

INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Mark as Story

When we enter the story of the Gospel of Mark, we enter a world of conflict and suspense, a world of surprising reversals and strange ironies, a world of riddles and hidden meanings, a world of subversive actions and political intrigues. And the protagonist—Jesus—is most surprising of all.

The Gospel of Mark deals with the great issues—life and death, good and evil, God and Satan, triumph and failure, human morality and human destiny, and the nature of authority in the life of a nation. It is not a simple story in which virtue easily triumphs over vice, nor is it a collection of moral instructions for life. The narrative offers no simple answers but tough challenges fraught with irony and paradox: to be most important, one must be least; nothing is hidden except to become known; those who want to save their lives must lose them.

Within the story, characters may think they understand their situation only to discover their expectations overturned: the disciples follow Jesus expecting glory and power, only to find a call to serve and the threat of persecution; the authorities judge Jesus in order to preserve their traditions and authority, but they only bring judgment on themselves; the women come to anoint the dead Jesus, only to discover he is among the living.

Not only is the story itself full of mysteries and ironies, but the composer has told the story in order to transform the audience and to be a means to help bring about the rule of God. The composer of this story has used sophisticated storytelling techniques, developed the characters and the conflicts, and built suspense with deliberateness, telling the story to generate certain insights and responses in the audience. The ending has a surprising twist that leads the audience to reflect on their own relation to the drama. As a whole, the story seeks to shatter the customary way of seeing the world and invites hearers to embrace another, thus impelling them to action.

The Historical Context of the Gospel of Mark

We know little about the composer of Mark's Gospel or about the first hearers. The Gospel was unsigned and undated and contains nothing that attests explicitly either to its geographical location or to the specific circumstances of its earliest performances or even to the gender of its originator.¹ Nevertheless, for convenience, we will continue to refer to the composer as "Mark."²

Two major proposals have emerged about the origin of Mark's Gospel. Some scholars accept a tradition from the second-century church leader Papias, who attributed this Gospel to a certain John Mark,³ "an interpreter of the apostle Peter" who wrote down the traditions about Jesus but "not in the right order." These scholars place the origin of Mark's Gospel in Rome in the mid- to late 60s CE, some thirty years after the death of Jesus and shortly after the execution of Peter and the harsh persecution of Christians in Rome by Emperor Nero.⁴

Other scholars doubt the accuracy of the Papias tradition. They argue that a study of Mark, taken by itself apart from any traditions about it, suggests no connection between the anonymous composer and the apostle Peter. These scholars locate this Gospel in or near Palestine, usually in a rural context, perhaps Galilee or Syria. They date the Gospel during or just after the Roman-Judean War of 66 to 70 CE—a revolt by Israel against Roman domination that resulted in the catastrophic defeat of Israel by the Roman legions and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Judean temple.⁵ We favor this view.

There are also differences among scholars about whether the composer was a Judean or a Gentile, whether he came from the peasant class, and whether he had some education. Most scholars think Mark wrote to a community or communities composed of both Judeans and Gentiles, even as he drew upon the traditions of Israel to shape his narrative. Some argue that Mark intended for the story to be told to many different audiences across a wide geographical area.⁶

There is general agreement that the composer addressed people who faced rejection and persecution in their mission to spread the word about Jesus and the rule of God. The narrative suggests that persecution came from both the Judean and the Roman authorities. Mark composed his Gospel, in large part, in order to give people courage to live for the rule of God despite opposition and threat.

What Type of Story Did Mark Compose?

What were some of Mark's aims in the Gospel? Mark clearly was inviting people to put faith in the good news about the arrival of the rule of God and the way of life that the rule of God entailed. In so doing, he was leading them to become followers of Jesus. He was also warning them about the imminent culmination of the

rule of God over nations and people. And, as we have suggested, he was seeking to empower followers in the face of conflict and persecution.

What genre or type of story does the composer tell in order to generate such a significant impact on hearers? Again, scholars are not in agreement. Some see similarities to Greco-Roman literature—ancient biography, Greek tragedy, popular novellas, or storytelling in the mode of ancient rhetoric. Others compare the Gospel with Judean literature—an “apocalypse” revealing the secrets of the end-time, an enigmatic parable, a midrashic commentary on the Hebrew Bible, or a writing in the mode of a Hebrew Bible narrative. Mark’s Gospel may be a mixed genre. Many suggest that Mark has created a new type of composition, a gospel—a narrative acclamation of the “good news” of the rule of God: what God has done and will do through Jesus of Nazareth and those who follow him.⁷

Whatever Mark intended, he has surely produced a narrative that makes a claim upon hearers. This claim is strengthened by the fact that his story concerns real people, is based on actual events, and makes predictions about future events. And Mark has apparently brought all his storytelling capacities to bear on this task.

The Coherence of Mark’s Narrative

Using a variety of oral sources and perhaps a growing oral narrative, Mark has created a story with settings and events and characters. So we might ask: How does Mark’s Gospel fare as narrative? How unified or coherent is it?

At first glance, Mark’s narrative may seem very spare, with many gaps and breaks. However, it is important to observe that narratives in general are a lot like matter: They feel solid to the touch, but they are really composed mostly of empty space.⁸ Thus to a greater or lesser degree, every narrative has gaps—unexpressed assumptions, inconsistencies, lack of resolution, and so on. Many such gaps in Mark are of the kind inherent in any narrative, because of the selective nature of description and the limitations of using words to portray people, places, events, and the meaning of life. So the point is not whether Mark has gaps, but rather: How successful has the composer been in creating a coherent experience of a unified world? Does the story hang together? Is it consistent?

Our study reveals Mark’s narrative to be of remarkably whole cloth.⁹ The narrator’s point of view is consistent. The plot is coherent: Events that are anticipated come to pass; conflicts are resolved; prophecies are fulfilled. The characters are consistent from one scene to the next. Oral techniques of storytelling such as recurring designs, overlapping patterns, and interwoven motifs interconnect the narrative throughout. There is also a consistent thematic depiction of the human condition, faith, God’s rule, ethical choices, and the possibilities for human change. The unity of this Gospel is apparent in the integrity of the

story it tells, which gives a powerful overall rhetorical impact. Mark's complex artistry has been compared to an intricately composed "fugue" or to an "interwoven tapestry."¹⁰

Given the unity of Mark's story, it is clear that some gaps in Mark are intentional. There are gaps due to rhetorical strategies that create suspense, puzzlement, and an open ending; gaps due to a spare style that is suggestive rather than exhaustive in description; and gaps due to the episodic nature of a narrative designed for oral performance. There are additional unintentional gaps for twenty-first-century audiences that are due to our lack of knowledge that Mark and his first-century audiences possessed—knowledge we no longer share but which we must construct in order to understand the story.

Because the Gospel of Mark is a coherent narrative with a powerful impact, it is important to experience the narrative as a whole. Those who first experienced the Gospel of Mark would have heard the whole Gospel proclaimed to them in groups on single occasions. They undoubtedly were engaged by the drama of the story, experienced the tension of the conflicts, identified with the characters, and felt suspense about the outcome. Emerging from the experience of Mark's story world, they were perhaps able to see the world around them in a new way and to have new possibilities awakened in them.

Unfortunately, in our time, we usually encounter Mark's Gospel in bits and pieces—as verses quoted apart from their context or as episodes read at worship. This is similar to hearing quotations from a Shakespearean play without ever having seen the whole play. To get the full impact of Mark's story, we need to experience it in its entirety. Therefore, we encourage people to read or hear all of Mark at one time.

The Story World

As a coherent narrative, Mark's Gospel presents us with a "story world," a world that engages and grips us, a world such as we experience when we get "engrossed" in reading a novel or experiencing a theatrical play.

As a way to grasp the notion of a story world, consider the experience of seeing a film: The images and sounds on the screen draw us into another world, a world with its own imaginative past and future and its own universe of values. For a time, it seems as if we are no longer sitting in a movie theater or our own living room but are immersed in a different time and place, sharing the thoughts and emotions of the characters, undergoing the events they experience. In a sense, then, this story world has a life of its own, independent of the actual history on which the film might be based.

Clearly, we as viewers are engaging with a film through the filter of our own experiences, making our sense of this world as it unfolds before us. Nevertheless,

depending on the power of the film and its relation to our lives, we may come away from the experience with a deeper understanding of life or a new sense of purpose or a renewed capacity for courage and creativity or with a different view of current events. We have entered another world, and it has changed us. Reading stories has the same power as seeing films, and in reading we participate even more fully, because as readers we ourselves visualize the world suggested by the words we read.

The same dynamics would be true for ancient audiences experiencing a performance of Mark's Gospel. The Gospel would be especially powerful because it was a story close to their life world; it depicted events of momentous importance to them, and it related directly to them and their circumstances. The ancient audiences would be experiencing Mark's *version* of these events *told in such a way* as to have a particular impact on them and to result in changed attitudes and actions.

As such, when we approach Mark as a work that creates a story world, we see that the statements in Mark's narrative refer to the people, places, and events *as portrayed in the story*.¹¹ Just as a film may be a version of historical events, so also Mark is a version of historical events. Although Jesus, Herod, the high priests, and the Roman procurator Pilate were real people, they are, in Mark, nonetheless characters portrayed in a story. The desert, the synagogue, and Jerusalem are settings as depicted in the story world. The exorcisms, the journeys, the trial, and the execution are events depicted in the story world. The ancient performers of Mark drew their audiences into this story world. It is this story world that is the subject of our study. *Thus, unless otherwise identified as helpful background information from the general culture of the first century, all subsequent references to people, places, and events refer only to the story world inside Mark's narrative.*

Guidelines for Reading Mark as a Story

It is important to seek to understand a story on its own terms rather than to have it say what we want it to say. For modern readers seeking to understand Mark's Gospel on its own terms as a narrative, the following four guidelines may be helpful.

First, as we have suggested, read Mark as story rather than as history. For if we look through Mark as a window into history, we will think first of the historical figure Jesus rather than of Mark's *portrayal* of Jesus. If we look through the story, then, if there is something we do not understand, we may think that Mark omitted something about Jesus from his narrative, and we will go looking to other sources to find the answer. By contrast, if we look at Mark as a portrayal of characters, settings, and events as they are presented to us *in the narrative*, then, if there is something we do not understand, we will reread Mark carefully to find within the story itself the basis for clarity.

Second, read Mark independently from the other Gospels. In narrative study, we cannot legitimately use the other Gospels to “fill out” or to “fill in”—as a way to explain or elaborate Mark’s story. For example, if we read Mark’s story in light of the birth narratives from Matthew or Luke, we have already significantly changed Mark’s story, because Mark does not contain these events. Or if we read an episode in Mark in light of details given about the same episode in one of the other Gospels, we will have changed Mark’s story. Mark’s story is complete in itself apart from the other Gospels—which are themselves also, in the same sense, self-contained stories about Jesus. Consider, for a time, treating Mark’s Gospel as if it were the only story we know about Jesus.

Third, avoid reading modern cultural assumptions into Mark’s first-century story. We bring to our reading many assumptions from the Western postindustrial, electronic, and individualistic age that are radically different from first-century assumptions. Because Mark is a first-century narrative, it is important to use social and cultural patterns from the first century as a basis for understanding Mark’s story—in the same way that we need to know about the language, customs, and culture of the sixteenth century in order to understand the plays of Shakespeare.

Fourth, avoid reading modern theologies about Jesus back into Mark’s story. We may bring to our reading of Mark our own image of Jesus, for example, Jesus as “meek and mild,” in the words of the hymn. Yet Mark’s Jesus is neither meek nor mild. Or we may read into Mark’s story later doctrines about the Trinity or the two natures of Christ. Or we may think of Jesus’ death in Mark as an atoning sacrifice for sins to be forgiven. Or we may think that the rule of God is only about individual salvation rather than a vision for the transformation of nations and all creation. Since these ideas are not present in Mark, however much they do or do not represent historical or religious truth, they should not be used to interpret Mark.

These four guidelines are really not possible to carry out in any absolute way, given the nature of texts and our own subjectivity. Nevertheless, our continual efforts to work at these guidelines will bear fruit as we seek to understand Mark’s narrative on its own terms.

A Narrative Method for Interpreting Mark

How do we unpack a narrative to understand what it means and to see how it works? We can point to five key features of narrative for analysis—narrator, setting, plot, character, and rhetoric.

Narrator refers to the way the story gets told—the voice of the storyteller, point of view, the overarching beliefs and ethical norms of the narrative, the manner of address and tone of the narrative, as well as the storytelling techniques

in the narrative. The narrator is not the author/composer, but a device the composer uses to get the story told.

Setting refers to the contexts within the story—the depiction of the cosmos, the social and political world of the story, as well as the specific temporal and spatial contexts in which events take place.

Plot involves events—their order in the narrative, sequential relations, turning points and breakthroughs, and the development and resolution of conflicts.

Characters are the actors in the story—their identity and place in society, their motives and drives, their traits, their ways of relating to each other, their disclosure in the plot, as well as the changes and developments that take place in the characters as a result of the action.

These first four features of narrative represent basic features of an overall view of life. The narrator manifests the beliefs and values of the story. The setting provides the possibilities and limitations within which people live out their lives. The plot represents a particular expression of movement from past to present to future. The characters reveal a view of human nature reflected in individuals and communities. Together these four features in a narrative constituting a way of viewing the world that readers and hearers might consider for their own lives.

Finally, the fifth element of narrative is *rhetoric*, which refers to the various ways an author or composer may use the combined features of narrative to persuade readers and hearers to enter and embrace the world presented by the narrative. As such, it is not enough to ask what a narrative *means*. We must also ask what a narrative *does* to change its audiences. A study of the rhetoric of Mark identifies how the narrative may transform its audiences.

To understand fully the dynamics of rhetoric, it is necessary to explain the concept of an “ideal audience.” In the conclusion of our study, we will imagine the responses of one possible real audience of Mark’s Gospel. However, throughout our study, we will be using the construct of an ideal audience or ideal hearers. For example, we will often mention how the narrator leads audiences or hearers to respond in certain ways to various aspects of the story world. In most cases, these references are not to actual audiences, since it is not possible to predict the responses of actual audiences.

Hence, in order to speak about the rhetorical impact of Mark’s story, we employ the hypothetical concept of an ideal audience. The ideal audience is an imaginary construct with all the ideal responses *implied by* the narrative itself, as best we can construe it. It is the audience that the narrator seeks to create and shape in the course of telling the story. Constructing a portrait of an ideal audience is a matter of inferring from each phrase in the narrative how an audience is being led to react and how these implied responses accumulate to generate an overall impact on an audience. We modern readers of Mark can track these implied responses in part by attending to what we may infer as ideal responses of ourselves as *ideal readers*.

We do not intend for our study of these five features of narrative to fragment the story, for we will be looking at the whole story from each of these different perspectives. Nor do we mean for our interpretation to be an abstract substitute for the story itself. We do not want to reduce the story to a moral or a message or a summary, for then it is no longer a story. A story is not just a vehicle for an idea, such that the story can be discarded once one has the idea.¹² Rather, our goal is to enhance the experience of the story as a story. Looking at these features of story can help us grasp the story more fully. For it is only in the reading and the hearing of the story itself that we experience its magic and its capacity to change us.