

T H E H O L M A N

A P O L O G E T I C S

C O M M E N T A R Y

O N T H E B I B L E

The Gospels and Acts

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The Gospels and Acts

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This project is dedicated to Bible readers who find themselves drawn to the difficult subjects, and who take hard questions and critical viewpoints seriously enough to engage them with honesty and integrity in a bid to offer faith-affirming answers. As Jesus said, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32).

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by David Noel Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1998.
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
ACCS	Ancient Commentary on the New Testament
ACNT	Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament
AGJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
AJSR	<i>Association for Jewish Studies Review</i>
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
ANTC	Abingdon New Testament Commentaries
BAA	<i>Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur</i> , by W. Bauer, K. Aland, and B. Aland. 6th ed. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988.
BAGD	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , by W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BDAG	<i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , by W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
BDF	<i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and R. W. Funk. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.
BDR	<i>Grammatik des newtestamentlichen Griechisch</i> . F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and F. Rehkopf. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984.
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
<i>BRev</i>	<i>Bible Review</i>
<i>BSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>

<i>BurH</i>	<i>Buried History</i>
Byz	Byzantine (manuscripts)
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
BZNW	Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche
c.	circa
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CC	Continental Commentaries
CD	Cairo Genizah copy of the <i>Damascus Document</i>
<i>CIG</i>	<i>Corpus inscriptionum graecarum</i> . Edited by A. Boeckh. Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1828–77.
<i>CIL</i>	<i>Corpus inscriptionum latinarum</i>
CGCT	Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary
CGTSC	Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges
ConBNT	Coniectanea neotestamentica or Coniectanea biblica: New Testament Series
<i>DBI</i>	<i>Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation</i> . Edited by J. Hayes. Nashville: Abingdon, 1998.
<i>Did</i>	<i>Didaskalia</i>
<i>DJBP</i>	<i>Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period</i> . Edited by J. Neusner and W. S. Green. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999.
<i>DJG</i>	<i>Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels</i> . Edited by J. B. Green, S. McKnight, and I. H. Marshall. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992.
<i>DLNT</i>	<i>Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments</i> . Edited by R. P. Martin and P. H. Davids. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012.
<i>EBC</i>	<i>The Expositor's Bible Commentary</i>
<i>EDBT</i>	<i>Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology</i> . Edited by W. A. Elwell. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996.
<i>EDNT</i>	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . H. Balz and G. Schneider. 3 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978–80.
<i>EJR</i>	<i>Encyclopedia of Jewish Religion</i> . Edited by R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder. New York: Adama, 1996.
EKKNT	Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
<i>EstBib</i>	<i>Estudios Bíblicos</i>
ESV	English Standard Version
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
Gk	Greek
<i>GNS</i>	<i>Good News Studies</i>
Hb	Hebrew
HNT	Handbuch zum Neuen Testament

HTKNT	Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
<i>IBD</i>	<i>Illustrated Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by J. D. Douglas. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980.
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>IEJ</i>	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
<i>IG</i>	<i>Inscriptiones graecae</i> . Editio minor. Berlin, 1924–.
<i>ILS</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae</i> . Edited by Hermann Dessau. Berolini: apud Weidmannos, 1906.
<i>ISBE</i>	<i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
<i>JSP</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KEK	Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament
KJV	King James Version
<i>L.A.B.</i>	<i>Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
lit	literally
LXX	Septuagint
<i>m.</i>	<i>Mishnah</i>
MM	Moulton and Milligan. <i>The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament</i> . London, 1930. Reprint, Peabody, Mass., 1997.
MS(S)	Manuscript(s)
MT	Masoretic (Hebrew) text
n	note (footnote)
NAC	New American Commentary
NASB	New American Standard Bible (1995)
<i>NBD</i>	<i>New Bible Dictionary</i>
NCB	New Century Bible
<i>Neot</i>	<i>Neotestamentica</i>
<i>NETS</i>	<i>A New English Translation of the Septuagint</i> . Edited by Albert Pietersma and Benjamin Wright. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
<i>NewDocs</i>	<i>New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity</i> . Edited by G. H. Horsely and S. Llewelyn. North Ryde, N.S.W., 1981–
<i>NIB</i>	<i>The New Interpreter's Bible</i>
NIBCNT	New International Biblical Commentary on the New Testament
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>NIDNTT</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i> . Edited by

	C. Brown. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986.
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NIVAC	The NIV Application Commentary
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Novum Testamentum Supplements
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
NTL	New Testament Library
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>NTT</i>	<i>Norsk Teologisk Tidsskrift</i>
<i>OGIS</i>	<i>Orientalis graeci inscriptiones selectae</i> . Edited by W. Dittenberger. 2 vols. Leipzig, 1903–1905.
OT	Old Testament
ÖTK	Ökumenischer Taschenbuch-Kommentar
<i>pc</i>	a few manuscripts
<i>PGM</i>	<i>Papyri graecae magicae: Die griechischen Zauberpapyri</i> . Edited by K. Preisendanz. Berlin, 1928.
PNTC	Pelican New Testament Commentaries
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
Q	<i>Quelle</i> , which means “source” in German. Traditions used by the Gospel writers.
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue Biblique</i>
RNT	Regensburger Neues Testament
<i>SB</i>	<i>Sammelbuch griechischer Urkunden aus Aegypten</i> . Edited by F. Preisigke et al. Vols. 1– , 1915–
<i>SBLSP</i>	<i>Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers</i>
<i>SE</i>	<i>Studia evangelica</i>
<i>SecCent</i>	<i>Second Century</i>
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SP	Sacra Pagina
Str-B	<i>Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch</i> , by H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck. 6 vols. Munich: Beck, 1922–61.
<i>t.</i>	tractate of the Tosefta
<i>TCGNT</i>	<i>Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament</i> . Edited by Bruce M. Metzger. 2nd ed. United Bible Societies, 1994.
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76.
Tg.	Targum

THKNT	Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TR	Textus Receptus
<i>TynB</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WJK	Westminster John Knox
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZRGC</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte</i>

Greek Manuscripts:

Ⲛ	Codex Sinaiticus, 4th century
A	Codex Alexandrinus, 5th century
B	Codex Vaticanus, 4th century
Byz	The majority of Byzantine mss, 10th–16th centuries
C	Ephraemi Rescriptus, 5th century
D	Bezae Cantabrigiensis, 6th century
K	Uncial ms in Paris, 9th century
L	Regius, 8th century
P	Papyrus
T	Uncial ms in Rome, 5th century
W	Freer Gospels, 5th century
Z	Codex Dublinensis Rescriptus, 6th /5th century
Γ	Uncial ms in Leningrad and Oxford, 10th century
Δ	St. Gall, 9th century
Θ	Koridethi, 9th century
Π	Codex Petropolitanus, 9th century
Ψ	Athos, 8th/9th century

APOLOGETICS COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL OF MARK

INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Mark, the shortest of the four canonical Gospels, tells the story of Jesus, from baptism to the empty tomb, in an impressive and compelling manner. Although neglected in the early centuries of the Church, this Gospel has enjoyed a great deal of recent scholarly attention throughout the twentieth century.

Authorship

The oldest testimony that we have concerning the authorship of the Gospel of Mark comes from Papias (AD 60–130), an early second-century church father who was bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor. Papias relates a tradition that he received from an elder (“presbyter”) who had been acquainted with some of the apostles:

And the elder used to say this: “Mark, having become Peter’s interpreter, wrote down accurately everything he remembered, though not in order, of the things either said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, followed Peter, who adapted his teachings as needed but had no intention of giving an ordered account of the Lord’s sayings. Consequently Mark did nothing wrong in writing down some things as he remembered them, for he made it his one concern not to omit anything that he heard or to make any false statement in them.” Such, then, is the account given by Papias with respect to Mark (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15).

Eusebius extracted this statement from Papias’s five-volume *Exegesis of the Lord’s Oracles* (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.1). Today all that remains of the work are several quotations, mostly cited in Eusebius. Papias wrote his work sometime between AD 110 and 120.

It is remarkable that the early church attributed authorship to Mark, who is thought to be John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas (Acts 12:12), rather than to Peter, the source of the material preserved in the Gospel of Mark. The tradition that Mark was the author must have been well known, for it is not easy to explain assigning the Gospel to him if there was any uncertainty. If there was any doubt, surely it would have been better to assign authorship to Peter, the rock on which Jesus was building his Church (Matt 16:16–19), rather than to Mark, whose failure on the first missionary journey caused a rift between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36–39) and who, some believed, was the man who fled naked the night Jesus was arrested

(Mark 14:51–52). The church’s attribution of the Gospel of Mark to Mark and not to a famous figure like Peter contrasts sharply with the habit of the authors of late fictional Gospels and Gospel-like writings who regularly assigned their works to major figures, usually apostles and sometimes Jesus himself.

Date and Purpose

Careful study of Mark 13 (Hengel 1985, 14–28) and a few related passages suggests that the Gospel of Mark was published in the early stages of the Jewish war with Rome (AD 66–70). Mark 13 begins with Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of the Herodian temple (v. 2). The disciples ask when this will happen (v. 4), and the long discourse that follows describes the signs that will precede the coming of the “Son of Man” (v. 26). Among these signs will be the appearance of false messiahs and false prophets (vv. 5–6, 21–22), as well as wars and rumors of war (vv. 7–8). But the major sign that will signify that the end is near will be the setting up of the “abomination that causes desolation” in the temple (v. 14).

The events of the 40s–60s correspond in many ways to these signs. But if Mark wrote sometime after 70, as many scholars believe, then the prediction of the abomination could not be thus fulfilled. Sensing this problem, some interpreters argue that the abomination was the occupation of the temple precincts by the rebels, or Titus’ entry into the sanctuary as it burned. But these proposals do not work. Jesus tells his disciples to flee from Jerusalem when they see the abomination set up. But as it happened, it was too late to flee the city when the rebels occupied the temple precincts, and certainly too late to flee when the Roman army stormed the Temple Mount and General Titus entered the sanctuary. Moreover, verse 18 urges believers to pray that this would not happen in winter. But the taking of Jerusalem and the horrors that resulted occurred in the summer. On any fair reading of Mark 13, therefore, the events of AD 70 do not seem to lie behind the warnings.

It is more probable that Mark 13 reflects the very beginning of the war, possibly even a time shortly before the war began. It is a time of rumors of war, perhaps the early stages of the revolt itself. It reflects a time when various would-be prophets and deliverers proffered signs of salvation. It was a time when Christians believed that the abomination of which Jesus spoke would be set up in the temple, thus making worship there impossible. It would be a time to flee the city, for judgment and the appearance of the Son of man would be quite near (vv. 14–27).

If the Gospel of Mark was indeed written in the middle 60s, then it was written at a time of severe Christian persecution at the hands of Nero (ruled AD 54–68). This emperor, increasingly hated and despised by his own people, promoted his deification. More than any emperor before him, he encouraged people to refer to him as “god,” “Son of god,” “lord,” “savior,” and “benefactor.” Written in the last two or three years of Nero’s life, when the Jewish rebellion was in its early stages, when persecution of Christians was severe, and when many prophets and deliverers were making themselves known, the author of Mark puts forward Jesus as the true Son of God.

Mark's opening verse makes the Gospel's purpose clear: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). Mark very carefully chose his language, deliberately echoing the language of the imperial ruler cult, as seen in an inscription in honor of Caesar Augustus: "the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning for the world of the good news." Mark challenges this imperial myth, asserting that the good news for the world began with Jesus Christ, the true Son of God (see Mark 15:39, where the Roman centurion admits upon seeing the impressive death of Jesus: "This man really was God's Son!").

From this extraordinary claim at the beginning of his narrative, to the sudden and dramatic discovery of the empty tomb, Mark takes pains to show that Jesus is truly God's Son, despite rejection by the religious authorities of his time and his execution at the hands of the Roman governor. The Julian emperors, whose latest and most unfortunate manifestation at the time of the publication of Mark is the demented Nero, can provide no compelling candidates for recognition as the Son of God, whose life and death are truly of benefit to humankind. To the Roman world Mark proffers Jesus and his message of the kingdom of God and by doing so encourages the faithful to remain steadfast, and enjoins the critics and opponents of the Christian faith to reconsider.

Provenance

Scholars generally agree that the Gospel of Mark was probably written in Rome, or at least Italy. This is based primarily on fairly consistent patristic testimony (France 2002, 37–38), the presence of Latinisms (Gundry 1993, 1044), and the connection between Mark and Peter's ministry in Rome (1 Pet 5:13; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1). Patristic testimony includes Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 2.15–16), Epiphanius (*Against Heresies* 6.10), Clement of Alexandria (in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.6–7; *Adumbrationes* on 1 Pet 5:13; *Letter of Clement of Alexandria on Secret Mark*), and the Anti-Marcionite Prologue.

General Reliability of the Manuscripts Available to Us

The listing below identifies the earliest and most important Greek witnesses to the Gospel of Mark. With the exceptions of the eighth- and ninth-century MSS L and 33, which evidently are copies of early and reliable MSS, the witnesses that are listed date from the third–sixth centuries (π^{45} could date to the end of the second century).

MS	CENTURY	MARCAN CONTENTS
π^{45}	III	4:36–40; 5:15–26; 5:38–6:3; 6:16–25, 36–50; 7:3–15; 7:25–8:1; 8:10–26; 8:34–9:9; 9:18–31; 11:27–12:1; 12:5–8, 13–19, 24–28
π^{84}	VI	2:2–5, 8–9; 6:30–31, 33–34, 36–37, 39–41
π^{88}	IV	2:1–26

⌘	IV	1:1–16:8
A	V	1:1–16:20
B	IV	1:1–16:8
C	V	1:17–6:31; 8:5–12:29; 13:19–16:20
D	V	1:1–16:14 (16:15–20 added later)
L	VIII	1:1–10:15; 10:30–15:1; 15:20–16:20
N	VI	5:20–7:4; 7:20–8:32; 9:1–10:43; 11:7– 12:19; 14:25–15:23, 33–42
P	VI	1:2–11; 3:5–17; 14:13–24, 48–61; 15:12–37
W	V	1:1–15:12; 15:39–16:20
S	VI	1:1–16:13
F	VI	1:1–14:62
059 + 0215	IV/V	15:20–21, 26–27, 29–38
064 + 074	VI	1:11–22; 1:34–2:12; 2:21–3:3; 3:27–4:4; 5:9–20
067	VI	9:14–22; 14:58–70
069 (= POxy 3)	V	10:50–51; 11:11–12
072	V/VI	2:23–3:5
080	VI	9:14–18, 20–22; 10:23–24, 29
083 + 0112	VI/VII	13:12–14, 16–19, 21–24; 14:29–45; 15:27–16:8; short ending; 16:9–10
087	VI	12:32–37
0143	VI	8:17–18, 27–28
0184	VI	15:36–37, 40–41
0187	VI	6:30–41
0188	IV	11:11–17
0212	III	15:40, 42 (from the <i>Diatessaron</i>)
0213	V/VI	3:2–3, 5
0214	IV/V	8:33–37
0263	VI	5:26–27, 31
0274	V	6:56–7:4, 6–9, 13–17, 19–23, 28–29, 34–35; 8:3–4, 8–11; 9:20–22, 26–41; 9:43–10:1, 17–22
0292	VI	6:55–7:5
33	IX	1:1–9:30; 11:12–13:10; 14:60–16:20

Although not as well attested as the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John, the MS attestation for Mark is early and substantial. It is still possible that additional witnesses to Mark will be found among the numerous unpublished Oxyrhynchus papyri. The era of manuscript discovery is not over. Finally, it should be stressed that the Gospel of Mark and other NT writings have not been found in Qumran's cave 7. (These small Greek fragments, some of which a few scholars at one time identified

as belonging to Mark and other NT writings, are now recognized as Jewish and pre-Christian.) Several of the small Greek fragments have been identified as belonging to the book of *Enoch*.

Mark's Relation to Matthew and Luke

Most scholars today are rightly convinced that the Synoptic Gospels are the oldest Gospels. But which one of these three is the oldest? Augustine (d. c. AD 430) believed that Matthew was written first and that Mark is in essence an abridgment of it. Johann Jacob Griesbach in 1776 proposed that Matthew was composed first, that Luke was composed next making use of Matthew, and that Mark was composed last conflating and abridging both Matthew and Luke. The Griesbach hypothesis was influential for about a century, but began losing ground to Markan priority in the years following the publication of a work by Heinrich Julius Holtzmann in 1863. Holtzmann argued that an early version of Mark ("source A") was written first and that Matthew and Luke independently of one another made use of it and another source of sayings ("source B"). The latter source eventually came to be called "Q," which is an abbreviation for the German word *Quelle*, meaning source.

Following the influential study of B. H. Streeter in 1924, the basic principles of Holtzmann's explanation of the relationships among the Synoptic Gospels became the dominant view. Although in the last thirty-five years or so William Farmer and a small number of like-minded colleagues have vigorously argued for a return to the Griesbach hypothesis, the majority of Gospel scholars still holds to Markan priority.

Markan priority appears to be the most prudent position for several reasons: (1) Mark's literary style sometimes lacks the sophistication and polish often seen in Matthew and Luke. This phenomenon is more easily explained in terms of Matthean and Lukan improvement upon Mark, rather than Markan degradation of Matthean and Lukan style.

(2) In the Markan Gospel Jesus and the disciples are sometimes portrayed in a manner that appears undignified. More often than not these potentially embarrassing passages are touched up or omitted altogether by Matthew and Luke. Again, it is easier to explain the phenomena in terms of Matthean and Lukan improvements upon Mark, rather than the reverse.

(3) The phenomena of agreements and disagreements among the Synoptic Gospels are more easily explained in reference to Markan priority. Among other things, we observe that where there is no Mark to follow (e.g., no infancy narrative, no "Q" material) this is where Matthew and Luke diverge from one another. This observation is more easily explained in terms of Markan priority and Matthew's and Luke's independence from one another than in terms of Mark writing last and making use of Matthew and Luke. Markan priority also avoids the problem of trying to explain Luke's inconsistent use of Matthew.

(4) The small amount of material that is unique to the Gospel of Mark also supports Markan priority. This material consists of 1:1; 2:27; 3:20–21; 4:26–29;

7:2–4, 32–37; 8:22–26; 9:29, 48–49; 13:33–37; 14:51–52. In reviewing this material we should ask which explanation seems most probable, that Mark added it or that Matthew and Luke found it in Mark and chose to omit it. The nature of the material supports the latter alternative, for it seems more likely that Matthew and Luke chose to omit the flight of the naked youth (14:51–52); the odd saying about being “salted with fire” (9:48–49); the strange miracle where Jesus effects healing in two stages (8:22–26); the even stranger miracle where Jesus puts his fingers in a man’s ears, spits, and touches his tongue (7:32–37); and the episode where Jesus is regarded as mad and his family attempts to restrain him (3:20–22). If we accept the Griesbach-Farmer Hypothesis, we would then have to explain why Mark would choose to add these odd, potentially embarrassing materials, only to omit the Sermon on the Mount/Plain, the Lord’s Prayer, and numerous other teachings and parables found in the larger Gospels.

(5) The final consideration that adds weight to the probability of Markan priority has to do with the results of the respective hypotheses. The true test of any hypothesis is its effectiveness. In biblical studies a theory should aid the exegetical task. The theory of Markan priority has provided just this kind of aid. Not only has Synoptic interpretation been materially advanced because of the conclusion, and now widespread assumption, of Markan priority, but the development of critical methods oriented to Gospel research, such as Form and Redaction Criticism, which have enjoyed success, has also presupposed Markan priority. In countless studies, whether dealing with this or that pericope, or treating one of the Synoptic Gospels in its entirety, it has been recognized over and over again that Matthew and Luke make the greatest sense as interpretations of Mark; but Mark makes little sense as a conflation and interpretation of Matthew and Luke.

The evidence is compelling that Mark represents the oldest surviving account of Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection. What sources the evangelist Mark made use of, if any, will in all probability remain a mystery. That he made use of some written material seems likely. That he made use of some eyewitness testimony is also probable; it cannot be ruled out. How early this Gospel was written will be considered shortly. But now we must ask what Mark is literarily.

What Kind of Literature Is Mark?

Mark is the only Gospel to call itself a “gospel” (see 1:1, “The beginning of the gospel,” or “good news”). This word has its origins in Isaiah (see 40:9; 41:27; 52:7; 61:1) but also carried important connotations in the Greco-Roman world (see comments on 1:1–3 below). The genre of Mark is for the most part biography, similar to the biography of Elijah and Elisha in the Old Testament (1 Kings 17–2 Kings 9) or examples of popular biography found in the Pseudepigrapha (such as *Lives of the Prophets* or *Joseph and Aseneth*). The distinctive features of Mark’s biography are the exclusive focus on Jesus and the emphasis on the proclamation of his message.

The “good news” has been realized with the appearance of Jesus. Now the story must be told and the message must be proclaimed (Guelich 1989, xix–xxii).

Mark may be a somewhat novel form of biography, but one must not expect of it what we moderns usually expect of biography. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark tells us nothing about Jesus’ birth and upbringing. The Evangelist says absolutely nothing about Jesus’ appearance or personality. Apart from his teaching and one or two details, Mark tells nothing of Jesus’ habits, likes, dislikes, or interests. The Evangelist is principally concerned with Jesus’ public ministry, the impact he had on others, and his fate in Jerusalem. But this account is not in a strictly chronological, developmental order. The order is thematic. The stories and teachings are sometimes clustered around common themes. When and where these things happened or were spoken often cannot be determined. The Markan presentation is largely guided by literary and theological interests.

Earliest Citations

The Gospel of Mark is cited and quoted many times in such second- to early third-century church fathers as Tertullian, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, Origen, and Cyprian.

Establishment in the Canon

From their beginnings in single locations in the ancient world, the individual Gospels spread until, according to F. F. Bruce, “probably quite early in the second century, the fourfold Gospel began to circulate among the churches in place of a single Gospel writing” (*DJG*, 1992, 94). According to Justin Martyr, by the middle of the second century two groups of writings were read in the church (of equal status or value): the Gospels (called “the memoirs of the apostles”) and the OT Prophets (*First Apology* 67). Inspired by the heretical Marcionite canon, which appeared in 144, the church responded by identifying its own list. The Muratorian Canon, believed to be the oldest list of NT canonical books, which dates to about 170, lists four Gospels. Although Matthew and Mark are not mentioned (the document is fragmentary), the “third” Gospel is Luke and the “fourth” is John. Although other Gospels were known at the time (the Gospel of Peter and the Gospel of the Hebrews, for example), Tatian, in about 160, took the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and made a single Gospel harmony called the *Diatessaron*. Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 3.11.8) responded to the appearance of other Gospels with an argument that there were four and only four Gospels.

APOLOGETICS COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL OF MARK

MARK 1:1–3

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ²As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

**Look, I am sending My messenger ahead of You,
who will prepare Your way.**

³ **A voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
Prepare the way for the Lord;
make His paths straight!**

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (1:1): Mark’s opening words, “the beginning [*arche*] of the gospel [*euangelion*] of Jesus Christ the Son of God [*huios theou*],” serve more or less as the title of the work as a whole. This is the normal function of the opening words (the *incipit*, “it begins”) of books in antiquity. The entire story of Jesus’ ministry, including his crucifixion, is gospel or “good news” for the world. But Mark’s opening words also recall the language of the Roman imperial cult, rooted especially in Caesar Augustus (30 BC—AD 14). The Priene inscription (9 BC) is in this instance very significant:

Providence . . . has given us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humanity, sending him as a savior [*soter*], both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and put all things in order . . . Caesar, by his appearance [*epiphanein*] excelled our expectations and surpassed all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done . . . the birthday of the god [*theos*] Augustus was the beginning [*archesthai*] for the world of the good news [*euangelia*] that came by reason of him.

Anyone acquainted with NT Christology will immediately recognize several important parallels, for NT writers speak of the *epiphany* of Jesus (2 Thess 2:8; 1 Tim 6:14; 2 Tim 1:10; 4:1, 8; Titus 2:13) the *savior* of the world (Luke 2:11; John 4:42; Acts 5:31; 13:23; Eph 5:23; Phil 3:20; 2 Tim 1:10; Titus 1:4; 2:13; 3:6; 2 Pet 1:1, 11; 2:20; 3:2, 18; 1 John 4:14).

Mark’s language (esp. “beginning,” “gospel,” and “Son of God”) deliberately echoes the Roman doctrine of the divine emperor. (On its OT antecedents, see comments on 1:14–15 below.) In effect, the Evangelist is saying to the Roman world: Caesar is neither the beginning of the gospel (or good news) for the world, nor God’s son; Messiah Jesus is. As such, Mark’s opening words directly challenge the Roman

emperor cult (see comments on Mark 15:39 below) and offer a powerful apologetic in support of the Christian movement and its faith in Jesus.

If Mark was composed and circulated in the late 60s, then the Evangelist's identification of Jesus as the true "Son of God" would be highlighted against the backdrop of the decline of the myth of the divine Roman emperor. After the Senate declared him a public menace, Nero committed suicide in 68. He was followed in rapid succession by Galba, Otho, and Vitellius. The first and last were murdered; the second committed suicide. Not one ruled for more than a few months. Vespasian, who ascended to the throne in late 69, was the fifth Roman emperor and "son of God" in two years. The dubiousness of the Roman imperial myth had become apparent to many. In this setting Mark presented to the Roman public a new model of divine leadership, the true "Son of God," with whom the good news for the world truly begins.

Mark's silence on Jesus' birth (1:1): By identifying Jesus' intersection with John the Baptist as "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ," does Mark indicate that the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke are irrelevant or legendary? Mark begins his Gospel with a quotation from Isaiah 40 in order to show that his focus will be on Jesus the divine warrior who will lead his people from their bondage and exile. It is commonly understood that in his prophecies of restoration from exile, Isaiah portrays the restoration as a new exodus. Rikki E. Watts has shown that "for Mark the long-awaited coming of Yahweh as King and Warrior has begun, and with it, the inauguration of Israel's eschatological comfort" (1997, 90). The Gospel's action begins in the wilderness, indicating that God's people are still in exile, outside the land of promise and blessing (cf. Evans 1997, 317–18).

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke, on the other hand, begin with birth narratives in part to emphasize the Davidic lineage of Jesus, who is coming to his people in fulfillment of the Davidic covenant. Mark also shows Jesus' Davidic lineage (Mark 10:47–48; 11:10; 12:35–37), but does not place the emphasis there as Matthew and Luke do. This is why Mark has no genealogy or birth narrative. For this situation and others that will arise during our examination of the Gospel of Mark, it is important to note that an author's silence about a given event or fact does not count as a denial of that event or fact.

Son of God (1:1): A few early manuscripts omit the words "Son of God." Many others contain them. Some scholars think the words were added later, arguing that early Christian scribes were more likely to add these words than to omit them. However, some early scribes may have accidentally omitted these words because of the *ou* (genitive) endings for Jesus, Christ, Son, and God. It is not difficult to imagine such an omission due to the scribe's eye returning to the wrong place, especially if these words were presented in abbreviated form (as *nomina sacra*, "sacred names"). Two factors strongly support the originality of the words. First, the parallel of Mark's opening words with the language of the imperial cult of the divine emperor (with

whom “begins” the “gospel” for the world) supports the original, intentional inclusion of “Son of God” in the text. Second, the Roman centurion’s climactic confession at the moment of Jesus’ death that Jesus “really was God’s Son!” (Mark 15:39) strongly supports the originality of “Son of God” in Mark 1:1. The evangelist Mark presses home the identity of Jesus (see 8:27 “Who do people say that I am?”) throughout his narrative. It makes sense that he would identify Jesus fully—as both Messiah and God’s Son—in his opening line (for arguments in support of the originality of the words “Son of God” in Mark 1:1, see Boring 2006, 30, 32, 250–51; Guelich 1989, 6).

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet (1:2): The evangelist Mark begins his narrative with an appeal to Scripture, in this case “Isaiah the prophet.” However, the quotation actually begins with words from Malachi: “Look, I am sending My messenger ahead of You, who will prepare Your way” (Mal 3:1). The part from Isaiah follows: “A voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord; make His paths straight!” (Isa 40:3). If the quote is a conglomeration of several OT passages, why does Mark attribute it to Isaiah alone? Some critics assume that Mark has blundered, not knowing that the first part of his quotation really does not derive from Isaiah. They believe this is why Matthew and Luke omit the Malachi part of the quotation in their respective quotations (Matt 3:3; Luke 3:4–6). However, these charges are hardly fair. In late antiquity Jewish quotation and interpretation of Scripture often involved linking related passages of Scripture (a practice known as *gezera shawa*). Watts has found other examples of citing more than one text under the name of only one author in the church fathers. For example, Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 3.20.4) attributes quotations from Micah 7:19 and Amos 1:2 to Amos alone, and Justin (*First Apology* c. 32) attributes quotations from Numbers and Isaiah to Isaiah alone (Watts 1997, 88). Both Malachi 3 and Isaiah 40 contain the words “prepare . . . way.” This common language draws the two passages together. But because Malachi 3 refers to God’s “messenger,” it is perfectly suited to serve as an introduction to the quotation from Isaiah 40. The Evangelist has made it clear that John the Baptist, whose voice is heard in the wilderness, is in fact God’s messenger, foretold in Scripture. Thus Mark’s citation here is not an example of sloppy exegesis or carelessness with the facts. He applies the OT passages in accordance with their original sense and “prepares the way” for his readers to comprehend his Gospel account. (See further comments at Matt 3:3.)

MARK 1:4–8

⁴John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were flocking to him, and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. ⁶John wore a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts

and wild honey. ⁷He was preaching: “Someone more powerful than I will come after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of His sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (1:4): Mark’s description of John’s baptism should not be taken to mean that baptism confers forgiveness. The meaning is rather that those who repent testify to their repentance publicly by undergoing baptism, which in Jewish thinking probably related to ritual purity. In describing John’s baptism the first-century Jewish apologist and historian Josephus says essentially the same thing. He says that John’s baptism was not employed “to gain pardon for whatever sins (one) committed, but as a consecration of the body implying that the soul was already thoroughly cleansed by right behavior” (*Antiquities* 18.117). Although it is possible that at one time in his life John had some connection with the Essenes (the sect whose scrolls were found at Qumran), the John we encounter in the Gospels, who calls on the Jewish people to come to him and repent, is not associated with this group.

The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem (1:5): Are we to take “the whole Judean countryside” and “all the people of Jerusalem” literally? These expressions are obvious exaggerations and would have been recognized as such by the original readers. Words like “all” in Greek, Hebrew, and most languages are commonly understood to have several nuances that we grow accustomed to recognizing according to context. Such expressions as, “all Americans know the Pledge of Allegiance,” are understood to have many exceptions. On the other hand, “all the marbles in this bag are black,” is understood to have no exceptions. Sometimes the Greek word for “all” (*pas*) was understood to mean “all kinds of.”

John wore a camel-hair garment with a leather belt (1:6): Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8 is dressed similarly. Did John consciously imitate Elijah, or did Mark simply invent this detail in order to support a John-as-Elijah theme? Mark 9:13 is the only verse in Mark that suggests an identity between Elijah and John the Baptist. There is no reason to suppose that an item of Mark’s agenda was to support a John-as-Elijah theme. Besides, if John the Baptist was as popular as Mark suggests (and Josephus confirms his popularity), such facts as John’s appearance would be widely known. Finally, the questionable ethics of making up facts to support a claim would not fit the teachings of the one Mark was writing about, who was noted as being truthful (cf. Mark 12:14).

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit (1:8): Is Mark putting words into John’s mouth here? After all, the baptism in the Holy Spirit did not occur until Pentecost. Would John the Baptist really foreknow this event? Speaking of the time of restoration, Ezekiel 36:27 depicts God as declaring: “I will place My Spirit within you and cause you to follow My statutes and carefully observe My ordinances.” At one

point in his ministry Jesus expressed surprise that Nicodemus, a “teacher of Israel,” did not know about such a new birth experience (John 3:10). In this light, surely John the Baptist, a prophet, would know about such prophecies. Thus it is not at all implausible that John made reference to a coming baptism of the Holy Spirit.

MARK 1:9–11

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. ¹⁰As soon as He came up out of the water, He saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending to Him like a dove.

¹¹And a voice came from heaven:

You are My beloved Son;
I take delight in You!

Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John (1:9): If John’s baptism was “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (v. 4), why did Jesus, who “knew no sin” (2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15), go to John to be baptized? The question is not easily answered. The evangelist Matthew expands the narrative (Matt 3:14–15) to show that John was reluctant to baptize Jesus and that Jesus insisted on being baptized. It was necessary for Jesus to endorse John’s ministry and establish continuity with it. John called on Israel to repent and “prepare the way for the Lord.” By submitting to John’s baptism Jesus exhibited humility, presuming nothing. This stands in sharp contrast to later apocryphal traditions that tend to deny Jesus’ full humanity. For example, in an apocryphal Gospel from the second century we encounter a very presumptuous Jesus: When told by his brothers that John was baptizing people “for the forgiveness of sins,” Jesus asks, “In what way have I sinned that I should go and be baptized by him?” (*Gospel of the Nazarenes* §2). (See further comments at Matt 3:15 and Luke 3:21.)

He saw . . . the Spirit descending to Him like a dove (1:10): The descent of the Spirit “like a dove” implies that the Spirit was visible to Jesus. But it is not clear why the Spirit is said to have appeared as a dove. In fact “like a dove” may only indicate the manner in which the Spirit came down, not its actual appearance (see comments on 1:12). Some suggest that the description is meant to recall the dove sent out by Noah after the flood waters had begun to abate (Gen 8:8–12), but this is not persuasive. The dove may contrast with the Roman eagle, which was a bird of prey. As God’s anointed Son, Jesus will bring peace, not war.

You are My beloved Son; I take delight in You! (1:11): This declaration sets Jesus apart from all others and makes clear that he should be identified as John’s expected “mighty one” who will baptize “with the Holy Spirit.” The tearing open of the heavens may well have been the moment that Jesus is presented before God as the “one like a son of man,” described in Daniel 7:13–14. This may account for

Jesus' frequent self-reference as the "Son of God," who on earth has authority to forgive sins (see Mark 2:1–10 and commentary).

To whom was the voice of the Lord addressed? (1:10–11): Did the voice from heaven address Jesus or the crowd? The parallels differ on this matter. According to Mark and Luke, Jesus was addressed by the voice: "You [singular] are My beloved Son." But in Matthew the voice declares, "This is My beloved Son," but with no indication of who heard it. In fact none of the Gospels indicate who heard the voice. It could have been only Jesus, or John the Baptist, or it could have been everyone present. The voice is quoting a combination of Psalm 2:7 ("You are My Son") and Isaiah 42:1 ("This is My Chosen One; I delight in Him"). What exactly the voice said or whether it was addressed to one or all is uncertain. Methods of quotation were not required to be exact in that culture, much as we use indirect quotation today. Pronouns could be changed to contextualize a quotation, and no ancient reader would think to charge an author with inaccuracy for doing so.

Does Jesus' baptism event support tritheism over Trinitarianism? (1:10–11): With Father (speaking), Son (being baptized), and Spirit (descending in the form of a dove) all present and distinguishable at the same time, does this event suggest that Christianity is a tri-theistic rather than a Trinitarian religion? We must recognize that the baptism took place during Jesus' incarnate state on earth. During that time, the distinctness of the three persons of the Trinity was most apparent. We still have to reckon with texts that highlight the oneness of God, such as those that identify Jesus with Yahweh in the OT (Mark 1:3), Jesus' instruction to baptize "in the *name* of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19), and Jesus' testimony, "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30). (See further comments at Matt 3:16–17.)

MARK 1:12–13

¹²Immediately the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness 40 days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and the angels began to serve Him.

Immediately the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness (1:12): Did the Spirit drive Jesus into the wilderness while still donning the form of a dove, such that a bystander would have seen a dove harassing Jesus, driving him toward the desolation? And does "drove" imply that Jesus resisted and the Spirit had to insist that he go into the wilderness? In the first place, the biblical text does not say that the spirit took the form of a dove. It only says that the Spirit descended "like a dove." The meaning is uncertain, but it likely just means there was something dove-like about the sight of the Spirit descending on Jesus. Once the Spirit had descended, the dove-likeness was likely over.

In the second place, “drive out” (*ekballein*) is frequently used to describe the casting out of demons (cf. Mark 1:34, 39; 3:15, 22, 23; 6:13; 7:26; 9:18, 28, 38). It is not surprising therefore that both Matthew (4:1) and Luke (4:1) replace “drive out” with forms of “lead.” Mark’s usage does not indicate that Jesus resisted, however. Most likely Mark wished to emphasize the power of the Spirit. That is, when the Spirit moves, dramatic things happen. Mark’s usage may also suggest that Jesus’ experience in the wilderness will not be easy. Besides, the majority of the 18 uses of “drive out” (*ekballō*) in Mark speak of Jesus driving out demons (see 1:34). So the use of the verb in 1:12 may foreshadow Jesus’ later demonstration of power over the demonic realm.

Being tempted (1:13): If the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted, does this contradict James 1:13? The text plainly indicates that God did not tempt Jesus in the wilderness, but that Satan did. God’s purpose was to demonstrate that Jesus was qualified to be the messianic son. It was God’s will that Jesus would be tested, but Jesus would succeed where Adam failed. (See further comments at Matt 6:13.)

Mark’s spare details on the wilderness temptation (1:12–13): Since Mark gives few details of the wilderness temptation, where did Matthew and Luke, both of whom used Mark as a primary source, get their detailed data? Matthew and Luke had other sources besides Mark, as is clear from the many passages that are found in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark. These would include written sources such as “Q” (available to both Matthew and Luke) and also oral sources. Since Matthew was an eyewitness and Luke based his work on Paul’s preaching, we may trust their testimony. (See further comments at Luke 4:1–13.)

Has Mark mimicked OT themes? (1:12–13): The reference to “forty days” recalls a common designation in biblical literature. Especially relevant is Elijah’s 40-day fast (1 Kgs 19:4–8). The “wild animals” may be part of an Adam-paradise typology. But also they may be part of the wilderness backdrop, perhaps even as Satan’s allies (Ezek 34:5, 8, 25; *Testament of Naphtali* 8:4 [“the devil will flee from you; wild animals will be afraid of you”]; *Testament of Benjamin* 5:2). Mark’s point may have been to underscore the dangers Jesus faced during his stay in the wilderness. Jesus encountered dangers from the spiritual world and from the natural world (cf. Daniel in the lion’s den; Dan 6:1–28).

The food that sustained Elijah was provided by an angel. This is probably the background against which we should understand Mark’s statement that “angels began to serve” Jesus. Thus, with angelic assistance—whose presence adds further corroboration of his divine approval—Jesus survives his natural and supernatural temptations.

These parallels between Jesus and Elijah do not indicate that Mark has created fictional elements for Jesus’ life. Elijah’s experiences may have helped shape how Mark chose to narrate Jesus’ temptation, drawing out similarities. By God’s

design, Jesus' life experiences show him to be the recapitulation and fulfillment of OT themes and events.

MARK 1:14–15

¹⁴After John was arrested, Jesus went to Galilee, preaching the good news of God: ¹⁵“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news!”

The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news! (1:15): Is the “good news” a concept borrowed from the Romans? If it is instead rooted in the OT, is Jesus inconsistent with its OT meaning? “Good news” (*euangelion*) in earliest Christianity likely derives from Isaiah (Hb *basar*) and not Greco-Roman usage (though Mark made use of the parallels; cf. comments on Mark 1:1 above). Isaiah 40, 52, and 61 contributed to the substance and manner of Jesus' preaching and teaching (Matt 11:2–6 = Luke 4:16–30; 7:18–23). Isaiah had promised the good news of God's reign (52:7), which Jesus now proclaims. The “good news,” or gospel, is that the promised and awaited kingdom of God is now here.

Mark's use of *euangelion* is somewhat curious. It occurs only seven times; three times in chapter 1 (vv. 1, 14, 15), then four times in the second half of the Gospel (8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9). An eighth occurrence is found at 16:15, in what is a later, secondary ending (see comments on 16:9–20 below). All of these occurrences appear to reflect early Christianity's description of the essence of Jesus' message and later the essence of its preaching about Jesus himself. But it would be unwarranted to infer from this that Jesus did not think of his proclamation as constituting the good news of God's reign, as promised in Isaiah. Jesus' use of Isaiah, especially 52:7 and 61:1–2, and the coherence with the Aramaic diction, as seen in the Isaiah Targum, are strong indications that from earliest times the proclamation of the kingdom (or reign) of God as “good news” originated with Jesus and became standard in the Christian community. We should understand the kingdom of God as a way of speaking of the presence and reign of God, as seen in Luke 11:20, where Jesus says, “If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you.”

MARK 1:16–20

¹⁶As He was passing along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, Simon's brother. They were casting a net into the sea, since they were fishermen.

¹⁷“Follow Me,” Jesus told them, “and I will make you fish for people!”
¹⁸Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. ¹⁹Going on a little farther, He saw James the son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in their boat mending their nets. ²⁰Immediately He called them, and

they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed Him.

Sea of Galilee (1:16): Mark’s “Sea of Galilee” is a colloquialism. This body of water is a lake, not a sea. Nevertheless, Mark is not mistaken, for the lake was often referred to as the “Sea of Galilee.” Luke provides the technically correct name when he calls it Lake Gennesaret (Luke 5:1).

Fish for people (1:17): The expression, “fish for people,” or “fishers of people,” is a clever turn-of-phrase that unquestionably originated with Jesus, for it was not picked up and put to use by Christians in the early church. Prior to meeting Jesus, these men had been fishers. Jesus now called them to catch people, bringing into the kingdom of God people whose time has come. A parallel from the fictional work *Joseph and Aseneth* is apropos: “By his (Joseph’s) beauty he caught me, and by his wisdom he grasped me like a fish on a hook, and by his spirit, as by bait of life, he ensnared me” (21:21).

Immediately they left their nets and followed Him (1:18): One of Mark’s distinguishing features is his repeated use of “immediately, at once” (*euthus*). He uses it about 40 times as opposed to five times in Matthew, once in Luke, and three times in John. If personal preferences and literary styles so shape the Gospel accounts, should we conclude that the facts of Jesus’ life have been warped by the Evangelists who took the liberty to develop their preferred themes? Or even if the liberties taken were somewhat circumspect, is this compatible with divine inspiration?

Very early such church fathers as Irenaeus recognized that the four Gospels, though different in style and content, were also united in that they all contained the one gospel. They began speaking of “the Gospel *according to Mark*.” They also recognized that the story of Jesus was too great to be told from only one perspective, that it needed four different perspectives to properly convey the Person and message of Jesus. Even such mundane happenings as sporting or political events are best represented by more than one account. The traditional doctrine of divine inspiration takes account of the fact that God uses the personalities, character, experience, and knowledge of individual authors in such a way that the inspired biblical books vary in style and approach.

Mark may have wished to impress upon his readers the authority of Jesus by his use of “immediately.” When Jesus extends a summons, people jump. Little or no ceremony is required. Most impressive is the comment that James and John “left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed Him” (v. 20). The mention of the “hired men” may have been meant to imply that Zebedee had no more sons; only paid workers remained. Given the values of Jewish culture, where sons were expected to assist and even support their parents, the departure of James and John to follow Jesus would strike most as bordering on irresponsibility, even

disrespect. (Such criticism may be hinted at in the saying in 10:29–30.) But for Mark it once again shows Jesus' authority.

Verse 18 is a good example of how Mark's preference for the "immediacy" theme risks giving readers the wrong impression if they read him in isolation from the other Gospels. Mark's account reads as if Peter dropped everything and followed Jesus from the first moment he met him, but John 1:35–42 (and possibly Luke 5:1–11) indicates that a longer process was involved and that Peter and Jesus are not meeting for the first time in this episode. This does not call Mark's reliability into question. In Mark's Gospel, the Greek word *euthus* is an adverb ("quickly," "promptly," "as soon as," "at once," and sometimes "immediately"), but when preceded by *kai* ("and") it can be either an adverb or a conjunction ("so then") (Decker 1997, 90–120). According to R. T. France, its use in 1:18 "may be intended to underline the immediacy of the new disciples' response, but it would be unwise to base too much on this feature, since in v. 20 the same phrase introduces Jesus' call rather than the disciples' following; its role is more to keep the story going with vigor than to comment on the specific nature of their response" (2002, 97).

Nothing in Mark's account denies that Simon Peter and Andrew had met Jesus previously (John 1:42). He gives an impression of immediacy to emphasize Jesus' authority, and it is also possible that he has telescoped two events as one. As for Luke 5:1–11, many scholars consider it to be a parallel account, but there are enough variations for others to conclude that it records a separate event.

MARK 1:21–28

²¹Then they went into Capernaum, and right away He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and began to teach. ²²They were astonished at His teaching because, unlike the scribes, He was teaching them as one having authority.

²³Just then a man with an unclean spirit was in their synagogue. He cried out, ²⁴"What do You have to do with us, Jesus—Nazarene? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!"

²⁵But Jesus rebuked him and said, "Be quiet, and come out of him!"

²⁶And the unclean spirit convulsed him, shouted with a loud voice, and came out of him.

²⁷Then they were all amazed, so they began to argue with one another, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him." ²⁸News about Him then spread throughout the entire vicinity of Galilee.

They went into Capernaum, and right away He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and began to teach (1:21): It has been asserted that in the time of Jesus there were no synagogue buildings as such, and that these buildings did not materialize until after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70. If this negative assertion was true, then the Gospels, book of Acts, and writings of Josephus are all anachronistic in speaking of synagogues prior to the year 70. As it turns out, there

is archaeological evidence of several pre-70 synagogues in the land of Israel (see Evans 2012a, 38–62, 158–62).

This verse suggests that it was Jesus' custom to enter a town and teach in the synagogue (cf. Luke 4:15–16). The reference to the spread of his fame “throughout the entire vicinity of Galilee” (v. 28) and the absence of stated opposition, at least at this point in Mark's narrative, suggest that Jesus freely taught in the synagogue of Capernaum (whose basalt foundations are probably those now exposed beneath the grander ruins of the third- or fourth-century limestone synagogue that stands above) and perhaps in other synagogues of Galilee. On the possibility that the basalt foundations beneath the limestone synagogue belong to the synagogue in which Jesus ministered, see Shanks and Strange 1983, 24–31.

They were astonished at His teaching because, unlike the scribes, He was teaching them as one having authority (1:22): Powerful personalities often gather a crowd of followers. If the congregants at the Capernaum synagogue were amazed at Jesus' authoritative bearing, did his success come down to his having lots of personal charisma and confidence? Though Jesus likely had an influential personality with charisma and confidence, he also had much more than that. Unlike the scribes, he had authority and power over the spiritual realm and the realm of disease. He was able to support his teachings and claims with supernatural action.

The authority of the scribes did not even begin to compare to the authority of Jesus. By “teaching” Mark means deeds of power, as well as verbal teaching. The two facets went together, as we see in the story of exorcism. Jesus speaks the word and the deed is done. Not surprisingly, the crowd is astounded by Jesus' authority (*exousia*). Unlike other exorcists who cast out demons through incantations and rigmorole (e.g., Josephus, *Antiquities* 8.46–49), Jesus speaks and the evil spirit obeys. For Mark this is the main point of the story. Recognized by God and empowered by the Spirit, Jesus possesses authority on an order not before witnessed. He is authorized to proclaim the good news of the kingdom (1:14–15), to call followers (1:16–20), and to make war on Satan (1:21–28). Jesus' power is such that people begin to invoke his name (9:38–40).

I know who You are—the Holy One of God! (1:24): “I know who You are” probably should be understood as the spirit's attempt to gain control over or fend off Jesus. The spirit knows that he is Jesus of Nazareth and knows that he is the “Holy One of God.” This knowledge is not by omniscience, something Satan and the demons lack as created beings. Perhaps their apprehension of Jesus' holiness tipped them off to his identity. In antiquity it was believed that to possess someone's name was an advantage. In supernatural dealings, to know the name was necessary if one was to manipulate a spirit or god. Jesus, however, rebukes the spirit, commands it to be silent, and orders it to depart. An inscription in Egypt, dating as early as the sixth century BC, has a demon through his host speak to the exorcist: “You come in peace,

great God, destroyer of the evil ones . . . I am your servant; I will depart to the land from which I came . . .” (Bentresch Stele).

Be quiet, and come out of him! (1:25): Jesus’ command finds an exact parallel in the papyri concerned with exorcisms (e.g., *PGM* IV.3013; see Deissmann 1927, 256). Josephus (*Antiquities* 8.46–49) and other authors of antiquity describe the activities of various exorcists (e.g., Philostratus, *Vita Apollonius* 4.20). The Genesis Apocryphon of Qumran describes Abram laying hands on Pharaoh’s head with the result that an evil spirit is removed (1QapGen 20:28–29). Lucian of Samosata (second century AD) relates what he was told when the exorcist interrogates the possessed person: “The patient himself is silent, but the spirit answers in Greek or in the language of whatever foreign country he comes from, telling how and whence he entered into the man; whereupon, by adjuring the spirit and if he does not obey, threatening him, he drives him out. Indeed, I actually saw one coming out, black and smoky in color” (*The Lover of Lies* 16).

MARK 1:29–31

²⁹As soon as they left the synagogue, they went into Simon and Andrew’s house with James and John. ³⁰Simon’s mother-in-law was lying in bed with a fever, and they told Him about her at once. ³¹So He went to her, took her by the hand, and raised her up. The fever left her, and she began to serve them.

Simon and Andrew’s house (1:29): The house of Simon and Andrew at Capernaum may have been identified. The foundations and flooring of a first-century house, constructed of black volcanic basalt stone, have been uncovered. Excavation and study indicate that this private dwelling was converted into a public meeting house (with plastered interior walls and placement of several lamps, all intended to increase indoor lighting). Subsequently this public meeting place was expanded into an octagonal church, complete with baptistery (see Shanks and Strange, 1982: 26–37).

The fever left her, and she began to serve them (1:31): Modern readers are likely to miss the significance of this healing. In one rabbinic tradition healing someone with a fever was considered a greater miracle (because it is heaven-sent) than the miracle of the three men who survived the ordeal of the furnace (because the fire was man-made): “who can extinguish” a fever? (*b. Nedarim* 41a). Luke’s version, “He . . . rebuked the fever” (Luke 4:39), could imply that the fever was thought to have been of demonic origin. The healing of Simon’s mother-in-law, then, may have been viewed as an exorcism as much as a healing.

Chronology of the healings (1:29–34, 40–45): Mark and Matthew present these events in different order. Can the Gospels be reliable if they present conflicting chronological data? Actually, the Gospels are not presenting a different *chronological*

order, because there are no chronological markers. They are only presenting events in a different order because of their different themes and approaches. Chronology is seldom a genuine issue in the Gospels. When it is an issue, it is noted by references to time or by temporal adverbs such as “before” and “after.” (See further comments at Matt 8:1–4.)

MARK 1:32–34

³²When evening came, after the sun had set, they began bringing to Him all those who were sick and those who were demon-possessed. ³³The whole town was assembled at the door, ³⁴and He healed many who were sick with various diseases and drove out many demons. But He would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew Him.

Those who were demon-possessed (1:32): Demon possession is reported throughout the Gospels. Was this condition more common in Jesus’ day, or was it simply that people in a pre-scientific age over-diagnosed it? The Gospel of Mark gives special attention to the theme of Jesus as the divine warrior who has come to destroy the demonic realm and free his people in a new exodus. According to Longman and Reid, the key to the meaning of Jesus’ exorcisms may be found in Jesus’ saying in Matthew 12:28, “If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (1995, 107). Judaism recognized that behind Israel’s physical enemies were evil spirits represented by the nations’ idols (11QMelch 4–6; *1 Enoch* 54:4–5; TDan 5:10–13). In that case it should not be surprising if there was more demonic activity than normal during Jesus’ life on earth. Much was at stake in the spiritual realm during Jesus’ earthly ministry, and so opposition to Jesus was at a frenetic pace. Lastly, it should be stated that demonic activity is likely more pervasive even today than is commonly realized. We have non-spiritual paradigms into which we fit many of our modern experiences, and perhaps one result is we mis-identify key realities.

He would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew Him (1:34): Why was Jesus so concerned to silence demonic and human confessions of his identity (see also 1:25; 1:44)? We are not to suppose that Jesus is trying to keep his identity a secret; rather, we should understand that Jesus shows the evil spirits no quarter. He does not wrangle or bargain with them. In effect Jesus is commanding them: “Shut up and get out!” The command to “say nothing to anyone” (1:44) in context may mean that the healed man is not to claim that he has been cleansed until he has been officially declared clean by a priest. It may also be another attempt by Jesus to quell counterproductive publicity. His avoidance of such publicity is seen in his later refusal to perform a sign, in response to the demands of some Pharisees (see comments on 8:11–12). Perhaps John 2:4; 6:15; and 7:3–6 also help answer the question, suggesting that Jesus guarded against letting others decide his timing, methods, and

message. Such injunctions to silence notwithstanding, Jesus' fame spreads everywhere, and according to 1:45, "with the result that Jesus could no longer enter a town openly." We may assume from our knowledge of Jesus that he foresaw the failure of his commands for silence.

MARK 1:40–45

⁴⁰Then a man with a serious skin disease came to Him and, on his knees, begged Him: "If You are willing, You can make me clean."

⁴¹Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out His hand and touched him. "I am willing," He told him. "Be made clean." ⁴²Immediately the disease left him, and he was healed. ⁴³Then He sternly warned him and sent him away at once, ⁴⁴telling him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go and show yourself to the priest, and offer what Moses prescribed for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." ⁴⁵Yet he went out and began to proclaim it widely and to spread the news, with the result that Jesus could no longer enter a town openly. But He was out in deserted places, and they would come to Him from everywhere.

A serious skin disease (1:40): The stigma attached to leprosy is well known and was often viewed as a judgment from God (e.g., Num 12:10; 2 Kgs 5:27; 15:5; 2 Chr 26:19; but in non-biblical sources as well, e.g., Herodotus, *Histories* 1.138: "The citizen who has leprosy or the white sickness may not come into a town or consort with other Persians. They say that he is so afflicted because he has sinned in some wise against the sun"). Many skin ailments were called "leprosy" in late antiquity. It has been claimed that true leprosy (Hansen's Disease) did not exist in Israel in Jesus' day, but recent archaeological evidence has shown otherwise (see Gibson 2009, 145–47; Evans 2012, 110).

Moved with compassion (1:41): Most manuscripts read "moved with compassion" (*splagchnistheis*), but a few read "becoming angry" (*orgistheis*). If the second reading is accepted (Guelich 1989, 72–72, among others, thinks it is the original reading), then we must ask what the anger means. Is Jesus angry because of the impertinence of the leper, a man who should keep his distance? Probably not, for this stands in tension to Jesus' willingness to touch the leper and heal him. A better explanation is that Jesus was moved to anger by yet one more instance of human suffering. Angered by the man's pitiful condition, and the estrangement from Israel's worship that this condition entailed, Jesus touches the man and heals him.

MARK 2:1–12

When He entered Capernaum again after some days, it was reported that He was at home. ²So many people gathered together that there was no more room, not even in the doorway, and He was speaking the message to them. ³Then they came to Him bringing a paralytic, carried by four men.

⁴Since they were not able to bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above where He was. And when they had broken through, they lowered the mat on which the paralytic was lying.

⁵Seeing their faith, Jesus told the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

⁶But some of the scribes were sitting there, thinking to themselves: ⁷“Why does He speak like this? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

⁸Right away Jesus understood in His spirit that they were thinking like this within themselves and said to them, “Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? ⁹Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, pick up your mat, and walk?’ ¹⁰But so you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,” He told the paralytic, ¹¹“I tell you: get up, pick up your mat, and go home.”

¹²Immediately he got up, picked up the mat, and went out in front of everyone. As a result, they were all astounded and gave glory to God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

When He entered Capernaum . . . it was reported that He was at home (2:1):

Whose home was this? Jesus grew up in Nazareth, several miles to the southwest. But Nazareth seems not to have been his base of operations (see comments on 6:1–6a). Jesus’ home (or headquarters) evidently was in Capernaum, but whether it was his home or the home of one of his followers cannot be determined. Given Jesus’ itinerant ministry, the house was probably not his.

Son, your sins are forgiven (2:5): Some scribes (Luke 5:21 adds “the Pharisees”) regard Jesus’ words as “blasphemy.” They reason: “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (v. 7). Why do the scribes think this? To answer this question, we must ask in what sense Jesus has forgiven this man’s sins. Is his pronouncement an instance of the divine passive? If so, Jesus is saying, “Your sins are forgiven (by God).” But in this case, the scribes should be accusing Jesus of presumption, for assuming priestly prerogatives (e.g., “Who does this man think he is—a priest?”). Or, is Jesus’ pronouncement based on his own authority, in which case the scribes’ thoughts of blasphemy make more sense. That this second option is the correct answer is suggested by verse 10, where Jesus says “the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” The self-designation “Son of Man” and the qualifier “on earth” point to Daniel 7, where a human (“one like a son of man”), coming with the clouds of heaven, approaches God (the “Ancient of Days”) and receives authority (Dan 7:9–14). The “clouds of heaven” are antithetical to “on earth,” with the latter presupposing the former. That is to say, because the “Son of Man” receives authority from heaven, he possesses the authority on earth, among other things, to forgive sins.

Only twice in Mark is Jesus accused of blasphemy, and both times Jesus identifies himself as the “Son of Man.” The other passage is found in the hearing before Caiaphas the High Priest. Jesus declares that he is the “Son of Man” who will be “seated at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven” (14:62).

Caiaphas reacts in horror and calls the statement blasphemy (14:64; see comments on 14:53–65). As the human being described in Daniel 7, the human being to whom divine authority is granted, Jesus has authority to forgive sins, or, in the case of someone like Caiaphas, he has the authority to sit in judgment. Jesus has not explicitly claimed to be God here (if he had, the scribes would have reacted much more violently); he has claimed to be God’s vice regent on earth, proclaiming God’s rule and offering forgiveness to those who respond in faith to the proclamation.

He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone? (2:7): That the scribes believed only God could forgive sins is an indirect indication that they did not expect Messiah to be divine. This raises the issue of messianic expectations. Is there any evidence that Jews before Jesus’ era expected Messiah to be divine? If not (or if the Jews were divided over this), was the OT not clear about Messiah’s divinity?

As R. T. France points out, “The Mishnah has a very tight definition of blasphemy, as the actual pronouncing of the divine name (*m. Sanh.* 7:5), and clearly Jesus has not done that, but it is clear that in the pre-70 period the term was used more broadly. . . . To claim to do what only God could do, and to constitute himself God’s spokesman in declaring sins forgiven, was to infringe the divine prerogative” (cf. John 10:33) (France 2002, 126).

Regarding whether the Jews were expecting a divine messiah, the short answer is probably not. The Dead Sea Scrolls show evidence of two expected messiahs: a royal Davidic king who would drive out Israel’s enemies and defeat them, and a righteous, anointed high priest who would cleanse the temple and institute cultic reforms in accordance with Scripture. Neither of those were expected to be divine. And the kind of messiah awaited at Qumran is not very different from that awaited by Jews elsewhere (Evans 2003b, 85–101). It is significant that one of the leading rabbis, Aqiba, called the revolutionary Bar Kokhba (revolt in AD 132–136) the messiah. Was OT teaching clear about the messiah being divine? No, it was not. The NT is clear (John 1:1; 8:58; 10:30), but there is no OT passage whose interpretation *requires* the messiah’s deity (with the possible exception of Isa 9:6–7). Therefore, it is not surprising that Second Temple Judaism did not expect a divine messiah.

Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven,” or to say, “Get up, pick up your mat, and walk?” (2:9): To defend his claim that he truly does possess divine authority to forgive sins, Jesus poses an interesting question to his critics. The word of healing is harder, because it can be empirically verified; the word of forgiveness is easier, because it cannot be empirically verified. Therefore, to prove that he really can do the easier (forgive the man’s sins), he does the harder (heal the man’s paralysis). Jesus commands the paralyzed man to rise, take up his pallet, and go home (v. 11).

Son of Man (2:10): Although it is commonly assumed that “the son of man” was a technical term referring to some sort of messianic apocalyptic figure, this is not the

case either in the Gospels or in early Jewish literature. The term was a generic for “man” or “mankind.” Although in the Gospel of John the expression is used for the incarnation of the divine Logos, there is no evidence that “son of man” is used as a messianic or apocalyptic title for Jesus in Mark. “At most, ‘son of man’ is understood as a specific reference to Jesus” (Evans 2000, lxxv).

But what about Daniel 7:13–14? Does this warrant a divine referent for Son of Man? Some of Jesus’ “son of man” statements involve identification with the character in Daniel 7, though the term is still generic rather than being a title. There is some slight evidence that some Jewish circles (at least by the first century BC) considered the son of man in Daniel 7:13–14 to be the Messiah, though the evidence is far from certain. But as stated before, the son of man in Daniel 7 is not presented as God but as God’s vice-regent.

MARK 2:13–17

¹³Then Jesus went out again beside the sea. The whole crowd was coming to Him, and He taught them. ¹⁴Then, moving on, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office, and He said to him, “Follow Me!” So he got up and followed Him.

¹⁵While He was reclining at the table in Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were also guests with Jesus and His disciples, because there were many who were following Him. ¹⁶When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they asked His disciples, “Why does He eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

¹⁷When Jesus heard this, He told them, “Those who are well don’t need a doctor, but the sick do need one. I didn’t come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Levi the son of Alphaeus (2:14): While Mark and Luke (5:27ff) use the name “Levi,” Matthew 9:9–13 and 10:3 use “Matthew.” Which is it? Can it be both? Levi the son of Alphaeus is almost certainly the same person as “Matthew.” It was not unusual for people to have two names. Simon Peter is the best-known example among the disciples. (See further comments at Matt 9:9 and Luke 5:27.)

Why does He eat with tax collectors and sinners? (2:16): Critics have said verses like Proverbs 13:20 justify the viewpoint of the Pharisees, and that Jesus was in the wrong. In later times 1 Corinthians 15:33 said: “Bad company corrupts good morals.” Is Jesus living contrary to this? Tax collectors and sinners were regarded as non-Torah observant persons. They failed to live up to the written commands of Moses or observe many of the oral traditions that were important to the Pharisaic scribes. Mark’s acknowledgment that Jesus associated with “tax collectors and sinners” testifies to the candor of the Gospel accounts. The temptation would have been to portray Jesus in the company of important, celebrated, recognized people. Even though critics of early Christianity complained that because Jesus associated with

the lowly he should not be highly regarded, the Evangelists nevertheless recounted the story truthfully.

The scribes and Pharisees object to Jesus' eating with non-Torah observant Jews, because as a religious teacher Jesus would have been expected to avoid ritual impurity. By eating with non-observant people Jesus ran the risk of eating food that failed to meet the requirements of the food laws (especially as understood by Pharisees) and of coming into contact with impure persons (e.g., improperly washed hands and other aspects of uncleanness). If Jesus really were the herald of the approaching kingdom of God, then one should expect his standards of purity to be exemplary. Why then does he eat with such people?

The Pharisees were concerned about food laws and other laws of purity, which Jesus did not honor. Immoral behavior was probably not the issue. Besides, the point of Proverbs 13:20 is that it is unwise to put oneself under the tutelage of fools. And the context of 1 Corinthians 15:33 is the denial of the resurrection. As Fee explains, the point is probably that "evil conversations such as those that deny the resurrection of the dead can only have a corrupting effect on your good character" (Fee 1987, 773). Jesus was not in the role of disciple but teacher of the gospel. Furthermore, Paul recognizes that association with "the immoral people of this world or the greedy and swindlers or idolaters" is inevitable for people who live in the world (1 Cor 5:10).

I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners (2:17): Who are "the righteous" here, for doesn't Scripture say that none are righteous (Mark 10:18; Rom 3:10)? It is important to note that Jesus regards these people as sinners. He does not take their sin lightly. He summons sinners to repentance and admonishes Torah-observant Jews to appreciate his mission. Several people in Scripture are referred to as "righteous" in one sense: Noah (Gen 6:9), Abraham (by faith; Gen 15:6), Job (having "perfect integrity, who feared God and turned away from evil"; Job 1:1), and Zechariah and his wife ("righteous in God's sight, living without blame according to all the commands and requirements of the Lord"; Luke 1:6). It meant that they were people of faith who followed God's commands, and when they failed they repented and brought the appropriate sacrifices. But they were not righteous in an absolute sense in that they were sinless. Only God is perfectly righteous.

MARK 2:18–20

¹⁸Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. People came and asked Him, "Why do John's disciples and the Pharisees' disciples fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"

¹⁹Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot fast while the groom is with them, can they? As long as they have the groom with them, they cannot fast. ²⁰But the time will come when the groom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.

Why do John’s disciples and the Pharisees’ disciples fast, but Your disciples do not fast? (2:18): People wonder why Jesus’ disciples did not fast (a sign of religious fervor, spiritual humility, and preparation for religious work), when the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees fasted. The question is not necessarily critical. The lack of fasting is viewed as exceptional and in need of explanation. After all, if Jesus regularly eats and drinks, sometimes with tax collectors and sinners, and apparently never fasts (at least not since the temptations in the wilderness), one might conclude that Jesus does not take humanity’s sinful condition very seriously, that he sees no reason to mourn in the presence of God.

Jesus provides the explanation why in verse 19: “The wedding guests cannot fast while the groom is with them, can they?” His presence is a cause for celebration. Jesus’ implied self-identification as the “bridegroom” coheres with his earlier and later self-identification as the “son of man” of Daniel 7. While he is present, announcing the good news of the kingdom of God and extending forgiveness and salvation to Israel, there can be no mourning. When he suffers and is taken from his disciples, then there will be mourning and fasting.

MARK 2:23–28

²³On the Sabbath He was going through the grainfields, and His disciples began to make their way picking some heads of grain. ²⁴The Pharisees said to Him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”

²⁵He said to them, “Have you never read what David and those who were with him did when he was in need and hungry — ²⁶how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest and ate the sacred bread — which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests — and also gave some to his companions?” ²⁷Then He told them, “The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸Therefore, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath? (2:24): The charge that they are doing something not permitted on the Sabbath has nothing to do with theft, for this sort of gleaning was permitted in the Law (Deut 23:25). The charge has to do with “reaping,” that is, working on the Sabbath (Exod 20:10; 34:21; Deut 5:14), at least according to oral tradition (e.g., *m. Shabbat* 7:2; CD 10:14–11:18). Jesus counters the criticism with an example from David (v. 25), at a time of disenfranchisement and hardship. David and his men entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence (1 Sam 21:1–6), which was reserved for the priests (Lev 24:5–9). The logic of Jesus’ reply suggests that the Pharisees can no more criticize his disciples who gleaned and ate on the Sabbath than they can criticize David and his men who ate the consecrated bread of the Presence.

In the time of Abiathar the high priest (2:26): Mentioning Abiathar, rather than Ahimelech, as the “high priest” when David and his men were given sacred bread is problematic. According to 1 Samuel 21:1–6, Ahimelech, not Abiathar, was priest when approached by David. This discrepancy has led some scholars to conclude that either Jesus himself was mistaken or that Mark (or his sources) was mistaken. Both Matthew and Luke omit the reference to Abiathar (see Matt 12:3–4; Luke 6:3–4). In all probability there were two traditions with regard to the priestly figures Ahimelech and Abiathar. The major tradition narrates Abiathar as the son of Ahimelech. Accordingly, the latter is the priest who gave the bread to David and his men. This is the tradition of 1 Samuel 21–22. But there is also a minor tradition, in which Ahimelech (or Abimelech in some manuscripts) is said to be the son of Abiathar, who survives and serves David alongside Zadok (2 Sam 8:17; 1 Chr 18:16; 24:3–31; compare 1 Kgs 4:4, where it is Abiathar who serves alongside Zadok; see also 4Q245 frag. 1, col. i, line 7). Mark 2:26 follows the minor tradition (see Bock 2005, 423–24, for an alternative explanation).

The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath (2:27): The Pharisees seemed to think the Sabbath law stood over them as a graceless restriction and not a means of giving them rest. Does OT revelation most naturally lead to Jesus’ interpretation or that given by the Pharisees? Jesus counters his critics by an appeal to creation (Gen 2:1–3; Exod 31:12–17). The Sabbath was recognized in the OT as a day of rest and refreshment, not as a burden or time of denial. A remarkable parallel to Jesus’ statement appears in an early rabbinic midrash: “The Sabbath is given over to you, not you to the Sabbath” (*Mekilta* on Exod 31:13). Jesus may have been alluding to a similar interpretation, or maybe the midrash echoes Jesus’ words. (For other Jewish parallels, see 2 Maccabees 5:19: “The Lord did not choose the nation for the sake of the holy place, but the place for the sake of the nation”; 2 Bar. 14:17: “Man . . . was not created for the world, but the world for him.”)

MARK 3:7–12

⁷Jesus departed with His disciples to the sea, and a large crowd followed from Galilee, Judea, ⁸Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and around Tyre and Sidon. The large crowd came to Him because they heard about everything He was doing. ⁹Then He told His disciples to have a small boat ready for Him, so the crowd would not crush Him. ¹⁰Since He had healed many, all who had diseases were pressing toward Him to touch Him. ¹¹Whenever the unclean spirits saw Him, those possessed fell down before Him and cried out, “You are the Son of God!” ¹²And He would strongly warn them not to make Him known.

Is the existence of Tyre in Jesus’ day problematic? (3:8): Ezekiel 26–28 says Tyre would be utterly destroyed and that people looking for it would not find it. Does Mark 3:8 (and Matt 15:21) indicate Ezekiel’s prophecy failed? Ancient Tyre had

two parts, one on the mainland and one on a rocky island half a mile offshore. It was a great center of commerce in the eastern Mediterranean. The Assyrians defeated mainland Tyre in 722 BC after a five-year siege. But even after another 13 years (587–572 BC) Nebuchadnezzar was still unable to conquer the offshore fortress. Alexander the Great finally conquered and destroyed the fortress in 332 BC by building a causeway to the island. Today it is nothing more than a fishing village, but the Romans had rebuilt it to something of its original size and influence. Very little archaeological work has been done there. (See further comments at Matt 15:21.)

He would strongly warn them not to make Him known (3:12): As before, Jesus orders the evil spirits “not to make Him known” (1:25, 34). Why these commands to silence? Given the context, where Jesus must make great effort to control the crowd and keep himself from being crushed, his silencing of the evil spirits should be understood as a further attempt to muzzle unwanted publicity (and not so much to keep his messianic and divine identity a secret until his resurrection). Jesus also silenced the shouting spirits because their recognition of him could have been threatening.

MARK 3:13–19

¹³Then He went up the mountain and summoned those He wanted, and they came to Him. ¹⁴He also appointed 12—He also named them apostles—to be with Him, to send them out to preach, ¹⁵and to have authority to drive out demons.

¹⁶He appointed the Twelve:

- To Simon. He gave the name Peter;
- ¹⁷ and to James the son of Zebedee, and to his brother John, He gave the name “Boanerges” (that is, “Sons of Thunder”);
- ¹⁸ Andrew; Philip and Bartholomew; Matthew and Thomas; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot,
- ¹⁹ and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed Him.

The appointment of the Twelve (3:16–19): The appointment of “twelve” apostles is surely historical, for in every list the name “Judas Iscariot” appears, which is hardly the stuff that pious imagination would lead Mark or the other Evangelists to include. Judas’ betrayal of Jesus was an embarrassment to the church and was often mentioned by early critics of the church. If the idea of “twelve” disciples/apostles was an invention, why include Judas in the list?

There are several notable differences between the lists of the Twelve. This is because some of the disciples had more than one name. It is also because one or two of the disciples may have dropped out during the ministry and were replaced by others. Verse 18 lists “Bartholomew” (from Aramaic, meaning “son of Tolmai”). Nothing is known about him, and his name appears in the Synoptic apostolic lists (Matt 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 14; Acts 1:13) but not in John’s. Some have suggested that he is the Nathanael of John 1:45–46. Köstenberger argues that “since the name ‘Nathanael’ is not mentioned in the Synoptics, it is likely that this was the personal name of Bartholomew . . . who is linked with Philip in all three Synoptic apostolic lists . . . yet is not mentioned in John’s Gospel. . . . Since ‘Bartholomew’ was a patronymic, it is very plausible that this man was also known by another name” (2004, 79–80).

“Matthew” is probably to be identified with Levi, whose call was recounted in Mark 2:14 (Matt 9:9). Apart from the call itself nothing is known of this person. The early church held that he authored the Gospel of Matthew, and must have had good cause for making this attribution since he was not a well-known figure. On “Thaddaeus” (v. 18), see commentary on Matthew 10:2. (See further comments at Matt 10:2–4 and Luke 6:12–16.)

MARK 3:20–35

²⁰Then He went home, and the crowd gathered again so that they were not even able to eat. ²¹When His family heard this, they set out to restrain Him, because they said, “He’s out of His mind!”

²²The scribes who had come down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebub in Him!” and, “He drives out demons by the ruler of the demons!”

²³So He summoned them and spoke to them in parables: “How can Satan drive out Satan? ²⁴If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. ²⁶And if Satan rebels against himself and is divided, he cannot stand but is finished!

²⁷“On the other hand, no one can enter a strong man’s house and rob his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he will rob his house. ²⁸I assure you: People will be forgiven for all sins and whatever blasphemies they may blaspheme. ²⁹But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” — ³⁰because they were saying, “He has an unclean spirit.”

³¹Then His mother and His brothers came, and standing outside, they sent word to Him and called Him. ³²A crowd was sitting around Him and told Him, “Look, Your mother, Your brothers, and Your sisters are outside asking for You.”

³³He replied to them, “Who are My mother and My brothers?” ³⁴And looking about at those who were sitting in a circle around Him, He said, “Here are My mother and My brothers! ³⁵Whoever does the will of God is My brother and sister and mother.”

He’s out of His mind (3:21): Why would Jesus’ own family say this of him? In particular, how could Mary doubt Jesus after experiencing all the revelations and events surrounding his conception, birth, and early years? Accusations of madness were sometimes made against prophets, exorcists, and healers. One of the Sibyls complains of being called a “crazy liar,” yet she knows that she will be vindicated when her words come to pass (*Sibylline Oracles* 3:811–818). Too much learning, it was thought, could lead to madness (Acts 26:24: “Too much study is driving you mad!”; Alciphron, *Letters of Courtesans*, “Thais to Euthydemus” 1.34.1–2: “. . . ever since you took it into your head to study philosophy you have put on airs . . . You have gone mad . . .”).

Cranfield suggests that the supposition that Jesus was “out of His mind” (*exestē*) may have been an exaggeration. But he explains that the family’s intention of getting Jesus under their control “indicates at least deep misunderstanding of him on their part, and is striking evidence of that ‘hiddenness’ or ‘veiledness’ of the Messiah. . . . It is not necessary, of course, to assume that the dark suspicion reflected in the word [*exestē*] must have originated in Mary’s mind; but at least it is implied that her faith in Jesus was not strong enough to withstand the determination of her sons” (1959, 134–35). Despite the special revelations that Mary had been given regarding her son, Jesus’ life was not turning out as she expected and this caused her confusion and grief.

He has Beelzebul in Him . . . He drives out demons by the ruler of the demons! (3:22): Beelzebul refers to the Canaanite deity, whom Israelites derisively called “Lord of the Flies.” Early rabbinic literature (AD 70–200) reflects the same sort of charge regarding Jesus’ powers: “On the eve of Passover Yeshu [Jesus] was hanged. And an announcer went out in front of him for fourteen days [saying], ‘He is going to be stoned, because he practiced sorcery and led Israel astray!’” (*b. Sanhedrin* 43a, pc. 107b; *b. Sota* 47a; *t. Shabbat* 11:15; cp. Justin *Dialogue with Trypho* 69:7). The rabbinic source provides important confirmation from a hostile source that Jesus was remembered as a worker of miracles.

Some scribes were exorcists, or at least tried to be. As scribes they sometimes had in their possession charms and incantations designed to cast out evil spirits. This is why scribes “from Jerusalem” (the capital of Jewish learning and religious practice) came to Galilee to examine Jesus.

The unardonable sin (3:28–29): Does Jesus take more seriously those who blaspheme the Spirit? And does this passage teach that all people will be saved, so long as they do not blaspheme the Holy Spirit? According to the context, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit amounted to ascribing to Satan what the Holy Spirit has done. The underlying assumption is that Jesus performs his miracles by the power of the Spirit. Therefore blasphemy against the Spirit involved rejection of Jesus as God’s son/servant. Lane generalizes that “blasphemy is an expression of defiant hostility toward God” (1974, 145). Of Jesus’ statement that “people will be forgiven

for all sins and whatever blasphemies they may blaspheme,” France says this “is not a free-standing saying with a validity of its own, but the foil to the negative statement which follows” (2002, 176). The point is that one type of sin/blasphemy is unforgivable, not that all will be saved who avoid this sin. (See further comments at Matt 12:32.)

Here are My mother and My brothers! (3:34): Was Jesus being rude to his family here? Earlier his family had tried to seize him, saying, “He’s out of His mind” (v. 21). Unable to get to Jesus, on account of the tightly packed crowd surrounding him, they now send word. Jesus is told, “Your mother, Your brothers, and Your sisters are outside asking for You” (v. 32). Jesus asks rhetorically: “Who are My mother and My brothers?” (v. 33). The question is indicative of the estrangement that has developed between Jesus and his family. Answering his own question, Jesus looks upon those sitting about him and says, “Here are My mother and My brothers!” Jesus has thus defined his true family: “Whoever does the will of God is My brother and sister and mother” (v. 35). Jesus’ use of hyperbole must be taken into account here. Has he literally rejected his family? Probably not, for his family will come to believe in him, and his brother James becomes an apostle and one of the “pillars” in the church (Gal 1:19; 2:9). But his language indicates the seriousness of his message and the need to commit to it. Jesus’ mission was to create a new family that was not only bound by a force stronger than blood—the Spirit—but was also eternal.

MARK 4:1–9

Again He began to teach by the sea, and a very large crowd gathered around Him. So He got into a boat on the sea and sat down, while the whole crowd was on the shore facing the sea. ²He taught them many things in parables, and in His teaching He said to them: ³“Listen! Consider the sower who went out to sow. ⁴As he sowed, this occurred: Some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Other seed fell on rocky ground where it didn’t have much soil, and it sprang up right away, since it didn’t have deep soil. ⁶When the sun came up, it was scorched, and since it didn’t have a root, it withered. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it didn’t produce a crop. ⁸Still others fell on good ground and produced a crop that increased 30, 60, and 100 times what was sown.” ⁹Then He said, “Anyone who has ears to hear should listen!”

Produced a crop that increased 30, 60, and 100 times (4:8): Some critics have claimed that the yield of the good ground is too high. This is hardly a weighty objection. Many of Jesus’ parables (and early rabbinic parables also) indulge in hyperbole in order to make the point. The “good ground,” whose identity will be explained in vv. 19–20, will be exceedingly fruitful, beyond all normal expectation.

MARK 4:10–13

¹⁰When He was alone with the Twelve, those who were around Him asked Him about the parables. ¹¹He answered them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to those outside, everything comes in parables ¹²so that

**they may look and look,
yet not perceive;
they may listen and listen,
yet not understand;
otherwise, they might turn back—
and be forgiven.”**

¹³Then He said to them: “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any of the parables?”

Jesus’ use of parables (4:10–13): It is often said that Jesus taught in parables so he could be readily understood. After all, parables simplify concepts and exemplify them in everyday terms. But Jesus might seem to name a different purpose for his choosing to teach in parables, which is to hide the meaning from certain groups. Are parables compatible with Jesus’ stated purposes in this passage? Is there an ethical problem with Jesus’ reason for using parables? Does Jesus’ tactic resemble the Gnostic emphasis on secret knowledge and salvation via initiation? And does Jesus change the meaning of Isaiah 6:9–10?

Many of the parables were easy to understand, but some were puzzling. Sometimes they are intentionally puzzling. Most of us think of parables as simple illustrations taken from everyday life. But the Hebrew understanding of parable (Hb *mashal*) is broad and applies to most forms of non-prosaic, non-literal speech. Songs, poems, riddles, parables, fables, allegories, and bywords all fall within the category. Therefore, whereas Jesus’ parable of the Sower is simple enough on one level, on another level it is mysterious. If one has not embraced Jesus and his message, then the full meaning of the parable will not be apparent. In that case one risks falling under the judgment spoken by the prophet Isaiah long ago.

In explaining why “those outside” are not given the “secret of the kingdom of God” (as are the disciples) but only “parables,” Jesus paraphrases (he does not pose it as a quote) Isaiah 6:9–10, a word of judgment spoken against an obdurate Israel in the days of king Ahaz (c. 734 BC). God instructs Isaiah to say to stubborn Israel, “Keep listening, but do not understand; keep looking, but do not perceive,” because judgment is drawing near. Only a remnant will repent and be saved (Isa 6:13). This citation is appropriate because refusal to heed Jesus’ preaching brings on spiritual blindness. In contrast, those who follow Jesus—a remnant, as it were—are more able to understand the parables; and, even if they do not understand them, they receive private explanation (4:34; 7:17–23). There is no ethical problem with Jesus’ approach, and it does not resemble the “secret knowledge” of the Gnostic cults.

Those who respond with faith to what little they know are given even more understanding. (See further comments at Matt 13:10–17 and Luke 8:10.)

MARK 4:14–20

¹⁴The sower sows the word. ¹⁵These are the ones along the path where the word is sown: when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word sown in them. ¹⁶And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, immediately they receive it with joy. ¹⁷But they have no root in themselves; they are short-lived. When pressure or persecution comes because of the word, they immediately stumble. ¹⁸Others are sown among thorns; these are the ones who hear the word, ¹⁹but the worries of this age, the seduction of wealth, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. ²⁰But the ones sown on good ground are those who hear the word, welcome it, and produce a crop: 30, 60, and 100 times what was sown.”

Jesus’ explanation of the parable of the Sower (4:14): Because Jesus gives an allegorical interpretation of the parable (i.e., the sower is the evangelist who proclaims the word of God; the four types of soil represent four types of human response to the proclamation), some critics claim that it is the interpretation of the early church, not of Jesus. This view overlooks the fact that most early Jewish parables contained allegorical elements. Some of the details of the parable itself are drawn from the OT. Some of these details already have allegorical values. One would think that if the explanation of the parable was generated by the church, the content of the “word” that is sown would have reflected the church’s proclamation of Jesus, God’s Son, risen on the third day. However, there is no hint of Christology or the Easter proclamation. The interpretation is best understood as deriving from Jesus himself.

MARK 4:21–23

²¹He also said to them, “Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket or under a bed? Isn’t it to be put on a lampstand? ²²For nothing is concealed except to be revealed, and nothing hidden except to come to light. ²³If anyone has ears to hear, he should listen!”

For nothing is concealed except to be revealed (4:22): To the parable of the Sower Mark appends three parables and two sayings (4:21–23, 24–25) that qualify the judgmental saying in 4:11–12. Lest one imagine that the purpose of Jesus’ parables is to veil the truth (and the language of 4:11–12 could suggest this), the saying in 4:21–23 makes it clear that light is not to be hidden. Jesus’ teaching is like a lamp, and like a lamp it should be “put on a lampstand” not “put under a basket or under a bed” (v. 21). The next verse (v. 22) explains that everything will be revealed. The point of this seems to be that whatever may at first seem obscure (to outsiders and even to the disciples) will become clear through spiritual insight and, as necessary,

through private explanation (to the disciples). Anyone who is willing to hear Jesus' word will gain understanding.

MARK 4:30–32

³⁰And He said: “How can we illustrate the kingdom of God, or what parable can we use to describe it? ³¹It’s like a mustard seed that, when sown in the soil, is smaller than all the seeds on the ground. ³²And when sown, it comes up and grows taller than all the vegetables, and produces large branches, so that the birds of the sky can nest in its shade.”

It’s like a mustard seed . . . smaller than all the seeds (4:31): Does Jesus make a false claim about the mustard seed being the smallest of all seeds? The point Jesus is making is that the kingdom of God begins in a small, seemingly insignificant way, yet grows to great proportions. This is analogous to the mustard seed, which starts out tiny and grows to be surprisingly large. Is the mustard seed literally “smaller than all the seeds” known to us? No, but it is the smallest in comparison to other seeds that typically were in use in Israel in Jesus’ time. The point that Jesus makes is apt, especially for his original audience, but he has made no attempt to teach botany here and thus is not guilty of error.

MARK 4:33–34

³³He would speak the word to them with many parables like these, as they were able to understand. ³⁴And He did not speak to them without a parable. Privately, however, He would explain everything to His own disciples.

He did not speak to them without a parable (4:34): Mark seems to make an overstatement here, for Jesus often taught by methods other than parables (the Beatitudes, for example). And again, the private teaching to the disciples—does this resemble the Gnostic emphasis on secret knowledge and initiation? Rather than making an exaggerated claim, Mark is stressing that Jesus normally used parables, not that he only used parables. As for the need for private teaching, it has nothing to do with Gnosticism. Many of Jesus’ parables required further explanation (4:11–13). His disciples, who included more than just the Twelve, were advantaged with further, private instruction because they desired it, having elected to follow him in faith. Some parables required explanation because they were not simply illustrations and nothing more. Jewish parables often contained allegorical, insider meaning. But becoming a disciple was a simple matter of faith, while non-disciples were blinded by their own unbelief.

MARK 4:35–41

³⁵On that day, when evening had come, He told them, “Let’s cross over to the other side of the sea.” ³⁶So they left the crowd and took Him along since He was already in the boat. And other boats were with Him. ³⁷A fierce windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking over the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸But He was in the stern, sleeping on the cushion. So they woke Him up and said to Him, “Teacher! Don’t You care that we’re going to die?”

³⁹He got up, rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Silence! Be still!” The wind ceased, and there was a great calm. ⁴⁰Then He said to them, “Why are you fearful? Do you still have no faith?”

⁴¹And they were terrified and asked one another, “Who then is this? Even the wind and the sea obey Him!”

Teacher! Don’t You care that we’re going to die? (4:38): The authenticity of this incident is strongly supported by the grittiness of the story, including and especially the apparent lack of respect the disciples show Jesus when they ask him if he cares that their lives are in danger. The same realism is seen when Jesus asks his disciples, “Do you still have no faith?” (v. 40). This is hardly the exchange one should expect to find in a post-Easter fiction that glorifies Jesus and his disciples.

Who then is this? Even the wind and the sea obey Him! (4:41): Given all that the disciples have seen and heard to date, why were they so astounded at Jesus’ power here? So many episodes in the Gospels portray the disciples as if they’ve seen Jesus perform a miracle for the first time. Is this because the Gospel writers made up the stories? Nothing makes one feel as powerless as a mighty storm at sea. The disciples had never seen Jesus (or anyone else) overpower the wind and were naturally terrified by such authority. Each time they saw Jesus perform a miracle they were more amazed, especially when it was more impressive than the last one. If the Gospel writers made up the stories, they would surely leave out their own expressions of unbelief. They repeatedly portray themselves as slow to comprehend, a sign that these accounts are authentic.

MARK 5:1–20

Then they came to the other side of the sea, to the region of the Gerasenes. ²As soon as He got out of the boat, a man with an unclean spirit came out of the tombs and met Him. ³He lived in the tombs. No one was able to restrain him anymore—even with chains — ⁴because he often had been bound with shackles and chains, but had snapped off the chains and smashed the shackles. No one was strong enough to subdue him. ⁵And always, night and day, he was crying out among the tombs and in the mountains and cutting himself with stones.

⁶When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and knelt down before Him. ⁷And he cried out with a loud voice, “What do You have to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg You before God, don’t tor-