

## *The Framework of the Gospel Narrative*

**Professor C. H. Dodd,  
M.A., D.D.**

**The University,  
Manchester**

[p.396]

The criticism of the Gospels has achieved at least one secure result. Scarcely any one now doubts that Mark is our primary Gospel. It offers the earliest extant narrative of the Ministry of Jesus Christ. The general order of that narrative reappears substantially in Matthew and Luke; and even in the Fourth Gospel, which offers at first sight a totally different arrangement of events, the influence of the Marcan order can be recognized. Thus the question is important, whether this earliest extant narrative can be trusted to give, if not a complete record, at least a record which so far as it goes follows the chronological order of events, and so enables us to trace the development of the Ministry. That this is the case is the assumption which underlies many of the modern 'lives' of Jesus. It has, however, been challenged by recent critics. Archdeacon Rawlinson, for example, in the Introduction to his Commentary on Mark, writes:

'It is the conviction of the present editor, as the Commentary will make plain, that no such developments are to be traced, and that such attempts to treat the Marcan arrangement of the Gospel materials as supplying an outline, in chronological order, of the course of events, are profoundly mistaken';

and again:

The most fundamental difficulty of all with regard to the "Marcan hypothesis" is just the intrinsic improbability of anything like a chronological outline of our Lord's Ministry, or an itinerary of His movements; having been preserved, throughout a whole generation of oral tradition, by a Church which was not primarily interested in such matters. It appears to be the clear upshot of the investigations to which reference has been made... that it is just the framework and the arrangement of the materials in our Gospels which ought to be set down to the account of the Evangelists, the materials themselves being derived from tradition.'

The 'investigations' to which Dr. Rawlinson refers are chiefly those of the German school of *Formgeschichte*, and in particular of Professor Karl Ludwig Schmidt, whose book, *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu* ('The Framework of the Story of Jesus'), is the most thorough treatment of this subject that has appeared.

Professor Schmidt's thesis is that the Gospel according to Mark is compiled out of separate *pericopæ*, each transmitted as an independent unit in the folk-tradition of the Church (a typical example is the Leper story in Mk 1<sup>40-45</sup>). The arrangement of these *pericopæ* is the work of the Evangelist, who in arranging them has had little regard for chronology or topography, but groups

them in the main according to the topics with which they deal, or the features of the Ministry which they illustrate. Only where some datum in the story itself anchors it to a particular place—as, for example, the appearance of a Syro-phœnician woman anchors Mk 7<sup>21-30</sup> to 'the borders of Tyre'—can we accept a topographical setting. Similar internal indications of time scarcely exist until we reach the Passion narrative at the close, so that there is no secure basis for a chronology.

Apart from the arrangement, and the insertion of such insignificant connecting words as εὐθὺς and πάλιν, the work of the Evangelist himself is to be recognized in the composition of short generalizing summaries (*Sammelberichte*), which punctuate the narrative, help the transition from one pericope to another, and remind the reader that the particular incidents narrated in detail are episodes in a widely extended ministry. These summaries can be recognized by their contrast in manner and content to the traditional narrative units. They lack the concreteness and particularity of the *pericopæ*. They relate nothing which belongs to one point of space and time to the exclusion of all other times and places. Their verbs are more often in the imperfect, the tense of continuous or habitual action, than in the aorist, the tense of action at a definite point. While the traditional units possess a high historical value, the *Sammelberichte* are mere 'framework,' and are not to be taken seriously as a contribution to our knowledge of the course of the Ministry.

Professor Schmidt seems to have made out his case that the main stuff of the Gospel is reducible to short narrative units, and that the framework is superimposed upon these units. But it seems worth while to inquire whether the order in which the units appear is indeed quite arbitrary, and the

[p.397]

framework nothing more than an artificial construction of the Evangelist.

First, Professor Schmidt himself admits certain qualifications to this theory that the Evangelist's materials came to him solely in the form of isolated *pericopæ*. In some portions of the Gospel he recognizes comparatively large blocks which must have reached the Evangelist in substantially their present form. Thus the whole Passion-narrative, 14-16, he thinks took form as a continuous whole long before Mark incorporated it in his work. Similarly, he recognizes as a single whole the story of the Sabbath at Capernaum, 1<sup>23-38</sup>, which consists of four *pericopæ*, one of them approximating to the character of a *Sammelbericht*. Not only, he thinks, did it reach the Evangelist in this form, but things actually happened so. Again, he thinks it probable that two further complexes received their present continuous form at an earlier stage of the tradition—one consisting of the Storm, the Gadarene Swine, Jairus's Daughter, and the Hæmorrhoussa; the other of the Feeding of the Multitude, the Voyage and the Landing (6<sup>34-33</sup>, repeated in 8<sup>1-10</sup>). In these cases, however, he will not admit that the complexes represent an original historical sequence.

Further, in the central portion of the Gospel, where notes of place are most frequent, Professor Schmidt repeatedly refers to 'fragments' or 'wreckage' (*Bruchstucke, Trümmer*) of an itinerary. I am not quite clear what he means by this. Sometimes he speaks as though the wealth of local indications reflected some real memory of journeyings in particular districts, which might have given rise to a formal itinerary; at other times as though some such itinerary had once existed, but had been disintegrated by the Evangelist. I should say myself that if a narrative started with the words ἐκεῖθεν δὲ ἀναστὰς, or the like (7<sup>24</sup> 9<sup>30</sup> 10<sup>1</sup>), even the simplest of the simple-minded early Christians would have been disposed to ask πόθεν. In other words, such narratives can hardly have been wholly independent in the tradition. Either they came down linked with other *pericopæ*, or those who heard them told had some kind of outline itinerary in their minds, to which they readily related the separate stories. In any case, some modification of the strict theory of wholly independent units must be admitted. If we should infer that some ancient and traditional itinerary really lies behind the record of journeys in the North, then clearly such an itinerary cannot have been transmitted by itself, or for its own sake, but only as a part of an outline of the Ministry as a whole.

Once again, the theory that the arrangement has been determined by topical considerations calls for critical examination. The clearest case is the series of stories of conflicts with the scribes and Pharisees (2<sup>1</sup>-3<sup>6</sup>). But this series Professor Schmidt himself is disposed to regard as having been formed in the tradition before Mark worked upon it. In that case it tells us nothing of his own method of arrangement. In the next great section, 3<sup>7</sup>-6<sup>13</sup>, the dominant motive, dictating the arrangement of the material, is, according to Professor Schmidt, the πώρωσις, or hardening, of the people, with the allied motive of the 'Messianic secret.' It is true that this double theme is prominent from time to time in this section; but it appears also in other sections, and even more strongly; and Professor Schmidt himself admits that it is difficult to trace it in all *pericopæ* of this section. This fact he accounts for on the ground that Mark, having decided to place here some one particular pericope bearing upon the main theme of the section, took over along with it other material already connected with it in the tradition, connected with it, therefore, by links not merely topical. In the two sections which follow, the supposed dominant theme is certainly more consistently prominent: 6<sup>14</sup>-8<sup>26</sup> does deal with the theme: Jesus among the Gentiles; and 8<sup>27</sup>-10<sup>45</sup> is dominated by the thought of the approaching Passion. But even here the topical unity of the sections is not absolute. The refusal of a sign and the saying about leaven (8<sup>11-15</sup>) have no direct bearing upon the theme 'to the Jew first and also to the Greek'; and it is difficult to bring the discussion of Divorce (10<sup>2-12</sup>) under Professor Schmidt's rubric, 'Jesus and His Disciples: The Imminent Passion.'

But apart from such qualifications, we may legitimately ask, Is this association of narratives dominated by a particular motive necessarily artificial or arbitrary? Let us put it in this way Was there, or was there not, a point in the life of Jesus at which He summoned His followers to accompany Him to Jerusalem with the prospect of suffering and death? Is it, or is it not, likely that from that point on His thought and His speech dwelt with especial emphasis upon the theme of this approaching Passion? Surely it is on every account likely. Thus, if one particular section of the Gospel is dominated by that theme, it is not because Mark has arbitrarily assembled from all quarters isolated *pericopæ* referring to the approaching Passion, but because these *pericopæ*

originally and intrinsically belong to this particular phase of the Ministry. Again, Was there, or was there not, a period in the life of Jesus when the outstanding

[p.398]

feature of the situation was the obduracy of the people of Galilee? That there was, we have the best authority for stating. A 'Q' saying, accepted by Professor Schmidt as unquestionably genuine represents Jesus as upbraiding the citizens of Capernaum, Bethsaida, and Chorazin because they did not repent. This utterance clearly belongs to some particular occasion, and it looks back on a period of unfruitful work in Galilee which is now regarded as closed. Thus the theme of the *πῶρωσις* of the people lies in the facts themselves, as they were in a particular phase of the Ministry.

To sum up: the theory of arrangement under topical rubrics is on the one hand not a sufficient explanation of the order of the Gospel, and on the other hand it is often not needed as an explanation; since the units have an inner connexion with one another grounded in the facts themselves.

We may now make a fresh start by considering some of those passages which Professor Schmidt regards as the most characteristic elements in the framework supplied by the Evangelist himself—the *Sammelberichte*, or generalizing summaries which serve as links between the separate episodes in that portion of the Gospel where there is least inner connexion between them. Professor Schmidt includes here:

1 <sup>14-15</sup>	Summary of the Galilæan Ministry.
1 <sup>21-22</sup>	Capernaum: Teaching with Authority.
1 <sup>39</sup>	Tour of Galilæan Synagogues.
2 <sup>13</sup>	By the Sea.
3 <sup>7b-19</sup>	Concourse of People; Retirement to Hill-country; Appointment of the Twelve.
4 <sup>33-34</sup>	Parabolic Teaching.
6 <sup>7, 12-13</sup>	Mission of the Twelve.
6 <sup>30</sup>	Return of the Twelve.

The most remarkable of these passages is 3<sup>7b-19</sup>. Professor Schmidt seems to be clearly right in regarding this whole passage as a generalizing summary. The characteristic features of the narrative *pericopæ* are absent. We have two bald and general descriptions of stages in the Ministry first, a stage of public teaching by the seashore; and secondly, a stage in which Jesus is in retirement in the hill-country with a select number of disciples. No single and definite act is narrated in such a way that we can visualize it as happening on a particular day in a particular place. The verbs are mostly in the present or imperfect tense. The nucleus of each of the two descriptions is a dry catalogue of names—names of the districts from which people flocked to Jesus, and names of the Twelve Apostles.

Thus we have before us a typical example of the kind of thing which Professor Schmidt attributes to the Evangelist's own composition. But what can have been his motive in composing

it? It does not help to give continuity to the narrative, or to link the preceding pericope with that which follows. Nothing in 3<sup>7b-19</sup> leads up to or prepares for the situation in 3<sup>20</sup>, which, in fact, does not differ from the situation in 2<sup>1-3</sup><sup>6</sup>. A boat is mentioned; but nothing is done with it until ch. 4. Twelve apostles are mentioned, but they play no part until ch. 6. If Mark composed the passage as part of the framework of his narrative, he has done his work very clumsily.

But now let us put together these generalizing summaries, as Professor Schmidt has marked them. We may neglect 4<sup>33-34</sup>, as belonging rather to an account of Jesus's methods of teaching than to the narrative framework. The remaining summary passages read as follows (with the imperfect tenses emphasized in translation):

‘After John’s arrest Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the Kingdom of God in the words, “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has drawn near: repent and believe in the Gospel.” And He enters<sup>1</sup> into Capernaum; and on Sabbath days He would go to synagogue and teach. And all were in a state of astonishment at His teaching; for He was wont to teach them as one with authority, and not like the scribes. And He went proclaiming in the synagogues throughout Galilee, and casting out demons. And He went out to the seaside, and the whole crowd would come to Him, and He would teach them. And from Judæa and Jerusalem, from Idumma and Peræa, and the districts of Tyre and Sidon, a great throng, hearing what He was doing, came to Him. And He told His disciples to have a boat waiting for Him because of the crowds, so that they should not throng Him; for He healed many, so that all who had plagues kept pressing upon Him to touch Him. And the foul fiends, whenever they saw Him, would fall before Him, and cry out, “Thou art the Son of God.” And He would enjoin them not to make Him known. And He goes up into the hill-country, and summons those whom He Himself wanted, and they came to Him. And He appointed Twelve that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach and to have

[p.399]

authority to expel demons. So He appointed the Twelve, and gave Simon the name of Peter; and James son of Zebedee and John his brother; and to them He gave the name Boanerges, i.e. Thundermen; and Andrew and Philip and Bartholomew and Matthew and Thomas and James son of Alphaeus and Thaddæus and Simon the Cananæan and Judas Iscariot His betrayer. And He summons the Twelve and began to send them out two by two; and He used to give them authority over foul fiends; and they went out and preached repentance. They kept expelling many demons and anointing many sick folk with oil and healing them. And the apostles gather to Jesus and reported to Him all that they had done and said.’

The striking thing here is the way in which the summaries fall naturally into something very like a continuous narrative. We have in fact obtained, merely by putting them together, a perspicuous outline of the Galilæan Ministry, forming a frame into which the separate pictures are set. So continuous a structure scarcely arose out of casual links supplied here and there where the narrative seemed to demand it. But we may raise the further question, whether it is the independent work of the Evangelist at all. The outline gives a conspectus of the Galilæan

---

<sup>1</sup> Mk 1<sup>21</sup>, following some MSS in reading εἰσπορεύεται, with Schmidt.

Ministry in three stages A. Synagogue preaching and exorcism in Capernaum and elsewhere; B. Teaching, healing, and exorcism by the seashore, in the presence of vast crowds from all Palestine and beyond; C. Retirement in the Hill-country with a small circle of disciples, who are sent on preaching and healing tours. This is the frame into which the pictures (the narrative *pericopæ*) are to be fitted. But they fit very ill. Under rubric A we have only two examples of visits to synagogues; the third synagogue episode comes much later on. With rubric B the case is better, for many of the incidents in 4-6 are actually staged on or near the seashore. If this group had followed immediately upon 3<sup>11</sup> the picture would have fitted the frame at this point; but actually the series of seashore stories is separated from its proper rubric by the third rubric, 'He goes up to the hill-country,' as well as by the twofold episode 3<sup>10-35</sup> which has no proper setting in the framework. The third rubric is actually an empty one, for there is no particular incident which has its setting in a retirement to the hill-country.

Now if you have in hand a set of pictures, and desire to frame them, you construct a frame to fit the pictures; but if you have in hand a set of pictures and a frame, not designed to fit one another, you must fit them as best you can, and the result may be something of a botch. Thus it seems likely that in addition to materials in *pericopæ* form, Mark had an outline, itself also traditional, to which he attempted to work, with incomplete success.

But Professor Schmidt and Dr. Rawlinson think there is some 'intrinsic improbability' in the idea that oral tradition transmitted an outline of the Ministry of Jesus in chronological order. As against this, we may note that Professor Martin Dibelius, in his *Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*, has pointed to summary outlines of the life of Jesus embedded in the primitive preaching of the Church, appearing in various speeches in the Acts of the Apostles. Fragments of such an outline he recognizes also in 1 Co 15<sup>3-7</sup> and 11<sup>23-25</sup>. The evidence, he observes, does not suggest that any one outline was universal, but it does suggest that some kind of outline formed a regular part of the kerygma everywhere. The fullest examples of such primitive kerygma that we possess are those of Ac 10<sup>37-41</sup> and Ac 16<sup>23-31</sup>. The former passage gives the scheme: preaching of John; baptism of Jesus; beginning of the Ministry in Galilee; healing and exorcism; change of scene to Jerusalem; crucifixion and resurrection. The latter passage contains a much fuller account of the preaching of John at the beginning, and of the Resurrection at the close. Its record of the Ministry is much slighter, but it establishes a journey in company with disciples from Galilee to Jerusalem, ending with the death of Jesus.

In view of this evidence, I cannot see any intrinsic improbability in the supposition that the primitive Church did transmit an outline of the Ministry of Jesus, with some regard at least to its topographical and chronological setting. The outline which we have recognized as existing in fragmentary form in the framework of Mark may well have belonged to a form of the primitive kerygma. It implies a somewhat more elaborate form of it than those which are preserved in the Acts of the Apostles; but these, no doubt, are summaries of summaries.

I submit, therefore, that we are led to conceive the materials which Mark took over from tradition as being of three kinds

- (i) Isolated independent *pericopæ*, handed down without any connexion;
- (ii) Larger complexes, which again may be of various kinds: genuinely continuous narratives; *pericopæ* strung upon an itinerary; *pericopæ* connected by unity of theme.
- (iii) An outline of the whole ministry, designed,

[p.400]

perhaps, as an introduction to the Passion-story, but serving also as a background of reference for separate stories; fragments of this survive in the framework of the Gospel.

In shaping these materials into a Gospel, Mark has attempted to work to the traditional outline, but he is embarrassed by two facts: (a) the outline was far too meagre to provide a setting for all the detailed narratives at his disposal, while on the other hand it referred to phases of the Ministry not illustrated by the detailed narratives; (b) the materials were already partially grouped in ways which cut across a truly chronological order. Thus he was faced by a difficult problem. I suggest he has solved it, though not wholly satisfactorily, by a compromise between a chronological and a topical order. Where the outline gave a clue to the setting of particular narrative units or groups of units, he has arranged them accordingly. Where groups of narrative units came down to him already arranged topically, he allowed the arrangement to stand, relating the first member of the group (e.g. 2<sup>1-12</sup>, the first conflict-story) to what appeared to be its most suitable point in the outline scheme. When he was left with wholly disconnected units on his hands, he found place for them as best he could, being sometimes guided by topical considerations, sometimes by a sense of the chronological stage to which the particular episode seemed most naturally to belong. Thus we need not be so scornful of the Marcan order as has recently become the fashion, though we shall not place in it the implicit confidence it once enjoyed. It is in large measure, as Professor Schmidt argues, the result of the Evangelist's own work, rather than directly traditional. But he did that work not arbitrarily or irresponsibly, but under such guidance as he could find in tradition. It is hazardous to argue from the precise sequence of the narrative in detail; yet there is good reason to believe that in broad lines the Marcan order does represent a genuine succession of events, within which movement and development can be traced.

---

This article is now Public Domain and can be freely distributed and copied.

Prepared for the Web in July 2006 by Robert I Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---