MARK AS STORY

Retrospect and Prospect
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For David Rhoads, Donald Michie, and Joanna Dewey …
with appreciation for your many contributions to biblical scholarship …
and our own thinking.

“God made man because he loves stories.”
Elie Wiesel
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Writing a Narrative Commentary on the Gospel of Mark

Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B.

Interpreters of my generation were not brought up in a scholarly world where professional interest in narrative theory was significant. Each of us was no doubt influenced by different factors to adopt such an approach to the Gospels. One that most influenced me was the first edition of *Mark as Story*. After years of teaching and thinking about the Gospel of Mark, always impressed by its power, this book showed admirably how close attention to the literary features of narrator, setting, plot, characters, and the reader(s) that can be traced within a narrative could lead to a fresh understanding of the Gospel of Mark as a deliberately contrived “whole utterance,” a passionate and unified story that runs from 1:1 to 16:8. There may be places where the passion is somewhat hidden, but a new world in the interpretation of “Mark as story” opened up.

As we mark the nearly thirty years that have passed since *Mark as Story* was published, it may be of value to share the principles that guided my attempts to start from the insights of that publication eventually to produce something that, in my opinion, was more demanding: a narrative commentary on the Gospel of Mark. David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie were able to focus upon crucial features of narrative theory and show how they could be effectively applied to the Markan narrative. This enabled chapters and sections of their fine book to identify the role of the narrator, describe the setting(s) of

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the Gospel story, trace the plot and ways the characters interact within that plot to catch the imagination of the readers of the story—those for whom it was written, and all subsequent readers.

A full-scale narrative commentary must allow the story of the Gospel to dictate its own terms. Many factors, including *Mark as Story*, had led me to the conviction that the Gospel of Mark had to be read as a carefully articulated and unified story. Mark 1:1–16:8 was not originally written, read, or listened to as a series of loosely connected pericopes. Many commentaries, and certainly all liturgical use of the text, present the Gospel in this way. As I set out on my mission of writing a narrative commentary on Mark, allowing my interpretation to be determined by the literary and theological unity of the story, I came to accept that the element in the narrative that had to be traced and eventually used as the “backbone” for my commentary was the *unfolding of a unified plot*, from 1:1 to 16:8. Working verse by verse, and turning over the pages of the story, doing my best to be an (undoubtedly poor) implied reader, I found that the narrator, the setting(s), the characters, and the involvement of the reader emerged from their function within, and subordinated to, the plot.2

**Tracing the Hand of the Storyteller**

It has often been said that a successful story has a good beginning, to catch the initial attention of the reader, a good central section to maintain that interest, and a good conclusion, to render satisfying the reading experience of the whole utterance.3 The Gospel of Mark stands up well to this test.4

**The Beginning**

The story begins with a solemn statement that what follows is “good news” (*euangelion, εὐαγγέλιον*) and an announcement little short of a confession of

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2. I was necessarily a poor “implied reader,” as I am a “real reader,” and I already knew the story well. I had to try to block that out so that each verse and turn of the page brought its own surprises. An implied reader emerges *from the text* and is only aware of what has been said and done *to that point* in the reading experience. But in a good story the implied reader and the real reader are very close by the time the book comes to its close. For me, Mark is a very good story. See Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002).


4. Attribution of the Gospel to “Mark” respects the tradition. We do not know who “the real author” was. For the discussion, see C. Clifton Black, *Mark: Images of an Apostolic Interpreter* (Studies on Personalities of the New Testament; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).
faith, that Jesus of Nazareth, whose story is about to be told, is the Christ, the much-awaited Jewish Messiah, and the Son of God (Mark 1:1). This announcement of the “good news” is followed by a gradual introduction of Jesus into the story. Initially he is absent, but he is witnessed to by means of God’s prophetic word that declares that he is “the Lord” (1:2–3), by John the Baptist, who points away from himself to a “mightier one” who comes to baptize with the Holy Spirit (1:4–8). At this stage, Jesus appears on the scene, but he does not say or do anything. He is baptized by John the Baptist, and as he rises from the waters of the Jordan the heavens split apart, the Spirit descends upon him like a dove. A voice from heaven, the voice of God, proclaims: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (1:9–11). Only in the final two verses of what can justifiably be called a “prologue” to the Gospel of Mark, does Jesus move into action. He is driven by the Spirit into the desert, is tempted by Satan, and is apparently victorious, as he is “with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him,” restoring the idyllic situation of the first Adam (1:12–13; see Gen 2:19–20; 8:6–12; Isa 11:6–8). The only people privy to all the information provided by 1:1–13 are the readers and listeners. Not even the Baptist has read or heard verses 1–3. The readers and listeners to what follows enter the story well-armed with information about Jesus: Messiah, Son of God, Lord, mightier one, filled with and driven by the Holy Spirit, the beloved Son in whom God is well pleased, the one in whom God’s original design for creation is restored.

The Center-Piece

There are many twists and turns in the story as it runs from 1:14 to 8:26. But in 8:27–30 another moment of truth arrives. Characters in the story (including the disciples) have been guessing about Jesus. Who can he be (see, e.g., 1:27, 45; 2:12; 3:22; 4:41; 5:20; 6:2–3, 48–50; 7:37)? The readers/listeners know who Jesus is because they have read or heard the prologue (1:1–13), but none of the other characters in the drama have done so. At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his disciples who people say he is. They respond: John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets (8:27–28). The readers/listeners know this is wrong. It does not match the truths about Jesus’ person stated in 1:1–13. Jesus then asks his disciples who they think he is. Peter, representing the disciples, confesses that Jesus is the Christ (8:29). This is part of the mystery of Jesus (see 1:1), but not the whole story (cf. 1:11). For this reason, “He charged them to say nothing about him” (8:30). This command to silence, after Peter has at least partially answered Jesus’ question, is surprising. If this is not the whole answer to the mystery of Jesus, then more is to come, and a new direction is taken by the story with the first of Jesus’ passion predictions in 8:31. There Jesus speaks
of himself, for the first time, as the Son of Man who must suffer and die, yet rise from the dead on the third day.

The Ending

From 8:31 until 15:47 Jesus lives out his destiny as the Son of Man who willingly accepts God’s design for him to suffer an ignominious death (see especially 14:36). Along the way he attempts to draw his disciples into this mystery, but they cannot or will not understand. They find it impossible to accept that “the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:45). Each time Jesus spoke of the Son of Man’s future suffering and death, he also announced that he would rise after three days (8:31; 9:31; 10:34). The readers/listeners have followed the story through Jesus’ failure to hold the allegiance of the disciples, his bringing Jerusalem and its leaders to a standstill, his words on the end of Jerusalem and the world (11:1–13:37), his lonely and ignominious death at the hands of the Romans (14:1–15:47). The disciples have betrayed him (14:1–2, 10–11), fled in fear (14:50), and denied him (14:66–72), while some women look on from afar (15:40–41, 47). The readers/listeners are ready for the story’s dénouement. Not surprisingly, 16:1–8 provides spectacular proof that Jesus’ story did not end with his death but that he has been raised (16:6). The women who had been at the cross and at the burial see the empty tomb and hear the Easter proclamation from the young man at the tomb (16:1–6). But in an intriguing end to the story, they are told by the young man dressed in a white robe to inform the disciples and Peter that he is going before them into Galilee, as Jesus had told them (16:7; cf. 14:28). “And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:8). Thus ends the Gospel of Mark!

At first glance, and even beyond a first glance, this hardly seems to serve as a satisfactory dénouement. Jesus’ unconditional obedience to his Father (see 14:36) has been satisfactorily resolved, as God has raised him from the dead after three days, as Jesus had promised (8:31; 9:31; 10:32–34).

But there is much that is left unresolved: What of the disciples and the women? As we will see, the answer to these questions is not found within

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5. The early scribes added more satisfactory endings. They are found in most Bibles, but they are scribal additions to a Gospel that the second-century scribes found unsatisfactory, as have many since. Scholars discuss whether or not the Gospel ended at 16:8 or whether there was a lost ending. On this discussion, insisting that 16:8 is the intended end of the Gospel, see Moloney, Mark, 339–54, and notes 4–11. More recently, see the important study of Kelly R. Iverson, “A Further Word on Final Γάρ,” CBQ 68 (2006): 79–94.
the narrative but in the lives of those who read and listen to the story. Like the prologue (1:1–13), 16:1–8 addresses readers and listeners. As such, it can be regarded as an epilogue, and this partially explains the strangeness of the ending at 16:8.

**Textual Markers**

The informative prologue (1:1–13), the surprising center-piece (8:27–30), and the even more startling conclusion (16:1–8) provide the bedrock of the plot, our first indications of a narrative that is a deliberate literary and theological design of a gifted storyteller. Not all interpreters and commentators would read these three turning points in the way suggested, but in this I was broadly following what could be regarded as “majority opinion.” But what of the rest of the story (1:14–8:26 and 8:31–15:47)? It should not be surprising that a storyteller who is so careful in the construction of the beginning, the center-piece, and the conclusion to his Gospel will leave further hints of his literary design. There are a number of features within the Gospel of Mark where the storyteller shows his hand by means of what I have called “textual markers.” Textual markers are places in the story where the hand of the author is most in evidence. They offer the reader clear hints that the storyteller is “up to something.”

The most obvious textual marker in any narrative is a summary, where the narrator pauses to open a new section in the story, to draw a conclusion, or to pass a critical comment upon events just reported. There are many summaries in Mark (see, e.g., 1:14–15, 39, 45b; 4:33–34; 6:6b, 53–56; 9:30–31; 10:1, 13). Another textual marker is repetition. For example, there are two bread miracles in Mark 6:31–44 and 8:1–9. The passion predictions are found three times: in 8:31; 9:31; and 10:32–34. There are two accounts of the cure of a blind man in 8:22–26 (the man at Bethsaida) and 10:46–52 (blind Bartimaeus). Another feature of Mark’s story is his practice of what has been called “intercalation.” This term indicates a literary pattern where the narrator begins a story but breaks it halfway through to insert another story. Once the central account is closed, the storyteller concludes the original story. The

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most famous “intercalations” in Mark are the account of the healing of Jairus’s daughter, in the middle of which Jesus heals the woman with a flow of blood (Mark 5:21–43), and the cursing of the fig tree, in the middle of which Jesus brings an end to the financial and cultic activities of the Jerusalem temple (11:12–25). But there are several other examples of this Markan practice (see 3:20–35 [Jesus’ family]; 6:6b–30 [disciples on mission]; 14:1–11 [Judas’s betrayal], 53–72 [Peter’s denials]).

Other textual markers are found when the narrator shifts the action from one place to another (a change in the geography of the story), from one period of time to another (a change in the time frame of the story), or from one set of characters to another (a change in the author’s focus upon characters). The Gospel of Mark has many such indications (e.g., 1:35; 2:1, 23; 3:7; 4:35; 7:24, 31). My attempt to write a commentary that takes into account the narrative purpose of the storyteller must focus upon these obvious signs of an original “author at work.” Mark certainly used traditions that were earlier than him and came to him in various forms. For the purposes of his story of Jesus’ life, teaching, death, and resurrection, he set them down in a certain order, some of which may have already been in place in the earlier tradition and some of which were original to Mark. In the end, the story emerges as the narrator tells it, and the best way to appreciate this is to devote attention to those places where the Markan literary activity is most in evidence.

A word of warning: no single textual marker in itself indicates an important change of direction in the plot. It is generally a combination of several. An important example that plays a crucial role in uncovering Mark’s literary design across 1:14–8:26 is the use of the summaries in 1:14–15; 3:7–12; and 6:6a. I provided a long list of “summaries” above that only went as far as 10:13; that is but a limited sample. There are many summaries in Mark’s Gospel, but only 1:14–15; 3:7–12; and 6:6a are immediately followed by material dealing with the disciples. Only here in the Gospel is this combination of features found: a summary statement, immediately followed by a passage that deals

8. This is a conservative list. Others are regularly suggested. See Tom Shepherd, “The Narrative Function of Markan Intercalation,” *NTS* (1995): 522–40. I have argued elsewhere, and this argument will be briefly resumed below, that the whole of 14:1–15:47 can be read as an extended use of intercalation. See Moloney, *Mark*, 276–79.


10. Readers well-versed in Gospel criticism will be aware that this principle is very important for what has been called redaction criticism. It is equally important for a form of narrative criticism that is the natural product of redaction criticism. I believe that, in narrative-critical terms, the real author (Mark?), the implied author, and the narrator are of one and the same mind.
with the disciples (the vocation of the first disciples [1:16–20], the establishment of the Twelve [3:13–19], and the mission of the Twelve [6:7–30]).

**The Plot of the Gospel of Mark**

Literary critics have many approaches to the plot of a narrative, but—for our purposes—the following general description is useful: “The plot in a dramatic or narrative work is the structure of its actions, as these are rendered and ordered toward achieving particular emotional and artistic effects.”11 The plot of the Gospel of Mark has been devised not only to have emotional and artistic effects (and it certainly does that), but also to convey a message about Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God (see 1:1), and the various characters who interact with Jesus during the course of the story, especially the disciples.12 Within the limits that this essay imposes, allow me to indicate the way plot has determined my understanding the Markan message about Jesus, his disciples, and other characters in the story.

As we have seen, “the beginning” of the story is announced in 1:1, and it runs from 1:1 to 1:13, forming a prologue to the Gospel.13 Jesus’ first appearance on the scene, proclaiming the good news of the impinging presence of

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12. The interaction between Jesus and the characters is, as I hope to indicate below, the essential dynamic that keeps the story moving. On these “other characters,” see Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 98–115 (Jesus), 116–35 (the authorities, the disciples, and the people). There are many monographs on these characters. For a survey of the many studies of the disciples, see C. Clifton Black, *The Disciples according to Mark: Markan Redaction in Current Debate* (JSNTSup 27; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989). See also the valuable studies of Susan Miller, *Women in Mark’s Gospel* (JSNTSup 266; London: T&T Clark, 2004); Kelly R. Iverson, *Gentiles in the Gospel of Mark* (LNTS 339; London: T&T Clark, 2007), and especially Elizabeth S. Malbon, *In the Company of Jesus: Characters in Mark’s Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000).

13. The practice of opening ancient “stories” with a prologue was widespread. Mark is not the only Gospel with a prologue. John’s prologue (1:1–18) is famous, but equally effective prologues are found in Matthew (1:1–4:16) and Luke (1:1–4:13). Readers and listeners become privileged “insiders” to the mystery of what God has done in and through Jesus Christ. The characters “in the story” have not read or heard the prologue, and they must respond on the basis of their encounter with Jesus’ person, words, and deeds. The reader/listener follows their response from her or his privileged position.
God as king (1:14–15), is the first of a string of summary statements, followed by material dealing with disciples (1:16–20; 3:7–19; 6:6a–30) that appears to determine the literary design of 1:14–8:26. The midpoint is highlighted by Peter’s confession and Jesus’ command to silence (8:27–30). These events close the first half of the Gospel and are followed by the first passion prediction (8:31), as Jesus sets off on his journey to Jerusalem. The second half of the Gospel has begun. As Jesus journeys to Jerusalem, he twice cures blind men (8:22–26; 10:46–52). On arrival in Jerusalem, he closes down the temple, reduces the leaders of Israel to silence, and speaks of the end of Jerusalem and of the world (11:1–13:37). The carefully argued account of Jesus’ passion follows (14:1–15:47). The end of the story reports the morning after the Sabbath, as women go to anoint the body of the crucified Jesus and discover an empty tomb, hear the Easter message, and flee in fear (16:1–8). Textual markers indicate the following overall shape of the narration.

2. Jesus opens his ministry in Galilee (1:14–15) and continues there until the next major turning point (1:16–8:26).
3. Jesus asks his disciples who they think he is and warns them against a possible partial understanding of his messianic status (8:27–30).
4. Jesus announces his journey to Jerusalem and the forthcoming death and resurrection of the Son of Man for the first time (8:31). Between two miracles in which blind men are cured (8:22–26 [the blind man at Bethsaida] and 10:46–52 [blind Bartimaeus]), Jesus journeys to Jerusalem and instructs his disciples as he continues to speak of his oncoming death and resurrection (8:22–10:52).
5. On arrival in Jerusalem (11:1–11), Jesus brings Israel’s cult to an end, reduces the leaders of Israel to silence, and speaks of the end of Jerusalem and the end of the world, instructing his disciples to “watch” (11:12–13:37).
6. After a final evening (Passover) meal with his disciples, Jesus is betrayed by Judas, arrested, denied by Peter, tried by the Jewish authorities and by the Roman authorities, crucified, and buried, as women watch from a distance (14:1–15:47).
7. Women discover an empty tomb, hear the Markan Easter proclamation, but flee in fear. They fail to report to the disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead of them into Galilee, as he had told them (16:1–8; cf. 14:28).

The careful ordering of a succession of events, outlined above, marks a new beginning in the history of Christian literature. To the best of our knowledge, Mark’s Gospel was the first attempt on the part of early Christians to communicate what God had done for humankind through the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus in a narrative form. We must remember that the first readers and hearers of the story now found in the Gospel of Mark already knew the basic facts about Jesus’ life. According to the first verses of the Gospel of Luke, they had been “delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word” (Luke 1:2). But Mark did not simply wish to put down in writing what they already knew. If the power of the narrative is any indication, this story passionately proclaims something about God, the Christ, and the followers of Jesus. Whatever the first readers knew of the life story of Jesus of Nazareth was subverted by the Markan story. The account of Jesus’ presence in Galilee, his single journey to Jerusalem to be rejected, tried, and crucified, the resurrection, and the surprising silence of the women at the empty tomb, told in this way, was not familiar. The radical newness of the Markan story must be kept in mind. It is an original way of telling the life of Jesus. A narrative commentary must be determined by that originality.

Mark 1:14–8:30

The overall plot of the Gospel has been traced—to this point—by focusing on the obvious beginning, midpoint, and end of the story, sketching in the rest of the plot with the help of the major textual markers. If careful storytelling high-

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14. The expression “gospel” (Old English God-Spel) means “good news.” It translates the Greek εὐαγγέλιον (euangelion). The term had been used in pre-Christian times to speak of major events in the lives of a nation or a ruling dynasty, etc. Prior to Mark’s Gospel, it had also been used extensively by Paul to summarize his message of the saving event of Jesus’ death and resurrection. However, in Mark 1:1 “gospel” is used to speak of the beginnings of a “story.” That use of the word “Gospel” is now part of Christian language, and Mark invented it.

lights these key moments places in the story, it is only to be expected that the bulk of the story also reflects careful plotting. Indeed, continuing to focus our attention upon the textual markers, we will find that 1:14–8:30 and 8:31–15:47 have also been designed to “achieve particular artistic and emotional effects.” You will have noticed that I include 8:27–30 in my description of the first half of the Gospel, even though I have also singled it out as the center-point of the Gospel. As we proceed further, you will also find that I include 8:22–26 in the first section of the second half of the story. We encounter here an important feature of all good narratives. We tend to create divisions between one part of the story and the next, but good stories do not work like that. As one part of the Gospel of Mark draws to closure in 8:27–30, another section is already being foreshadowed in 8:22–30.16

After the prologue (1:1–13), where the reader/listener is soundly informed about the person, the mission, and even the destiny of Jesus, the first half of the Gospel (1:14–8:30) establishes relationships, as well as raising questions concerning the person of Jesus among characters in the story who are ignorant of 1:1–13. From the very first moment of the Gospel, Jesus calls all who hear to “repent and believe in the gospel” (1:14–15). As he bursts upon the scene, he immediately calls the first disciples to “follow” him (1:16–20). Mark certainly tells a passionate story about Jesus, the Christ, Son of God (1:1), but he is equally passionate about the challenge to “follow” a suffering Son of Man to Jerusalem and beyond. This theme will dominate the second half of the story (8:31–15:47), but it is not absent from 1:14–8:30. The responses of the Twelve, the followers of Jesus, the crowds, the Jewish leaders, the Romans, the Gentiles, and the several “minor characters” all instruct the reader on how one should or should not respond to what God has done in and through Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God.17

On three occasions across 1:14–8:30 the narrator slows down the fast-moving story to summarize Jesus’ ministry at that stage. These summaries of Jesus’ activities cannot be easily tied to a fixed setting. They offer, in a more general fashion, illustrations of that activity (see 1:14–15; 3:7–12; 6:6b). The Gospel of Mark contains other similar summaries of Jesus’ ministry (see, e.g., 1:39, 45b; 4:33–34; 6:53–56; 9:30–31; 10:1, 13). What is unique about the gen-

16. Indeed, the second half of the narrative is clearly foreshadowed by the discussion between Jesus and the disciples in the boat in 8:14–21, including his accusation that they are blind (see 8:18). For extensive consideration of this phenomenon in the Gospel of Mark, see Joanna Dewey, “Mark as Interwoven Tapestry: Forecasts and Echoes for a Listening Audience,” CBQ 53 (1991): 225–36; Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, “Echoes and Foreshadowings in Mark 4–8: Reading and ReReading,” JBL 112 (1993): 211–30.

17. See above, note 11.
eral descriptions of Jesus’ ministry in 1:14–15; 3:7–12; and 6:6b, however, is that each of these summaries is followed by material that deals with disciples and discipleship (1:16–20; 3:13–19; 6:7–30). The summaries, and the associated report of Jesus’ association with his disciples, are followed by a series of episodes during which three different audiences respond to the words and deeds of Jesus. At the end of each episode, a decision is made about Jesus. Two of the decisions are negative (3:6 [the Pharisees and the Herodians]; 6:1–6a [people from “his own country”]), and the third is a misunderstanding (8:29 [Peter, responding on behalf of the disciples]).

The three summaries lead directly into passages that deal with disciples and conclude with a response to Jesus indicating Mark’s careful plotting of 1:14–8:30. The three sections unfold as follows.

(1) **Jesus and the leaders of Israel** (1:14–3:6). In 1:14–15 we read a summary of the ministry of Jesus: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the good news.’” This summary is followed by the account of the vocation of the first disciples (1:16–20). Initially, Jesus’ presence in the midst of the demonic, the sick, and the impure sweeps all evil away (1:21–45), but opposition mounts. In five episodes Jesus’ authority continues to manifest itself, but rejection of this authority mounts, leading to a decision that he must be eliminated. The five episodes are elegantly assembled and told. Jesus forgives the sin of the paralytic, and “some of the scribes question his authority in their hearts,” but the miracle affirms his authority (2:13–17). Jesus shares his table with tax collectors and sinners, and the “scribes of the Pharisees” complain to the disciples (2:13–17). When others are fasting, “people” ask Jesus why he does not fast. He tells them they will fast when the bridegroom is taken away from them (2:18–22). As Jesus and his disciples eat grain they have plucked along the way, “the Pharisees” question Jesus on the right observance of the law (2:23–38). Again on a Sabbath, Jesus cures the man with a withered hand as his opponents watch, in order to condemn him. He reduces them to silence and grieves over their hardness of heart (3:1–6). A decision is made: “The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him” (3:6).19

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18. See Moloney, *Mark*, 60–71 and references there, especially to the work of Joanna Dewey.

19. Care must be taken with the use of the expressions associated with Israel and Judaism. For Mark, the first part of his story of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee is entirely focused upon a Jewish region and the Jewish leadership. The geographical locations and the characters involved in the story will be broadened in 5:1–20 and also in later episodes (see 7:24–8:10).
Jesus and his new family (3:7–6:6a). In 3:7–12 we find a lengthy general statement about Jesus’ Galilean ministry. It concludes with the summary: “He had cured many so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him. Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, ‘You are the Son of God!’ But he sternly ordered them not to make him known” (3:10–12). This summary leads into the account of Jesus’ institution of the Twelve (3:13–19). But his ministry meets opposition from his family and from Israel (3:20–30). He establishes new principles for belonging to his family (3:31–35) and teaches his new family, the disciples to whom the mystery of the kingdom is revealed, through parables that insist upon the relentless growth of the kingdom, despite opposition and difficulty (4:1–34). The disciples then follow him through a stunning series of miracles that steadily show Jesus’ authority over nature (the calming of the storm), the demonic (the Gerasene demoniac), human sickness (the woman with the flow of blood), and death itself (the daughter of Jairus) (4:35–5:43). As Jesus returns to his hometown, his own people ask the correct question: “Where does this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands?” (6:2). Readers and listeners, who have read and heard the prologue (1:1–13), know the answer to that question, but the people from his home village do not. They reject him: “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him” (6:3). Jesus was “amazed at their unbelief” (6:6a).

Jesus and his disciples (6:6b–8:30). Following Jesus’ rejection in his hometown, we find a brief general summary about his ministry in Galilee: “Then he went about among the villages teaching” (6:6b). Jesus sends out the Twelve on a mission that parallels his own (6:6b–13). While they are on their successful mission, Mark reports the death of John the Baptist, a forerunner to the death of Jesus and an indication of the cost of discipleship (6:14–29). It will cost no less than everything. But the disciples return to tell Jesus all the wonderful things that they have said and done (6:30). They have not understood the true source of their missionary success, their “being with” Jesus (cf. 3:14). The remainder of this section is marked by the repetition of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (6:31–44; 8:1–10). It features the issues of food and purity, of Jesus’ universal presence to both Jew and Gentile, and the necessary involvement of the disciples in Jesus’ mission to nourish all who

Their attitude to Jesus is the issue in the Markan story. This intensifies in 11:1–15:47. See further, Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, Mark as Story, 116–22.

come to him in need (6:37: “You give them something to eat”). The narrative is marked by increasing hostility between Jesus and the Jews, especially in his conflict with the Pharisees over what is pure and impure (7:1–23). The lack of understanding among the disciples also increases. Jesus leaves Israel and cures the Syrophoenician woman (7:24–30) and a deaf and dumb man from the Decapolis (7:31–37). Rejected by his own, he cures (7:24–37) and feeds (8:1–9) Gentiles. Despite their hesitations, his disciples, his new family, also become more deeply involved with his ministry (see 6:7–13, 30–44; 8:1–9). After further discussions with the disciples, who fail to recognize Jesus and what he has done in the two bread miracles (8:11–21), a blind man stumbles to sight (8:22–26). He moves from blindness to partial sight to full sight. This staged movement from “blindness” to “sight” is repeated in another key, as the first half of the Gospel closes and the second opens. Jesus broaches the question that has been lurking behind the narrative since 1:14: “Who do people say that I am?” (8:27). The response shows that “the people” are blind to the true identity of Jesus. But when Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am” (8:28), Peter responds: “You are the Christ” (8:29). The reader/listener, informed by the storyteller at 1:1, has known from the outset that Jesus is the Christ. The question “who is Jesus?” has been answered. There is a sense in which Peter is correct, but there is a danger that this confession reflects only “partial sight,” matching the partial sight of “men who look like trees, walking” (8:24). Jesus’ words to the disciples (“them”) sounds a warning bell and opens the door to the second part of the Gospel: “He charged them to tell no one about him” (8:30).

Jesus’ commanding his disciples to silence in 8:30 closes the first half of the story and points toward the second half, which opens with the first prediction of his future death and resurrection in Jerusalem (8:31). It is only in Jesus’ self-revelation as the Son of Man who must suffer and rise again that the fullness of sight emerges. The remainder of the Gospel will reflect the relentless attempts of Jesus to instruct his disciples, matched by the struggle of the disciples to move away from their partial sight, their expectation that Jesus will be the expected all-conquering Davidic Messiah. It will end in failure (cf. 14:50–52) and promise (cf. 14:28; 16:7).

Mark 8:22–15:47

Textual markers across 8:22–15:47 indicate a plot that has three major moments. The first half of the Gospel raised the question of the identity of Jesus, and that was partially answered in 8:27–30. The second half of the Gospel tells of a suffering and finally vindicated Son of Man, Messiah, and Son of God whom the Jewish leaders and the people reject and whom the disciples
cannot or will not understand. It unfolds in three unified sections. As we have already mentioned, 8:22–30 does not simply bring the first half of the Gospel to a close. These passages, on blindness and the identity of Jesus, also open the second half of the story.21 Obvious changes of place, characters, and situations occur across this second half of the story.

(1) Jesus and the disciples’ journey to Jerusalem (8:2–10:52). This section of the story is circumscribed by two cures of blind men: 8:22–26 (the blind man at Bethsaida) and 10:46–52 (blind Bartimaeus.) Between these miracles, one of which has a blind man stumbling to sight (8:22–26) and the other a blind man leaping to his feet at Jesus’ call and following him down “the way” (10:46–52), Jesus journeys to Jerusalem and predicts his future suffering, death, and resurrection three times (8:31; 9:31; 10:32–35). Immediately after each passion prediction, the disciples fail to accept and understand the destiny of the man they are following and, implicitly, their own destiny as his disciples. Peter fails (8:32–33), all the disciples fail (9:32–34), the sons of Zebedee, and then the other ten disciples fail (10:36–40, 41–44). Jesus never abandons his fragile followers. After each failure, he instructs them on the need to take up the cross (8:34–9:1), on service and receptivity (9:35–50), on the need to abandon hopes for human authority and power (10:36–44). Jesus teaches his disciples by means of other words and events: the transfiguration, the lesson of the boy they could not heal (9:1–29), the practice of discipleship in marriage, and in the correct understanding and use of possessions (10:1–31). He closes his instruction of the disciples on the way to Jerusalem with words that describe Jesus’ own role: “For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:45). Bartimaeus shows that it is possible. He abandons what little he has and follows Jesus down the way (10:46–52).

(2) Endings in Jerusalem (11:1–13:37). A radical change of setting indicates the beginning of the next stage of the plot. In a way that questions all expected messianic expectations, Jesus enters Jerusalem (11:1–11). Framed by the cursing of the fig tree, he brings to an end all temple practices and replaces them with faith, prayer, and forgiveness (11:12–25). Still in the temple, he encounters and brings to an end Israel’s religious authority. He condemns their lack of care for the Lord’s vineyard and systematically reduces to silence the Pharisees, the Sadduccees, and the scribes (11:27–12:40). In their place, he points to the widow who has nothing but, like Bartimaeus, gave her very life

21. On this, see the excellent work of one of my students, Gregg S. Morrison, “The Turning Point in the Gospel of Mark: A Study in Markan Christology” (Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 2008).
Finally, he tells of the end of Jerusalem (13:1–23) and the end of the world (13:24–37). Despite all of these “endings,” the rejected stone will become the cornerstone of a new temple (12:10). The disciples and their followers will suffer much, but none of this marks the end of the new temple built on the rejected cornerstone (cf. 12:10–11; 14:57–58; 15:29–38). “The gospel must first be preached to all nations” (13:10). But the end will come, when the angels will gather the elect from the four corners of the earth to present them to the Son of Man (13:27). In the meantime, as Jesus must suffer through the evening, at midnight and at cock-crow, the disciples are to be attentive servants, at their post watching, as they do not know when the master of the household will come: in the evening, at midnight, or at cock-crow (13:32–37).

(3) The passion and death of Jesus (14:1–15:47). The second half of the story ends with a description of the passion, death, and burial of Jesus that is distinguished by obvious textual markers: an extended use of intercalation. In 14:1–72 one finds eleven distinct pericopes, moving between the darkness of failure and the light of Jesus. At its center, in the sixth scene, Jesus celebrates his final meal—which will be the first of many meals—with his disciples.22

The passage is arranged as follows:

[A] 14:1–2: The plot of the Jewish leaders
[B] 14:3–9: The anointing of Jesus
[A] 14:10–11: Judas, one of the Twelve, joins the plot of 14:1–2
[B] 14:12–16: Jesus sees to the preparation for a Passover meal
[A] 14:17–21: Jesus predicts the betrayal of Judas, one of the Twelve
[B] 14:22–25: Jesus shares the meal, giving bread and wine to the disciples
[A] 14:26–31: Jesus predicts the future denials of Peter and the flight of all the disciples
[B] 14:32–42: The prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane
[A] 14:43–52: Judas, one of the Twelve, along with representatives of the Jewish leaders arrest Jesus, and all the disciples flee
[B] 14:53–65: The self-revelation of Jesus at the Jewish hearing
[A] 14:66–72: Peter denies Jesus three times

The eleven brief scenes in this arrangement shift systematically from portrayals or predictions of disciples’ failures to a presentation of the person of Jesus. Poignantly, and importantly for the Markan understanding of Jesus and his

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disciples, at the very center, in the sixth scene (14:21–25), the failing disciples and Jesus share a meal. The Markan theme of Jesus’ never-failing presence, breaking his body and shedding his blood for a new covenant with his fragile, failing disciples, is succinctly articulated by means of this literary structure. The same literary pattern is found in 15:1–47. Here there are nine pericopes, and the fifth, central, passage is the point toward which the Gospel has been moving since 2:10: Jesus’ crucifixion.23

[A] 15:1–5: The self-revelation of Jesus as the Roman hearing begins
[B] 15:6–11: The question of Barabbas
[A] 15:12–15: Pilate ironically proclaims Jesus innocent and king as the Roman hearing closes
[B] 15:16–20a: The Roman soldiers ironically proclaim the truth as they mock Jesus
[C] 15:20b–25: The crucifixion of Jesus
[B] 15:26–32: Passers-by and the Jewish leaders ironically proclaim the truth as they mock Jesus
[B] 15:40–41: The women at the cross
[A] 15:42–47: The burial of Jesus

The disciples have abandoned Jesus, who has died alone and in agony and despair (15:34, 37). The women watch, and a Gentile—seeing the way Jesus died—has confessed that he was the Son of God (15:39; cf. 1:11; 9:7). The reader/listener knows that the death of Jesus is not the end of the story. On the basis of what he or she has learned in 1:1–13, Jesus’ promises that he would rise on the third day (8:31; 9:31; 10:34), that he would drink the new cup with his disciples in the kingdom (14:25), and that he would go before them into Galilee (14:28), must be fulfilled. The word of Jesus will not be uttered in vain.

**The Epilogue: Mark 16:1–8**

In a context of wonder (16:1–5), the young man dressed in a white robe announces to the women who had been at the cross and burial that the crucified and buried Jesus “has been raised” (16:6). The women are told of the promise that Jesus would go before his disciples into Galilee (16:7). What he said he would do (14:28), he is now doing (16:7). But the women fail to speak

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to anyone because they, like the disciples before them, flee in fear (16:6–8; cf. 14:50).

Everything in this epilogue points beyond the limitations of the Markan story to the existence of a believing Christian community. The prologue to the Gospel (1:1–13) informed the reader that Jesus was the Christ (1:1), the Lord (1:3), the mightier one (1:7), one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit (1:8), the beloved Son of God (1:11), restoring God’s original creative design (1:12–13). The original Markan community accepted this confession of faith and attempted to live as authentic disciples of Jesus, taking up their cross, receptive servants of all, in imitation of Jesus (see 8:31–10:44), who came to serve and not be served and to lay down his life (10:45). Yet in human terms, the disciples, both men and women (14:50–52; 16:8), fail to follow Jesus through the cross to resurrection. In the same human terms, even Jesus failed, crying out in anguish from the cross (15:34, 37). But Jesus’ apparent failure is his victory. On the cross he is King, Messiah and Son of God (15:26, 31–32, 39), and God has entered the story by raising his Son from the dead: “He has been raised” (16:6b, ἐγέρθη, ἠγέρθη). He is no longer in the place where they laid him (16:6c).

The author believes and wishes to communicate that the exalted christological claims of the prologue (1:1–13) have been vindicated by the story of the suffering and crucified Jesus, especially by means of the Easter proclamation of the epilogue (16:1–8). The affirmation of God’s project by means of the prologue (1:1–13) and the epilogue (16:1–8) also points to God’s vindication of failed disciples. The original readers of the Gospel of Mark, aware of their fragility, were encouraged by a story that told of the inability of the original disciples, men and women, to overcome their fear and follow Jesus through the cross to resurrection (14:50; 16:8). But the reader/listener is aware that, as God has transformed the failure of Jesus by the resurrection (16:6), his promise to the failing disciples of a meeting in Galilee (14:28; 16:7) has also eventuated. God, and not human beings, generated the new temple, built upon the rejected cornerstone (12:10–11; 14:57–58; 15:29, 38). The existence of the Gospel and its original intended readership are proof of that fact.

The accomplishment of Jesus’ promises is not found in the text. The existence of the Markan community and its story of Jesus indicate that it is taking place among the readers of the text, in the experience of the original readers (and hearers) of the Gospel of Mark. But that is not the end of the process. The proclamation of the Gospel of Mark in fragile Christian communities, experiencing their own versions of fear and flight, for almost two thousand years, suggests that the accomplishment of the promise of 14:28 and 16:7 continues in the Christian experience of the subsequent readers (and hearers) of the Gospel. What Jesus promised (14:28; 16:7) happened for the Markan com-
munity and continues to happen among generations of fragile followers of Jesus. As Christian disciples continue to fail and flee in fear, they are told that God's action in and through the risen Jesus overcomes all such failure.\(^{24}\) Jesus is going before them into Galilee. There they will see him. The epilogue, the conclusion to Mark's Gospel, is not a message of failure but a resounding affirmation of God's design to overcome all imaginable human failure (16:1–8) in and through the action of God's beloved Son (1:1–13). Words addressed to the struggling disciples at the transfiguration are addressed to all who take up this Gospel: “Listen to him” (see 9:7).

**Conclusion**

By means of this well-constructed plot, the narrator takes readers who are already familiar with the story through a new telling that transforms its well-known ending. Mark faced a problem stated some twenty years before the Gospel appeared: “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than any human strength” (1 Cor 1:22–25). Mark attempts to solve the scandal of the cross by means of a story that begins as “the good news” that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (1:1, 11), and ends with a scream from a cross and an agonizing death, an empty tomb, and an Easter message that is not delivered (15:33–16:8). A story of the Christ and the Son of God that ends in this fashion is a narrative repetition of the Pauline message: “the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than any human strength” (1 Cor 1:25).

This essay has attempted to indicate the elements in the Markan narrative that determined the writing of a narrative commentary on the Gospel. However, lest my reader comes to think that this process is now obvious, allow me to conclude with a word of warning. It must not be thought that, having discovered the plot and the way the characters interact through the unfolding of that plot, the journey is over. There are places in the Gospel of Mark where a reader finds the logic of the movement from one episode to the next hard to follow. We have become used to stories that flow smoothly and tend to judge them according to the author’s ability to lead the reader gently from one

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episode to the next. Such an easy passage is not always the case in the Gospel of Mark. One good example of this is found in 9:42–48, where a series of sayings of Jesus that may have originally been independent have been placed side by side on the basis of the repetition of the same words in the sayings (“cause to sin” [see 9:42, 43, 45, 44] and “salt” [9:49, 50]). But the link between each saying is hard to trace, and one must strain one’s imagination to follow the logic of 9:42–48. These moments of obscurity in the narrative indicate the respect that the early writers in the Christian church had for the traditions that came to them. Mark was certainly a creative writer, but he respected words and events from the life of Jesus that he received. As the first attempt to tell the life of Jesus that proclaimed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, Mark's story must not be judged by the criteria we use to judge an enjoyable novel.

I resolved the tensions in the narrative by the application of two principles. In the first instance, I took it for granted that Mark the storyteller attempted to write an account of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus that coherently communicated what he wanted to say to the original readers. The fact that we are historically, culturally, and even religiously distant from those original readers means that we must allow ourselves to be challenged by the strangeness of this ancient text. A danger for all narrative critics is that, among the various “setting(s)” they trace in a Gospel, insufficient attention is given to the original historical and cultural setting that produced the text. The rich results of 150 years of historical-critical scholarship must not be abandoned.

Second, I strove “even if unconsciously, to fit everything together in a consistent pattern.” My striving may be judged as an imposition of my literary and theological biases. That is an inevitable, and indeed acceptable, part of the reading, listening, and interpreting process. It is true that we shape the meaning of what we read in the light of our own experiences and understanding. But the text has also shaped me. This is particularly the case when Christians read or listen to the Gospel. It is respect and admiration for a text that has been read again and again by many Christian individuals and within the life of the Christian church for almost two thousand years that inspires my striving to understand the message of the Gospel of Mark. “Every element in the story is there for a reason, which we will discover only by combing back and

forth through the text until it yields its own narrative coherence.”27 To “give
up” on a section of the narrative—or even on the Gospel as a whole—because
it does not speak to me according to my expectations is to forget that, while
we always bring ourselves to our reading, we must also allow this important
text to speak to us in its own terms.

In 1921 perhaps the most significant New Testament scholar of the twen-
tieth century, Rudolf Bultmann, assessed the Markan narrative as follows: “In
Mark we can still see clearly, and most easily in comparison with Luke, that
the most ancient tradition consisted of individual sections, and the connec-
tion together is secondary…. Mark is not sufficiently master of his material to
be able to venture on a systematic construction himself.”28 Almost a century
later, our current understanding of Mark as Story, a narrative whole of con-
siderable power and passion, has led me to claim that the exact opposite is the
case.

27. Ched Myers, Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus
28. Rudolf Bultmann, History of the Synoptic Tradition (trans. John Marsh; Oxford: