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The Markan Story

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In the nineteenth century, scholars accepted that Mark was the first gospel to be written. As it was the oldest, many thought it would be the best place to look for an accurate record of the life of Jesus. But after an initial burst of interest in Mark as an historian, scholars increasingly agreed that Mark was little more than an editor who had clumsily stitched together older stories. Rudolf Bultmann claimed: "Mark is not sufficiently master of his material to be able to venture on a systematic construction himself."[1] This essay joins the voices that insist Mark ventured "on a systematic construction," and told a good story.[2]

It is often said that a successful story has a good beginning, a good middle, and a good end. Mark's story begins with a solemn confession concerning the good news of Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God (Mark 1:1). Then follows a gradual introduction of Jesus into the story, by means of God's prophetic word (vv. 2–3), John the Baptist (vv. 4–8), culminating in the witness of God in a voice from heaven (vv. 9–11) and Jesus' victory over Satan (vv. 12–13). In the middle of the Gospel, Jesus asks his disciples who they think he is, and Peter confesses: "You are the Messiah" (8:29). At the end, the reader finds the spectacular proof that Jesus' story did not end with his death, but that he has been raised. The women see the

[1]Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. J. Marsh (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963) 350.

[2]A good introduction to this "change of direction" in reading the Gospel of Mark is David M. Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

Contrary to Bultmann's claim that Mark offered no "systematic construction" in his Gospel, a careful analysis of the story reveals a clear plan and a definite theological intention. Mark tells a striking story that calls us into its message.

empty tomb and hear the Easter proclamation from the young man at the tomb. But in an intriguing closure to the story, they do not obey the young man's command to inform the disciples that Jesus is going before them into Galilee. They are so frightened they run away and say nothing to anyone (16:1–8).

The beginning, the midpoint, and the end of the Gospel of Mark indicate that Mark may be a good storyteller.[3] But he leaves other signs of his handiwork in what I like to call "textual markers." They offer the reader hints that the storyteller is "up to something." The most obvious textual marker in any narrative is a summary, where an author pauses to open a new section in his story, to draw a conclusion, or to pass a critical comment upon events just reported. There are many summaries in Mark (see, for example, Mark 1:14–15, 39, 45; 3:7–12; 4:33–34; 6:6b, 53–56; 9:30–31; 10:1). Other textual markers may be repetition. For example, there are two bread miracles, in Mark 6:31–44 and 8:1–9. The passion predictions are found three times, in 8:31, 9:31, and 10:32–34. Two stories tell of the cure of a blind man (8:22–26; 10:46–52). Other markers are shifts in the action from one place to another (a change in the geography of the story), from one period of time to another (a change in the time frame of the story), or from one set of characters to another (a change in the author's focus upon characters). The Gospel of Mark has many such indications (see, for example, 1:35; 2:1; 2:23; 3:7; 4:35; 7:24, 31). The suggested "plot" of the Gospel of Mark that follows will depend upon some of the textual markers that indicate a carefully designed story of Jesus.

Plotting the Gospel of Mark

"Plot" has been helpfully described as follows: "The plot in a dramatic or narrative work is the structure of its actions, as these are rendered and ordered toward achieving particular emotional and artistic effects."[4] The plot of the Gospel of Mark not only generates emotional and artistic effects, but its major concern is to convey a message about Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God (see 1:1). Textual markers highlight turning points in this plot. "The beginning" of the story is announced in 1:1, and it runs from verses 1 to 13. Jesus' first appearance on the scene, proclaiming the good news of the impinging presence of God as king (1:14–15), signals an important moment in the story. The midpoint is highlighted by Peter's confession and Jesus' command to silence (8:29–30). These events close the first half of the Gospel and are followed by the first passion prediction (8:31), as Jesus sets off on his journey to Jerusalem. The second half of the Gospel has begun. The end of the story reports the morning after the Sabbath, as women go to anoint the body of the crucified Jesus and discover an empty tomb (16:1–8). We can thus suggest that there are four clear textual markers:

[3]We cannot be sure exactly who "Mark" might have been, but it appears that the author probably had that name, and I will continue to refer to him as "Mark." On this, see Francis J. Moloney, *Mark: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004) 3–18.

[4]M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 5th ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1988) 139.

1. The Gospel begins (1:1)
2. Jesus opens his ministry in Galilee (1:14–15)
3. Jesus announces his journey to Jerusalem, and his forthcoming death and resurrection, for the first time (8:31)
4. Women discover an empty tomb (16:1–8)

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This careful ordering of a succession of events in the earliest Christian gospel is an indication that the story as a whole is permeated by a storyteller's desire to proclaim something about God, the Christ, and the followers of Jesus. *Whatever the first readers knew of the life story of Jesus of Nazareth was subverted by the Markan story. The account of Jesus' presence in Galilee, his single journey to Jerusalem to be rejected, tried, and crucified, the resurrection and the surprising silence of the women at the empty tomb, told in this way, was not familiar.* The *radical newness* of the Markan story must be kept in mind.[5] It is an original way of telling events from the life of Jesus, and the storyteller must be credited with an equally original understanding of why he thus plotted the story.

The Design of Mark's Story

On the basis of the textual markers listed above, I suggest an initial idea of the author's literary design.

1. Mark 1:1–13 serves as a prologue, providing the reader with a great deal of information about God's beloved Son.
2. From Mark 1:14 to 8:30 the words and deeds of Jesus' ministry increasingly force the question: Who is this man (see 1:27, 45; 2:12; 3:22; 4:41; 5:20; 6:2–3, 48–50; 7:37)? Some accept him, some are indifferent, and many oppose him, but the question behind the story is: Can he be the Messiah? In 8:29 Peter, in the name of the disciples, resolves the problem by confessing: "You are the Messiah." The guessing has come to an end. This section of the Gospel can be framed as a question: "Who is Jesus?" In the last verse, however, Jesus warns Peter not to tell anyone of his being the expected Messiah (8:30). Peter's confession may not contain the whole truth about Jesus.
3. Mark 8:31–15:47 opens with the first passion prediction (8:31: "Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and

[5]See the important essay by Eduard Schweizer, "Mark's Theological Achievement," in *The Interpretation of Mark*, ed. William Telford (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 42–63.

after three days rise again"). Jesus is setting out on a journey to Jerusalem. He will suffer, be crucified, and rise in that city. One can sense that this part of the story forms a "second half" of Mark's story of Jesus. Mark 1:14–8:30 made it clear that Jesus was the Messiah (8:29), but in 8:30 the suggestion emerges that this may not be the whole truth. The second half of the story shows that Jesus is the Messiah who will be revealed as Son of God on the cross, a suffering and vindicated Son of Man (8:31; 9:31; 10:32–33; 13:26; 14:61–62; 15:39). In 15:39 a Roman centurion confesses: "Truly this man was God's Son!" The suffering Christ is truly the Son of God. The mystery has come to an end. Mark 8:31–15:47 can be called "The suffering and vindicated Son of Man: Christ and Son of God."

4. Many questions raised by the story remain unresolved. The disciples have fled (see 14:50), and Jesus has cried out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (15:34). In 16:1–8 the reader learns that God has not forsaken his Son. He has been raised (see 16:6). But a solution to the problem of failing disciples lies in the future. They are to go into Galilee; there they will see him (v. 7). The women, frightened by all they have seen and heard, flee and say nothing to anyone (v. 8).

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Mark 1:14–8:30

Closer examination shows that other markers indicate that 1:14–8:30 and 8:31–15:47 can be further subdivided. The first half of the Gospel (1:14–8:30) establishes relationships, and raises questions concerning the person of Jesus. But the Gospel of Mark is not only about Jesus, Christ and Son of God (see 1:1, 11). It is equally about the challenge of "following" a suffering Son of Man to Jerusalem and beyond, a theme that will dominate the second half of the story (8:31–15:47), but is not altogether absent in 1:14–8:30. On three occasions across 1:14–8:30 the storyteller slows down his fast-moving story to summarize Jesus' ministry at that stage. These summaries of Jesus' activities cannot be easily tied to a time or a place. They offer, in a more general fashion, illustrations of that activity (see 1:14–15; 3:7–12; 6:6b). The Gospel of Mark contains other similar summaries of Jesus' ministry (see, for example, 1:39, 45b; 4:33–34; 6:53–56; 9:30–31; 10:1). What is unique about the general descriptions of Jesus' ministry in 1:14–15, 3:7–12, and 6:6b, however, is that each of these summaries is followed by material that deals with disciples and discipleship (1:16–20; 3:13–19; 6:7–30). The summaries, and the accompanying report of Jesus' association with his disciples, are followed by a series of episodes during which three different audiences respond to the words and

deeds of Jesus. At the end of each episode, a decision is made about Jesus. Two of the decisions are negative (3:6 [the Pharisees and the Herodians]; 6:1–6a [people from "his hometown"]), and the third is a misunderstanding (8:29 [Peter, responding on behalf of the disciples]).[6]

The three summaries leading directly into passages that deal with disciples and concluding with a response to Jesus indicate Mark's careful writing of 1:14–8:30. The three sections unfold as follows:

1. *Jesus and the leaders of Israel* (1:14–3:6). The first major summary appears in 1:14–15: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news.'" This summary is followed by the account of the vocation of the first disciples (1:16–20). Jesus then exercises his ministry in Galilee, chiefly at Capernaum (1:21–3:6), until the political leaders and the religious authorities respond to him: "The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him" (3:6).
2. *Jesus and his new family* (3:7–6:6a). A summary of Jesus' Galilean ministry follows in 3:7–12. It concludes: "[H]e had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him. Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, 'You are the Son of God!' But he sternly ordered them not to make him known" (3:10–12). This summary leads into the account of Jesus' institution of the Twelve (3:13–19). But his ministry meets opposition from his family and from Israel (3:20–30). He establishes new principles for belonging to his family (3:31–35) and teaches through parables (4:1–34) and a stunning series of miracles (4:35–5:43). As Jesus returns to his hometown, his own people reject him: "'Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offence at him" (6:3). Jesus was "amazed at their unbelief" (6:6a).
3. *Jesus and his disciples* (6:6b–8:30). Rejected in his hometown, Jesus' ongoing ministry in Galilee is summarized: "Then he went about among the villages teaching" (6:6b). Jesus then sends out the Twelve on a mission that parallels his own (6:6b–13). The narrative continues, marked by increasing hostility between Jesus and the Jews, especially in his conflict with the Pharisees (see 7:1–23). His disciples, his new family, also become more deeply involved with his ministry (see 6:7–13, 30–44; 8:1–10). This section draws to a close as Jesus broaches the question that has been lurking behind the narrative since 1:14: "Who do people say that I am?" (8:27); "[W]ho do you say that I am?" (v. 28). Peter responds: "You are the Messiah" (v. 29). The reader,

[6]For this proposal, which many have followed, see Schweizer, "Mark's Theological Achievement," 46–54.

informed by the storyteller at 1:1, has known from the outset that Jesus is the Christ. The question "Who is Jesus?" has been answered. There is a sense in which Peter is correct, but Jesus' words to the disciples ("them") sound a warning bell, and open the door to the second part of the Gospel: "And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him" (8:30).

Mark 8:31–15:47

Jesus' command to silence in 8:30 closes the first half of the story and points toward the second half, which opens with the first prediction, spoken openly, of his future death and resurrection in Jerusalem (8:31). Textual markers across 8:31–15:47 point to a further threefold articulation of the suffering and finally vindicated Son of Man, Messiah, and Son of God. Obvious changes of place, characters, and situations occur across this second half of the story.

1. *Jesus and the disciples journey to Jerusalem* (8:31–10:52). Jesus' journey to Jerusalem focuses strongly upon his teaching of his oncoming death and resurrection (8:31; 9:31; 10:32–34) and his instruction of increasingly recalcitrant disciples.
2. *Endings in Jerusalem* (11:1–13:37). Jesus enters Jerusalem (11:1–11), brings all temple practice to an end (11:12–24), encounters and silences Israel's religious authorities (11:27–12:44), and prophesies the end of the Holy City and the world (13:1–37).
3. *The passion and death of Jesus* (14:1–15:47). The ministry is over as Jesus accepts and suffers his passion and death.

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The reader notices that the storyteller designed the first half of his Gospel by asking the question, "Who is Jesus?" The second half is designed to respond: "the suffering and vindicated Son of Man, the Christ and Son of God." However, these two "halves" of the plot overlap. Narrative units are not separated by brick walls. One flows into the other, looks back to issues already mentioned, and hints at themes yet to come. Peter's confession of faith in Mark 8:29 might mark the closure of "The Mystery of the Messiah," but a theme of "blindness" has emerged in 8:22–26 in the strange story of a blind man at Bethsaida, who has his sight restored in stages. This theme will be resumed in 10:46–52, where a further story of a man coming to sight is reported: the story of blind Bartimaeus. Between these two miracle stories where blind men are cured Jesus speaks of the oncoming death and resurrection of the Son of Man (see 8:31; 9:31; 10:32–34), an issue hidden behind the events reported in 1:14–8:30 (see 3:6; 7:14–29; 8:11–15). After each of the passion

predictions, Jesus instructs increasingly obtuse disciples who will not or cannot understand what it means to follow him (see 8:32–33; 9:33–37; 10:36–45). An earlier accusation of blindness also comes into play. After the second multiplication of the loaves and fishes (8:1–9) Jesus asks his dull disciples: "Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? *Do you have eyes, and fail to see?* Do you have ears, and fail to hear?" (8:17–18). This is but one example of Mark's ability to overlap, to look forward and to glance back, as he tells his story.[7]

Mark takes readers who are already familiar with the story through a new telling that transforms its well-known ending. Mark faced a problem stated some twenty years before the Gospel appeared: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1:22–25). Mark also attempts to solve the scandal of the cross by means of a story that begins as "the good news" that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (1:1, 11), and ends with a scream from a cross and an agonizing death, an empty tomb, and an Easter message that is not delivered (15:33–16:8). A story of the Christ and the Son of God that ends in this fashion is a narrative repetition of the Pauline message: "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1:25).[8]

A Roadmap

The following "skeleton" presentation of the Gospel's narrative structure is merely a brief list of the headings that we have already uncovered. Only a personal and/or shared reading of the Gospel itself can nourish a fuller understanding of the way the story unfolds. What follows is something of the "bare bones" of the story of the Gospel of Mark, a type of roadmap that a first-time reader can glance at occasionally, to see where she or he is at any particular time or place during the journey through the story.[9]

1. Prologue: The beginning (1:1–13).
2. Who is Jesus? (1:14–8:30).
    (a) Jesus and the leaders of Israel (1:14–3:6).

[7]For extensive consideration of this phenomenon in the Gospel of Mark, see Joanna Dewey, "Mark as Interwoven Tapestry: Forecasts and Echoes for a Listening Audience," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53 (1991) 225–236; Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "Echoes and Foreshadowings in Mark 4–8: Reading and Rereading," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112 (1993) 211–230.

[8]On Mark 16:1–8 and the failure of the women, see Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002) 239–254, and, more theologically, Moloney, *Mark: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist*, 191–285.

[9]For my attempt to "read the whole story," see Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark*, and Moloney, *Mark: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist*, 59–121.

(b) Jesus and his new family (3:7–6:6a).

(c) Jesus and the disciples (6:6b–8:30).

3. The suffering and vindicated Son of Man: Christ and Son of God (8:31–15:47).

(a) On the way from blindness to sight (8:31–10:52).

(b) The symbolic end of Israel and the world (11:1–13:37).

(c) The crucifixion of the Son of Man, Christ and Son of God (14:1–15:47).

4. Epilogue: A new beginning (16:1–8).

I must conclude with a word of warning. Having discovered the roadmap, the journey from this point on will not be easy. There are places in the Gospel of Mark where a reader finds the logic of the movement from one episode to the next hard to follow. We have become used to stories that flow smoothly, and tend to judge them according to the author's ability to lead the reader gently from one episode to the next. Such an easy passage is not always the case in the Gospel of Mark. For example, in 9:42–48, a series of sayings of Jesus, which may have originally been independent, have been placed side by side on the basis of the repetition of the same words in the sayings ("cause to stumble" [see vv. 42, 43, 45, 47] and "salt" [vv. 49, 50]). But the link between each saying is hard to trace, and one must strain one's imagination to follow the logic of vv. 42–48. These moments of obscurity in the narrative indicate the respect that the early writers in the Christian church had for the traditions that came to them. Mark was a creative writer, but he respected words and events from the life of Jesus that he received. Mark's story must not be judged by the criteria we use to judge an enjoyable novel.

The tensions in the narrative should be resolved by the application of two principles. In the first instance, we need to understand that Mark the storyteller attempted to write an account of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus that coherently communicated what he wanted to say to his original readers. We are historically, culturally, and even religiously distant from those original readers. We must allow ourselves to be challenged by the strangeness of this ancient text. Secondly, every reader strives "even if unconsciously, to fit everything together in a consistent pattern."[10] Inevitably a reader traces literary and theological connections across the Gospel that may be judged as the striving of that particular reader to impose her or his consistent pattern. That is an inevitable and perfectly acceptable part of the reading and listening process. It is true that, in some respects, we shape the meaning of what we read in the light of our own experiences and understanding.

But the text also shapes us. It is respect and admiration for a text that has

[10]Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) 283.

been read again and again by many Christian individuals and within the life of the Christian church that inspires our striving to understand the message of the Gospel of Mark. Despite Bultmann,[11] Mark was master of his material, and he used it to tell a striking story that has stood the test of time. It is our Christian responsibility to be seduced by the Markan story of Jesus and his disciples. ⊕

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[11]See note 1.