

## Getting Rid of Mark

E Bruce Brooks

University of Massachusetts at Amherst

(11 Jan 2019)

Mark is the Problem Gospel. It portrays a human Jesus, one who had ideas about God and himself that went nowhere. The churches would like nothing better than to get rid of Mark. There have been many ways of doing so. Wallace Stevens has told us that there are thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird. Not to be outdone by some poet, here are sixteen ways in which tradition has sought to get rid of Mark.

1. **Replace it.** Luke's Gospel told the same story as Mark, but he further divinized Jesus and added supplementary teaching material, thus seeking to replace Mark.

2. **Replace it.** Matthew added a supernatural Birth Story, still further divinizing Jesus. He recast much of Luke's teaching material (plus further additions of his own) as five sermons of Jesus, thus seeking to replace both Mark and Luke.

3. **Replace it.** Luke remade his Gospel, added a Birth Story better than Matthew's, relocated some passages, and added several Matthean innovations, thus seeking to replace both Mark and the upstart Matthew, not to mention his own earlier effort.

4. **Ridicule the Author.** Acts as first written showed Mark going on tour with Paul, but quitting at Perga. The verdict: Mark was ineffective in preaching the Gospel.

5. **Outdo the Author.** In an extension of Acts, Luke implied that he had been with Paul on his preaching tours. Not quitting, as Mark had done, he had followed Paul through persecution and storm to a final climactic showdown with the Jews of Rome.

6. **Replace it.** In the Gospel of John, Birth Stories are abandoned for cosmic origin. Key incidents are suppressed (Jesus' Baptism occurs offstage) or relocated to weaken their Messianic implications (the Cleansing of the Temple is put earlier in the story), thus seeking to replace, and indeed to neutralize, Mark, Luke, and Matthew.

7. **Eliminate it.** Marcion (early 2nd century) sought to reduce the NT canon to a pared-down Luke plus the Letters of Paul, literally pushing Mark outside the canon.

8. **Bury it.** Tatian wound the Four Gospels together into one combined narrative, which was dominated by John, the latest of them, and gave little space to Mark.

9. **Don't Put it First.** The standard canonical order, with Matthew coming first, diminishes the impact of Mark on any consecutive readers of Christian Scripture.

10. **Don't Comment on It.** It was not until Victor of Antioch, in the 5th century, that anything resembling a commentary on Mark was written.

11. **Omit it From the Lectionaries.** It was not until the modern critical period, when scholars began to give importance to Mark, that passages from Mark were included among those scheduled to be regularly read in churches.

12. **Go Q.** Lachmann in 1835 showed that Mark was the earliest Gospel, and by implication, the most authoritative Gospel. That went nowhere. Then in 1838, Weisse proposed that Mark was the earliest Gospel (which by then was becoming obvious), but that there was another Gospel, Q, which might be even earlier. The support of Holtzmann in 1863 proved to be decisive, and Q is now a worldwide industry. No two supporters of Q have the same idea of its content, or of the reason for its composition, but all agree that Q is real, and early, and that it effectively antedates Mark.

13. **Go Thomas.** More popular than Q with lay readers is the Gospel of Thomas, which appeared in a popular translation in the 1950's, and still has many votaries. Thomas drew material from all the Gospels, including John, but for reasons of its own avoided doctrines which in modern times have become problematic for many.

14. **Go Oral.** Better than getting rid of Mark would be to get rid of *all* the Gospels. This was done by Bultmann's unargued claim that a long period of oral transmission of stories preceded their assembling into the canonical Gospels. It is easily shown, by consulting with professional storytellers, that the stories in Mark are not orally tellable – they are too short, and too little independent of the preceding stories, to have stood alone in anything like their present form. And the differences between Mark's and (say) Luke's versions of a story are not such as retellings of a tale in a genuine oral tradition are likely to produce. But such mundane observations as these do nothing to diminish scholarly enthusiasm for the Bultmann Cure.

15. **Ignore Interpolations.** Worse than Mark is the specter of a still earlier Mark, buried under later interpolations and additions. Those who have noticed interpolations (such as the interruptive and interrelated Mk 14:28 and 16:7) have labored in vain; those suggestive discoveries have been refused notice in subsequent commentaries.

16. **Deny All Interpolations.** The modern insistence on reading the canonical texts as they are (the term of art is "synchronic"), dismissing as subjective and unverifiable all efforts to see how they *got to be* what they are, eliminates this problem with Mark – and with every other Biblical text, agreeably to the conservative agenda..

Getting rid of Mark, by any of these methods, leaves the field wide open for Paul, whose theology (in the version of his latest Epistles, though *not* that of his earlier ones) is authoritative for most modern Christian churches. But no method is actually needed. One can simply prefer Paul, without taking note of the Gospel tradition at all.

Open a Christian Bible, and there, nevertheless, is Mark. Why? Most likely due to completism, as when a scribe includes both of two incompatible manuscript readings, lest some bit of Truth be lost. Preferring to save all, even if some seems problematic, and leaving it to a future "Elijah" to resolve any present difficulties.

### *Readings*

Melville Jacobs. *The Content and Style of An Oral Literature*. Chicago 1958

Melville Jacobs. *The People Are Coming Soon*. Washington 1960

Seán P Kealy. *Mark's Gospel: A History of Its Interpretation*. Paulist 1982