

# **The production of the Gospel of Mark: An essay on intertextuality**

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## **Abstract**

For more than a century the emphasis has been on the growth and not on the making of the Gospel of Mark. This essay focuses on the latter. Firstly, attention is paid to the current views on the origins of the material in order to illustrate the implications of the traditional focus. Secondly, the production of the Gospel of Mark is discussed from the perspective of a totally different perception of the phenomena of text and textual relationships.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Modern informed readers know the Gospel of Mark from critical Greek editions with text-critical and other notes in the margins. These notes inform them not only about the history of the transmission of the final text, but also about allusions and quotations in the text. In addition, it is commonly maintained that the Gospel was originally written in Greek, and that the final text represents a rather lengthy history of growth. For more than a century attempts have been made to explain the origin of the gospel material and to interpret the space between the related events and the final inscripturation of the contents of the Gospel. For that reason the emphasis has been on the growth and not on the making of the Gospel. Very few scholars have

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taken the production of the written Gospel seriously. Certain data beliefs and assumptions concerning the Gospel have become so dominant that very little progress has been made in the history of interpretation of the Gospel (see e.g. Peabody 1987: 3ff).

In this essay I will discuss the importance of the unsolved problem of the production of the Gospel of Mark. To achieve my goal, I will first pay attention to current views on the origin of the material. The idea is to illustrate the implications of the traditional focus on the origins of the Gospel. In the next part of the essay I will turn to the production of the Gospel from the perspective of intertextuality. In this section I will focus on the implications of a totally different perception of the phenomena of text and textual relationships.

## 2. MARK AND ITS PREDECESSORS

It is no longer possible to determine with any certainty who Mark, as we normally call the author of the Gospel of Mark, really was. Neither is it absolutely certain how he went about writing his Gospel and where he got his material from. A period of three or four decades must have passed after the death of Jesus before Mark decided to write his story. What happened during that period lies in the dark.

It is normally argued that the followers of Jesus transmitted his words and deeds by telling and retelling things he did and said. In view of the folkloric nature of many of the stories of and about Jesus, the aphoristic character of many of his sayings, the many parables he apparently told his followers, and the role of oral communication in that period, it is probable that Mark was informed about the story of Jesus by way of tradition. It is also probable that his audience would have known these traditions and others, such as the institution of the Lord's Supper, and controversy stories. It is therefore possible to argue that Mark based his written story of Jesus on traditional material which he received and decided to put into written form. This is also the way in which the origin of the material was explained in the early church. The earliest witness to the authorship of Mark is the quotation from Papias of Hierapolis (c 140 CE) in the history of Eusebius (*Hist Eccl* III 39:15), according to which the Gospel was based on *memory* of the things Peter had told Mark (see also Breytenbach 1992).

What other sources did Mark use? One of the interesting things about early Christian literature is that although there was only one Jesus, we have many Gospels. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke – the so-called Synoptic Gospels – are closely related and have much material in common. Some form of dependence is therefore presumed (see Sanders & Davies 1989). The dominant assumption is

that Matthew and Luke made use of Mark in compiling their Gospels, and that they also had a hypothetical collection of sayings of Jesus normally called Q (that is, 'Quelle' = 'source'), at their disposal when they wrote their Gospels. On the grounds of this hypothesis it is much easier to explain the origin of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke than it is to explain that of Mark. The question therefore arises whether Mark also had other, perhaps written, sources in addition to the 'traditional material' referred to above when he wrote his Gospel.

First of all there is the so-called Old Testament. It is probable that Mark had copies of the Old Testament in either Greek or Hebrew in written form at his disposal. Whether he had these copies on his desk is difficult to determine. This is also not the place to argue the problem. That his Gospel echoes the Old Testament is clear from both the quotations and the many allusions to Old Testament writings. There are, moreover, large chunks of material in the Gospel, such as a collection of miracle stories, parables, an apocalyptic speech and the passion narrative, for example, which have prompted scholars to investigate the possibility of other written sources behind the Gospel of Mark (see Vielhauer 1975:332-336 and Neiryck et al 1992:646). The passion narrative is presumably related to the Gospel of Peter, which is basically a passion story (see Crossan 1988); Mark 13 is based on an earlier Jewish leaflet (see Brandenburger 1984); Mark 4 on a collection of parables, and the miracle stories in chapters 5 and 7 on catenae of miracle stories (see Kuhn 1971). It has furthermore been proposed that some of the sayings material is also related to the material found in Q (see e.g. Neiryck 1991:421ff). In addition, it has been argued that Mark's Gospel is based on an original lost *Urmarkus* or *Grund-schrift* being either the 'proto-Mark' or 'deutero-Mark', or that it is a revision of the Secret Gospel referred to by Clement of Alexandria (see Koester 1990:273 ff). However it may be, there seems to be little evidence that Mark invented the material in his Gospel.

From the perspective of the making of the Gospel, different viewpoints have been advanced in accordance with views on the role attributed to the person who was finally responsible for composing the Gospel. Mark has been regarded as a collector, a composer, a redactor (editor) and an author (see Vorster 1980). These perceptions are based on data assumptions. Underlying assumptions concerning authorship, the phenomenon text, text types, the history of early Christianity, the origin of early Christian literature and other aspects of the Gospel are responsible for the current state of affairs. Let us briefly discuss this viewpoint since I have treated the problem elsewhere in more detail (see Vorster 1980).

In the 1920's the idea that Mark was written by an author was replaced by the current view that he was nothing more than a collector of traditions. The Gospels

were regarded as *Kleinliteratur*, the products of the transmission of tradition by illiterate, unknown persons – a collective community (see Schmidt 1923 & Güttgemanns 1970). Mark's task was to collect these traditions and to put them into a narrative framework. His contribution was limited to the collection of material which he knitted into a loose composition of episodes concerning the deeds and works of Jesus. Mark was regarded as a stringer of pearls (see Schmidt 1923:127f) or a collector of traditions (Dibelius 1971:3). This should be understood against the background of the emphasis on the interest in what lies behind the text and not what is in the text.

The situation changed in the late 1950's with the rise of the so-called redaction-critical approach to the Gospels (see Marxsen 1959 & Peabody 1987). The material in the Gospel was increasingly regarded as edited tradition – an idea which goes far back, but one that had only recently developed. Although the Gospel as a whole came into focus, the interest was in the redaction of tradition. This resulted in detailed investigations concerning tradition and redaction in the Gospels. In the case of Mark it was extremely difficult to determine exactly what could be regarded as tradition and what could not, because of the absence of copies of the presumed sources. On the basis of style, regular occurrence of certain words and phrases, views that were peculiar to the specific Gospel, so-called seams or breaks in the text and other features, scholars reached a certain degree of consensus about redaction and tradition in the Gospel of Mark.

Mark's (theological) emphasis was determined by interpreting his redaction of tradition. At least a certain amount of creativity – however limited – was ascribed to the redactor. Mark's own contribution to the story of Jesus came into focus, despite the fact that he was soon described as a conservative redactor (see Pesch 1976). The emphasis which Wrede (1969) had put on Mark's creativity in 1906 was newly appreciated.

In circles where Mark was regarded as a composer, he received more credit for what he had achieved, and attention was given to the Gospel message as a whole. It was, however, only in the late 1970's that scholars started paying serious attention to Mark's Gospel as a narrative, and to Mark as an author or author/narrator and to the Gospel as an autonomous text.

The renewed interest in Mark as author and his Gospel as a narrative opened new possibilities in the interpretation of different aspects of the Gospel. It was discovered that the story had been told from a certain narrative point of view, why time and space play an important role in the Gospel, and that characters, including Jesus, were presented in conjunction with the story line – in short, that narrative analysis posed new challenges to interpreters of the Gospel (see Vorster 1980; Hahn 1985 &

Moore 1989). Perhaps the most important single contribution of this approach is the fact that interpreters were forced to take the Gospel as a complete text seriously. It also implied that the transmitted text – and not its history or the origin of parts of it – was placed in the centre of interest. This does not imply that the text was interpreted a-historically as is so easily incorrectly assumed by critics who regard narrative analysis of the Gospel as an extension of redaction criticism (see Zwick 1989).

This short survey clearly indicates that the emphasis that was put on the growth of the Gospel also determined the role of the person who was responsible for the final text. One can safely say that there has been little reflection on the role of the person who produced the Gospel, except for the descriptions I have mentioned, namely collector, composer, redactor and author. How one should picture Mark editing tradition in written or oral form by changing a word here and there, adding a sentence or two, rearranging the order of material, putting the traditional material into a narrative frame and joining separate units or episodes – as redaction critics make us believe – is difficult to imagine. There is much more to the production of a text than traditional views would allow. As long as the Gospels are perceived mainly from the perspective of their growth, the process of production is blurred. What is needed is serious reflection on the production of texts from the perspective of what happens when other texts, whether oral or written, are included in or absorbed by a new text. The traditional approach is anti-individualistic because the driving force behind the Gospels is the anonymous community.

In addition to the assumption that the message (meaning) of the Gospels can be studied from the perspective of their origin, and that the authors were redactors and not authors in the proper sense of the word, the idea of influence also plays an important role. The assumption is clearly that Mark was influenced by his sources. One should be very careful with this type of argument. If Mark is simply regarded as an exponent of the community within which he stood, it may be thought that his task was to put into words what the community thought. From the insights of Sociology of Knowledge we are aware that all knowledge is context-bound. But that does not imply that there is no place for creativity. On the contrary, even oral storytellers tell the 'same' story differently in different contexts and under different circumstances, although their knowledge is bound to their contexts.

A further problem with the traditional approach to the Gospel of Mark is that the final text is not sufficiently distinguished from its history of growth. This is due to the text concept which underlies the approach. As we have seen it is not the text as such that is studied, namely a new edition of a text, but a text which should be divided into segments of redaction and tradition.

In the next section an attempt will be made to take the fact seriously that Mark probably did not invent the material, but that he nevertheless made up his own story of Jesus for his own purposes and in his own circumstances. This will be done from the perspective of the production of the text and not from its growth.

### 3 THE PRODUCTION OF MARK: MARK AND PRECURSOR TEXTS

I have already mentioned that there is no certainty about the identity of the author of the Gospel or about his audience. It is probable that he was a bilingual Jew, and it is possible that he wrote his Gospel for an audience in either Galilee or in Rome (see Vorster 1990 & 1991). We do not know what the place where he wrote his Gospel looked like, whether it was a study in a private house, or some other room where he had different manuscripts at his disposal. We assume that much of his material was known to him through the tradition in which he stood. It is also possible, as I have already said, that he had some manuscripts of Old Testament writings available.

The main thing, however, is that we have a text, written in Greek with different allusions to and quotations from precursor texts. This last observation underscores the fact that Mark as a reader/hearer of texts reacted to different intertextual codes, and thus created a new text which refers to different texts and codes intertextually. These include parables, miracle stories, controversy stories, bibliographies, stories of cult heroes, speeches about the future, stories of suffering and resurrection stories. In addition Mark apparently knew themes, words, phrases and stories from the Old Testament. He must have had acquaintance with the Elisha cycle and with other performers of miracles. He must also have known the economic, political and other cultural codes of his time. However, we still do not know exactly how he went about creating his story of Jesus – that is, how he made his Gospel.

Two recent attempts at explaining the making of the Gospel are, however, worth mentioning. Mack (1988:322-323) maintains that Mark's Gospel was '...not a pious transmission of revered tradition. It was composed at a desk in a scholar's study lined with texts and open to discourse with other intellectuals. In Mark's study were chains of miracle stories, collections of pronouncement stories...'. Mack assumes that Mark had different Hellenistic Jewish texts, the Scriptures and other Christian texts in his study. One need not agree with Mack, but he has at least given some thought to what might have been possible in the production of a text in the first century.

Botha (1989:76-77), on the other hand, maintains that the Mediterranean world of the first century was predominantly oral. Mark came from an oral community

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and his Gospel should be seen as oral literature. Mark told his story of Jesus orally and at some stage dictated it to somebody who wrote down his words. It still bears the signs of oral literature. Again, Mark is taken seriously as the producer of a text and not simply as a conduit through which a stream of tradition flowed, or a (passive) exponent of a community out of which his text arose (see also Vorster 1980).

The next question is whether we can say more about the actual process of the making of the Gospel by using a concept of the phenomenon text which is different from the concept we know (the traditional approach we have dealt with above), and by asking different questions concerning the making of texts. My hypothesis is that a concept of text different from the one we are used to in New Testament scholarship, and a rethinking of the process of production, can help us understand the Gospel of Mark and its relation to precursor and other texts. This would, however, imply a total rethinking of the traditional approach.

The idea that any text is a network or mosaic of different texts referring to other texts is challenging. The concept 'intertextuality' has not been sufficiently explored by New Testament scholars (see however Draisma 1989; Phillips 1991; Vorster 1992).

There is no reason to doubt that the written Gospel of Mark echoes many different precursor texts and intertextual relationships. In this regard the use of the Old Testament in Mark's Gospel is helpful. I have elsewhere argued that Mark's use of the Old Testament is totally different from that of Matthew or Mark who use the Old Testament within a promise-fulfilment scheme (see Vorster 1981). Allusions to and quotations from the Old Testament are usually absorbed into Mark's story in such a manner that, except for a few cases where he specifically mentions the origin of the quotation, the allusions and quotations form part of the story stuff. They are so embedded into the story that, if it were not for the references in the margins and a knowledge of the Old Testament, the reader would not have noticed that Mark uses an allusion or a quotation (see Mk 15:24). This is best seen in Mark's story of the passion of Jesus.

It has often been noticed that psalms of lamentation such as Psalms 22, 38 and 69 concerning the suffering of *the just*, are knitted into the passion narrative in such a manner that one can say that the passion narrative of Mark is narrated in the language of the Old Testament. The point is, however, that the allusions and 'quotations' form such an integral part of the passion narrative that it is impossible for the naive reader to realize that the text is enriched by its intertextual relationships concerning the suffering of the Just.

One of the significant things about the use of the Old Testament in Mark is that he had no respect for the original context of the quotations and allusions to Old Tes-

tament writings in his text. The story of John the Baptist at the very beginning of the Gospel proves the point. In the first place the very first quotation (Mk 1:2-3) does not come from Isaiah the prophet, as Mark asserts. It is a composite reference to Exodus 23:20, Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 which he connects to Isaiah the prophet. The quotation is taken out of context and worked into his story of John and Jesus in order to show the relationship between the two. The beginning of the Gospel does not prove the fulfilment of the Old Testament, it characterises John as the predecessor of Jesus. Only at a later stage does the reader realize the resemblance between the apocalyptic John and the apocalyptic Jesus.

One of the inferences one should make from the use of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark is that the author created a new story with the aid of intertextual codes that helped him to communicate his own point of view. The Old Testament quotations and references formed part of the new story that Mark created in order to convince his readers of his point of view concerning Jesus and the implications of Jesus' life, works and words for the prevailing situation.

Somebody may argue that the Old Testament is a special case and that it does not say much. However, let us argue the use of traditional material in the Gospel of Mark from the perspective of intertextuality.

It is an illusion to think that Mark was a conservative redactor. In fact, Mark not only reshaped his story of Jesus by retelling the story for the sake of a particular situation, he also told it from his own perspective. Whether he transmitted tradition 'conservatively' or 'creatively' is of little significance. Even eyewitnesses shape their messages for their own purposes. Vansina (1985:5) correctly observes:

...[M]ediation of perception by memory and emotional state shapes an account. Memory typically selects certain features from the successive perceptions and interprets them according to expectation, previous knowledge or the logic of 'what must have happened', and fills the gaps in perception.

This is all the more true of the Jesus tradition which has been shaped by eyewitnesses as well as those who retold the tradition for their own purposes and in their own circumstances. That is already clear from the different versions of the same stories of and about Jesus in the canonical gospels. First of all we do not have any (un-biased) eyewitness reports; furthermore, the retelling of the Jesus tradition was done in different circumstances for different purposes. This is, for instance, confirmed by the 'same' version of the 'same' parable in different contexts in the different gospels. Retelling of the 'same' event or word of a specific person involves creativity.

What is apparent regarding the use of the Old Testament in Mark seems to be even more applicable to the tradition incorporated in the Gospel of Mark. Let us take individual units such as controversy stories between Jesus and his opponents in the Gospel of Mark as an example.

From a form-critical perspective most of these stories presuppose a sociological situation of conflict in early Christianity. In addition, some of the stories are transmitted in Mark's Gospel in a mixed form – that is, a story which relates conflict between Jesus and opponents within the framework of a miracle story. These stories seem to have been created around a saying of Jesus and reflect situations in early Christianity which the other evangelists used in their own stories about Jesus. In retold form, these stories were used not only for different purposes but also for different messages, depending on new situations.

Retelling involves creativity, whether in oral or in written form. It is impossible to tell the 'same' story twice. Each telling has its own context and its own message. The truth of this statement is confirmed by the retelling of the stories of the Old Testament within the Old Testament, as well as in later Jewish literature. Each time a story or event is retold, it is done for a specific purpose and from a specific point of view. In other words, each account involves creativity. The same applies to oral transmission of history.

Even if Mark's version of narrative units is based on authoritative transmission of tradition, or on written accounts of certain chunks of material in his Gospel, he made up his own story by putting the narrative units into the order he wanted and into the framework he developed. It is important and significant to see that Mark knitted the Jesus tradition into a new narrative web of his own.

Even if he had based his version of Jesus' speech on the Mount of Olives in Mark 13, for instance, on an existing Jewish flyleaf, as is often assumed, this narrated speech of Jesus, which is a network of quotations and allusions to the Old Testament, has its own Marcan message and function (see Vorster 1987). As it stands, it refers back to precursor texts and to intertextual codes of apocalyptic disruption and disaster, but it also takes up the apocalyptic theme of the imminent coming of the Son of Man, which is a Marcan creation (see Mack 1987). The same applies to other material in the Gospel of Mark which can probably be connected to pre-Markan collections or pre-Markan written or oral compositions.

In addition to the many studies on the texts behind and in the Gospel of Mark, two recent attempts have been made at describing the Gospel as the rewriting of Old Testament stories. Although I am not convinced about the total outcome of either (see Roth 1988; Miller & Miller 1990) they have both indicated how important it is to regard Mark's Gospel as a creation of a new text. The Millers correctly

observe that New Testament writers created what they call new *midrashim* on older texts. They argue that Mark did not simply interpret the Old Testament midrashically. Mark created a new *midrash* – that is, new scripture in typical Jewish fashion. This is another way of seeing the importance of creativity in Mark's Gospel. It also supports my argument.

We have already noticed that Mark did not hesitate to use the Old Testament out of context, and that it is probable that he did the same with the tradition he received. This simply underscores our notion that he retold tradition for his own purposes. By doing this Mark created a new text from other texts, traces of which can be seen in his text.

The relationship between the final text of the Gospel of Mark and precursor and other texts is an intertextual relationship. There is no causal relationship between this new text and the texts out of which Mark made his text. Mark quoted other texts, and his story alludes to other texts and absorbed other texts. This is how his story becomes meaningful and different from other stories with the same theme when the reader interprets Mark's texts in the light of other texts known to him/her.

There is a total difference between an attempt where the Gospel of Mark is understood from the perspective of its production, and an attempt where it is understood from the perspective of its growth. The first approach seriously considers that any allusion or quotation from another text forms an integral part of the new text, even when it seems to be out of context. The latter regards the final text, which has relationships with precursor texts, as the result of a causal process.

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