

I. Introduction to Mark



INTRODUCTION

This introduction will focus on two issues as it summarizes the commentary discussion of the setting of Mark. Initially we give consideration to issues of authorship, setting, and date, not discussing each category separately, but rather looking at how commentators have handled the combination. The key questions here revolve around whether we can identify the Mark tied to the Gospel, whether he had connections to Peter, and whether Mark was written before or after the destruction of Jerusalem. This forms the backdrop for my own discussion of where I place the setting of the Gospel, its themes, and other key issues tied to it.¹

COMMENTARY DISCUSSION OF AUTHOR, DATE, AND SETTING

The common scholarly position that Mark is the earliest Gospel means that there has been an intensification of attention paid to this Gospel. This attention has resulted in several excellent commentaries, some of which I will discuss in groups for reasons of space. Because there are so many valuable treatments, our survey of commentaries on Mark will not review Synoptic Gospel issues, but will focus on questions tied to Mark's setting, date, and authorship.

¹ This introductory discussion combines two previous pieces I have done elsewhere. "Commentaries on the Synoptic Gospels: Traditional Issues of Introduction," in *On the Writing of New Testament Commentaries: Festschrift for Grant R. Osborne on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*, eds. Stanley E. Porter and Eckhard J. Schnabel (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 339–63, and "The Gospel of Mark and the Historical Jesus," in *Jesus Research: New Methodologies and Perceptions. The Second Princeton-Prague Symposium on Jesus Research*, ed. James Charlesworth with Bryan Rhea (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 551–76.

Vincent Taylor's classic commentary works faithfully through the Greek text.² It does not have a plethora of background discussion, since key Second Temple finds came after the bulk of his work. Still, the commentary is a useful treatment of Mark with a full introduction of 149 pages. This introduction covers the history of the Gospel in the early church and in modern criticism; it provides a careful look at the manuscripts behind the text, vocabulary syntax and style, the Semitic background of the Gospel, his sources, the Markan materials, and its forms, literary structure, arrangement, theology, and historical value. On authorship, Taylor argues there can be no doubt the author was Mark, Peter's attendant. He argues that the external testimony to Mark is unanimous and that Mark is not a likely candidate to surface as author unless there was a reason to make the connection. He says the Gospel shows local knowledge of the region (places like Bethphage, Bethany, Gethsemene, and Golgotha). The Gospel dates to the decade of the sixties, with AD 65–67 likely, given things like the emphasis on persecution and suffering as well as Gentile freedom from the law. It was probably written for Rome as the anti-Marcionite prologue, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria testify.

Another major commentary from a past generation is from C. E. B. Cranfield.³ It also is focused on the Greek text and treats historicity questions unit by unit. The introduction is a crisp twenty-six pages. Like Taylor, Cranfield argues the authorship is not open to serious doubt. He responds to claims about uncertainty from Jerome and the lack of mention of many writers before him as assuming the identity as known. He challenges the idea that Mark has got the reference to the timing of Passover wrong as evidence against Markan authorship. Mark is to be dated between 65 and 70 CE. Mark writes for Gentiles, since he explains Jewish customs (Mark 7:3–4; 15:42). Rome is the likely locale, and its quick wide dissemination, as evidenced by its use in the other Gospels, also suggests the support of a key church. He sees Mark as an “extremely honest and conscientious compiler.”⁴ Mark had contact with Peter and used oral tradition. The fact that witnesses, both hostile and believing, were alive when he wrote limits the possibility of embellishment. Mark's willingness to publish embarrassing material also speaks to his general reliability.

² *The Gospel According to St Mark: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes and Indexes*. 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan 1966). The first edition was published in 1952.

³ *The Gospel According to St Mark*. The Cambridge Greek Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959). Supplemental notes were last added in 1977.

⁴ Cranfield, *St Mark*, 16.

Two more modest commentaries from the United Kingdom by Hurtado and Hooker express uncertainty about the exact setting of Mark.⁵ Both regard the only case for Mark being John Mark as the claims of tradition. They do not so much argue against Mark as argue there is no compelling evidence for him as the author. Hooker argues the identification may come from a deduction by Papias working with 1 Peter 5:13. Of course, Papias' claim, as reported in Eusebius, is that his knowledge of this link is from conversation in the context of his relationships, not from reading or hearing a text (through John the Elder, see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.7). The author writes to Gentiles explaining Semitic terms and Jewish customs. Hurtado argues the Gospel was written in a window from 50–75 CE, whereas Hooker opts for a date right around (probably after) 70 CE, somewhere between 65 and 75 CE. Dating is related to two issues: how the Olivet discourse is seen (give evidence of a post-destruction setting or not?) and how early to place it in light of dating of the other Synoptics. The setting might be Rome, but neither commentator stakes much in the possibility. What both commentators do is discuss the debate that goes on about Mark between historical roots and adaptation to the setting. Hooker argues that there is not creation of material *ex nihilo*, but there is adaptation of materials in arrangement, wording, and presentation. Both commentators stress the writing of the Gospel to present and defend the suffering of Jesus and the mystery of his messiahship as roots for a call to followers to be prepared to suffer in the journey of discipleship.

Two very full commentaries going different ways on the setting are by Rudolf Pesch and Robert Gundry.⁶ Pesch's sixty-nine-page introduction makes a case against accepting the traditional ascription of authorship to John Mark. As Hooker does, Pesch sees the connection as informed by an awareness of the 1 Peter link of Mark and Peter and uncertainty that John the Elder (noted by Eusebius of Papias) knew of a relationship between Peter and Mark. A desire for apologetic strengthening of the Gospel has forged the link. The author may have been named Mark, but cannot be tied to John Mark and to Peter. The locale is likely not Rome, but a Gentile-oriented community in the East (Galilee, Syria, or the Decapolis). The date,

⁵ Larry W. Hurtado, *Mark*. New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989); Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*. Black's New Testament Commentaries (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991).

⁶ Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium*. Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament. New ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1984); Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

because of the Olivet discourse and the dates of the Gospels that used Mark, is post-70 CE. Gundry saves his introduction for the end of his commentary. It runs twenty-nine detailed pages. He argues that the traditional ascription to Mark is old, reaching back to circa 100 CE, not 130 as many claim, and the conversation being passed on seems to belong to the late first century and involves only three steps (apostles, those who heard the apostles, Papias). The chronological order of discussion in Eusebius' *Chronicon* is for this conclusion. John the Elder and John the Apostle are not distinct figures as some argue, nor is Mark distinct from John Mark. This tradition is "as early and authoritative as one could wish."⁷ Details against this Markan connection to authorship on claims of community forming (versus a singular author background), supposed errors in Palestinian and Syrian geography (especially as it relates to issues in the north), ignorance of Jewish customs, the Gospel's handling of Peter, and appeals to 1 Peter 5:13 are not substantive objections, as Gundry works through each category one at a time. His responses are to the point with perhaps the one exception tied to issues of geography, which if they were to have come through Peter would not involve someone unconnected to the north, as Gundry claims for Mark by seeing the evangelist as a Jerusalemite responsible for these discrepancies. Gundry dates the Gospel pre-70 CE, likely before Peter died in the early sixties. He also contends for Rome as the locale, as extensive Latinisms in the book suggest. Mark is an apologetic, defending the cross and Jesus' suffering as part of God's plan where the cross is a cause of glory. Such a theme would be very appropriate for this locale where Christians were facing rising persecution.

The Word Biblical Commentary for Mark has been shared by two authors, Robert Guelich and Craig Evans, with the latter currently engaged in revising work on Mark 1:1–8:26 so his treatment of the Gospel can be full.⁸ This commentary is a very full treatment of issues and exegesis tied to Mark and follows the Word commentary format. Guelich's introduction is a mere twenty-four pages, but covers the key issues well. He defends the age of the authorship tradition and its roots. He argues there is no hard evidence for making a distinction between Mark and John Mark, calling it "special pleading." He notes that Papias' explanation of Petrine roots for

⁷ Gundry, *Mark*, 1034.

⁸ Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1:1–8:26*. Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1989); Craig Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*. Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001). Evans hopes to have the volume out in a few more years.

the material is oversimplified, given the evidence of the tradition in Mark being similar in form to what we see about Jesus elsewhere in the tradition. A question remaining for Guelich is the influence of someone like Peter on the traditions about Jesus that circulated broadly in the church. Guelich sees the remarks of Papias about Mark's lack of order as having less to do with chronology and more to do with rhetoric as fits a Greco-Roman context. He responds to geographical issues as Gundry did, noting the references are not as improbable as some claim. The locale of the Gospel is uncertain, with Latinisms slightly favoring the traditional locale of Rome. He sees it as more likely the Gospel was written at the beginning of Rome's War with the Jews than after Jerusalem's fall, so 67–69 CE. What this commentary on Mark shares between its two authors is full references to potential background from the Second Temple context, something Evans especially brings to his treatment of Mark.

Similar in approach to the setting is the work by Ben Witherington and his sixty-two-page introduction.⁹ For him, the Latinisms are the key evidence the work is rooted in Rome and not from a setting farther east. Order is about rhetoric, not chronology, as the remarks of Papias are full of rhetorical technical terminology that Witherington traces in some detail. It is hard to imagine someone making up a connection to Mark. Rather the tradition shows signs of being quite old and early. He also notes that Mark's themes on suffering and servanthood suggest a Pauline connection as well. Rome as the setting makes sense. The Gospel fits a post-Neronian persecution context in which Mark is defending the need to persevere through persecution. A date in the latter period from AD 66–70 is likely.

A classic evangelical commentary on Mark comes from William Lane.¹⁰ He sees Mark's task as "the projection of Christian faith in a context of suffering and martyrdom."¹¹ Twenty-eight pages of introduction overview Gospel criticism as well as the background for the Gospel. The rise of persecution meant Roman Christians needed to see the parallel between their situation and that of Jesus. He places the Gospel in the aftermath of the Neronian persecution in the second half of the sixties, agreeing with the testimony from the anti-Marcionite prologue and Irenaeus. The author is John Mark. Lane notes that Papias both sees a key role for Peter and yet

⁹ Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

¹⁰ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

¹¹ Lane, *Mark*, 15.

recognizes the initiative and independence of Mark. The Roman setting fits the Latinisms and the use of a four-watch method of reckoning time.

On the other hand, Eugene Boring produces a commentary that emphasizes Mark's theological creativity as an evangelist.¹² He argues in a consistent and thorough way for some distance between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. In fact, if one desires a handy source for how the argument can be made for Mark presenting an apocalyptic take on Jesus that incorporates the Messianic secret as well as the abiding tension between what he calls "Kenosis Christology" and "Epiphany Christology," then this commentary is an excellent guide. The key statement that drives the commentary is that

Whatever the first readers knew of the life-story of Jesus of Nazareth was subverted by the Markan story. They were not familiar with this plot: Jesus' presence in Galilee, his single journey to Jerusalem to be rejected, tried and crucified, the resurrection, and the surprising silence of the women. It saw the light of day for the first time when Mark invented it.¹³

What Boring later calls a two-level story with the contemporary needs of Mark's audience almost always trumping any historical concerns is a consistent theme of Boring's treatment of Mark. Twenty-five pages of introduction introduce the setting. The Gospel was written somewhere between 65 and 75 CE. The author is "a Christian teacher who writes not as a charismatic individual but as a member of the community."¹⁴ He seeks to curb the "irresponsible excesses" of the Christian prophets. Mark's tie to Peter is part of a later theological legitimization by the second-century church, given that the tradition is not consistent and is aimed at theological validity. The claim in defense of the tradition that the church would not make such a connection, given Mark's otherwise obscure role, is met with Boring's reply that such an argument is not used for non-canonical Gospels where apostolic names appear. However, the issue here involves both claimed authorship and reception, as well as a date that makes such an association even plausible. Mark has that combination, while the other Gospels Boring names (*Thomas, Judas, Matthias, Bartholomew*) do not, in part because there was doubt about the source of these other Gospels' materials. For Boring, the author may have been named Mark, but the material comes to him through community tradition versus contact with

¹² Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*. The New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

¹³ Boring, *Mark*, 9.

¹⁴ Boring, *Mark*, 20.

eyewitnesses such as Peter. The Gospel lacks accuracy about Palestine or Palestinian Judaism in references we will note and discuss later in our evaluation of Mark and the ancient testimony about his potential association with Peter. Mark likely wrote for Syria or Galilee. The message encourages discipleship in a threatening, confused, and conflicted situation. It is a work designed to edify his readers in faith.

Another full presentation of the Gospel comes from Joel Marcus.¹⁵ His introduction is sixty-two pages. Someone named Mark is the likely author, since the adoption of this name as a pseudonym is unlikely. More than that, the obscurity of this figure makes it likely that the name was attached for a reason. Against such a connection are the Gentile orientation of the Gospel and supposed issues tied to Jewish customs and Palestinian geography. Marcus argues the Gentile orientation does not make the author a non-Jew (e.g., Paul) but does see issues in the way what is said about handwashing in Mark 7 is treated, how the beginning of the day is reckoned in 14:12, and how the Law is handled in a kind of yes in terms of observing the thrust of the law (go to the temple, show mercy) but not the details (1:40–45; 2:23–28; 7:1–23). In the end, Marcus has responses to each of these concerns. For example, he notes the tension in how the law is seen is paralleled by the very Jewish Paul. He argues that positive evidence for John Mark is not overwhelming, since Marcus regards the strong apologetic tone in Papias as rendering that testimony suspect. So, in the end, Marcus argues we are likely dealing with a Mark, but not one with Petrine connections, although that connection cannot be entirely excluded. The case is “not proven.”¹⁶

My own view stands in contrast to Marcus here. It seems difficult to accept the initial reception of this Gospel, if the Mark in question is an unknown or random Mark. Surely something that ended up circulating early in the church’s distribution of accounts about Jesus would have had roots known to the early leaders who circulated it. After all, most Gospel scholars see Mark as a source used by the other Gospel writers.

Marcus argues that the setting more likely supposes a Syrian community and the Jewish War over a Roman context, even though there is no direct evidence of persecution of Christians in that war. Marcus argues such evidence does exist for the 132–35 CE war and that the same might have taken place earlier. The Gospel is written in the shadow of the Temple’s destruction, between 69 and 74 CE.

¹⁵ Marcus, *Mark 1–8*. The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1999); *Mark 8–16*. The Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

¹⁶ Marcus, *Mark*, 24.

Adele Collins has produced a full commentary that carefully examines the social background to Mark's Gospel and is especially rich in Hellenistic sources.¹⁷ Also full is her introduction, which comprises 125 pages. Mark is an eschatological sacred history written with an eye on Hellenistic historiography and biography. It is most like the didactic type of ancient biography as well as the historical type of ancient biography. It also has parallels with how Jews related history about key leaders like Moses, Elijah, Elisha, and David, but with an eschatological focus that serves as a counterpoint to these biblical foundational histories. She notes the importance of giving titles to works when they go public in the ancient world on the model of Galen's testimony in *De libris propriis liber*. This is a way to argue that the tradition tying the Gospel to Mark would likely have been old once it circulated. Papias is critical of Mark's lack of order, but has come to terms with it in the end. Collins argues that had 1 Peter 5 driven the identification, Silvanus would have likely been named as the Gospel's author. She sees the author as Jewish, not a Gentile, challenging claims in this direction that argue that the handling of Passover, handwashing, and the reckoning of the day by sunrise cannot come from a Jewish author. In the end, she appears to hold to the author as John Mark but never says so explicitly. Although the external evidence favors Rome as the setting, the internal evidence points to Syria. She notes that the geographical description of the Decapolis region, often challenged, has parallels in Pliny the Younger's work in that the area of Damascus is included (*Natural History* 5.16.74). The way coins are referenced also points to this setting.¹⁸ She makes a plausible case for this setting, although Rome remains a possibility as well. A careful walk through Mark 13 leads her to conclude the Gospel is written in a window from 66 to 74 CE. The slight differences between what is said and what took place in 70 CE cause her to prefer a date in 68–69 CE. The Gospel is a historical work on the ancient model, articulated by Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1.4.13 = 1360A), Quintilian (*Institutio Oratorio* 2.4.2), and Polybius (39.1.4 and 1.2.8) where memorable deeds are recorded. Collins also traces how the Messiah for Mark is tied to the revelation of the hidden Son of Man at the end of Jesus' ministry, a theme that has conceptual parallels in the *Similitudes* of 1 Enoch. This suffering is a model for the discipleship Mark also highlights.

¹⁷ Collins, *Mark*. Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

¹⁸ Collins follows the work of Gerd Theissen, *Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), for this position.

Two commentaries focused on application are by David Garland and myself.¹⁹ Both accept John Mark as the author. Garland prefers a date that is pre-70 CE during the period of the war, an option Bock also regards as quite possible, while noting that an earlier date in the late fifties to early sixties is possible if one accepts a strand of tradition from Clement of Alexandria that argues Mark wrote before Peter died. Both accept a Roman setting for the Gospel. Garland's treatment spends much time in the movement toward application, as do all the NIV Application commentaries. Bock's treatment of Mark is more concise, moving quickly between notes on key points in the Gospel and commentary that summarizes the unit's argument in a brief space.

Robert Stein treats this Gospel for the Baker series.²⁰ His introduction is thirty-five pages. He also notes how the tradition surrounding Mark as the author is early. Stein notes how inventing a name for a Gospel involving a non-apostle would be unusual. He cites all the major witnesses to authorship from the tradition up to Jerome, thereby showing the early and widespread affirmation that Mark is the author. Stein argues for a Roman setting, as he notes that the author knew Jewish practice and Aramaic, but his audience did not, a point more likely for Rome than the Decapolis or Syria. He also deals with claims about supposed geographical, chronological, and customs discrepancies along the lines noted previously. He argues that traces of perspective from within Syria and Palestine point to the roots of the Gospel tradition Mark works with rather than being an indication of Mark's setting. The reference to a "Syrophoenician" makes more sense for a Roman audience than a Syrian one, where Phoenician would have sufficed. Latinisms and the right of women to divorce also fit here. Stein rejects the attempt to date Mark early (in the fifties or early sixties) by appealing to what he sees as the open ending of Acts as setting a limit to where Mark must fit. He argues that Luke ignores the Pauline prison outcome not because he writes before its resolution, but because it rounds out the goal of Acts, namely, to show how the message got to Rome. So a date before 62 CE is not required for Mark. Stein traces the lack of evidence for a post-70 CE perspective in Mark 13 and prefers a date of

¹⁹ David Garland, *Mark*. The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Darrell Bock, "The Gospel of Mark," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew, The Gospel of Mark*. Vol. 11 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005).

²⁰ Stein, *Mark*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

68–69 CE. Mark’s Christology points to a “more-than-human” status for Jesus. He challenges the idea that the motif of the messianic secret is a Markan theological construction by noting its presence in primitive materials and the fact that a resurrection would not push one to make someone a messiah who was not already regarded as such. The secret makes historical sense because it averts direct challenge of Rome and was required to prevent misunderstanding about the type of suffering Jesus foresaw the Messiah possessing that the crowds did not anticipate. Stein also challenges the idea that Mark writes against the Twelve when he depicts them as so slow to respond to Jesus. He notes especially how positively they are portrayed at the start and the end of the Gospel, where they are even commissioned to take the message out (16:7). I might add that Peter gives the key confession of the book at Caesarea Philippi, a point that hardly shows the apostles as rejected figures. In the end, Mark wrote to encourage disciples in the face of persecution, appealing to the example of Jesus’ own suffering.

R. T. France has written a forty-five-page introduction that spends more time setting up his commentary than engaging in detailed introductory discussion.²¹ France says his commentary is about the exegesis of Mark and not a commentary on commentaries that gets lost in discussing theories of textual or tradition origin. Mark is modeled on Greco-Roman biography. France defends the external tradition about Mark, relying heavily on the work by Martin Hengel on the second Gospel.²² Hengel argues the Gospels would not have circulated anonymously once there was more than one circulating in the church. This would make authorship identification a very early activity for the church. A setting in Rome also seems to fit far better than a Syrian context. Translation of Aramaic, the explanation of terms like *two lepta* and the *aulē*, and the naming of the Syrophoenician woman point in this direction. France never explicitly discusses the date but questions the tradition that argues Mark wrote after Peter’s death while also noting Hengel’s preference for a date in 69 CE. He argues that because these Gospels were intended to circulate widely, determining a specific setting is not so important. For this emphasis, he appeals to work by Richard Bauckham who argues the Gospels were composed for a broad audience.²³

²¹ France, *The Gospel of Mark*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

²² Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*. ET (London: SCM, 1985).

²³ Bauckham, ed. *The Gospel for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998).