



Mark, the Gospel of the suffering Son of Man: An encouragement directed to a despondent religious minority in the city of Rome

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Abstract

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In his narrative the author of this Gospel starkly emphasizes the humiliation and suffering of Jesus as the Son of Man (i.a. 10:45). In doing so, Mark emphasizes that Jesus' way to be the Christ is the way of suffering. In several instances Mark describes Jesus' disciples' ignorance of this fact. Special focus is placed on the ignorance of Peter when confessing Jesus as the Christ.

The point of departure for this article is that the Gospel of Mark was written to a specific believing community. It is argued that Rome, rather than Syria or Galilee, most probably was the Sitz im Leben and reason for the second Gospel. Furthermore it is reasoned that the context of Rome provides a relevant hermeneutical key to the understanding of the text of this Gospel.

Seen from this perspective, Mark purposefully emphasized the humiliation and suffering of Jesus on his way to glory in order to encourage his despondent readers during or directly after the persecution in the days of Nero 64 CE.

*Evidence from tradition has indicated that Peter, the great leader of the Christian community in Rome, died as a martyr. This left the Christians in Rome without a leader, fearful and discouraged. The Gospel displays evidence of a Petrine eyewitness account that implies a close link between this apostle and Mark. Although at first Peter did not realize the necessity for Jesus to suffer, the Gospel of Mark clearly explains it with its focus on the passion narrative. Jesus had to walk the way of suffering. In Mark the word "way" is used in a significant manner to indicate that Jesus' *via dolorosa* had implications for Peter and still has implications for all those who follow Him*

by confessing Him as the Christ. Christians are called to follow in his footsteps with suffering and endurance. Accordingly, Mark adds a paradoxical connotation to the term "Gospel". "Gospel" is the good news of the salvation in Jesus. This message, however, is also concomitant with suffering and even the loss of life.

Opsomming

Markus, die Evangelie oor die lydende Seun van die Mens: 'n bemoediging aan 'n moedeloze godsdienstige minderheid in Rome

In sy narratief plaas die skrywer van hierdie Evangelie besondere klem op die vernedering en lyding van Jesus as Seun van die Mens (o.a. 10:45). Hierdeur beklemtoon Markus dat die weg van Jesus dié van lyding is. Op verskeie plekke beskryf Markus die dissipels van Jesus se gebrek aan begrip hiervoor. Daar word in besonder gefokus op die onkunde van Petrus, juis toe hy Jesus as Christus bely. Die vertrekpunt in hierdie artikel is dat Markus aan 'n spesifieke gelowige gemeenskap geskryf het. Rome word as die mees waarskynlike Sitz im Leben en rede vir dié Evangelie beskou, eerder as Sirië of Galilea. Voorts word beredeneer dat die konteks van Rome 'n geldige hermeneutiese sleutel bied vir die verstaan van die teks van hierdie Evangelie.

Vanuit hierdie perspektief blyk dit dat Markus doelbewus die vernedering en lyding van Jesus op sy weg na verheerliking beklemtoon het om sodoende die moedeloze lesers te bemoedig te midde van die vervolging wat hulle in die dae van Nero 64 n.C. of kort daarna gely het.

Volgens oorlewing het Petrus, die groot leier van die Christelike gemeenskap in Rome, as martelaar gesterf. Dit het die Christene in Rome sonder leier, beangs en moedeloos gelaat. Die Evangelie van Markus toon tekens van Petrus se weergawe as ooggetuie, wat 'n noue verbintenis tussen die apostel en Markus impliseer. Hoewel Petrus aanvanklik nie die noodsaak besef het dat Jesus moes ly nie, verduidelik hierdie Evangelie dit duidelik met sy fokus op die lydingsnarratief. Jesus moes die weg van smarte volg. Markus gebruik die woord "weg" op 'n betekenisvolle manier om aan te dui dat Jesus se via dolorosa gevolge inhou vir Petrus en al die ander wat Jesus volg deur Hom as Christus te bely. Christene word geroep om in sy voetspore te volg – 'n handeling wat lyding en volharding impliseer. Dienooreenkomstig voeg Markus 'n paradoksale konnotasie aan die term "evangelie" toe. "Evangelie" is die goeie nuus oor die verlossing in Jesus, maar hierdie boodskap gaan gepaard met lyding en selfs die verlies van lewe.

1. Introduction

The second Gospel, Mark, foregrounds the theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) significantly (Vorster, 1983:130). In his narrative of Jesus as the Son of God the emphasis falls starkly on the suffering Son of God, who has come to add a new dimension to the Kingdom of God. Seeing that Mark, to a greater extent than the other Synoptic Gospels, supplies detailed information about the narrative of Jesus' passion, one may expect this aspect to constitute an important element in his message.

Within the approach of the historical criticism, the "meaning" of Mark's Gospel is usually tied only to the historical events and persons who are described. Since Wrede published his *Messiasgeheimnis* in 1901 (cf. Wrede, 1969), it has become accepted by scholars that the Evangelists did not merely describe the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth for the sake of a historical report. Wrede indicated that the authors of the Gospels had a theological intention apparent in the way in which they presented their material. These intentions became even more apparent with the development of the *formgeschichtliche* approach to the Gospels as applied by Bultmann (1970:362-376 [1921]) and Marxsen (1959).

A new dimension was added to Markan research by narrative criticism: the "meaning" is more likely to be understood in terms of the effect that the story is expected to have on its readers (Powell, 1993:345).

To my view, the disciplines of historical, redaction and narrative criticism are not mutually exclusive and at times can work in a complementary fashion. Although I accept that Mark's Gospel refers to real historical events and persons, I am also of the opinion that Mark described the work and life of Jesus in such a way as to influence the readers' thoughts about Jesus and to let them act in a specific manner in their own circumstances. Mark's narrative therefore is seen to have a strong pragmatic function. The narrative tells about the Son of God, the suffering anointed of God, who died on the cross and would come soon. The readers (audience) of this narrative had to make a decision in the light of the story.

In Markan scholarship the possible reasons for the writing of the Gospel are usually linked to a specific proposed setting of the Gospel. If Mark's narrative then was meant to address a specific situation of his readers, it should be possible to reconstruct the distinctive features of the Markan community and to explain the Gospel as addressing specific issues within the community.

Bauckham (1998:44-45), however, reacted to the attempt to situate a Markan community in whatever place. Accordingly the Gospel was not addressed to or intended to be understood solely by any specific community. To put it in his own words: “the enterprise of reconstruction an evangelist’s community is ... doomed to failure” (Bauckham, 1998: 45). Scholars should therefore stop using the term Markan community, since it no longer has any useful meaning. Bauckham’s (1998:20) warning against “historical fantasy” in the service of reconstructing the history of the community behind the Gospel is relevant in some cases where reconstruction is taken to the extreme. However, as Mack (1988: 82-97) and Van Eck (2000:994-1004) have indicated, the early Christian movement was not that universal. The *Sitz im Leben* in which a Gospel originated and the specific needs of the community undoubtedly had an influence on the way the life and ministry of Jesus was described (also consult Dreyer, 2001:391).

Therefore it is assumed that if we could have insight in the specific problems, circumstances and questions of the believing community to whom the Gospel was written in the first place, it would serve as a relevant hermeneutical tool to understand the text. The importance of the historical setting with regard to the interpretation of texts is generally accepted. However, historically the exact context of any utterance can never be specified with complete certainty (Botha, 1993:27).

The aim of this article is therefore a modest attempt to identify, from internal and external evidence, elements by which the probable provenance of the second Gospel can be reconstructed.

2. Internal evidence to the situation in which the Gospel was written

Internally there is no explicit identification of the Markan audience. The audience is known as reconstructing an “implied audience”, taking evidence of what the author expects readers to know and what they are interested in (Juel, 1995:67).

However on a limited scale, some impressions of the audience can be formed and the situation in which the Gospel originated can be reconstructed from the way in which the author compiled his narrative about Jesus. To determine this, some of the most important aspects in the text are investigated.

2.1 Apocalyptic eschatological perspective

Apocalyptic eschatology was related to a crisis situation. This Jewish literary genre communicated the hope of the ultimate triumph of God to those in the midst of persecution. People in distress were given a perspective to cope with their circumstances (Aune, 1987:230; Du Rand, 1993:227). When standards and structures of a community do not make sense any longer, a new system of meaning is often developed (Vorster, 1991:50). The future then is used to define the present. With a perspective on the future, the present becomes bearable.

The sentence with which Mark's Gospel opens and with which it concludes¹ is important when considering the eschatological perspective of the Gospel. According to Mark 1:1 the Gospel is concerned with the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God:

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Mark 1:1).

The narrative ends with a tense description of three fearful women fleeing from the grave:

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid (Mark 16:8).

This abrupt ending leaves the narrative open ended. Seen from a narrative-critical point of view, this unresolved conflict tends to impinge directly upon the readers (Guelich, 1992:524; Powell, 1993:344). They may wonder what they would have done had the conflict affected them the way it did the characters in the story. The reader is compelled to think of the rest of the story, thus being drawn into an apocalyptic world view (Vorster, 1991:50-53). Although not mentioned in the story of Mark, the coming of Jesus certainly is implied. This expectation of his coming, defines the whole of the Gospel (cf. Mark 8:38).

The narrated world of Mark is constantly influenced by the concept of "the time has come" (Mark 1:15). Jesus manifests the Kingdom with his sayings and acts. However, the final coming of the Kingdom with power is still to happen (Mark 9:1 and 14:25) (Floor, 1981:43).

Throughout the Gospel it seems as if Jesus came to solve problems for those who are willing to follow Him. Sick people were healed; He ate with a tax collector and his questionable associates and made them his

1 According to most accepted results of textual criticism research, Mark 16:8 is accepted as the concluding verse of the Gospel (Metzger, 1971:122-126).

disciples. In each of the parables the expectation is created that the Kingdom would come in its fullest realization, however, only at some point in the future. Only those to whom the secret of the Kingdom has been given, can really understand the meaning of the parables of the Kingdom (Mark 4:10-12). Mark celebrates the victories of the weak and the defeats of the strong. These elements in the social drama of Mark's narrative inevitably engender expectation and hopes in the life of its readers (or hearers) (Rohrbaugh, 1993:394).

This expectation of the coming of the Kingdom determines the way in which one has to act at present. A strong appeal is made to the readers to act correctly in expectation of the coming of the Kingdom (Mark 9:47; 10:14-15, 23-25; 12:34).

This appeal strongly figures in the "mini-apocalypse" (Mark 13). The disciples should be prepared to suffer troubles and persecutions. However, they should not despair. Therefore the discourse ends with these words: "If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'" (Mark 13:36-37) (see Guelich, 1992:517; Van Bruggen, 1988:284).

This eschatological perspective indicates that the people to whom this Gospel was written experienced crises. The expectation that Jesus who had suffered, would return as Son of God, comforted the readers in their present situation.

2.2 Christology

Another important aspect, which determines the meaning of Mark, is its Christology. The Christological aspect is apparent from the many names used to identify Jesus. The names are defined in such a way that what happened to Jesus, is described. Mark used names to describe the person of Jesus. Apparently these terms receive their meaning from the context in which they are used (Boring, 1985:131).

Jesus of Nazareth is described by many names. The names "Son of God" and "Son of Man" were the most important names that structured the image of Jesus in Mark (Dreyer, 2001:393).²

2 Jesus was also called "Christ" (1:1; 8:29; 9:41; 13:21; 14:61; 15:32); "Rabbi" and related terms (9:5; 10:51; 11:21; 14:45); "Master" (4:38; 5:35; 9:17, 38; 10:17, 20, 35; 12:14, 19, 32; 13:1; 14:14) and "King of the Jews" (15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26, 32).

- **Son of God**

The author introduces Jesus right from the start as the “Son of God” (Mark 1:1). Voices from heaven confirm this status. The first time Jesus’ status was confirmed was when Jesus was baptised (Mark 1:11). This happened again on the Mount of transfiguration (Mark 9:7). Even the evil had to confess this name (Mark 1:24; 3:11; 5:7). In reply to the question of the high priest Jesus Himself confirmed that He is the Son of God (Mark 14:61). For the Jews these words signified blasphemy. However, most remarkably, the Roman soldier at the cross came to confess Jesus as Son of God (Mark 15:39).

In several ways the reader is informed as to who Jesus, the Son of God is. From the beginning to the end of Mark, the theme of Jesus, the Son of God, develops. Jesus exemplifies authority in word and deed (Dreyer, 2001:395). Although this position of Jesus became so clear, his own people still did not understand or accept it. However, an outsider (the Roman soldier) recognized Jesus as the Son of God.

Closely related to the name “Son of God” is the name “Christ” (Guelich, 1992:520). Christ is identified with the Son of God (Mark 14:62). Peter could not accept that Jesus had to suffer as the Messiah (Mark 8:32). He possibly had the idea that the Son of God as King and Messiah had come to establish the Kingdom of Israel, resulting in the end of the Roman domination. Mark, however, emphasizes that it is only at the cross that one can know what it means to be the Messiah and Son of God (Kingsbury, 1993:374).

- **Son of Man³**

Only Jesus Himself used this name by which He identified Himself (Guelich, 1992:520). Jesus used this term to reveal Himself to his followers and opponents. With this name He revealed essential aspects of how He saw Himself.

Contexts in which He used this name, are related to three aspects of his life:

- His earthly ministry (2:10, 28; 10:45)
- His passion and ascension (8:31; 9:9; 12:31; 10:33; 14:21, 41)
- His second coming (8:38; 13:26; 14:26)

3 The name “Son of Man” is related to what is said in Daniel 7:13-14 about the “one like a man.”

The first aspect (his earthly ministry) is related to the authority of Jesus over sin and the Sabbath. He is characterized as a servant for He did not come to be served, but to serve. A key passage in this regard is Mark 10:45: "For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"⁴. This aspect is developed in several ways to teach his disciples not to try to be important, big or first. They should rather be like the Son of Man who came to serve (Vorster, 1991:48).

The second group of texts is related to his passion and ascension. It is very significant that, in these instances, Jesus announced three times before his trial that He would suffer, be killed and ascend from death. It is yet more remarkable that his disciples even then were not prepared for his death (Dreyer, 2001:398). Both the inability of the disciples to understand his passion and the fact that Jesus repeatedly announced his death sharply emphasize his character as the Son of Man (Guelich, 1992:520; Vorster, 1991:48).

The third group is related to his second coming. According to Mark, the Son of Man will return with power and glory. The reader is compelled to let his actions and expectations be defined by the expectation of the imminent return of the Son of Man (Vorster, 1991:48). He will come in eschatological glory (Versteeg, 1992:47).

The question arises as to the relation between the names "Son of God" and "Son of Man". According to Mark the Son of God had to suffer. This fact has a strong impact. The Son of God Himself was prepared to suffer. Jesus is the greatest, God incarnate, the Messiah. However, He entered history as a servant. With all the power of the almighty God, Jesus came to mankind as a servant. Mark links the idea of the suffering of Jesus with that of his glory. By suffering (Isaiah 53) Jesus became the glorified Son of Man (Daniel 7) (cf. Van Bruggen, 1988:412). Mark affirms that salvation and victory come from God alone through the death of the perfectly obedient Son (Kingsbury, 1993:379).

The combination of the titles "Son of God" and "Son of Man" is therefore crucial for the understanding of the meaning of the Gospel as a whole. It has the implications that his disciples and readers should also be prepared to humble themselves and be willing to suffer. "Christology thus is more a question of doing than of knowing" (Lambrecht, 1973:273). Apparently Mark's intention is to help people in crises to be willing to die for the Gospel. In his trial and crucifixion, Jesus not only provides the necessary condition for the apocalyptic end but also illustrates through

4 These words most probably refer to the suffering servant described in Isaiah 53.

his behavior how all his followers must face persecution in this short but painful time before the coming of the Kingdom in glory (see 13:9-13) (Tolbert, 1993:356). He endures to the bitter end as Peter and the twelve cannot.

2.3 Discipleship

Another theme that very strongly determines the meaning of Mark is that of discipleship (see Guelich, 1992:522; Versteeg, 1992:48). This implies that Jesus' followers would have understood what it takes to be a disciple of Jesus and to follow in his footsteps.

Very early in the narrative the author introduced this theme of discipleship when Jesus called his disciples to help Him gathering people (Mark 1:16 ff.). His followers were expected to leave behind their possessions, occupations, family and wealth (Mark 1:18, 20; 2:14; 9:17-22). Although Jesus had often explained the implications of being his follower, Mark indicates that they still did not understand what Jesus meant by this warning (Mark 4:13, 40-41; 6:50-52; 7:17 ff.; 8:16-21 and 9:6, 10).

In this regard Mark 8:27-10:45 is important. In this section Jesus is described as the suffering Son of God. The passion of Jesus is an important focal point of Mark's narrative (Burrige, 1992:198; Dreyer, 2001:396; Kähler, 1964:80) at the stage when his disciples were called to follow in his footsteps (Vorster, 1983:122). They should also be willing to suffer, serve and be the least.

The initial ignorance of Peter in this regard is strongly emphasized in the way he is rebuked by Jesus (Mark 8:32-33). Thus the author prepares his readers to follow Jesus although they will suffer in doing so. They should even be willing to die for the Gospel:

Then He called the crowd to Him along with his disciples and said: 'If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me and for the gospel will save it' (Mark 8:34-5).

According to many exegetes, the young man who followed Jesus but fled when the crowd seized Jesus (Mark 14:51-52), refers to the author of the Gospel (cf. Floor, 1978:64; Van Bruggen, 1988:353). This incident accentuates the fact that everyone deserted Jesus at that stage (Mark 14:51), even the author himself. But now the author urges his audience not to do the same.

Thus Mark's characterization of the disciples serves an important literary function within the narrative. It enables the readers to identify their own inadequacies in following Jesus (Powell, 1993:344), but also to persuade or move them to action. The characterization, role and fate of the disciples form a centrepiece to promote this goal (Tolbert, 1993:347).

Closely related to his characterization of his disciples, Mark's use of the word "way" (on which to come after me) is significant. Especially in the second part of his Gospel the "way" becomes a *via dolorosa* (way of pain and suffering) (Versteeg, 1992:48). Jesus followed this way on his way to Golgotha. As the obedient Son of God He is willing to go the way of the cross (Kingsbury, 1981:31).

In Mark 8:27 we read that Jesus and his disciples continued on (the way) to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. Directly linked to their going (on the way), Mark records how Jesus predicted his death for the first time (Mark 8:31-9:1).

It should be noted that Peter's confession of Christ is embedded in this passage (Mark 8:27-30). Mark emphasizes that the confession of Christ is never a neutral issue. When confessing Christ, Peter also had to follow the way (of suffering). *Marturia* (confession) and martyrdom (suffering) are closely related. Mark emphasizes the idea of *imitatio Christi*, the following of Christ.

In this respect, the way Mark uses the word "Gospel", is significant. The Gospel is the good news of the salvation in Christ. However, to accept this news, implies that one has to forfeit oneself to follow Jesus (Mark 8:34-38). The suffering that God calls people to endure may imply the following: unavoidable loss and tragic persecution that come to followers in the course of being, or when proclaiming the good news of God's realm of salvation (Rhoads, 1993:363). The proclaiming of the good news often leads to an active encounter with oppression.

Thus, faith is the opposite of fear (4:40; 5:36; 6:50). Mark's narrative empowers readers to follow Jesus. Jesus' courage and commitment in the face of execution empower people to live for the good news in the face of rejection and loss. Readers identify with Jesus. Jesus is afraid and does not want to die; yet He is willing to do what God wills, what God wants people to do (14:39) (Botha, 1993:50; Rhoads, 1993:365).

When the Gospel ends with the women running away from the empty grave, terrified and telling no one (16:8), the readers are led to say "I will not be paralyzed into silence as the disciples and women were. I will tell, even if it means persecution and death" (Rhoads, 1993:366, also see Collins, 1995:21; Guelich, 1992:525).

2.4 Conclusion

The story of Mark is determined by several internal aspects of which the most important are:

- the apocalyptic eschatological perspective;
- the Christology; and
- discipleship

Mark's audience must have suffered some kind of persecution. In apocalyptic language he encourages them not to despair by giving them an immanent eschatological perspective. Mark pictures Jesus as the Son of God who had to suffer as Son of Man. However, He conquered all kinds of resistance. Christ acted with authority and will come again in glory. As a result of this He can call upon his followers to follow Him, irrespective of what the consequences may be. He gathers a group of followers who are willing to follow in his footsteps. This implies suffering for the sake of the Gospel. However, his followers will share his victory.

It is not without reason that Schweizer (1968:25, 222) formulated the theme of Mark as "Ruf in die Nachfolge". This theme gives strong internal evidence as to the situation in which the Gospel was written.

3. External evidence to the situation in which the Gospel was written

3.1 Rome as probable provenance

According to the unanimous early tradition, the second Gospel was written in Rome before or after the persecution of Christians by Nero. Papias (Exegesis of the Lord's oracles), Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, the Muratorian Canon, Origen, Eusebius (*Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.39.15) and Jerome all attest that Mark was known as the author right from the beginning (see Burrige, 1992:213; Guthrie, 1970:69; Van Eck, 2000:974; Versteeg, 1992:38).

Until recent times, many scholars argued in favour of this early tradition. From the socio-historical reconstruction by Lampe (1987) concerning the first Christians in Rome, there apparently is little reason not to accept the Rome hypothesis.

Brandon (1967:240-266) argues that Mark was written in the aftermath of the Jewish war as an *apologia* for Roman Christians. Roman Christians might have seen the great procession of Vespasianus and Titus in Rome, celebrating Rome's victory over the Jews. According to Josephus

(*Wars of the Jews*, VII, 116-157) the Romans displayed “those ancient purple habits” (the purple hangings of the sanctuary in the temple in Jerusalem, the temple curtains mentioned in Mark 15:38). This visual display of triumph would have affected the Christians in Rome. They realized that the Romans might regard them as also being infected with the Jewish revolutionary ideas (Brandon, 1967:242-243). Brandon finds the following internal evidence in Mark that concur with these external arguments:

- The Gospel contains a strong polemic against Judaism (e.g. Jesus’ controversy with the Jewish leaders (Mark 2:6; 3; 6, 22-27)).
- Simon the Cananean was one of Jesus’ disciples (Mark 3:18).
- Jesus was rejected by his own family (Mark 6:1-6).
- The tribute to Caesar (Mark 12:13-17).
- The responsibility of the Jewish leaders for the death of Jesus (Mark 15:6-15).
- Jesus’ own disciples wrongly understood Him as the Jewish Messiah (Mark 8:37-33).
- The climax is the tearing of the temple curtain (Mark 15:39) and
- the confession of the Roman centurion that Jesus was truly the Son of God (Mark 15:39).

Thus Mark dissociates the Christians in Rome from Judaism, and appeases the Roman government.

Standaert (1983) also argues in favour of a Roman setting, taking his point from the liturgy of the Roman church. His hypothesis is that the Gospel was read to introduce a new adherent of the faith to the rite of baptism. The prologue of the Gospel (Mark 1:1-13) begins with a call by John for conversion and baptism, a promise that Jesus would baptise with the Holy Spirit and Jesus’ baptism. Jesus’ question as reaction to the request of James and John for honorary seats in the kingdom “Can you drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?” Mark 10:38 might also point to the baptismal imagery of the Gospel.

Some criticism, however, has challenged this traditional assumption that the Gospel originated in Rome.

A popular hypothesis is that it originated in Galilee before the destruction of Jerusalem 70 CE. Lohmeyer (1936:162) argues that early Christianity had two main centres, Galilee and Jerusalem. In Galilee the Son of Man-

eschatology predominated, and in Jerusalem a nationalistic messianic hope prevailed. Accordingly, Mark's gospel has taken up this historical (geographical) difference(s) between Galilee and Jerusalem in the sense that "geography becomes theology" (Lohmeyer, 1936:162).

Lightfoot, using the *Formgeschichte* as historical tool, advocates a theological opposition between Galilee and Jerusalem throughout the Gospel. He is also of opinion that the Gospel of Mark originated in Galilee for "Galilee is the sphere of revelation, Jerusalem the sphere of rejection" (Lightfoot, 1938:124-125).

A Galilean provenance of Mark has become synonymous with the views of Marxsen. According to the second gospel, Galilee is the centre of Jesus' activity, the centre of the Markan community, as well as the place for the awaiting *parousia* (see Mark 14:28; 16:7). According to Marxsen (1959:92) Mark thus writes a "Galilean Gospel"; "Galilee is Jesus' place" (Marxsen, 1959:59); and Jesus' "decisive preaching always occurs in Galilee".⁵

Whether Rome or Galilee⁶ is taken as place of origin, both viewpoints have an important element in common. Both of them agree that the original readers were in a situation in which they suffered a threat in one way or another.

In contrast to the Galilean assumption, other critics oppose the authorship of Mark because of the non-Palestinian background of the second Gospel.⁷ According to this criticism it is improbable that Mark wrote the Gospel. It would be out of keeping with a one-time resident of Jerusalem (Vorster, 1991:36). However, this argument is not convincing, as Mark wrote to residents of a non-Palestinian city. Arguments in favour of the traditional viewpoint are for example Mark's use of Latin loan words (e.g. Mark 4:21; 5:9, 15; 6:27; 6:37; 7:4; 15:15 and 15:39, 44, 45) and his

5 Other scholars who argue for a Galilean setting for Mark are Kealy (1982:160 ff.); Kelber (1974); Schoep (1960:1-60); Parker (1970:60); Trocmé (1975:48-59).

6 Beside these hypotheses, either Decapolis, Tyre, Sidon, Syria, Asia Minor or Greece is suggested by scholars as the place of origin (see van Eck, 2000:981-982; Vorster, 1983:112).

7 The objection against Mark's authorship because of the non-Palestinian background of the Gospel, can also be used to oppose the Galilean assumption.

explanation of Palestinian practices (e.g. Mark 12:42 and 15:16) (see Van Eck, 2000:976-977).⁸

3.2 Mark as probable author

In the Gospel itself there is no indication of the author's identity. The superscription "according to Mark" is a later addition, probably some time during the second century (Vorster, 1983:107).

According to the early tradition, however, the second Gospel was attributed to John Mark, the nephew of Barnabas. Papias (*Exegesis of the Lord's oracles*), Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, the Muratorian Canon, Origen, Eusebius (*Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.39.15) and Jerome all attest that Mark was known as the author right from the beginning (see Guelich, 1992:514; Guthrie, 1970:69; Versteeg, 1992:38).

It is, however, striking to find this young man who disappointed Paul during the first missionary journey (Acts 13:13; 15:37-38) as the author of a biography of Jesus Christ. It is even more striking to find his name attached to the Gospel, as he was not one of the disciples of Jesus. According to Van Bruggen (1998:59) this improbability of Mark argues in favour of the tradition's authenticity.

From the above it seems most probable that a Roman setting for the second gospel, with John Mark as author, as proposed by and derived from the Papias account, depends on both the external (the Patristic witness) and the internal evidence.

3.3 The probable voice of Peter

Moreover, the early tradition also connects Mark with Peter in the production of the Gospel (Guthrie, 1970:69-70; Van Bruggen, 1988:15; Versteeg, 1992:38-43). Accordingly, Mark wrote more or less as the mouthpiece of Peter. Papias mentions a tradition that he ascribes to the *presbyteros* John, which is reported by Eusebius:

The presbyter [John] used to say: 'Mark who had been Peter's interpreter, wrote down carefully, but not in order, all that he remembered of the Lord's sayings and doings. For he had not heard the Lord or been one of his followers, but ... one of Peter's. Peter used to adapt his teaching to the occasion, without making a systematic arrangement of the Lord's *logia*, so that Mark was quite

8 Other scholars who also argue for a Roman setting of the Gospel are Swete (1909); Johnson (1960); Burkhil (1972); Nineham (1963); Pesch (1977); Evans (1970); Martin (1972); Lane (1974); Farmer (1974); Kealy (1977); Hengel (1984) and Myers (1988).

justified in writing down some *logia* just as he [Peter] remembered them' (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.3-4).

Origin states that Peter even instructed Mark to write the Gospel (see Van Eck, 2000:975).

The close relation between Peter and Mark is apparent from 1 Peter 5:13. In this letter Peter not only calls Mark his son but also greets the church "who is in Babylon", an apocalyptic way of referring to Rome (cf. Revelations 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21).

Grant (1943:52), however, argues that Mark was a far too common name in Rome to be certain that it referred to Barnabas' nephew. He considers that tradition mixed up the identities and that some Roman Mark, who knew Peter, was the author.

With regard to Mark's connection with the apostle Peter, the questions have arisen from form-critical theories that much, if not all of the written account of Mark, is composed of oral traditions which have been formed in the life of the community (Guthrie, 1970:70). Many would hold that the author was in possession of certain Petrine traditions and to such a limited extent became Peter's interpreter. Some form critics, however, deny all Petrine influence (Guthrie, 1970:70).

Versteeg (1992:39-41) convincingly identifies the voice of Peter in the Gospel of Mark.

- More detail with regard to Peter as such is found in Mark in comparison to the other Synoptics (e.g. Mark 1:29-31; 1:35-36 and parallel sections).
- It is also remarkable that only Mark mentions Peter's name in specific circumstances (e.g. Mark 11:20-21 and parallel sections).
- It is remarkable that Mark describes in more detail the shortcomings of Peter (e.g. Mark 8:33; 9:5; 14:30-31; 14:66-72 and parallel sections) while being hesitant to describe something in honour of Peter (e.g. Mark 6:45-62 *and parallel sections* and Matthew 16:17-19: "And I tell you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church" which has no parallel in Mark). This would be expected from a humbled Peter as is known in history.

3.4 Probably a time of fierce persecution

The emphasis that Mark places on the passion of the Son of Man and Him calling people to follow Him with the implication of forfeiting themselves, makes even more sense when one accepts the situation of

Mark's audience as experiencing fierce persecution. According to traditional evidence John Mark wrote to Christians living in Rome who suffered persecution (Versteeg, 1992:38, 42). In his Gospel Mark writes that, although Jesus as the suffering servant had to suffer the most severe persecution, He now reigns as the Son of Man. A person who confesses Him as Christ, has to follow the same way of suffering. Jesus conquered the evil persecutor. People, who follow Him, will share in his victory.

In his narrative Mark describes Jesus' disciples' ignorance of the fact that Jesus had to be humiliated on several occasions. Special focus is placed on Peter's ignorance when confessing Jesus as the Christ. Seen from this perspective, Mark purposefully emphasizes the humiliation and suffering of Jesus on his way to glory. Thus, he encouraged his despondent readers in times of persecution.

The years immediately prior to 69 CE can be described as apocalyptic in character. In 64 CE Nero persecuted the Christians in Rome and Peter was martyred just before 69 CE. Towards the end of Nero's reign there were reports of famine and unrest. The Jewish revolt and war started in 66 CE. After Nero's suicide in 68 CE there was a civil war in which three emperors lost their lives. Several earthquakes were experienced in Italy round about 68 CE (Van Eck, 2000:979). All these events could have led the Christians in Rome to see their times as the end of time (see Burrige, 1992:213).

The death of Peter, the great leader of the Christian community in Rome, as martyr (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* III,1) left the Christians in Rome without a leader, fearful and discouraged. Mark may have been prompted by the death of Peter, or other eye-witnesses during Nero's persecutions (Burrige, 1992:213). Mark probably wrote (finalized) the Gospel some time between 64 and 70 CE in which the words of Peter would continue to reach them (Guelich, 1992:514; Versteeg, 1992:38; Vorster, 1983:112).

Mark described that at first Peter did not realize the necessity for Jesus to suffer. However, the Gospel of Mark which resembles the words of Peter, clearly explains the necessity as Peter realized later. Therefore Mark focuses on the passion narrative. Jesus had to walk the way of suffering. Mark uses the word "way" in a significant manner to indicate that Jesus' *via dolorosa* has implications for Peter and all of those who follow Him by confessing Him as the Christ. Christians are called to follow in His footsteps with suffering and endurance.

3.5 Conclusion

From external evidence the following postulation of the *Sitz im Leben* of Mark can be made.

- The Markan community was probably established in Rome.
- Mark John probably wrote the Gospel.
- Being the earlier interpreter and companion of Peter, he wrote down the story of Peter.
- Mark wrote at a time shortly after the community's lost of great leaders, Peter and Paul, through martyrdom. It was a period in which the community was in danger of being abandoned and apocalyptic expectations threatened to run out of control. Such a situation is most understandable in the great year of terror, 69 CE. They experienced this situation as a crisis.

4. Final conclusion

The postulation of a Roman historical context facilitates the understanding of Mark's text.

The community feared persecution. As a way of coping with persecution, the community was encouraged by the promise of an apocalyptic hope. The Son of God also suffered persecution, but conquered. He holds authority and will come in glory. All his followers will share in his victory. In the meantime they will experience resistance, persecution and martyrdom, such as Peter, their previous leader, did.

In these circumstances Mark calls his community to take up their cross and to follow Jesus. Mark exhorts a community who became despaired and had lost its original fervour to follow Jesus. Mark constantly contrasts two ways of life: saving one's life out of fear, and losing one's life for others out of faith. Within the Roman situation Mark's emphasis on the following of Jesus in circumstances of suffering and resistance makes sense.

We may think that Mark's effort to get people to face death and persecution is not relevant to us today, because most of us do not face persecution and execution as Mark's first readers had to. Yet any loss of status or wealth or power is a form of death. We tend to diminish our vision of life and function within the safe confines of actions that bring little threat to ourselves. Mark seeks to shake readers from such fortresses of self-protection and lead them to face death and to take risks.

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Kernbegrippe:

dissipelskap

Markus (se) gehoor/konteks/sosiale omgewing/situasie

navolging van Jesus

Key concepts:

discipleship

following Jesus

Markan (Mark's) audience/context/social location/situation