

Jesus, Mark, and the Modern Reader

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1) Introductory Considerations

It is axiomatic in biblical as well as theological study to insist that between the Jesus of history and the modern reader or student of the Bible there stands the enigmatic text called the Gospel of Mark. In other words we moderns have no viable avenue to reach the founder of the Jesus movement save this early vita of Jesus. For the last century and a half scholars have, with few exceptions, accepted the conclusion that Mark was the first Christian to have assembled the community's oral stories about the master and to have organized them into a continuous narrative. Indeed, as this relatively simple story of Jesus of Nazareth became accepted in many early communities of the movement, as its authority and influence increased, and as oral memory of the original events began to recede, others took it upon themselves to revise or update this relatively primitive life of the master to meet new challenges as the movement's membership became both more numerous and more diversified.¹

Matthew, on the one hand, saw this work as basic, indeed, the only real source for the community's vision of God's Messiah. Matthew borrowed from Mark the sequence, the episodes, and overall understanding of Jesus' life from Mark (about 90% of its content is summarily borrowed) and set out to present a "new Jesus for a new day" or in Matthean terms, to express a vision of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah who constituted and commissioned the New Israel, i.e., the Jewish-Christian community, for its role in the world mission.

On the other hand, Luke, another early disciple, also acknowledged Mark's influence and dominant position as pioneer by borrowing heavily from that Gospel to compose a new life of the master, one that readers of the Greco-Roman world might find more congenial and certainly more

understandable. Luke also borrowed the basic outline, format, and inspiration for a new life of Jesus from Mark's sequence and content.

Thus, what we as modern readers know about early Christian history, particularly the life of Jesus, we owe almost entirely to the Gospel of Mark, for it provides the only sequence we possess of Jesus' life and work, since the other Synoptics follow this very same Markan schema. Two other shadowy figures, however, are often brought into this picture, namely the no-longer extant collection of sayings of Jesus, known as the "Q-Source" and the "Sign Gospel" which forms the outline of John's Gospel.² These two however provide little narrative glue for a life of the master and limited insight for an understanding of who Jesus was, what he said and did, or for what happened to him.³ I therefore return to the title of this presentation: between Jesus and the modern reader, presumably virtually all readers over the centuries, stands Mark and its peculiar portrait of Jesus of Nazareth. What we know is Mark's Jesus; so how much do we know about the historical Jesus?

2) The Enigmatic Jesus of Mark's Gospel

A cursory reading of Mark reveals a generous list of exalted titles and other descriptive expressions to characterize Jesus' identity, activity, and authority. At various junctures in the Markan narrative Jesus is addressed or described as "Christ," "Son of God," or "of the Blessed One," as "Son of Man," "Son of David," also as "teacher," "prophet," "rabbi," "the Nazarene" or as healer or even as "Lord." But when he is addressed as "the Holy One of God" or "Son of God" by unclean spirits, Jesus issues an immediate command of silence (1:24-25 and 3:12).⁴ Even Peter's confession of Jesus as "Christ" or "Messiah," which is contrasted to the less-than-adequate claims of the crowds (Jesus is John come back to life, or Elijah or a prophet- 8:27-28), even Peter's seemingly accurate statement is called into question a few verses later when he is demonized and disavowed: "Get behind me, Satan," Jesus tells Peter, "For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (8:27-29 and 33). Furthermore, the heavenly voice proclaims Jesus' identity not to the crowd of the baptism scene but to Jesus alone: "you are (singular) my beloved Son:" (1:11). Whether through commands of silence or the use of non-trustworthy witnesses, Mark

leaves doubts about Jesus' real or true identity and certainly doubt about how well the characters in the story understand Jesus' role therein.

Furthermore, in dealing with the above titles one soon becomes aware, in technical terms, of the problems they present, for they are seemingly from different strands of the Jesus tradition which understood Jesus and his role in different ways.

Each of these traditions bears its own Christological stamp. Some appear to hit historical bedrock (Jesus as teacher, prophet or healer), or go back to the primitive Jewish-Christian tradition (Jesus as Messiah, apocalyptic Son of Man, royal Son of David or suffering Servant). Others may reflect perhaps an estimate of Jesus more widely current within Hellenistic Jewish or Gentile Christianity (Jesus as Lord, Son of God, 'divine man') (Telford, pp. 30-31).⁵

Seemingly, Mark has made use of traditions which see Jesus in dissimilar and indeed contradictory ways, for the stories about the man from Nazareth are juxtaposed with messianic, royal or apocalyptic claims which are variously assessed by the evangelical narrator. Thus stories about the prophet (the one who is rejected by his own countrymen--6:4) and about the popular teacher and healer (6:2: "where did this man get all this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!"), [these stories are] counteracted by the author's judgment that they are only the claims of the uninformed crowds, i.e., what "people" are saying about Jesus (6:14-16 and 8:27-28). Further, Mark seems reluctant to insist on messianic claims, whether by Peter at Caesarea Philippi or the crowds during the crucifixion scene (8:29; 15:32). Also royal claims are seemingly reduced to a minimum for Jesus is rarely called "Son of David" or "king of Israel," the latter, along with "king of the Jews," occur in scenes of mockery prior to his death by crucifixion. Additionally the apocalyptic title, "Son of Man," while clearly defined as future in character on three occasions (8:38; 13:26; 14:62), is regularly employed in a non-apocalyptic sense (11 of 14 occurrences), particularly when Mark insists repeatedly that the Son of Man must suffer, die, and be raised on the third day (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). The above then are contradictory or conflicting claims as well as uses of traditions.

Further not only is the figure of Jesus an enigma in terms of titles and themes but also in terms of character portrayal. On the one hand, Jesus is a human hero on a human stage, a character who encounters superhuman powers in his battles with the demon world. He acts for others, encounters the religious and political leaders of the day, and proceeds to preach, teach, and gather followers. Lastly, he encounters an unjust fate and is finally vindicated by God. Thus heroic status is repeatedly confirmed, for he is sent by God (9:37), tested, approved, and commissioned. Indeed he is a willing servant of God's will for others, a teacher of divine realities, one who heals and acts by God's power, and finally one who is divinely vindicated and accepted by the centurion at the end of the story as "Son of God" (15:39)- this is the positive side.

On the other hand, the story is far from a straight-forward presentation of the heroic founder of the Jesus movement, for Jesus is rejected or misunderstood by virtually all characters in the story--this is the negative or flip side. While one would expect him to be feared by members of the demon world (see various exorcism stories), one might be surprised to see that he is rejected first by the Jewish religious and political authorities who, early in the story, set in motion their plan to destroy him--3:6 speaks of Pharisees and Herodians and later the plot involves the chief priests, other members of the Sanhedrin, and even one of his disciples: 14:1f. Secondly, he is misunderstood and rejected by his family and countrymen in two memorable scenes, the first in 3:20f when he is said by them to have "gone out of his mind" and in the second in a visit to his birth place where Jesus notes that he, like the proverbial prophet, has honor everywhere "except in his hometown, and among his own kin and in his own house" (6:4). And thirdly, after a series of misunderstandings and less-than-stellar reactions to Jesus' teaching and activity, the disciples are reproached: "do you not yet understand?" (8:21). The story then proceeds to show these same apostles as rejecting Jesus' destiny (8:33-34) and as more interested in positions of power as their master heads to his grim encounter with the Jewish and political authorities in Jerusalem (9:32; 10:34), and finally, after a triumphant entry in the city and a memorable last meal with them, presents these same apostles as leaving him in the face of an arresting party and fleeing for their lives (14:50)--even the lead apostle denies him three times (14:72).⁶

Beyond these plot and thematic considerations concerning Jesus' identity or what I have called Mark's enigmatic presentation of Jesus, one finds the Markan Jesus silencing not only the defeated demons but even characters who are healed of their infirmities. And as noted earlier even Peter's seemingly insightful statement that Jesus, in contrast to popular estimates about his identity, is indeed "the Christ" or "Messiah" (8:29), even this confession is not accepted as satisfactory, since the one who pronounces it is thereafter disavowed as untrustworthy--one who thinks not in a divine but in a human way (8:33). Indeed, the disciples, in Mark, never really confess Jesus' true identity. So why this anomaly in what is seemingly Mark's straight-forward story of the Jesus movement's founder? If Mark's story were an example of early christian hagiography, i.e., holy or glorified writing, about the founder and his early followers, one would not find such stark contrasts and even contradictions.

3. A Brief Note on Methodology

Before looking more seriously at Mark's presentation of Jesus we will have to consider even more seriously the author's purpose for writing in the first place, for we must not forget the hermeneutical axiom presented by our title: the Jesus the modern reader will find in Mark's Gospel is undoubtedly conditioned by the author's purpose and strategy. Mark presents not a historical character, pure and simple, but a character who addresses the community's situation and the author's strategy for the gospel. The Jesus who appears in Mark is the character the evangelist allows to appear, one compatible or amenable to the works' purpose and message.

While some scholars, in the immediate past, have looked to Mark, the first written life of Jesus, for the historical Palestinian figure and while others have resigned themselves to describing the early Church's various estimates of him, we find that more serious consideration must be given to the filter (or Mark's purpose and vision) through which one encounters Jesus. Between Jesus and us as modern readers is the Gospel of Mark and its distinct portrait of the master. First therefore we must focus on Mark's purpose and strategy and to do this we must look at the community or addressees' situation.

4. The Community's Situation: Apocalypticism and Its Consequences

From a reading of Mark 13 one gets a fair sense of the community's situation and indeed its beliefs--the members of the community are focused on Jesus' imminent return as warring Son of Man.⁷ I will focus on three areas: the community's belief in the imminent end, its christology, and its activity.

a. The end is near. By a reverse reading of Mark 13:5f one sees that the community, in true apocalyptic fashion, expects the end of the world soon. For these early christians the kingdom is present or imminent. God is ready to usher in the kingdom with strength. One simply has to read the signs of the times: cosmic and civil disruption (13:6-8) as well as persecution and disaffection of many (see 4:14f).

b. Jesus' identity and imminent return. The community's image of Jesus is that of the conquering, triumphant Son of Man. Jesus, in the imagery of Daniel 7 (see 14:62), will soon return on the clouds as endtime warrior and judge (13:26-27). Such an image, seemingly, is further underscored throughout the first part of the Gospel by stories of Jesus as miracle worker, indeed, as the powerful one announced by John the Baptist (1:6), the one who has already confronted Satan and his agents, the one who has plundered Satan's kingdom (3:22-27). Jesus for this apocalyptic community is the Christ, the kingly Messiah who is coming soon as warrior and judge to gather his elect (13:27).

c. Discipleship as focus on self. The community members, seemingly, are self-absorbed. Concerned about their difficulties, real or imagined, which they interpret as the messianic woes, they are neglecting the christian mission and some are falling away (those with shallow roots, those enticed by the world's pleasures--chapter 4). It is to such a community that Mark is addressed, not to the Church at large and, it might be added, this fact will greatly influence the presentation the author makes of Jesus, the principal character of the story.⁸

5. Mark's Purpose for Writing

At first blush one sees Mark's immediate concern as a response to these various issues, given above as a, b, and c. Indeed one discerns a point by point response to these claims.

a. It is not the end. Community members claim that the end has come, but Mark insists that the contrary is true and says: you may easily be led astray by false prophets, by a misreading of the signs, "but the end is still to come" and "it is only the beginning of the birth pangs" (13:5-8). Additionally, The first words of Jesus in the Gospel address this very issue: "the kingdom of God is at hand"; one must believe in the good news (1:15). Indeed, Mark has already insisted in the first line of the story: "this is but the beginning of the good news" (1:1) and not its ending. Before the end, "the good news must be proclaimed to all nations" (13:10). Besides, the community members, personified by Peter and disciples, must follow Jesus to Galilee "of the Gentiles" (16:7). Additionally, Mark suggests that the kingdom is like a mustard seed; it must grow like a great shrub (4:30f)--the end is not yet; the small seed must have time to grow into a great shrub.

b. Portrait of Jesus. For Mark Jesus is God's Son, a concept communicated by a heavenly voice at Jesus' baptism (1:11). Jesus then is God's agent or holy man, but as one who pleases God. He is also the one who teaches God's point of view for the heavenly voice, a second time (9:7), not only publicly declares him "Beloved Son" but also insists that believers "listen to him" as he expounds on the Messiah's suffering, death, and resurrection (8:31; 9:31; 10:33). God's agent, in the present, is not a triumphant but a dying and rising Son of Man. Thus Mark uses the title "Son of Man" either, overwhelmingly, in a non-apocalyptic way (the one who acts in the present or one who is destined to die and be raised by God) or with a distinct future emphasis, that is, as a future one whose return is still distant (both 13:26 and 14:62 employ the future tense: "they will see" or "you will see the Son of Man"). Presently, Mark insists, Jesus is God's Son, the Messiah who has died and been raised, for again at the end of the story the reader is presented with a heavenly message, given by "the young man dressed in white," to the effect that Jesus is alive and leads the community in mission (16:6-7).

c. The Community's Situation and a New Perspective on Jesus, Satan and Evil. Jesus' life, Mark insists, is an indication of incipient victory over evil, whether Jesus' temptations or his miracles. This victory is real

but it is also short-lived for the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners (14:41) and presently there is the plundering of the bound, strong one's house (you will recall the parabolic story of 3:27 about the strong man). In the death of God's Son (15:39--see the centurion's confession) new life is given (16:6). Indeed Jesus' life is a ransom for many (10:45) and as the resurrected one he becomes once again the strong one, the first among God's servants (10:43), the one who as risen lord continues to perform God's activity in mission.

6. Mark's Strategy: A Life of Jesus & Its Structure

It is not enough for Mark to respond, point by point, to the community's misconceptions, apocalyptic focus, or image of Jesus. Mark instead structures, into a story, the Jesus material received from oral tradition both to address this situation and to present a more solid interpretation of Jesus' role and a discussion of the community's responsibilities, namely, a more solid christology and ecclesiology. Thus the text of Mark falls roughly into two parts, each with its own focus, dynamics, and message.⁹

a. 1:1-8:21. The first part of the gospel (1:1f) is unified by a secrecy motif: Jesus, according to Mark, issues orders of silence to allow his deeds and words to reveal who he is. Even the heavenly voice speaks to Jesus alone (1:11--"you are"). Jesus is declared "Son of God," one in whom God is well pleased. The first part of the gospel is dedicated to showing how Jesus is God's Beloved Son. He acts (in God's name) for others; he reveals love, mercy, and kingdom. But this first section also focuses greatly on rejection: by authorities (3:6), by his family or country (6:4-5), and by his disciples (expressed as profound misunderstanding: 8:21).

b. 8:21-16:8. The second part (8:21f) is no longer dominated by the commands of silence (which quickly cease: 8:30; 9:9). Instead Mark begins to focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus (chapters 8, 9, 10). Just as the theme of secrecy of the first part is introduced by a heavenly voice (1:11) so the themes of Jesus' death and resurrection are underscored by the second occurrence of the voice (9:7), for there the characters in the story (and the gospel reader) are commanded to approach Jesus as teacher ("listen to him"). Just at this point, he is one

who teaches about the Son of Man's death and resurrection (8:31; 9:31; and 10:33-34), about doing God's will (14:36), about faith only in light of the resurrection (9:9), about confession of Jesus as Son of Man who will return in the future (13:26; 14:62) and as Son of God, that is, as one who acts in God's name for the good of others (10:45--this last passage deserves to be cited in full: "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many").

c. A third heavenly message. In 16:6-7 one encounters another important passage which contributes to our understanding of Mark's strategy, for beyond the heavenly voice and its statements in chapters 1 and 9 (the Baptism and Transfiguration scenes, respectively), at the end of the story a heavenly figure (dressed in white) announces that Jesus of Nazareth is not a dead man but a risen lord, who leads the community in mission (16:7; 13:10).¹⁰ The community, rather than idly waiting for the end of the world, must be active and productive in the world and must preach the good news. It must let its light shine before others (4:21)--its members must be like Jesus: dedicated to the service of others and to spreading the good news.

d. Mark's Message. The community thinks that Jesus is a warrior (or Son of Man) who is coming soon to rescue the community from its problems and persecution (see 4:13-20). Mark insists, however, that Jesus is a suffering and rising Son of Man (8:31f) though he is also the one who will return in the future as warrior and judge (14:62). But especially Jesus is one who does God's will (at the service of others) and so is God's Beloved One- the one in whom God is well pleased. Mark hopes that the reader and members of the community for whom the text is written will confess and accept the profound conclusion that Jesus is indeed, as the centurion exclaims, "God's Son" (15:39). The present (i.e., the disciples' life and mission) should not be a time of anxious waiting for suffering to end but a time for imitating Jesus (carrying cross even--see 8:34f) and a time for being on the road to mission (16:7). Indeed, at the end of the Gospel Jesus is on the road to Galilee and beyond and insists that the good news must be preached to all before the end comes.

7. Mark's Jesus in Light of the Author's Purpose and Strategy

It is time, at this point, to turn to the evangelist's image of Jesus. It is my contention that Mark's seemingly erratic use of titles, especially "Son of God," "Son of Man," and "Christ" or "Messiah," makes narrative sense if one starts from the perspective of the gospel as presenting the author's response to an apocalyptic community that has focused exclusively on eschatological or endtime issues. These titles are employed both to counteract the community's false expectations about Jesus' imminent return and to impart that same community's traditional christology and ecclesiology. In other words Mark wants 1) to dispel apocalyptic fervor (the end is not yet and no one knows when the end will be except the Father- 13:7-8 and 32) and 2) Mark wants to present an image of Jesus more in keeping with the community's basic belief--Jesus is less a triumphant, apocalyptic figure and more an obedient, suffering, and altruistic figure who now as risen Lord directs the community's world mission. Each title and its use by Mark makes sense in light of this purpose for writing.

The "Son of Man" title, despite the debate about its origin in the Jesus tradition,¹¹ is employed by Mark in a complex but understandable way. On three occasions (8:38; 13:26; and 14:62) Mark insists, in agreement with the community, that Jesus is to be seen as an apocalyptic figure, but, in disagreement with the community, Mark insists further that Jesus' return is a future, even distant, occurrence. Jesus as Son of Man will return in the future. In the meantime Mark prefers to use other titles for Jesus (see below). And yet, Mark focuses further on the community's preferred title, Son of Man, and actually subverts the title. Instead of underscoring its apocalyptic, i.e., warrior/judge, characteristics, Mark insists repeatedly that this seemingly triumphant figure is a suffering/rising figure, even an authoritative one, who has come as a servant for others (11 non-apocalyptic uses out of 14 occurrences of the title--only the three occurrences noted above are clearly apocalyptic). Rather than an erratic use of the Son of Man title, sometimes in an apocalyptic and sometimes in a non-apocalyptic fashion, Markan usage is understandable in view of the author's anti apocalyptic strategy. The community's favorite title for Jesus is employed sometimes to underscore not the imminent but the future return of Jesus and most regularly as a subverted title to remind the community that the cross and not the sword is Jesus' way to the Father and finally that mission and not apocalyptic withdrawal is the disciple's responsibility as follower. Thus both the apocalyptic and non-apocalyptic types of Son-of-Man sayings are

used by Mark to address the community's situation and in this way to propose a more orthodox christology for the community's instruction and imitation.

The title "Son of God," though used more sparingly (approximately a half dozen times), is more central to Mark's strategy and message.¹² The heavenly voice unhesitatingly identifies Jesus for the reader and for the characters of the story as God's beloved agent and favored one. The heavenly voice, unmistakably identified as stating God's point of view, also insists that Jesus' identity involves the death and resurrection or the community's core beliefs, for in the Transfiguration scene, the heavenly voice commands publicly that Jesus' teaching about the suffering and rising Son of Man be taken to heart (9:7: "listen to him"). While other characters (demons and public figures) refer to Jesus as "Son of the Blessed One," it is reserved for the outsider, the Gentile soldier or centurion to voice the community's true or ideal belief: Jesus, in the words both of the heavenly voice and of the true believer, "is indeed God's Son" (15:39).

Even the title "Christ" or "Messiah" though used by the community as a name tag (see opening line of Gospel: "good new of Jesus Christ") or as an identifying mark as confessed by the community's leadership (personified by Peter in 8:29 "You are the Christ"), even this title is not sufficient. Confession and Christian practice must have more orthodox content. Thus bearing the name of "Christian" (see Acts 11:26; 26:28; and 1 Pet 4:16) does not of itself guarantee a proper confession of Jesus and his role as God's Son--this is the role played by Peter's confession and its sequel (8:29f).

In like manner other features of Mark's seemingly enigmatic presentation of the story's hero and other characters, whether commands of silence or negative treatment of Jesus' early followers, make sense in light of the Gospel's strategy in dealing with apocalyptic fervor and in light of its message to a community that is totally absorbed by its short-sighted reading of the signs of the times. Not only is the end not yet but the community must look forward and outward and must get busy about the task of being followers in the world of their time. Mark then employs the early Church's tradition to reject and correct the community's apocalypticism and to redress its christology by reemphasizing the kerygma (i.e., the death/resurrection), its

soteriological function, and the community's call to mission, while awaiting, despite difficulties, the culmination of the kingdom and Jesus' future return as Son of Man--the last mentioned are future and not imminent, insists Mark.

8. Jesus, Mark, and the Modern Reader

In conclusion, we might well ask: where have these considerations taken us and what light do they shed on the three focal points of our title: "Jesus, Mark, and the Modern Reader"?

We turn first to the term "Jesus," as seen in the title of the essay. The historical figure behind or at the origin of the Christian movement remains an illusive target for modern curiosity or scholarship. The modern reader must take the Markan narrative seriously as the only real means to reach the historical Jesus and must read Mark's portrait of the master as what it is, a partial, culture-bound presentation of the community's founder. The Markan narrative has forever left its imprint on the Jesus tradition and provides the only schema of the reality for later generations to consider. Unless some accident of archaeology were to present us with new documentation,¹³ our only avenue to the historical Jesus is Mark's anti apocalyptic life of the prophet from Nazareth. The quest for the historical Jesus is well and alive, indeed there now exists a third quest which seems hell-bent on considering all evidence for reconstructing a life of the master except the one real source, the Markan Gospel. For example the Jesus Seminar's fascination for the Q-Source and especially a host of apocryphal gospels, whether Thomas or Peter,¹⁴ is well known but so is the work of other less-radical inquiries into the life of Jesus.¹⁵ But they too will have to take more seriously Mark's presentation of Jesus and work from that vantage point. Mark is more than a disparate collection of Jesus tradition which can then become the object of varying criteria of authenticity. Mark and its story stand forever between the modern reader and the historical reality at the origin of that tradition. A better knowledge of Mark's portrait or presentation of Jesus offers the historical quest both more focus and renders it more difficult, for the modern's access to the historical Jesus has been forever limited and conditioned by Mark's biographical activity.

So we turn to “Mark,” the second focus of the title. What many scholars see as a poorly written, desperate attempt to preserve the community’s stories about the master emerges from our discussion as a well-considered anti-apocalyptic narrative designed to meet the needs of an early Christian community as it focused far too much on the presumed imminent return of Jesus as Son of Man.¹⁶ This early narrative stands at a strategic point in the development of the tradition. As the vicissitudes of history would have it, the oral tradition from which Mark drew to compose the Gospel disappeared with time, leaving few traces in later documents, whether the Matthean and Lukan communities’ store of sayings and peculiar narratives or the Q-Source’s apocalyptic and sapiential sayings. Instead, Mark becomes the only real and indeed reliable resource for access to the historical figure behind the Christian movement. The understanding of Mark’s story becomes even more crucial for the quest as literary or exegetical activity reveals more clearly the focus, purpose, and message of Mark’s presentation of Jesus. Proper reading of Mark’s narrative is not a luxury but a necessity for the modern reader and historian, for Mark not only collected oral stories about and saying of Jesus the founder, but shaped these into a connected narrative, a narrative which time and historical happenstance have rendered into the one critical document for any serious historical search.

Finally, we turn to the third focus of our title, “the modern reader.” In hermeneutical terms the modern reader is confronted by a plethora of options. The modern can and indeed follows with fascination the popular press’ participation in this process as it reports on the current interest in looking or searching for the “real Jesus,” whether as presumed member of the Dead-Sea-Scrolls community or Essenes, as “talking head” of the Jesus Seminar, or as the Christological figure of denominational interest. Thus the modern reader can follow a host of paths in the quest for the historical Jesus. I will present, briefly, three general areas. 1) First, there is the historicist perspective. Here readers tend to combine or confuse the written documents (whether the gospels, other resources or a combination of these) with the historical reality. Here one tends to combine indiscriminately John with the Synoptics; one speaks of “red letter” bibles; one readily speaks of “Jesus saying” things rather than Mark or Matthew reporting what Jesus said. One easily speaks of NT or Gospel tradition. One sees very little or no difference between the composite or generic figure of Jesus found in the New Testament and considerations about the historical figure of first-century Palestine.

Indeed, this is a non-critical and naive approach. 2) Secondly, there are the more cautious, limited and admittedly dry estimates of Jesus' work and activity. Here we think of the thick tomes of more or less historical reconstructions either of modern biblical historians or of theological or christological treatments of the subject.¹⁷ 3) Thirdly, one can also follow a variety of creative options, whether the more outlandish and eccentric scenarios presented by the more liberally minded, on the one hand, scenarios of Jesus the Cynic peasant, the revolutionary Jew of Zealot background, the Galilean social and spiritual reformer or on the other hand, scenarios from the less-avant-garde who wish to see a spiritual Jesus who lives within the Christian community and calls this community not to historical recollection but to active, social discipleship.¹⁸ In this last category one might also include the pseudo-biographical portraits (both liberal and conservative) one sees on television's educational channels. One also thinks here of more recent literary and philosophical approaches that eschew the historical and prefer to deconstruct the Jesus of the Gospels and popular piety to construct an image more suited to the modern village and its spiritual concerns. Mark (and its Jesus) might be seen as a story of conflict, as a subversive and liberating text, as a myth of origin, or even as a narrative quest for the Divine.

So I conclude: modern literary or exegetical methods have taught us that we have the ability and obligation to read ancient texts in a manner approximating the intentions of their original authors. Yes, texts, ancient and modern, also have rights. We are duty bound to read them as their authors intended them to be read--this is a moral issue. In the case of Mark we may ask questions of history, of perspective, and of intention. Indeed, we are bound, methodologically, to admit and to grapple with the fact that the Jesus of history lies beyond and only partially in Mark's portrait of Jesus. The modern reader of necessity encounters Mark's vision of Jesus and may wish and indeed goes beyond that enigmatic Markan figure. One travels that route with Mark as guide or one travels at one's own peril. Modern readers, whether historian, theologian, or believer, must come to grips with Mark's vision of Jesus, if they are to contemplate the life and work of the prophet from Nazareth.

Notes:

1 For introductory studies on the relationship between the first three gospels, see C.M. Tuckett, "Synoptic Problem," 6:265-70 in The Anchor Bible Dictionary (New York: Doubleday, 1992); also

F. Neirynck, "Synoptic Problem," 587-95 in The New Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs, NY: Prentice Hall, 1990); C.M. Tuckett, "Introduction: The Existence of Q," 1-39 in Q and the History of Early Christianity: Studies on Q (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996). For further study on the gospels themselves--for Mark, see W.R. Telford, ed., The Interpretation of Mark (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1995) and M.D. Hooker, The Gospel according to St Mark (London, UK: A&C Black, 1991); for Matthew, see G. Stanton, ed., The interpretation of Matthew (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1995); D. Senior, What Are They Saying about Matthew? (New York: Paulist, 1996); and D.J. Harrington, The Gospel of Matthew (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991); and for Luke: see C.M. Tuckett, ed., Luke's Literary Achievement: Collected Essays (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1995); and L.T. Johnson, The Gospel of Luke (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991).

2 For a good overall view of the extensive literature on the Q-Source, see C.M. Tuckett, Q and the History of Early Christianity (see note 1); J.S. Kloppenborg, The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity PI, 1999); idem, ed., The Shape of Q: Signal Essays on the Sayings Gospel (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994); idem, ed., Conflict and Invention: Literary, Rhetorical, and Social Studies on the Sayings Gospel Q (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity PI, 1995); R.A. Piper, ed., The Gospel Behind the Gospels: Current Study on Q (Leiden: Brill, 1995); and D.R. Catchpole, The Quest for Q (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1993). For a discussion of the Sign Gospel found in the Fourth Gospel, see U.C. von Wahlde, The Earliest Version of John's Gospel: Recovering the Gospel of Signs (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989); and R.T. Fortna, The Fourth Gospel and Its Predecessor: From Narrative Source to Present Gospel (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1988). For the latter, however, see the negative evaluation of G. Van Belle, The Signs Source in the Fourth Gospel: Historical Survey and Critical Evaluation of the "Semeia" Hypothesis (Leuven: Peeters, 1994).

3 For studies, more generally, of the Jesus tradition, see B. Chilton and C.A. Evans, eds., Authenticating the Activities of Jesus (Leiden: Brill, 1999) and idem, eds, Authenticating the Words of Jesus (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

4 On the Markan "commands of silence," see C.M. Tuckett, ed., The Messianic Secret (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1983) and more recently H. Raisanen, The "Messianic Secret" in Mark (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1990).

5 W.R. Telford, The Theology of the Gospel of Mark (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University, 1999), 30-31. For an overall study of Mark's use of titles, see E. K. Broadhead, Naming Jesus: Titular Christology in the Gospel of Mark (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1999); also idem, Prophet, Son, Messiah: Narrative Form and Function in Mark 14-16 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield, Academic, 1994).

6 Much has been made of Mark's plot and narrative ability since the work of D. Rhoads and D. Michie; see the second edition, with the assistance of J. Dewey, Mark as Story : An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1999); see also B.M. van Iersel, Mark: A Reader Response Commentary (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1998). On the negative features of the Markan plot, see Telford, Theology of the Gospel of Mark, 116-37.

7 Studies of Mark 13 have been relatively numerous; see F. Neiryneck, "Le discours anti-apocalyptique de Mc., xiii," 598-608 in Evangelica--Gospel Studies--Collected Essays (Leuven: Peeters, 1982); A.Y. Collins, "The Apocalyptic Rhetoric of Mark 13 in Historical Context," Biblical Research 41 (1996) 5-36; and K.D. Dyer, The Prophecy on the Mount: Mark 13 and the Gathering of the New Community (Bern: Lang, 1998).

8 On the apocalyptic character of Mark's Gospel, see N. Perrin (with D.C. Duling), The New Testament: An Introduction (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982); H.C. Kee, Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark's Gospel (Macon, GA: Macon University, 1984); and J. Marcus, Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

9 For an earlier, more extended, and slightly different discussion of Mark's depth structure, see E. Richard, "The Gospel of Mark," 99-128, in Jesus: One and Many. The Christological Concept of New Testament Authors (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988).

10 Ibid., 123-28.

11 D.R.A. Hare, The Son of Man Tradition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1990), especially 183-211; see also G.W.E. Nickelsburg, "Son of Man," 6:137 150 in The Anchor Bible Dictionary (New York: Doubleday, 1992); A.Y. Collins, "The Origin of the Designation of Jesus as 'Son of Man,'" Harvard Theological Review 80 (1987) 391-407; and D. Burkett, The Son of Man Debate: A Historical Evaluation (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University, 1999).

12 Broadhead, Naming Jesus, see note 5 above.

13 See G. Stanton, Gospel Truth? New Light on Jesus and the Gospels (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity PI, 1995), 11-32, for a critical discussion of recent, sensational claims concerning first-century fragments of Matthew (by C. Thiede) and of fragments of Mark among the Dead Sea Scrolls (by J. O'Callaghan).

14 See Stanton, "Other Gospels: Peter, Egerton, Thomas and 'Secret Mark,'" 77-95, in Gospel Truth?

15 For a discussion of this “third quest,” see B. Witherington, The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997); M.A. Powell, Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee (Louisville, KY: Westminster JohnKnox, 1998); and D. Chilton and C.A. Evans, eds, Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research (Leiden: Brill, 1994). There have been severe critiques of the Jesus Seminar’s approach (represented by R. Funk, J.D. Crossan, M.J. Borg, and B.L. Mack, among others); see L.T. Johnson, The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1996) and J.P. Meier, “The Present State of the ‘Third Quest’ for the Historical Jesus: Loss and Gain,” Biblica 80 (1999) 459-87; but there have followed equally heated responses, e.g. R.J. Miller, The Jesus Seminar and Its Critics (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 1999). At the same time serious dialogue between opposing camps is in progress: M.J. Borg and N.T. Wright, The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1999) and J.D. Crossan, L.T. Johnson, and W.H. Kelber, The Jesus Controversy: Perspectives in Conflict (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity PI, 1999). Scholarship, however, goes well beyond the two extremes, noted here and in note 15 below, as the far-ranging surveys of the third quest demonstrate, whether scholarly focus on Jesus’ Jewish context, on archaeological activity occurring presently in Galilee, or on the application of social-scientific methods to situate Jesus in contemporary Mediterranean culture; see Witherington, The Jesus Quest (noted above), as well as D. Marguerat et al, eds, Jesus de Nazareth: nouvelles approches d’une enigme (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1998), and W.E. Arnal & M. Desjardins, eds, Whose Historical Jesus? (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfred Laurier University, 1997).

16 See parts five and six of above discussion.

17 See the recent unfolding work of J.P. Meier, A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus: vol. 1: The Roots of the Problem and the Person (1991), vol. 2: Mentor, Message, and Miracles (1994), and an announced, third volume (New York: Doubleday). See also the extensive work of N.T. Wright, Christian Origins and the Question of God, particularly vol 2: Jesus and the Victory of God (London: SPCK, 1996). See also the sympathetic, conservative reviews of these, e.g., D. Ingolfsland, “The Historical Jesus according to John Meier and N.T. Wright,” Bibliotheca Sacra 155 (1998) 460-73 and C.C. Newman, ed., Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N.T. Wright’s “Jesus and the Victory of God” (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999).

18 See note 15 above.