from the use of the term *euangelion* in the text of Mark and subsequently employed as a generic description for texts in which that ‘good news’ was to be found.

Its appropriateness as a description of the text, at least from a theological point of view, is apparent. If the ‘Gospel’ genre was a unique one in the ancient world, and Mark, as has been suggested, was the originator of it, the term adequately describes its special features, namely, that it is ‘kerygmatic in nature and evangelical in design.’⁹ On the other hand, from a literary point of view, it is inappropriate, derivative and even misleading as a generic description of the text. No genre can be said to be without roots in antecedent literary types and treating Mark as unique draws attention away from a number of potential models in the ancient world by which Mark could have been influenced in the overall conception of his work. Much recent research has been conducted on this subject, and discussion can be found elsewhere¹⁰ but it is worth here

⁷ R. A. Guelich, ‘“The Beginning of the Gospel”. Mark 1:1–15’, *Biblical Research*, 27 (1982), pp. 5–15; K. Kertelge, ‘The Epiphany of Jesus in the Gospel (Mark)’ in Telford (ed.), *Interpretation*, pp. 106–7; Martin, *Mark*, pp. 24–8.

⁸ *Apology*, 66 (c. 150 CE) and Martin, *Mark*, p. 19.

⁹ Martin, *Mark*, p. 21.

¹⁰ D. E. Aune, *The New Testament and its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster-

commenting on the implications of the question of genre for theology.

Establishing the genre of a literary work provides us with our first clue as to its origin, meaning and purpose, and without such indications, the theology cannot be fully appreciated. Two conflicting models for the emergence of the Gospel are currently espoused. The first has been described as the model of 'aggregate growth'. Based on the results of form criticism, this sees the Gospel text as an 'evolutionary'¹¹ document, the end result of a somewhat impersonal, collective, immanent process by which the diverse oral traditions of the early Christian community came eventually to be written down. This approach often anchors the text in a cultic rather than literary tradition and as a result tends to diminish not only the literary but also the theological creativity of the one(s) responsible for its final form. Based on the results of redaction criticism and the newer literary methods, the second model sees the Gospel text as a 'revolutionary' document, the result of authorial creativity adopting or adapting existing genres (Graeco-Roman biography, Hellenistic romance, Greek tragedy, or, within the Jewish field, apocalyptic or wisdom literature have been some of the parallels cited). By anchoring the text to a self-conscious literary tradition and enterprise, this approach tends by contrast to elevate the literary and theological creativity of the author.

But who was the 'Mark' who was ultimately responsible for 'The Theology of the Gospel of Mark'? This third question will be addressed in my next section but here let me anticipate the discussion by stating that I, in common with many Markan scholars nowadays, regard the available evidence as insufficient

ster Press, 1987); R. A. Guelich, 'The Gospel Genre' in P. Stuhlmacher (ed.), *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien. Vorträge vom Tübinger Symposium 1982* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1983), pp. 173–208; W. H. Mare, 'Genre Criticism and the Gospels' in J. H. Skilton (ed.), *The Gospels Today. A Guide to some Recent Developments* (Philadelphia, PA: Skilton House, 1990), pp. 82–101; Sanders and Davies, *Gospels*, pp. 25–47; M. J. Suggs, 'Gospel, genre' in *IDB(S)*, pp. 370–2; C. H. Talbert, *What is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* (London: SPCK; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978); W. R. Telford, 'The Interpretation of Mark: a History of Developments and Issues' in Telford (ed.), *Interpretation*, pp. 15–17; Telford, *Mark*, pp. 94–100.

¹¹ L. W. Hurtado, 'The Gospel of Mark: Evolutionary or Revolutionary Document?', *JSNZ*, 40 (1990), pp. 15–32.

to establish the actual *identity* of its author, and hence to support its traditional attribution to the John Mark of the New Testament.¹² That is not to say that we cannot compile some kind of *profile* of the author – indeed in seeking to illuminate his theology I shall be attempting in this respect to do so – but the internal evidence of the text hardly permits the drawing of an identikit picture which would link the author with any named members of the early church. Few hard facts indeed are known about such figures, legend, historical naivety or the romantic imagination often supplying what we think we know about them. For convenience, however, and following convention, I shall continue to refer to the text's anonymous author as 'Mark' but with a disclaimer, as in the modern novel or film, that the character 'Mark' in this book is a literary fiction, and is not intended to signify an identification with any actual person in the New Testament! In light of this, I might further comment on why I have chosen to refer to the author throughout as 'he'. This is not merely a matter of consistency and convenience. The gender of the author, I recognize, is to some extent an open question. While it remains a possibility that the author of this work was female, the balance of probability nevertheless argues in favour of a male author given the preponderance of literary activity by male writers in the ancient world and the early church. In the final chapter we shall in fact be considering the way women are presented in the Gospel, a treatment which will have implications for the gender of the author.

Having raised some issues and offered some definitions, let me now summarize the overall plan of the book and highlight some of the distinctive features of the approach that I shall be taking to 'The Theology of the Gospel of Mark'. In this first chapter, I shall say something about the background of the text and its general message, attempting briefly to place the Gospel (and therefore its theology) in its historical setting. In a second

¹² The most recent comprehensive treatment of the traditions surrounding Mark is that by C. C. Black, *Mark. Images of an Apostolic Interpreter* (Studies on Personalities of the New Testament; Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1994). Black concludes that 'we lack enough hard, pertinent evidence to confirm the historicity of the connection between the apostle Peter and the Second Evangelist or his Gospel' (p. 205).

major chapter, I shall describe and analyse the Gospel's theology, again from a historical perspective and with particular regard to its original context. Special emphasis will be given to three important and interrelated aspects of Mark's theology, namely his Christology, soteriology and eschatology. In chapter 3 we shall examine the Gospel in relation to other relevant writings of the New Testament. Briefly reviewing this larger corpus and highlighting parallels and contrasts, where appropriate, I shall seek to locate the Gospel's theology in its wider canonical context. The fourth and final chapter will range even further afield, commenting on the Gospel's history of interpretation and on its significance in the contemporary context.

Three emphases in particular will characterize the approach that will be taken. The first, as this outline demonstrates, is the importance of *context* in understanding the theology of the Gospel of Mark. For some literary approaches, texts may be interpreted purely with regard to their own internal relations or 'narrative world' and without reference to speculative extrinsic factors.¹³ I shall assume, however, that without an appreciation of the ancient context in which the Gospel was conceived (the historical setting out of which it emerged, the literary and cultural environment in which it was written, the theological situation to which it was addressed), the theology of Mark cannot be adequately understood. It is for this reason, therefore, that I have also taken particular care to preface my discussion of individual features of Mark's thought or treatment of the tradition (whether it be the parables, the miracles or the Kingdom of God), with general background explaining how these were understood in the various traditions to which he was heir (for example, the Old Testament, apocalyptic Judaism, the wider Hellenistic world, or the immediate pre-Markan tradition). In focusing upon the ancient context, however, I shall also be mindful of the contemporary context within which this study of Mark's theology is also conducted, whether it be the university, where the Gospel functions as a resource for historical reconstruction, sociological investigation or literary analysis, or

¹³ For example, Kingsbury, *Christology*.

the church where it functions as scripture (both religiously and ethically), or society in general where it functions, for good or ill, as an influence, cultural, ethical, political or otherwise.

My second emphasis will be on the importance of *method*. The principal method employed will be the historical-critical one (especially redaction criticism) but I shall also draw upon the insights of the newer literary approaches where appropriate. Where a holistic perspective on the text is relevant I shall adopt it. Account will be taken of the role of the reader in the construction of the theology of Mark, whether the ancient reader to whom the text was intended to speak, or the modern reader who comes to it with very different eyes. I shall also be conscious in particular of my own reading of the text, a critical academic one which attempts to construct, using categories that in part would have been alien to the evangelist, a much more systematic or self-conscious account of his theology than he himself would perhaps have recognized!

A third emphasis will be on the importance of *Mark as a theologian*. For me, as already indicated, 'The Theology of the Gospel of Mark' is largely the theology of its author, the evangelist, although he himself has taken over traditions with their own theological stamp. It is also the theology of the text for whose final form he was responsible. Where Mark's theology differs from or is in tension with that of his sources I shall endeavour to illuminate its distinctiveness. Where no tension appears to exist, I shall assume that he took over the tradition because he agreed with the theology it reflected. My focus, therefore, will be on the contribution of the evangelist to the theology of the developing Jesus movement and in this I would join forces with those who see in Mark a theologian of some considerable creativity.¹⁴

AUTHORSHIP, DATE AND PROVENANCE

In speaking of Mark as a theologian, we immediately run up against a traditional view of the Gospel which attributes it, as

¹⁴ See Telford, 'History of Developments' in Telford (ed.), *Interpretation*, pp. 24–5.

already mentioned, to the John Mark of the New Testament and regards it as a simple and largely unvarnished historical account of the reminiscences of the apostle Peter. This account, moreover, is frequently viewed as crude from a literary point of view and unsophisticated from a theological one. Since this again raises the question of authorship in relation to theology, let me deal with it briefly. A fuller discussion can be found elsewhere¹⁵ but let me here summarize some of the main points of the argument.

The traditional view of authorship can be traced to the early second century and is based on the testimony of Papias, bishop of Hierapolis, who, according to Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* III.39.14–16), attributed it to an unknown contemporary, ‘the Elder’. In favour of its authenticity is the strength and virtual unanimity of the church tradition, at least between the second and the fifth century; the ‘understated’ nature of the testimony, namely its ascription to a non-apostle; the widely held view that this Gospel was also used as a source by the authors of at least two of the three later canonical Gospels (Matthew and Luke), a state of affairs which may also attest to the strength of the tradition lying behind it; the prominence given to Peter in the Gospel (the so-called ‘Petrine passages’ are 1.16–39; 2.1–14; 3.13–19; 4.35–5.43; 6.7–13, 30–56; 8.15–9.48; 10.32–52; 11.1–33; 13.3–4, 32–7; 14.17–50, 53–4, 66–72) and even, it has been claimed, the appearance of John Mark himself as the enigmatic (but anonymous) young man in Gethsemane who flees away naked leaving his garment behind (14.51–2)!

Against this position, however, there are weighty objections. That early church tradition was virtually unanimous in supporting the claim is not surprising since the later church fathers were almost certainly dependent upon Papias, and hence offer no independent attestation. Papias’ evidence itself is unreliable and often ambiguous. The identification of ‘Mark’ with the John Mark of the New Testament is not actually made by Papias himself (although he may have intended this figure) and is not explicitly made indeed until Jerome. If the ‘John Mark’ of

¹⁵ See Telford, *Mark*, pp. 15–20.