

INTERPRETING MARK

(Darrell Bock)

Structure and Themes

Today, Mark's Gospel generally is regarded as the first one written. Thus, its outline of Jesus's ministry has become the basic structure through which his life has been traced, even though sections of it probably are given not in chronological order but in topical arrangement (e.g., the conflicts in Mark 2-3). It is Mark's overall structure that flows into the other Synoptics. Here is a basic working outline:

- I. Prologue on the beginning of the gospel (1:1-15)
- II. Jesus's public ministry (1:16-8:26)
 - A. Calling of disciples and conflicts leading to rejection (1:16-3:12)
 - B. Teaching on the mystery-filled kingdom and miracles of power still yield rejection (3:13-6:6)
 - C. From challenge and misunderstanding to confession (6:7-8:26)
- III. To Jerusalem, passion, and vindication (8:27-16:8)
 - A. Passion predictions and discipleship teaching (8:27-10:52)
 - B. Conflict in Jerusalem and prediction of judgment (11:1-13:37)
 - C. King of the Jews executed for blasphemy, confessed as Son, and vindicated by God (14:1-16:8)

The first major section of this Gospel cycles through a consistent structure in each of its three parts. There is a story about disciples at the start (1:16-20; 3:13-19; 6:7-13) and a note about rejection or a summary at the end (3:7-12; 6:1-6; 8:22-26).¹³ The turning point of the Gospel is the confession in 8:27-31 that Jesus is the Christ. A miracle appears before this key confession that pictures Jesus giving sight, a symbol of how Jesus brings light to life. After the confession comes the repeated instruction that this Messiah will suffer. Half of the Gospel treats the movement toward the final week of Jesus's ministry, while a full quarter of it is on the last week alone. For Mark, the events of the final week are central to the story.

The key themes are also evident in how the account proceeds. It begins with a note that what is being told is the gospel. Though to a lesser degree than Matthew or Luke, Mark also traces the kingdom of God as a theme. For Mark, it has elements that indicate its initial presence, while the bulk of the emphasis is that it will come in fullness one day in the future. Kingdom entry, available now, requires one to be like a child. The parables look to a day when this kingdom will grow to be like a place where birds nest. The mystery of the kingdom is that it starts out small but still will accomplish all that God has called it to be. It will grow into a full harvest.

Another theme that is present but less developed than in Matthew or Luke is that the time of fulfillment has come. Mark opens with this theme (1:15), and it appears here and there.

Mark is more a Gospel of action than teaching. Things happen immediately—one of Mark's favorite expressions. Mark has only two discourses, one involving the parables of the kingdom (4:1-33) and the other being an eschatological discourse (13:1-37). Miracles abound. Mark has twenty miracle accounts. Combined with healing summaries, these units comprise a third of the Gospel and early



one-half of the first ten chapters. These pictures of Jesus's authority are important to Mark; he presents Jesus as one who teaches with authority, but a key part of that authority is seen in his activity, not just in his pronouncements. The authority underscores that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (1:1; 8:29; 15:39). Jesus shows who he is more than describing who he is. Mark's Christology presents Jesus as this promised figure. Jesus's actions of authority over sin, his relationship as Son, and practices tied to purity, Sabbath, and temple get him into trouble with the Jewish leaders, who early on determine that they must stop him. This conflict that Jesus's actions raise and the claims tied to them are central features of the Gospel.

However, Jesus's authority is not one of raw power. In terms of proportion, Mark highlights Jesus as the suffering Son of Man and servant more than the other Gospels. In fact, nine of thirteen uses of Son of Man language look to Jesus's suffering. Although Isa. 53 is not cited, the descriptions of Jesus clearly parallel the portrait of this figure, especially the claim that his mission is to come and give his life as a *ransom for many* (10:45). The importance of understanding the suffering role probably explains the commands to silence given in Mark to those, including demons, who confess Jesus as the Messiah (1:44; 5:43; 9:9). Without an appreciation of his suffering, Jesus's messianic calling is not understood. Some have called this the "messianic secret," but it is not so much that his messiahship is to be kept a secret as that it is not to be shared until it is more fully understood. Most Jews conceived of a powerful Messiah, whether he was seen as a military conqueror or a transcendent figure (Pss. Sol. 17-18; 1En. 37-71). Only as the cross draws near does the full scope of divine promise and calling emerge for those walking with Jesus.

The disciples are not in a position to preach Jesus until they appreciate this aspect of his mission, as the subsequent mission of the church makes clear. This reframing of Jewish expectation is very much a part of the Jesus story and an important aspect to appreciate about it. So Mark highlights it.

The servant Jesus is an example of how to walk with God in a world that rejects those sent by God. It is here that the pastoral demands of discipleship appear as well (10:35-45). Mark is like Mathew here. After the suffering come glory and vindication. The same Son of Man will return one day to render judgment, as the eschatological discourse reveals. The need for discipleship and really listening to Jesus is clear, as Mark notes without hesitation the failures of the disciples. Their instincts will not take them in the right direction. What is required is trust in God and the new ways he calls disciples to go. Alongside this, Mark notes the emotions of Jesus and the disciples more than do any of the other Gospels.

In sum, Mark addresses the church under duress, suffering a rejection like that of their teacher. Yet the call to serve, to rest in God's plan, and to look to Jesus as the example provides the antidote for their stressful situation in a world slow to grasp what God's ways are.