

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

II. THE DISSEMINATION

CONTRARY to ordinary experience, tradition regarding the origin of Mark antedates most of the extant evidences of its employment. The statement of John of Jerusalem as to its authorship and relation to the anecdotes of Peter must date not later than 117 A.D. Outside the four canonical Gospels themselves, we have absolutely no trace in any correspondingly early writing of the existence of Mark. However, even this canonical employment is not without bearing on the question of its provenance. Considering that this was an anonymous Gospel, a writing whose most ardent champions did not venture to claim for it more than second-hand relation to one of the Apostles, the degree of respect shown for it by Matthew and Luke at the very threshold of the second century is truly extraordinary. This is difficult to account for unless the Gospel had already attained wide currency and acceptation, implying that it was vouched for in high quarters. A document which on its face makes so little pretense of authority could hardly be expected to attain such standing if emanating from some obscure region, undistinguished as the seat of any "apostolic" church.

The representative of the Jerusalem "Elders" deprecates, as we should expect, exaggerated dependence upon the Gospel of Mark. To take this written record as a complete, "ordered" account of Jesus' life and teaching, of directly apostolic authority, would be fatal to the claims of Jerusalem's own most cherished prerogative, its apostolic tradition of the Lord's words. Still, the Elder treats the book with consideration and respect. So much as Mark gave was really from "Peter," and was "accurately" recorded. Still greater respect than this is implied in the use made of Mark at a considerably earlier date by Matthew and Luke.

Mark's narrative and practically nothing else is adopted by our first canonical evangelist for his entire outline of Jesus' career. But the author of Matthew represents, by the consensus of ancient tradition with modern criticism, the same region and ecclesiastical connections as John of Jerusalem.

He probably does not antedate the Elder's testimony by more than a decade or so. It is insupposable that this Palestinian evangelist did not have access to at least as ample stores of evangelic διήγησις as Luke attests both by direct reference (Luke 1, 1) and by employment. He is likely, rather, to have sympathized with our fourth evangelist's complaints (John 20, 30; 21, 25) of an *embarras de richesse* on this score. Therefore when we find Matthew's outline so strictly limited to Markan material, and even the order of Mark unchanged save in one important regrouping (Matt. 8-9), we can only infer that this is due to the great authority already enjoyed by the earlier Gospel.

This inference from Matthew is re-enforced by the treatment accorded to Mark by Luke. Here again the degree of respect shown for the contents of Mark, and (in spite of the evangelist's endeavor to write *καθεξῆς*) even for its order, is so far beyond what its self-indicated origin would lead us to expect, that no other explanation seems available than that of quasi-authoritative acceptance.

This remarkable fact, that the non-apostolic Greek Gospel of Mark should by 100 A.D. have attained a currency and standing so completely dominant as to determine for all subsequent time the standard outline of Jesus' career, is of enormous significance. An age which has but recently accommodated itself to the conviction that Mark is the oldest of the Synoptic group, Matthew and Luke being independently dependent on it, may be pardoned for not immediately appreciating all its implications. One of them, however, is the following: Repetitions by one or both of Mark's satellites may not be taken off-hand as corroborations. They may be mere reflections of Mark. For corroboration we should require the added testimony of Paul, or of the Second Source (Q). When for example Luke (but not Matthew) takes over the Markan theory of the demonic recognition of Jesus as the Christ and Son of God,¹ we have not two witnesses for the fact, but only one witness, whose weight with later writers must be judged by this relation. Conversely

¹ See Bacon in *Zeitschrift für N. T. Wissenschaft*, VI (1905), pp. 153 ff.

when Matthew (but not Luke)¹ takes over Mark's idea that the parables were riddles intended to hide the mystery of the kingdom of God from "those without," we merely have evidence how greatly Matthew was controlled in his conceptions by even an erroneous theory of Mark. When, therefore, we come to a consideration of the peculiarities of Mark as respects Christology, eschatology, and otherwise, it will not do to argue: Such and such a phenomenon is not "Markan" because the same passage appears also in one or both of the two later Synoptists. Only in subordinate changes could Matthew and Luke depart from Mark. As a whole, the Markan outline and content was imposed upon them. The minor changes, aiming to effect improvements in geography (mainly in Matthew), rehabilitation of Peter, the Apostles, and the kindred of the Lord, restoration of the Davidic pedigree of Jesus, and the like, are all the more significant. But when we speak of the "Markan" outline, this must be understood to include that portion of Mark which has been taken over by Matthew and Luke. To judge how far this represented the general stream of gospel teaching we must compare it with Paul and the Q material, not merely with its own reflection in "triple tradition" material.

It is entirely erroneous to connect the Second Source with the name of "Matthew." This Apostle's name is never connected, in early tradition, with any other writing than our own first Gospel — a false ascription whose origin we can only conjecture. "Peter" thus remains as the only apostolic source of evangelic material *ἡ λεχθέντα ἡ πραχθέντα* for the earlier tradition; and the respectful treatment accorded by both Matthew and Luke to Mark, as compared to that accorded to Q material, corroborates the result.

When we leave the field of the canonical Gospels and come down to the pseudoapostolic composites of the second century, the earliest and most important is the so-called Gospel of Peter (140-150 A.D.?). In *Evangelium Petri* the fundamental narrative outline is again Markan, and the apostolic authority ap-

¹ The Markan idea of the "hardening of Israel" is adopted by all later evangelists. On this see below. Luke (Acts. 28, 26-27) and John (12, 40) welcome and extend the proof-texts (Isa. 6, 9). But only Matthew goes so far as to adopt Mark's theory of the teaching in parables as proving it. Cf. Luke 8, 9-10.

pealed to is "Peter." In fact, "Peter" now even speaks in the first person.

It was at about this period (125-140 A.D.) that the relatively late and dependent Greek Gospel of Matthew succeeded in ousting "Petrine" tradition from its commanding influence, this result being due to its vastly greater appeal to the post-apostolic demand for *ἐντολαὶ τῇ πίστει ὑπὸ τοῦ κυρίου δεδομένα*, and for direct apostolic authority; and the title *κατὰ Ματθαίου* is not very much later in origin than the Gospel itself. Once the ancient glory of *ἀπομνημονεύματα* of Peter had been eclipsed by "Matthew," we begin to get pseudo-Matthean gospels. At the outset "Synoptic" tradition, as we call it, is nothing more nor less than the Gospel of Mark, filled out in the second generation with some minor attachments of relatively late and apocryphal anecdote, and with large supplements of discourse material (Q) taken from the so-called Second Source. There is no claim to any other apostolic authority than "Peter," until the Greek Gospel of Matthew enters the field with a problematic ascription to "Matthew," not traceable earlier than Papias. Finally, Ephesus, the great headquarters of Paulinism, shows sufficient independence to break away for considerable sections of the story from the stereotyped "Petrine" outline of Mark. As in the case of Matthew, tradition soon brings forward the claim of apostolic authorship in behalf of this last and best of the Gospels. Theophilus of Antioch (181 A.D.) maintains that it was written by the Apostle John.

The history of Mark in the formative period of the Gospels is therefore unique. A superstructure of unequalled authority is built upon a foundation of most modest claims. This is all the more significant in view of the rapid decline of this once dominant Gospel to a position of almost complete eclipse. It could not hope to maintain itself, once the larger Gospel of Matthew with its higher claims of apostolic authority had come into general use. As we see from Papias, the demand of the age was for a systematic compend of the divine oracles of the Lord (*σύνταξις τῶν κυριακῶν λόγιων*). It required a *nova lex*, a revealed Law like that proclaimed from Sinai, "commandments delivered by the Lord to the faith, which are derived from the truth

itself." On this score the mere "Memoirs of Peter" could not hope to compete with Matthew.

Even from the annalist's point of view, Mark took second rank. As a complete narrative "from the very first" down to the establishment of the new religion in the world's metropolis it was hopelessly outdistanced by the splendid double work attributed to Luke the companion of Paul, which also made pretensions to "order." The marvel is that a Gospel so completely superseded as Mark in the estimate of the post-apostolic age could manage to survive at all. Nothing but its one-time influence saved it; and the mutilated and reconstructed form in which we have it attests the pressure it went through before the newer and larger Gospels took its place in common employment. Its survival is unquestionably due in large part to the belief that it represents the preaching of Peter. Justin at Rome in 152 even refers to Mark 3, 17, as "written in his (i.e., Peter's) memoirs." But this tradition has no traceable foundation in the book itself. The Gospel obtained its first currency under the name of Mark; the name of Peter was superimposed later to increase and widen its authority. Had it been otherwise the title would certainly have been *κατὰ Πέτρον*, and it is impossible to imagine such a title displaced by the unpretentious *κατὰ Μάρκον*.

What, then, can be inferred on the score of provenance from the extraordinarily high and wide-spread authority of Mark? Had the authority, position, and influence of the community which first gave it currency something to do with this; or was it obtained on its intrinsic merits, plus the belief in its indirect derivation from Peter?

Judged from the point of view of a Clement of Rome, a "Second Clement," an Ignatius, a Polycarp, a Hermas, the intrinsic merits of a Gospel of Mark in comparison with others of the "many" *δηγήσεις* referred to by Luke cannot have been at all conspicuous. None of these writers, save possibly Hermas (and Hermas is from Rome), show special predilection for Mark. Both epistles ascribed to "Clement," as well as the seven of Ignatius, use uncanonical gospels more freely than they use Mark. Predilection, as soon as traceable in the Fathers,

is always in favor of Matthew, for reasons already set forth. Basilides and Marcion favor Luke. Their preference is equally explicable. Besides its larger content than Mark, Luke represents Antioch, or (North) "Syria and Cilicia," the native province of Basilides, and of Cerdon the teacher of Marcion as well.

The only other exception to the rule of second-century preference for Matthew is reported, and correctly accounted for as well, by Irenaeus. He tells us¹ that "Those who make a distinction between Jesus and Christ (i.e., Adoptionists or Docetists of the type represented in *Ev. Petri* and *Acta Joh.*), alleging that Christ remained impassible, but that it was Jesus who suffered, prefer the Gospel by Mark." This mere doctrinal preference has, of course, no bearing on our problem.

Mark is no more likely to have won popularity from the rhetorical and stylistic point of view than from that of contents or authorship. The innumerable corrections to Mark's Greek by both Matthew and Luke show plainly enough how his uncouth and barbarous idiom was regarded. Either, then, this primitive Gospel must have emanated from some centre of very great authority and importance, with or without the important sanction of an alleged derivation from Peter; or we are at a loss to account for the dominant position it acquired in every region of the early church to which our knowledge extends. Such an authoritative centre of emanation might be Rome; or it might equally well (so far as yet appears) be Jerusalem. Antioch might come next in consideration as a possibility; but Antioch, like Ephesus and Jerusalem, has a Gospel of its own, and yet (while using Mark, and in addition a large amount of "Petrine" material) makes no pretensions to any special relation to Peter. This would hardly be possible if the Antiochian church had previously employed the famous Markan "*Memorabilia of Peter.*"

As we have seen, the only place besides Rome that raises a whisper of claim to the honor of being the birthplace of the Gospel is Alexandria, and that at a period so late (Chrysostom) and in a form so manifestly imitated from the Roman tradition

¹ *Haer.* iii. 11, 7.

which it aims to supersede, as to be immediately ruled out of court. As regards Jerusalem, whose claim might otherwise be regarded as strongest, the tradition of John the Elder is very damaging. For if ever there was a case of "damning with faint praise" it is here. And "the Elder" certainly speaks for Palestine.

To what extent, then, was the early dominance of Mark due to emanation from an authoritative centre, and to what extent to its alleged relation to Peter? In the attempt to answer this question it is important to recall the relation of priority already adverted to. The Gospel was not first known as ἀπομνημονεύματα Πέτρον and afterwards entitled κατὰ Μάρκον. It was first known simply as τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, later (to distinguish it from rivals) as τὸ κατὰ Μάρκον. Finally, to give it still greater authority, perhaps for wider circles, it was declared to embody recollections of the teaching or preaching of Peter. The reverse process is inconceivable.

If it were possible still to maintain the theory already described as that of the defenders of the authenticity of First Peter, representing the great Apostle of the circumcision as coming to Rome after Paul's death to become as it were administrator of his Gentile-church estate, in co-operation with his surviving fellow-workers, this would of course make the Roman provenance of Mark almost indisputable, confirming without more ado the tradition traceable to Papias. Unfortunately this tradition, as we have seen, cannot be traced any further back than Papias himself, and the more clearly it is seen to rest upon inference from 1 Peter 5, 13, the more dubious it becomes. The whole conception of Peter's ministry at Rome (I do not say, of his execution there) may be built out of this pseudonymous epistle. At all events, it lacks every element of support not derived from it. It also conflicts with Matthew, a gospel which beyond all others exalts the authority of Peter, making him the "Rock" on which the Church is founded and endowing him with authority to "bind and loose," while at the same time it surpasses all others in the strictness of its permanent limitation of the apostolic see to Jewish soil. Considerations of this type compel us to renounce a method of proof based on

Papias' exegesis of 1 Peter 5, 13. But what is the alternative? Grant that Peter never was in Rome; grant that the vague and allegorizing references of the Epistle to the "elect sister in Babylon," and to Mark as Peter's spiritual "son," are part of the author's literary *mise en scène*, grant that the commendation of Silvanus as "a faithful brother" and the gospel of the Pauline churches as "the true grace of God" are spoken in the name of "Peter" not because Peter was really present, but because his authority was indispensable to the object, we are still called upon to account for the immediate and undisputed acceptance of the inferences of Papias from this Epistle as to the provenance of a well known Gospel.

Papias' inference from 1 Peter 5, 13 would hardly have met such unopposed success, obtaining the assent even of Clement of Alexandria, if any other centre than Rome had at this time been putting forward claims to be the source of the Petrine teaching. Doubtless Antioch could boast many traditions of Peter; but so far as evangelic tradition was concerned, Antioch was already depending on another name, that of "Luke" the companion of Paul. Rome, not Antioch, was now (140-150 A.D.) aspiring to be known as "the see of Peter." Hence Papias' discovery in 1 Peter 5, 13 "met a long-felt want," precisely as did Eusebius' subsequent discovery in Papias' own pages of the much-desired "other John" in Asia, whom Dionysius of Alexandria had sought in vain, to be the author of the Revelation. At an earlier time, the period of Luke and Matthew, the "see of Peter" is Antioch or Jerusalem, as it had been since Paul described him as "the Apostle of the circumcision" and classed him with James the Lord's brother and John as one of the "pillars" at Jerusalem (Gal. 2, 7-9). Why, then, was it so desirable to bring Peter to Rome? If the (probably Roman) author of First Peter intends *ἐν Βαβυλῶνι* to be understood as Papias understood it, the motive is manifest. Himself a Roman, he would have the chief Apostle speak from Rome. This intention, however, is far from certain. With an equally emphatic "if" we may make the same assertion of John 21, 18, whose author employs First Peter, and is also probably Roman. If the Appendix to John is of Roman origin, ca. 150 A.D., as I

have argued in *The Fourth Gospel in Research and Debate*,¹ and if the phrase, "shall carry thee away whither thou wouldst not," is intended covertly to suggest Rome, we may still be dealing with ideas suggested by 1 Peter 5. But neither passage mentions Rome, or has anything to distinctly imply it. In these cases the ground is too uncertain; we base no inferences upon them. With Papias and those who adopted his account of Gospel origins the case is otherwise. There can be no mistaking the motive of his transforming comment upon "the Elder's" meagre testimony, when we compare it with the original. Papias is bent on making Mark simply the "translator" (*ἐρμηνευτής*) of the oral discourses of Peter, a "translator" who also transcribes upon the spot. By this means, the authority of the Gospel is enhanced to the very verge of direct apostolicity. "Mark, therefore made no error in writing down some things as he heard them; for he made it his one aim to omit nothing that he had heard, and to set down nothing amiss." Papias' motive in assuming Peter to be in Rome is to enhance the value of the Gospel he employs.

We come back, then, to the period antecedent to these attempted connections of Peter with Rome, a period when this Gospel was generally current, but known only by the name *κατὰ Μάρκον*. John of Jerusalem, it is true, vindicates a further claim commonly made on its behalf, that it contains authentic anecdotes of Peter. But its standing and currency were not originally gained on this representation. They were gained on the basis of the older tradition represented by its title. It had been "the Gospel according to Mark." We must look for its origin and its primary acceptance where such a title would suffice to give authority.

Considering first the possibility of a Palestinian provenance, it is self-evident that no gospel would be likely to attain currency and authoritative standing in the region of the apostolic mother church which could offer no better basis for its claims than the name of "Mark." To say nothing of the probability that in Palestine "John" was probably the designation of the individual in question (Acts 12, 25; 13, 5), and deferring the

¹ C. 7, "Epistles and Appendix."

question of language, no gospel having such small pretensions to apostolicity could have won in Palestine the place Mark came to occupy.

Attainment of it in Antioch, Alexandria, or Ephesus, under such a title would be less insupposable; but the very late and highly suspicious form of the tradition making the claim on behalf of Alexandria is strongly opposed to an Egyptian provenance, while Antioch and Ephesus have Gospels of their own, not mere revisions of Mark, though they make use of it. Tradition is absolutely silent as to provenance from these regions.

When we come to Rome, the conditions are precisely such as would favor the attainment of the standing achieved by Mark under the simple title *κατὰ Μάρκον*. The Pauline Epistles show John-Mark a trusted helper of Paul in Rome when the curtain falls on the great Apostle's activity. Rome, and Rome alone, has anything to relate of personal connection with this individual that may be based on actual knowledge. Hippolytus¹ at Rome calls Mark *ὁ κολυβοδάκτυλος*. What the meaning of the epithet may be we cannot say, declining to add new romances to the fanciful interpretations of medieval and later legend makers. But the mere currency of the epithet proves that early in the third century Rome still had something of its own to tell concerning John-Mark. No other region tells anything not found in Acts save the unimportant claim of Alexandria, and a real sojourn of Mark in Alexandria in 50-60 is quite admissible.

But after the period of the later Pauline Epistles an epoch is begun by a new characterization of our evangelist. In 85-90 A.D. Mark appears again in 1 Peter 5, 13. It is not certain that Mark is here regarded as resident in Rome, it is not even certain that he was still living; but it is important to observe that in this probably Roman writing his chief claim to distinction has come to be the fact that he had been a (spiritual) "son" of Peter, no mention being made of his relations to Barnabas and Paul. This corresponds to the rapidly growing reverence of the sub-apostolic age for "eye-witnesses and ministers of the word," a word of divine revelation which had been "first spoken by the

¹ Refut. vii. 30.

Lord" and afterward confirmed to it "by them that heard."¹ The epithet "my son" explains how (at Rome?) a Gospel could attain to superlative authority on the simple assurance that it was "According to Mark." In other domains than evangelic story the name of Mark was probably not one to conjure with. But Mark had once been an associate of Peter. As time went by such a distinction rapidly increased in value. In Hebrews (ca. 85) those who had "heard" the revelation and seen the "signs and wonders" are already reckoned to a past generation. Anecdotes of the "sayings and doings of the Lord" put forth under the name and sanction of Mark would soon attain locally all the authority of direct narrations of Peter himself. At the same time resort to secondary authority in support of the Gospel argues strongly against ability to appeal to primary. Wherever Mark obtained its title it is practically certain the local church was not as yet able to say: This is the Gospel we received from Peter himself.

Outside its place of origin a Gospel having the reputed sanction of the chief Apostle would have free course to be glorified. Once current in the Greek-speaking church as *ἀπομνημονεύματα Πέτρον* no other compend could hope to rival it until one should appear bearing the name of an Apostle and supposedly representing the church of "the Apostles and Elders" in Jerusalem. But for years after Mark appeared the mother church in Jerusalem still manifests the well known Jewish preference for oral tradition, perhaps appreciating the principle of which Rome later made ample use, that published teaching is anybody's or nobody's property, the tool of friend and foe alike. Contrariwise, the unpublished "tradition of the fathers," handed down by word of mouth, and limited to the initiate, is an almost impregnable bulwark of orthodoxy. Synagogue rule allowed the targumist liberty to draw up written notes of the translation and interpretation of the sacred text for his own private use at home; and doubtless the Aramaic basis of our earliest Greek Gospel must be referred to such written *διηγήσεις*, gradually extended in compass. Officially, however, the "church of the Apostles and Elders in Jerusalem" will have stood for "the

¹ Luke 1, 2; Heb. 2, 3.

living and abiding voice" as of "more profit than books." The result was that the first widely circulated Gospels, properly so-called, were Greek; though they rest on a Semitic foundation. The Aramaic compositions of which we have actual knowledge through surviving fragments and reports by the Fathers are without exception later than the Greek and based upon them. These pseudo-apostolic, second-century Aramaic gospels represent the belated and fruitless attempt of the Oriental church to undo the ill effects of its earlier conservatism.

The preference of the Aramaic-speaking mother-church in Jerusalem for oral tradition, combined with its exalted sense of its own commission as custodian and interpreter of the true gospel of Jesus, is the true explanation of the curious anomaly that the oldest extant Gospels are Greek writings, though based from the necessities of the case on Aramaic material. It also explains that other curious phenomenon with which we are now engaged, that by the unanimous testimony of ancient tradition, corroborated (as we shall see) by the internal evidence, the primitive Church turned not to the East, and to Palestinian contemporary records, for its standard story of the life and teaching of Jesus, but to a Greek writing of the remotest branch of the Church, a writing which did not even claim to be by an Apostle, but was admittedly composed under circumstances which made the testimony of the eye-witnesses inaccessible to the evangelist!

At first sight this anomaly would seem almost incredible. In reality it is precisely what close knowledge of the conditions should lead us to expect. Remote and self-confident Rome under its Pauline leaders¹ need have no hesitation in putting to any use it chose such traditions and records of Jesus' life and teaching as its archives afforded. Few, at this remove of time and distance, would dispute the statements advanced. A large and fast growing body of Gentile Christians would welcome the work, support its claims (such as they might be) to apostolic authenticity, and maintain its authority. Contrariwise, the nearer we approach to Jerusalem with its body

¹ On the Paulinism of the Roman church in Paul's day, and for some decades after, see below.

of eye-witnesses, jealous to an extreme degree of their claim to hold the true tradition of the Lord's career and teaching, yet at the same time refusing to put it in writing, the more difficult does it become for any non-apostolic record (and the claims of the Second Source on this score must have been even less than Mark's, from the treatment accorded to its order by Matthew and Luke) to obtain currency and standing.

Of all possible quarters from which to expect early and wide dissemination of such a gospel as Mark, Rome is by all odds the most probable. That this earliest of extant Greek Gospels should attain its short-lived supremacy under the simple title "According to Mark" is explicable under the theory of Roman provenance, but hardly otherwise. By virtue of its claim to represent the teaching of Peter, whose spiritual "son" Mark had been, and no less by virtue of the refusal on the part of the "successors of the Apostles" (*διάδοχοι τῶν ἀποστόλων*) at Jerusalem, who regarded themselves as trustees and guardians of the "commandments delivered by the Lord," to publish their deposit of the faith in written form, this Gospel attained that pre-eminence in the field which produced the phenomenon known to modern criticism as "Synoptic" tradition. Deep below the surface it laid the foundation for the see of Peter at Rome. For Matthew and Luke, Jerusalem (with Antioch as a daughter see) is still the seat of "Petrine" authority. For Matthew the very Church of Christ is founded on this "Rock." Authority to "bind and loose" is vested in him, and under his leadership the Church wins its victory over the powers of the underworld. Even when "the Holy City" has been laid waste, Matthew cannot conceive the departure of the apostolic see from one of "the cities of Israel" till the Son of Man be come. However, this transfer, so unimaginable to Matthew, is ultimately accomplished by purely literary means. The Gospel of Mark effected it; for the more concerned men were to prove that this Gospel comprised the preaching of Peter, the more easily persuaded were they that the church which had given it out had listened to the Apostle himself. Thus Peter's emigrant spiritual "son" provides his venerable father with a new home in the West. Rome gave to the Christian world under the

name of " Peter's Memoirs " that written record of the " sayings and doings of the Lord " which it craved, and which Jerusalem had refused. The Christian world gave to Rome in return that " power of the keys " which Jerusalem had intended for itself.