Exegetical Issues in Mark's Gospel

Robert H. Stein

Robert H. Stein is Mildred and Ernest Hogan Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. A world-renowned scholar of the Synoptic Gospels, Dr. Stein has published numerous books, papers, and journal articles addressing the Gospels and hermeneutical issues. Among his many books are *Luke* in the New American Commentary (Broadman & Holman, 1992), *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Baker, 1994), *Jesus the Messiah* (InterVarsity, 1996), *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (Baker, 2001), and *Mark* in the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker, forthcoming).

In the study of the Gospel of Mark, there are several key issues that need to be addressed in order to understand its meaning. What I would like to do is to discuss six of these issues and why they are important in the study of this Gospel.

The Importance of Having a Clear Goal

There are numerous reasons why a person might choose to study the Gospel of Mark. Mark is in reality a treasure chest containing vast amounts of information, and one must come to some conclusion of exactly what one is hoping to discover in this treasure chest. Numerous people for example choose to study the Gospel of Mark in order to understand the teachings of Jesus. This is one of the most popular reasons why people study Mark. At first this appears like an easy task, because all one has to do is to find a red-letter edition of the Bible and read the red parts of Mark. Yet some problems immediately arise once we ask such questions as, "What did Jesus mean by this *English* word in this sentence?" We all, of course, know that the New Testament is not written in English but Greek, so that the question about the meaning of an English word in the text involves not what Jesus meant by this word but what the English translators meant by it. Far more appropriate would be the question "What did Jesus mean by this *Greek* word in this sentence?" But this also raises a question. The native tongue of Jesus was not Greek but Aramaic, so that the question about the meaning of a Greek word involves not what Jesus meant but what the Evangelist meant by this. If, on the other hand, we seek to reconstruct from the present Greek text the actual words that Jesus spoke in Aramaic—and vast amounts of effort have been poured into such efforts—we would always be dealing with probabilities and not certainty. It is difficult at times to distinguish clearly between what Jesus said and what the Evangelist in his interpretation of Jesus' words reports. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that in preaching and teaching something is lost when we say, "Here is the word of the Lord, if my reconstruction of what he said, is correct." The truth of the matter is that our access to the teaching of Jesus is through the inspired Evangelist, who accurately recounts for us the message of Jesus under the guidance and supervision of the Holy Spirit. That is why the text of Mark, in the original, is both infallible and inerrant. Even if we knew exactly what Jesus said in Aramaic, his words would not be "infallibler" or "inerranter" than that of Mark, any more than something can be "perfecter" than "perfect." As a result, a better goal—I believe the best goal—is to seek to understand how Mark understands and interprets the teaching of Jesus.

A second goal some people set for themselves in the study of Mark is to understand the acts and deeds of Jesus. Such a "quest for the historical Jesus" became extremely popular during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries and became the most researched area in all of biblical studies. Mark, since it was considered the earliest written gospel, was mined extensively in

order to find golden nuggets of information about the Jesus of history. Although the quest flourished in the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth centuries, it came to a crashing halt in the early twentieth century. Albert Schweitzer pointed out the deceptive nature of the entire process by showing that the results of this liberal quest for the Jesus of history was not a first-century Jesus but a Jesus made in the image of German liberalism, and that the real Jesus of history would not be a Jesus attractive to theological liberalism. On the contrary, the real Jesus of history would be an offense to liberal theology. Listen to what Schweitzer writes in his monumental work, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*:

> There is nothing more negative than the result of the critical study of the Life of Jesus. The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the Kingdom of God, who founded the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth, and died to give His work its final consecration, never had any existence. He is a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in an historical garb.[1]

He goes on to say that the real Jesus, on the other hand,

> . . . will not be a Jesus Christ, to whom the religion of the present [i.e., theological liberalism] can ascribe, according to its long-cherished custom, its own thought and ideas, as it did with the Jesus of its own making. Nor will He be a figure which can be made by a popular historical treatment so sympathetic and universally intelligible to the multitude. The historical Jesus will be to our time a stranger and an enigma.[2]

As a result scholars lost interest in the quest. Why work so hard on seeking the Jesus of history if the final result will be a Jesus offensive to one's liberal theology? Other scholars, such as William Wrede and the form critics K. L. Schmidt, Martin Dibelius, and Rudolf Bultmann, pointed out that our Gospels are not objective, "historical" biographies of Jesus. They are, rather, Christian proclamations portraying selected vignettes of a supernatural Jesus who by definition was not "historical," since in their view "historical" research excluded the possibility of the supernatural. Consequently there also arose a skepticism as to the possibility of getting back to the Jesus of history. In addition Martin Kähler pointed out that historical research based upon the presupposition of analogy can only produce a Jesus that is essentially like us. He writes,

> The distinction between Jesus Christ and ourselves is not one of degree but of kind . . . [And] if a person really asks himself what he is looking for when he reads the Gospels, he will admit to himself, "I am not seeking someone like myself, but rather my opposite, my fulfillment, my Savior."[3]

The quest by its very nature could not provide the object of faith that a believer needs. Thus by the 1920s the quest of the historical Jesus had essentially died.

In the 1950s the quest for the Jesus of history revived, but it has produced mixed results. Some, such as the Jesus Seminar, have completely forgotten the lessons of Schweitzer and others, and have once again created a Jesus in their own image. Only in this instance it is not a Jesus of German liberalism, but an American politically-correct, egalitarian Jesus, and they have minimized, if not denied, the

Jewishness of Jesus. Others, such as N. T. Wright and John Meier, have been more helpful and reaffirmed the Jewishness of Jesus and his eschatological understanding of his mission. Yet, the question must be asked as to whether this should be the goal of the study of Mark. I would suggest that it is not.

Another goal some people have in the study of Mark is to learn about the various personalities referred to in Mark. Just as some people seek to mine the Gospel of Mark to learn about Jesus, some do so to learn about different characters in Mark. This may involve learning about John the Baptist, Peter, Joseph of Arimathea, Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas, and so on. Yet most of the same problems involved in the search for the historical Jesus are also involved in similar searches for the historical John the Baptist or the historical Peter.

I would like to suggest that the main goal of the study of Mark should be to understand what the author, Mark, is seeking to teach his readers and the implications of this for us today. The difference in this and the other goals mentioned above can be illustrated quite simply, I think, by an assignment I give students in my hermeneutics class. I assign them the task of finding the meaning of a passage in one of the Gospels, such as Mark 5:1-20—the story of the healing of the Gerasene demoniac. The first sentence of their paper must begin, "I, Mark, have told you the story of the healing of the Gerasene demoniac in Mark 5:1-20, because _____." After filling in the rest of this sentence, they must then seek to defend their view. It becomes clear by this first sentence that the student cannot simply repeat the subject matter found in Mark 5:1-20, in other words, they cannot simply talk about what happened. Rather they must seek to understand what Mark is seeking to teach by this story. I would suggest that in our study of Mark that it would be helpful in our study of the accounts in Mark to seek to fill in the sentence, "I, Mark, have told you this account, because _____." In so doing we will be forced to deal with Mark's meaning of the text and not be detoured from this by the investigation of the text's subject matter. I personally doubt that even two or three percent of the sermons today on the various sayings and stories found in Mark actually deal with what Mark, himself, sought to teach by them.

The Importance of Mark 1:1 in Understanding Mark's Gospel

The second issue that needs to be addressed and that builds on the first involves the importance of Mark 1:1 in understanding Mark's Gospel. The first question that we need to ask concerning Mark 1:1 is the question of where it came from. When we ask the same question about such passages as the healing of the paralytic in 2:1-12, the parable of the evil tenants in 12:1-11, or the cleansing of the temple in 11:15-19, the answer is quite easy. These passages came to Mark from the Jesus traditions that circulated in the early church, which he, under the inspiration of the Sprit, incorporated into his Gospel. However, Mark 1:1 is not a tradition that circulated within the early church. It never existed before Mark wrote his Gospel. It was created by Mark as an introduction to his Gospel, just as Matthew 1:1 ("A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the Son of David, the son of Abraham") and Luke 1:1-4 ("Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that

have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.") were created by Matthew and Luke as introductions to their Gospels. The fact that Mark choose to introduce his Gospel in this way and that the first words his audience heard from his Gospel were Mark 1:1 means that this verse is extremely important for understanding his Gospel. For Mark, the first thing that he wants his readers and hearers to know about his Gospel is that it is about the good news "of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."[4]

The biggest clue that Mark gives us as readers is that Mark 1:2 through the rest of his Gospel is about "Jesus Christ, the Son of God." This indicates that the following account in Mark 1:2-8 is not about John the Baptist. On the contrary, it is about Jesus Christ, the Son of God! The only reason Mark tells us about John the Baptist is because this account helps us in some way to understand who Jesus is. Thus the emphatic words in 1:2 are not "my messenger" and "who," but "you" and "your way." In 1:3 they are not "a voice of one calling in the desert," but "Lord" and "him." Thus when reading these verses we should emphasize these words:

> It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of ***you***, who will prepare ***your*** way"—"a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the ***Lord***, make straight paths for ***him***.'"

Consequently, when we teach or preach Mark 1:2-8, the Evangelist does not want us to focus on John the Baptist but on Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and how the ministry of John the Baptist helps us to understand who Jesus is. Similarly, Mark 4:35-41 is not about the disciples and their fear during a terrible storm on the Sea of Galilee but about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and the emphasis falls on the concluding words in 4:41—"Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" Mark 1:1 reveals to us that the meaning of 4:35-41 is that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the "Lord of nature," that hurricanes and storms are subject to his mighty power and word.

Similarly, Mark 5:1-20 is not about a demoniac or the people of Gerasa, but about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is stronger than Beelzebub and his demons. Mark 5:21-43 is not about a sick, hemorrhaging woman and about Jairus and his dead, young daughter, but about Jesus the Lord over disease and death. Mark 16:1-8 is not about women who were frightened and did not tell the news of Jesus' resurrection to others, but rather about Jesus and his resurrection, and the emphasis falls on 16:6-7, "He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him!" The emphasis is on the fact that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, had risen from the dead and would meet the disciples in Galilee, just as he said. Although there are at times subordinate themes and emphases in the individual accounts in Mark, the main point that Mark is seeking to emphasize in his Gospel, according to Mark 1:1, is Christological in nature. It is that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Son of God.

The Importance of the Demons' Christological Confessions in Mark

A third key issue involves the demons' confession concerning Jesus. Within the Gospel of Mark we find on three distinct occasions a confession from the demons that Jesus is the Son of God. In 1:24 the demon calls Jesus "the Holy One of God" and in 5:7 the "Son of the Most High God." In the Markan summary found in 3:7-12, Mark comments in 3:11 that the demons constantly referred to Jesus as "the Son of God." During the 1970s and 80s various scholars argued that Mark wanted his readers to understand that such confessions portray a wrong understanding of who Jesus is and that such a view is actually demonic in origin. It was maintained that for Mark this emphasis on Jesus as an exorcist and healer, a doer of wonders and a miracle-worker, was Satanic. The fact that these confessions come from the lips of demons supposedly proves that they should be rejected. Yet such reasoning stumbles over the fact that the opening verse of Mark's Gospel indicates that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. More important still, however, this reasoning is refuted by the fact that in the Markan summary found in 1:34, Mark states, "but he [i.e., Jesus] would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was"! Mark provides this editorial comment to help his readers recognize that, although the Jewish leadership and Rome do not recognize Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, the demons because of their supernatural knowledge truly recognize who Jesus is. They are thus "reliable 'spokesmen'" for the Markan Christology! As a result, if we seek to complete the paradigm, "I, Mark, have told you of the story of Jesus' healing of the demoniac in the synagogue of Capernaum in 1:21-28 and in the healing of the demoniac of Gerasa in 5:1-20, because _____," we would have to answer, " . . . because I want you to know that the demons, who as I told you in 1:34 truly know the identity of Jesus, confess that he is the Son of God, just as I told you in 1:1." The fact that the demons are commanded in 3:11 to cease confessing that Jesus is the Son of God is because, as 3:12b indicates, Jesus does not want them to make known who he was. This assumes that their confession was correct.

The Importance of the Summary Statements in Mark

The fourth issue involves the summary statements in Mark. Within Mark we encounter numerous editorial comments by the Evangelist that are summary in nature. Since they often summarize the preceding materials in the Gospel of Mark and prepare the reader for what is to take place in the coming chapters, it is evident that they are the result of Mark's editorial work. The Markan vocabulary, grammatical style, and theological emphases found in these summaries also witness to their coming from the hand of the Evangelist. This does not mean that what is recorded in them was simply created by the Evangelist out of nothing. They are, on the contrary, a summarization of the various traditions and pieces of tradition known to him. Some of these summaries are fairly brief, whereas others are lengthy. Some of the most obvious are 1:14-15, 21-22, 28, 32-34, 39, 45; 3:7-12; 4:1, 33-34; 6:6b, 53-56; 9:30-32; 10:32-34; 12:12; 14:1-2. Since these are not simply traditions that Mark is repeating verbatim, they contain a great deal more of his own editorial work than his repetition of traditions and teachings he found in the materials passed down

by the eyewitnesses and ministers of the word (Luke 1:2). Consequently, reading through them one after the other provides a good feel for the interests and emphases of the Evangelist in his Gospel. When one does this, it becomes clear that Mark seeks to emphasize Jesus' popularity among the people; his powerful healing and exorcism ministry; the divine necessity of his death; and the role of the Jewish leadership in his death.

The Importance of Repetition in Mark

A fifth key issue involves repetition in Mark. It is common sense to believe that what is important for a writer tends to be repeated in their writings, whereas what is less important is not. Although at times theologians and exegetes have rightly been criticized for majoring in minor issues, generally the biblical writers emphasize and repeat what is important for them and downplay what is not. One area that Mark emphasizes in his Gospel is his portrayal of the death of Jesus as a divine necessity. Martin Kähler at the end of the nineteenth century referred to Mark as essentially "a passion-narrative with an extended introduction." Although somewhat overstated, the point is well-taken. Mark emphasizes the importance and divine necessity of Jesus' passion. Allusions to Jesus' forthcoming death are found already in 2:20 where Jesus refers to himself as the bridegroom who "will be taken from them." Although the passive voice of the verb may refer to the role of Jesus' enemies in his death, it can also be interpreted as a divine passive for "God will take him away." In his first passion prediction in 8:31, Jesus speaks of his death as "necessary" (*dei*), and it is clear that his death is portrayed here as a divine necessity. His death is not a matter of some nebulous "fate" or "tragedy" but the fulfillment of the divine plan and purpose.

In 9:31 and 10:33-34 we have the second and third passion predictions of Jesus. In the second, Jesus refers to himself as "[given over] into the hands of men," and this is probably to be understood as a divine passive referring to God's giving Jesus over to death. In the third passion prediction Jesus is referred to as being delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and this also is probably best understood as a divine passive. In 10:45 Jesus refers to his having come ("from God" is implied) to give his life as a ransom for many. In 14:8 Jesus expresses foreknowledge of his death. When we come to 14:21 ("the Son of Man will go just as it is written about him"), v. 24 ("this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many"), v. 36 ("Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will"), and v. 49 ("But the Scriptures must be fulfilled") the divine necessity of Jesus' death is strongly emphasized. The portrayal of Jesus' death as a divine necessity and Jesus' foreknowledge of this are clearly emphasized in Mark, and it should be a strong emphasis in our preaching and teaching of his Gospel.

The Ending of Mark

The final issue involves the ending of the Gospel of Mark, which presents a host of problems, both textual and exegetical. There are three different endings to the Gospel in the manuscript tradition. One ends at 16:8 with "because they were afraid" (*ephobounto gar*). It has in its support the two best Greek manuscripts available (Siniaticus and Vaticanus) and is supported by the difficulty of conceiv-

ing a book ending with a "because" (*gar*). Another is known as "the shorter ending of Mark," and the third is "the longer ending of Mark," which is found in the King James Version and has the best textual support. Without entering into the debate as to the merits of the various textual traditions, I shall simply assume that both the shorter and longer endings of Mark are inauthentic, that is, they did not come from Mark's hand. The vocabulary, style, and theological emphases found in them clearly come from someone other than Mark, and there is almost universal agreement among scholars that they did not come from the hand of Mark. The major question is whether Mark's intended ending was lost or never written (the majority view during the first half of the twentieth century) or whether Mark intended to end his Gospel at 16:8 with "because they were afraid" (the majority view during the second half of the twentieth century). My own view is that the original ending of Mark was somehow lost, and I base this on the fact that there are two heavily Markan statements in 14:27 and 16:7 which refer to Jesus meeting the disciples in Galilee after his resurrection. The latter reference especially would be most strange, if Jesus' promise to meet the disciples in Galilee is unfilled and one verse later the Gospel ends with 16:8, for this would then be an unfulfilled prophecy—the only prophecy of Jesus in Mark that is unfulfilled without the possibility of being fulfilled.

Those who argue that Mark intended to end his Gospel at 16:8 seek in various ways to explain why Mark ended his Gospel here. A sampling of some of these explanations includes the following: to force his readers to think out for themselves the Gospel's challenge; to encourage readers to persevere despite the disobedience and failure of the disciples; to counter an obsession with miracles by Mark's opponents and their "divine man (*theios anēr*) Christology;" to challenge Mark's readers to become "the perfect disciple" and fulfill what the disciples and women failed to do; to have the readers make their own decision of obedience; to leave the readers to make the crucial step of faith for themselves without presenting them with less ambiguous evidence for the resurrection; to criticize and attack the disciples and Peter in order to show Mark's readers that the true followers of Jesus must not follow them and their teachings; and so on. Such interpretations are good examples of what happens when, instead of interpreting the Gospel of Mark in terms of how Mark intended his first-century audience to understand this passage, exegetes read Mark from the perspective of their own twentieth-century existential skepticism.

If we seek to interpret Mark 16:1-8 in light of Mark 1:1, it becomes clear that the emphasis and key passage in this account is not 16:8—"Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." It is rather 16:5-7—"'Don't be alarmed,' he said. 'You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, "He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you."'" Mark 16:1-8 is not about the women but about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and its purpose is to reveal that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, rose from the dead and met his disciples in Galilee. What happened to the original ending of Mark's Gospel is unclear, but that 16:8 is a satisfactory

ending to Mark is refuted by 1:1 and the rest of Mark. Beyond saying this, we must, then, be extremely careful not to draw any exegetical and theological conclusions from endings that were probably not original.

Conclusion

The six key issues listed above are issues that a person needs to wrestle with in the study of the Gospel of Mark. They are not isolated but interconnected, and in dealing with one you will often have to deal with another. Most important, however, is the need to have a clear understanding of the goal that one should set for oneself. In a day and age where the "reader" and his or her reading of the text has taken priority over the intended meaning of the author, it is important for evangelicals to affirm that the goal of our study is to understand what the divinely inspired authors of Scripture meant by the texts they have provided for us. In the study of Mark this means to seek to understand what Mark meant by the words and traditions of Jesus that he has provided for us. The affirmation of the divine inspiration of Mark should have as a corollary to this a determination to understand the meaning that the biblical author gave to his words. The last five issues we discussed are intended as means to assist in achieving this goal.

ENDNOTES

[1]Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. by W. Montgomery (New York: MacMillan, 1910), 398.

[2]Ibid., 398-399.

[3]Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*, trans. by Carl. E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 53 and 59.

[4]There is a textual problem concerning the words "Son of God" that we cannot discuss, but I shall assume for various reasons that originally Mark 1:1 read, "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."