BRIEF INTRODUCTION

There are many commentaries on the Gospel of Mark, old and new. Undoubtedly many more are yet to be written. This century has seen very varied approaches to the Marcan Gospel and to the Synoptics in general, ranging from emphasis on the general accuracy of the Marcan chronology for the historical events of the Saviour’s life to a rejection not only of such, but even a virtual denial that we have any of the ipsissima words of Jesus.

The present author is aware of his indebtedness to both Synoptic Criticism and Form Criticism, and even to those who stress the place of the Calendar in shaping the Gospel. He cannot accept that Mark gives any accurate guide to the chronological order of events of the Ministry. He is willing to allow that the sayings of Jesus may indeed have been thought to have been preserved close to the form in which they were delivered. But the situation or occasion in which they now feature in the Gospel account may bear no relation to that in which they were first said. The acts of Jesus and His miracles may rest on a foundation of fact but have all been later reinterpreted.

There is nothing new in such views. What is new is that the present writer sees the form of not only the individual incidents of the Life and Ministry determined by Midrash on selected Old Testament passages, but the form of the whole Gospel itself determined by such. The present writer has felt that the question of the Gospel Form as a whole, and not individual parts thereof, has not received the attention it deserves. While Archbishop Carrington and others with the theory of individual Gospels for each Lord’s Day, and Van Goudoever with his Calendar Theory, have sought to explain some elements in the overall Gospel form, they do not convincingly provide a raison d’être for the Gospel. They are right to note the liturgical application of the Gospel, but overstress it and ante-date it. One must look for a more internal, more compelling reason for the shape of the Gospel of Mark than the provision of weekly Gospel readings in the Christian Religious Calendar. In the case of Mark in particular, it is most doubtful if such can be proved. But is there anything within Mark’s Gospel, not imposed on later from without, which gives it its shape? If one were to reply: ‘The life of Jesus as it actually was’ or even ‘the life of Jesus as understood in the Early Church’, such answers raise more questions than
they solve. What do we mean by ‘actually was’ and at what level of existence? Or if it is the life of Jesus as understood in the Church, when and in what Church? For not even the Synoptists agree and the Johannine presentation is so different.

We are faced with the fact of Mark’s Gospel. Arguments for its organic unity are at least as strong as those that it is a concatenation of disjecta membra. And even if it were the latter, why have they been put together in the form they are? It is not a biography, though it may be an interpretation of a life and work, but highly stylized and rigorously subordinated to a certain pattern. But what pattern? The needs of the whole liturgical year of the Jewish Church are too diffuse to explain the tight unity of Mark’s Gospel. Only one Festival clearly stands out in Mark’s Gospel, the Passover, the Memorial of the Exodus Deliverance from bondage in the past and pattern of all future deliverances. The Passover too is the Festival of the Home primarily, and not of Temple or Synagogue. The Church is rooted in the Home.

At a Passover celebration there is the Passover Haggadah, the story of deliverance, which begins with the Promise, retails the struggles of the deliverer with the oppressor and culminates with the deliverance he wrought. The Passover Haggadah with all its diversity but underlying unity provided the pattern not merely for the Last Supper, but for the whole of Mark’s Gospel form. What better than the Passover Haggadah, a uniquely Jewish oral literary form, to give shape to the story of the long awaited Messianic Deliverance, and to gather up in itself stories of the Saviour, His words and deeds of power, which led to His Exodus.

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John Bowman