A STUDY GUIDE TO MARK'S GOSPEL

SCOTT SINCLAIR
A Study Guide to Mark’s Gospel
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Discovering Mark's Message for His Day and Ours

By
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In thanksgiving for

my brother Mark

and

the people of St. Mark’s Episcopal Church

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Some people read Mark’s gospel primarily to learn what Jesus said and did. Since Mark’s gospel is an early—indeed, the earliest—biography of Jesus, they turn to it to gain information about him.

For Christians, a presupposition of this approach to the gospel is that we come to know God by looking at the historical Jesus. Jesus was God incarnate, and thus to learn about God, we need to study what Jesus actually said and did.

Other people read Mark’s gospel to stimulate subjective reflection. They go through the gospel, hoping that some image or phrase will “jump out” at them and lead to personal insights about their own lives and relationships to God.

For Christians, a presupposition of this approach is that the Holy Spirit guides our meditations as we interact with the Bible. When we read God’s word, the Spirit helps us find special messages that address our unique situations and needs.

As a Christian, I myself hold both presuppositions and so read Mark in both ways. I believe that we do come to know God by looking at the historical Jesus and that the Holy Spirit does give us personal messages as we read the Bible. Hence, we should read Mark both to learn about what Jesus said and did and to promote subjective reflection.

There is, however, a third way to read Mark’s gospel: One can read the gospel to discover what the evangelist was trying to say to the church of his own time. Like later Christian preachers and writers, Mark responded to specific problems in his day and retold the story of Jesus to address them. Therefore, his presentation about Jesus challenged his first readers to come to particular conclusions which would lead to certain choices. For more than half a century, many scholars have
concentrated on reading Mark to discover what these conclusions and choices might have been.

For Christians, a presupposition for trying to discover Mark's specific message to his first readers might be that we learn about God primarily by looking at individuals whose actions have been shaped by their understanding of Jesus. God is especially visible in the lives of people who seek to know and obey Jesus. Mark was such a person, and by looking at how he retold the story of Jesus to address the needs of his own time, we can discover something about what God would say to us today.

Of course, discovering what Mark was trying to communicate to the people of his own time should help us both in learning about the historical Jesus and in using the Scripture for subjective reflection. If we know the "slant" Mark placed on his portrayal of Jesus, we can take that into account as we try to look behind the gospel to see Jesus himself. Similarly, if we know what Mark's point of view was, we can make that viewpoint itself a subject for personal reflection. Perhaps Mark's message to his original readers has a special application to our individual lives today.

In the following little book, I will concentrate on discovering what Mark was saying to the Christian readers of his own time. Specifically, we will go through the gospel section by section and see what Mark's primary points to his original audience were. To help us do this, I will first provide a new translation of a section. I hope that giving a new translation will help readers experience the sometimes all-too-familiar material in a fresh way. Then we will try to discover what the basic message of the section would have been for the first readers of the gospel. Of course, as we look at the messages of one passage after another, the message of the gospel as a whole will emerge.

By going through the gospel section by section and concentrating on the major points, we will experience the gospel much the way Mark's original audience did. Here we should note that
Mark’s original audience was scarcely in a position to do detailed analysis. In an era when there were no Xerox machines, documents were always in short supply and the usual way that people encountered texts was by hearing them read. Hence, most Christians could not flip pages to remind themselves of what had been or would be covered, or even pause for careful study of the passage at hand. All a hearer could do would be to listen to the flow of the story, note the major emphases, and draw preliminary conclusions as the reading progressed.

To find Mark’s message for the readers of his time, we will especially look at how Mark has arranged and worded his material and also examine any changes he seems to have made in its content. Before Mark wrote his gospel, people mostly repeated the individual traditions about Jesus by word of mouth. Naturally, under these circumstances the sayings of Jesus and the stories about him had no fixed order, since preachers and teachers varied the order depending on what points they were trying to make. Also, there must have been variations in wording, since we do not normally repeat oral material word for word. Hence, when Mark wrote his gospel, he had some freedom in how he organized the sayings and stories and in how he worded them. Not surprisingly, Mark used this freedom to help communicate his own concerns. Accordingly, by noticing how he arranged and worded material, we can get some idea of what those concerns were. Naturally, any changes Mark made in the tradition are especially informative concerning what he was trying to communicate. We must also assume that his original audience would have been at least fairly sensitive to how Mark arranged, worded, and altered stories, since his Christians hearers would already have been familiar with the individual stories and so would have noticed how Mark put his personal stamp on them.

To help modern readers reflect on whether Mark’s message is helpful today, I will pose a couple of questions for reflection at the end of each section.
I have written this book primarily for lay people who want a very brief introduction to the gospel that will highlight its essential message and can be used for individual or group reflection. I originally prepared the translation and most of the commentary for an introductory course on Mark that I taught at Dominican College, San Rafael, California.

Biblical scholars will find much of the material familiar, but may be interested in my treatment of the so-called “messianic secret.” For generations now, scholars have puzzled over why Jesus sometimes tries to hide his identity and miracles in Mark and yet at other times insists on proclaiming them. I have attempted here to give a coherent explanation which does justice to each instance, and I believe that in some respects it is original.

The rise of inclusive language provides a special challenge to the translator and commentator. In this book I have used inclusive language when referring to human beings. To make the language inclusive, I have adopted the colloquial usage of “they” and “them” to refer to “anyone” or any member of a class. I have followed Mark’s usage in retaining masculine pronouns for God.

I gratefully acknowledge my indebtedness to many. The Rev. Lin Ludy read the initial draft, made helpful suggestions, and urged me to publish the book. The Rev. Ronald Culmer, Mrs. Jane Hartman, and Mrs. Ann Kurteff read later drafts and encouraged me. Ann also made many minor corrections. Dr. Duane Christensen persuaded me to turn the book into a study guide by including questions for reflection. The Rev. Robert Haberman read the final version and convinced me to add a few more such questions. Some of the ideas I offer here first appeared in a small article I published in St. Luke’s Journal of Theology in 1990. At various points in my discussion of the miracles in Mark, I have taken over the ideas found in L. William Countryman, “How Many Baskets Full? Mark 8:14–21 and the Value of Miracles in Mark,” Catholic Biblical Quarterly.
PREFACE
