

CHAPTER 1

Mark's Portrait of Jesus

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It is fitting that this volume, the *Blackwell Companion to Jesus*, which is dedicated to exploring the diverse ways in which Jesus has been considered significant in human culture over the past 2,000 years, should begin with Mark's portrait of Jesus. The Gospel of Mark is considered by many to be the primary compendium of Jesus traditions, and the first connected narrative account of the life of Jesus resulting therefrom. The status of the gospel in this regard cannot, therefore, be overestimated. While there are still those who would assign it a secondary role in the development of the Jesus tradition, for example, by casting doubt on its position as the first gospel to be written, and claiming that honor for the Gospel of Matthew (e.g., Peabody et al. 2002), most scholars nowadays would accept the case for Markan priority, and hence a scholarly consensus resulting from over two centuries of debate on the interrelationship of the gospels (e.g., Head 1997; for a full summary of scholarship over the last quarter century on the issue of Markan priority and posteriority, see Telford 2009, 4–5). The apostle Paul, of course, was the first to establish a Christian literary tradition through his epistolary activity, but his letters offer us little in the way of a description of Jesus. The compilers of Q (the other putative source used by Matthew and Luke in addition to Mark) may have been the first to compile a collection of Jesus' sayings, but nothing that resembles a picture of Jesus emerges from them. The Markan evangelist, on the other hand, was the first to bring together into a coherent form the various traditions that had grown up over a generation regarding Jesus' teaching and activity, and by placing not only his sayings but also his deeds within the framework of a story recounting his life and death, he it is who provides us with our first real portrait of Christianity's founder.

Being *first* at anything in human life and experience brings with it its own kudos, but in the case of Mark, the *first* evangelist, and the Gospel of Mark, the *first* gospel, we can recognize an achievement that, in historical, literary and theological terms, was to have profound significance for the emergence, development, and influence

of early Christianity, as well as for the subsequent history of western civilization itself. The Jesus portrayed by Mark, the Markan Jesus, was a major influence on the Matthean Jesus, the Lukan Jesus, and the Johannine Jesus, the later canonical writers using Mark's gospel directly (in the case of Matthew and Luke) and (arguably) indirectly (in the case of John) as one of their sources. The Markan Jesus was the progenitor of and inspiration for countless other representations of Jesus, and elements of Mark's portrait of Jesus can be discerned elsewhere in the New Testament; in ancient apocryphal, orthodox, and Gnostic portraits of Jesus; in the history of art, literature, and film; in modern historical reconstructions of Jesus; or in contemporary ideological constructions influenced by feminism, for example, or liberation theology; in short, in many of the Jesuses that this volume will be treating.

The significance of Mark's portrait as the first real portrait of Christianity's founder does not lie, however, in the assumption that it is, of necessity, a historically reliable portrait, for what the evangelist offers, if you like, is a literary "construct," or "fixation," of the developing tradition surrounding Jesus some forty years after his death. Although Mark's gospel may be reckoned the earliest of such accounts, primitiveness should not be confused with historicity. The significance of Mark's gospel does not lie, furthermore, in the claim that it is a literary masterpiece, for while the gospel's effectiveness as a literary vehicle for the "good news" of (or about) Jesus has stood the test of time, other more striking or compelling portraits have emerged in the ensuing development of the Jesus tradition, as this volume will demonstrate. Neither does Mark's significance lie in the sophistication or profundity of its theology, although, as we shall see, the evangelist can be claimed to have made an important contribution to the theological history of early Christianity, and his role as a theologian, therefore, notwithstanding the simplicity of his literary style, should not be dismissed. Where the significance of the Gospel of Mark does lie is in the fact that the primary images of Jesus that it presents, in scenes that have etched their way into the religious consciousness and literary imagination of believer and non-believer alike, have provided the basis for an array of Jesus constructions over the past 2,000 years.

Mark, then, has played a seminal role in the shaping of the traditions about Jesus, and it will be one of the aims of this chapter to explore this aspect of his achievement in relation to the portrait of Jesus that it has produced. As we shall see, Mark's portrait of Jesus, in this respect, is not an altogether uniform one, for the Jesus portrayed is a product or even, to some extent, an amalgam of the various prior traditions that the evangelist has attempted to incorporate and reconcile. Before the Markan Jesus, there was the Jesus of the pre-Markan tradition (or, to complicate things in the interests of greater accuracy, the Jesuses of the pre-Markan traditions).

In recognizing this, one must also acknowledge the decisive role that Mark has likewise played in the formation of the Jesus story, and it will be another of the aims of this chapter to examine this further facet of his achievement. While the Markan gospel gives evidence of its composite nature, the reader of the Markan text nevertheless gains the impression that a story, with its own plot, characters, and settings

is gradually being unfolded. The Jesuses of these pre-Markan traditions, in other words, appear to have been replaced by a narrative Jesus who acts with seeming consistency within the story-world that the evangelist has attempted to construct.

Although he has made a significant contribution to the characterization of the central figure of his gospel, Mark was concerned not with the character of Jesus as such, but with his status, with what his words and his deeds reveal about who he is. Theology (a form of ideology) underpins his traditio-historical and literary enterprise, and the ideology that underlies his representation of Jesus has in turn been influential in the subsequent development of christology. When all of this is taken into consideration, therefore, it becomes obvious that Mark's portrait of Jesus is capable of being understood from different perspectives, in particular, the historical, the literary, and the theological; and it is the examination of these three distinct aspects of his achievement that will constitute the specific objectives of this chapter.

Some Preliminary Questions and Answers

Any consideration of "Mark's portrait of Jesus," then, must take account of the complexities that face us in examining this gospel text. At this point, it would be useful to highlight and explore some of these and to offer some observations and reflections on them. The very title, "Mark's Portrait of Jesus," raises a number of preliminary questions.

First, who is the "Mark" of the title? Is it the "Mark" referred to by Papias¹ as the interpreter of Peter, the John Mark of the New Testament,² or an anonymous figure whose identity in fact remains hidden from us? I would continue to uphold the position argued in my previously published work (Telford 1995b, 15–20 = Riches et al. 2001, 133–137; Telford 1999, 9–12), and maintained by most Markan scholars in the last quarter century, that the internal evidence of the Markan text hardly suggests, far less supports, Papias' testimony and that we should opt for an anonymous author, a profile of whose cultural background, socio-political situation and religious concerns can, nevertheless, to some extent be constructed.

Second, what is implied by the word "portrait"? The term conjures up the image of an artist with his subject in person before him, who attempts to capture on canvas the special features and enduring characteristics of the sitter. But few scholars would accept nowadays that the anonymous writer of this text had any personal knowledge of Jesus, and hence that his "portrait" was painted with the benefit of such individual experience. As a second-generation Christian, Mark, as we have said, had the role of shaping the traditions about Jesus.

But how should we envisage the "role" of this "Mark" in the shaping of such traditions? In light of advances in our knowledge of the literary and theological aspects of Mark's achievement, can the judgment, voiced by Dibelius (1934, 3) so long ago, that the evangelist, in common with the other synoptic writers, should be

considered principally as a collector, a compiler, a vehicle of tradition, a mere editor and only to the smallest extent an author, still be maintained? In brief, I would consider him, if not an "author" in the literary sense, then a "highly creative redactor" of the traditions at his disposal, and one who, at times, gives evidence not only of an "authorial" voice in his shaping of the traditions about Jesus but also of theological creativity in his treatment of them. Redaction criticism³ has taught me to respect this first gospel for what it was, a synthetic and constructive exercise in narrativizing the disparate Jesus traditions, to appreciate the evangelist's role in the selection, arrangement, modification, alteration, and even creation of these traditions, and to recognize the influence of the evangelist's theology in the construction of his portrait of Jesus. Over the years, moreover, I have owed an increasing debt to literary criticism, and in particular narrative criticism, which has in turn has made me conscious of the evangelist's literary ability, has enabled me to recognize the signs of literary artifice in the shaping of the traditions about Jesus, and to value Mark's considerable skill as a storyteller.

How, then, did the evangelist "shape" the traditions at his disposal, what was his contribution to the developing Jesus story, and to what extent was he a master of his material? There is no doubt, as the early form critics recognized, that he supplied notes of place, time, and audience where these were missing, seams uniting the individual units of tradition or pericopae, and summary and transitional passages linking series of pericopae. Redaction critics have gone further, however, and demonstrated more extensive redactional activity on his part. Composition critics have, likewise, pointed to chiasmic structure and topical arrangement in the gospel; rhetorical critics have illuminated the numerous literary techniques and rhetorical devices at work in the shaping of the traditions; and narrative critics have exposed the various themes, motifs, and concerns that give the text its literary coherence, as well as offering evidence of the use of plot, characterization, and settings to provide unity and narrative progression.

The reasonably high degree of internal coherence which Mark has thereby imposed on his materials means that we must now treat him as more than a mere collector or editor of traditions, as formerly conceived; but – and here we should acknowledge the contribution of those early form and source critics – the countervailing evidence of disjunction in the narrative, of inconsistencies, aporias, and discrepancies should lead us to be cautious, in my view, in attributing too much authorial creativity to him. Due weight needs to be given, then, to both the textually-integrative and the textually-disintegrative factors in Mark's narrative, due attention to both his story-world and the real or historical world that impinges upon it, due regard for both his literary activity and for the pre-Markan traditions about Jesus that he has pressed into service, the incorporation of which has left a number of incongruities in the narrative (for a list and discussion of these, see Telford 1999, 18–19).

Mark was a highly creative redactor of the traditions about Jesus, traditions that he shaped both in a literary and in a theological way. But what were these traditions,

and what form did they take? The case for written sources in Mark has still, in my view, to be proved, and so I am inclined to agree with most scholars that his sources were oral, and, in line with the classic form critics, that they consisted of sayings and stories about Jesus that had been circulating for a generation in various Jewish- or Gentile-Christian communities before they came to literary expression and theological (re)interpretation at his hands. Their specific content and form and his treatment of them will occupy us later.

And, finally, who is the "Jesus" that we are talking about when we speak of Mark's portrait of Jesus? From one point of view, this Jesus is, of course, the *historical* Jesus, reconstructed by the modern historian and approached through critical analysis and evaluation of the available sources. From another point of view, it is the Jesus of *culture*, constructed by the literary or religious imagination and propagated in the interests of the believing community or society. As has already been emphasized, however, the Jesus that confronts us in the Markan text is first and foremost a *narrative* Jesus who has been given a story, and has been shaped by the evangelist out of the prior Jesus, or better, Jesuses, of the pre-Markan tradition. Any attempt to engage ultimately with the historical Jesus must begin first of all, in my view, with the *Markan Jesus*, and then proceed backwards, as the evidence allows, to the pre-Markan Jesus or Jesuses on which it is based. Any endeavor to come to grips with the *cultural* Jesus, and hence to understand the diverse ways in which Jesus has been considered significant in human culture over the last 2000 years, must also start with *Mark's portrait of Jesus*, but, conversely, move forwards in order to recognize what human artifice, need, and circumstance have added to that picture. Mark's portrait of Jesus is a focal point, therefore, for a whole spectrum of Jesus studies, and that portrait, as I have indicated, can be examined from different points of view, and in particular from a historical, literary, or theological perspective. It is these three particular dimensions of Mark's portrait that we shall now consider.

Historical Perspective: Forms, Sources, and Redaction

The evangelist's debt to the pre-Markan tradition

The first of these perspectives on Mark's portrait of Jesus requires us to ask what might have been the historical basis for the evangelist's depiction of Jesus, and what sources, oral or written, might have been at his disposal for such a portrait. Classic form criticism, with its emphasis on the oral tradition, has established the principal forms of the sayings and narrative tradition on which Mark drew for his portrait of Jesus: apophthegms, paradigms or pronouncement stories, prophetic or apocalyptic sayings, legal sayings, community rules, christological sayings, parables, miracle stories, historical stories and legends, and a passion narrative.

It is clear, too, that this material has been placed in certain main groupings, thereby illustrating the key features of Jesus' teaching and activity:⁴

- miracle stories (1; 4:35–5:43; 6:35–52; 7:25–8:9, 22–26);
- controversy stories (2:1–3:6; 3:20–35; 7:1–23; 11:27–12:40);
- parables (4:1–33);
- teaching about discipleship (8:27–10:45);
- apocalyptic discourse (13);
- passion narrative (14–16).

It is also obvious that this material has been placed in a loose, overall geographical framework by the evangelist, thereby indicating the main contours of Jesus' career:

- Jesus in Galilee (1:14–5:43);
- Jesus in Galilee and the surrounding Gentile area (the northern journey) (6:1–9:50);
- Jesus' journey to Judea and Jerusalem (10:1–52);
- Jesus in Jerusalem (11–16).

As indicated earlier, the work of source critics on the gospel has highlighted the fact that there is insufficient evidence that Mark used extensive written sources in creating his gospel. Some collections of material (e.g., miracle stories in 1, 4:35–8:26; controversy stories in 2:1–3:6, 11–12; parables in 4; apocalyptic material in 13; passion narrative in 14–16) might be pre-Markan, but the overall arrangement is more likely to be the product of his own redactional (or editorial) activity. Werner Kümmel once summarized scholarly consensus on the Markan sources in the classic judgment, "We cannot go beyond declaring that Mk is probably based on no extensive written sources, but that more likely the evangelist has woven together small collections of individual traditions and detailed bits of tradition into a more or less coherent presentation" (Kümmel 1975, 85). This verdict, I think, can still stand, although nowadays, as I have suggested, there would be more respect on the part of scholars for the coherence of the resulting Markan presentation and for Markan creativity in the shaping of these Jesus traditions than was previously entertained.

Where the redaction critics and their understanding of the editorial process is concerned, judgments would vary as to the precise purpose of Mark's redactional activity (although most scholars would agree, I think, that the overall purpose was theological, or more specifically, christological). Nevertheless, as indicated in several of my publications on Mark (Telford 1995b, 77–78 = Riches et al. 2001, 184; Telford 1999, 28), a gathering scholarly consensus would now probably identify the following features of the gospel as of prime importance in determining Mark's theological purpose insofar as it can be garnered from his redactional activity:

- the secrecy motif and the writer's interest in the true but hidden identity of Jesus;
- an interest in the passion of Jesus (his suffering, death, and resurrection) and its significance for christology;

- an interest in the nature and coming of the kingdom of God and in the question of Jesus' return as Son of Man;
- an interest in Galilee;
- his use of the term "gospel" (*euangelion*);
- an interest in Gentiles and the Gentile mission;
- an interest in persecution, suffering, and martyrdom and the true nature of discipleship;
- his harsh treatment of the Jewish leadership groups, Jesus' family, and especially his original disciples.

The pre-Markan Jesus(es)

Armed with knowledge of the components of the inherited pre-Markan tradition, with appreciation of the evangelist's redactional methods and interests, and with respect for his literary achievement in welding these materials together, contemporary Markan scholars are in some ways better equipped than an earlier generation, despite the complexities involved, to make the move I earlier referred to from the Markan Jesus, or the narrative Jesus, to the pre-Markan Jesus (or Jesuses) and thence to the historical Jesus.

My own position on this has been made clear in my published work (Telford 1995b, 126–127 = Riches et al. 2001, 225–227; Telford 1999, 33–35, 88–103). In keeping with a normal tradition-critical approach to the gospel, I have asserted that Mark has taken over traditional material already stamped with particular estimates of Jesus' significance. Three pre-Markan traditions in particular can be isolated: Jesus as *teacher*, Jesus as *prophet* and Jesus as *miracle-worker*. These three traditions are likely to be pre-Markan, since they form the core of the sayings and narrative traditions isolated by the form critics, and they are multiply attested in our early sources (for example, in Q). They also have a claim to go back to the historical Jesus.

One of the earliest impulses in the Jesus movement was the collection of Jesus' sayings, as the "sayings" tradition underlying the gospels indicates. In Q, indeed, as we previously noted, attention focuses mainly on Jesus' sayings and there is little interest otherwise in his life, death, or resurrection. In this early source, which is independent of Mark, Jesus is principally portrayed as a teacher, preacher, or prophet of the coming kingdom of God.

This tradition of Jesus as a prophet is also deeply embedded in primitive Christianity as well as in Mark. Jesus is believed to have had close connections with John the Baptist, whose disciple he may have been. Jesus' own consciousness appears to have been a prophetic one (cf. e.g., Mark 6:4; Luke 13:31–35), and it is certain that he was regarded as such (cf. e.g., Mark 6:14–16; 8:27–28). A substantial number of the sayings attributed to him are prophetic or apocalyptic ones, with many regarded by form critics as authentic. Certain activities associated with him, it has

been suggested, may originally have been examples of dramatic prophetic action (e.g., the feeding in the wilderness, the triumphal entry, the cleansing of the temple, the cursing of the fig tree, the last supper). Traditions furthermore concerning his possession by the Spirit (e.g., Mark 1:9–11), ecstatic experience (e.g., Luke 10:21–22/Matt 11:25–27), clairvoyance (e.g., Mark 2:8), and even celibacy would also fit the prophetic mould.

The Jesus of the pre-Markan tradition was also deemed a miracle-worker, most notably a healer and an exorcist. The proclamation of Jesus' "mighty deeds" was another of the early impulses in the Jesus movement, as the "miracles" tradition also underlying the gospels indicates. Mark, of course, offers us the most notable evidence of this (with subsequent developments and embellishments provided by Matthew and Luke), for Q presents few, if any, actual miracle stories, and John, although he offers his readers a series of Jesus' "signs" (e.g., John 2:1–11; 4:46–54; 5:2–9; 6:1–15, 16–21; 9:1–7; 11:1–44), presents no exorcisms. Q, however, reveals knowledge of such a tradition by preserving a saying ("But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you"), which indicates that the significance of Jesus' miracle-working was eschatological; i.e., it vindicated his claim to be an eschatological prophet and provided evidence that the kingdom of God was imminent, as he proclaimed (Matt 12:28/Luke 11:20; cf. Matt 11:2–6/Luke 7:18–23). This saying not only has a high claim to authenticity, but it also links together all the essentials of this threefold pre-Markan tradition, namely Jesus' exorcisms, his teaching, and his prophetic proclamation, thereby lending support for the historicity of at least the core elements in Mark's parallel traditions.

Historical criticism and the Jesus of history

Even the most stringent historical criticism, therefore, cannot sever the link between the Markan Jesus, the pre-Markan Jesus (or Jesuses), and the Jesus of history, however one may wish to understand that "link." Though a literary composition, Mark's gospel shows evidence of being connected with a real or historical world. That world is the political world of the Roman Empire, and the cultural and religious worlds of Hellenism and Judaism. In constructing his portrait of Jesus, the evangelist refers to historical characters and groups (John the Baptist, Jesus' disciples, Pharisees, Sadducees, Herod, Pontius Pilate, etc.). In sketching the career of Jesus, he refers to historical regions (Galilee, the Decapolis, Judea, etc.), places (Capernaum, Tyre, Sidon, Caesarea Philippi, Jericho, Jerusalem, etc.), and even localities (Mount of Olives, Gethsemane, etc.).

Mark also has historical roots in the sectarian community out of which his gospel springs. That community has preserved the popular tradition of Jesus as a Jewish teacher, prophet, and healer-exorcist but is also in debt to Jewish Christian estimates of him as a Messianic figure. As I shall assert later, he may even be in tension with such traditions, for the evangelist clearly also has a debt to the Hellenistic Christianity

that was to exalt him even further and to see in him a divine figure with salvific significance for the wider Greco-Roman world.

Mark's portrait of Jesus is more complex, then, than it first seems. From a historical perspective, it is manifestly not a complete or even adequate portrait, for it contains important lacunae (e.g., details of Jesus' birth and education, material relating to the first thirty or so years of his life, etc.). Nevertheless, by virtue of its debt to a pre-Markan tradition, the gospel does present data that has a claim to authenticity: Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, his eschatological teaching and preaching, his gathering of disciples, his healings and exorcisms, his conflict with Jewish leadership groups, his death at the hands of the Romans. It is worth keeping these historical data in mind when one comes to consider the second dimension of his portrait, namely, the literary aspect.

Literary Perspective: Plot, Settings, and Characterization

Mark as story

Emphasis on the literary features of the Gospel of Mark has been a significant facet of Markan studies in the last quarter century, and the notion of Mark as *literature* has rivaled, although not eclipsed, the gospel's treatment as *history*. Literary studies have explored the question of the gospel's genre, its language and style, its composition and structure, its literary techniques and rhetorical devices. Approaching the gospel as a story, and providing analyses of the narrator, the characters, the plot and settings, a number of scholars have drawn attention to the insights that are to be gained by reading Mark through the lens of the storyteller (e.g., Minor 2001), or sought to demonstrate that Markan theology, which we shall consider shortly, can be appreciated by paying attention to the storyline (e.g., Humphrey 1992).

This storyline, or plot (which one would not expect, one notes, in a text that was *merely* a collection of traditions), leads to a recognizable climax, namely, the death and resurrection of Jesus, and has two major strands. The first is the conflict between Jesus and his opponents, the Jewish leadership groups, which is built up section by section (2:1–3:6; 3:22–30; 7:1–23; 10:2–9; 11–12; 14–15) and culminates in Jesus' visit to Jerusalem, his besting of his opponents in argument, his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. The second plot theme is the conflict between Jesus and his disciples, who, despite his repeated instructions to them, fail to understand who he is (4:41; 6:52; 8:21) – indeed, in the second half of the gospel (from 8:30 on), positively misunderstand the true nature of his divine status and mission as well as the Christian discipleship springing from it – and are left in the dark at the end after the announcement by the young man of his resurrection (16:1–8).

Apart from Jesus, whom we shall consider presently, and these major supporting characters (Jewish leaders and disciples), a host of minor ones, many of them, like the young man, unnamed (e.g., Jairus' daughter, the woman with the hemorrhage,