

Chapter four: Where Mark gets it from

We have stopped off at the point that Mark was first formulated, towards the end of the first century. It will be useful to identify what were the sources for his narrative and how he used them. It will perhaps be even more interesting to look at his main characters and see where these came from.

But first of all, there is the question of how we know that Mark (along perhaps with the Gospel of Peter) was first. There is a large amount of common content which this gospel shares with the other synoptics, Matthew and Luke. These latter, however, are much longer. It is easier to argue that these were elaborations based on Mark, than it is to contend that Mark is a cut-down version of the other two. Were this latter the case, then the author of Mark would have consciously missed out on elements that should have been of great interest, such as the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord's prayer and the birth of John the Baptist. It is more likely that these elements were simply not available, because Mark was earlier.

In copying, the other synoptics sometimes pared down stories in Mark, leaving out significant details. This generated confusions that can only be explained by going back to Mark. So, for example, in the story of the paralytic man who could not reach Jesus in a crowded building, the men carrying him make a hole in the roof to let him down to be healed. Jesus acknowledges their faith in taking such drastic action. He is then given both to heal the man and forgive him his sins. Matthew includes these details but omits to say that the paralysed man was let down through the roof. So, we no longer know why Jesus marvels at the faith of the men bringing the paralytic man to him!

In another instance, Mark frames a retrospective story of Herod Antipas executing John the Baptist within a sequence in which Jesus sends his disciples out on a preaching and healing mission, from which they then come wearily back sometime later. The retrospective story inserted into the narrative helps in showing the passing of time.

Matthew replicates the sequence but fails to include the detail of the disciples coming back from their mission. The text which then follows appears confusingly to be part of the retrospective story on John the Baptist.

There are also other grounds for the conclusion that Mark was first, including the fact that later gospels freely describe Jesus as 'Lord' whereas Jews, including the Nazarenes, believed in 'no Lord but God'. There is no case in Mark where the author describes, or Jesus' followers describe, Jesus as Lord. The only instance occurs where a non-Jew, a Syrophenician woman (and thus someone of inferior status) addresses Jesus as Lord in asking him to heal her mentally disturbed child.

So, Mark does appear on these and other grounds to be first, or at least first among the gospels that have survived. But where did he get his material from?

There is little or no biography. There is some description of Jesus teaching and recruiting followers. Then, at the core, there is the passion narrative, in which Jesus travels to Jerusalem at the time of Passover, provokes the Jewish authorities and then is captured, tried and

crucified by the Romans, after promising that he will return to Galilee. Following interment in a tomb, the body of Jesus is found to be missing ... and here the narrative ends.

The core passion narrative is replete with direct and indirect allusions to Old Testament prophecies. Jesus' cry from the cross, 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me', is actually a quote from Psalm 22, which could also have provided a source for the soldiers dividing up Jesus' clothes by lot – 'they divide my garments among them and for my raiment they cast lots'. There may be nods to Amos in the description of darkness at the middle of the day and several to Isaiah in the form of the abuse suffered by Jesus, his silence in the face of this and his death among thieves, as the 'suffering servant, numbered with the transgressors'. These and other parallels, and maybe quotes, have led some writers to the conclusion that the whole narrative is a fiction, generated largely from Old Testament prophetic texts.

Another possibility, deriving from precisely the same evidence, is that the passion narrative was originally written in the form of a Hebrew peshar, a number of which survive among the scrolls from the Dead Sea attributed to the Essenes. These were generally in one of two forms, either a commentary on a particular book or a discourse using quotes from several different books. In both instances, the commentator/interpreter was seeking to make sense of present circumstances and events in the light of past prophecies.

The prime source for Mark could have been one such peshar, written by a Nazarene follower of Jesus and relating the misfortune of the ill treatment of Jesus a fulfilment of prophecy. The Nazarenes were extremely zealous Jews, like the Essenes, and had a very similar organisation including property-sharing, communal meals and strict rules. This is such that there could have been just one movement, referenced in different ways, or a number of loosely-aligned groups with much the same interests and ethos.

Either way, the Nazarenes may not only have been the source for the fallen messianic Jewish leader, reinterpreted by Saul/Paul and then reinvented by the Christianoi. They may also have provided the peshar of interwoven prophecy, as commentary on the fate of Jesus, subsequently used by the author of Mark.

There were other elements, such as sayings attributed to Jesus that might have been collected in a written form and in oral testimonies passed on and then sought out and collected by Mark. This author makes a number of references to the Hebrew Old Testament though, as already noted, often imperfectly. He also would have had available, and clearly did know of and use, some of the letters attributed to Paul.

The way in which Mark used this material is revealing. So, for example, in 1 Corinthians Saul enjoins his followers in Corinth to observe a ritual meal of bread and wine, the Lord's Supper, commemorating the death of Jesus and his expected return. But Paul, it should be noted, never met Jesus. So, when he said in his letter that the details of this observance were 'received from the Lord' as 'what I also delivered to you', what he means is in the visions that he had of the dead Jesus.

The ritual details were not then testimony which had been recorded, since a vision could hardly amount to this, but something generated by Paul. The author of Mark bases his account of this last meal very closely on what Paul says Jesus said, or rather what in Paul's view Jesus would have said. Mark's source for the Last Supper is actually Paul's invention in I Corinthians.

The ritual meal could equally well have been invented and first practised by Paul's pagan converts, at Antioch or elsewhere, adapting their former Mithraic ritual to embrace the new messianic man-god. In which case, Paul was seeking to take ownership of something which was happening and which he could not entirely control or change.

There are other examples which suggest that Mark used, and attributed to Jesus, material which had come from the pen of Paul. He follows Paul's guidance, in his letter to the Romans, to respect the governing authorities and to pay 'taxes to whom taxes are due', while also following the commandment to love one another. In Mark, this is made into a saying by Jesus to 'some Pharisees and some Herodians, sent to trap him'. His admonition, referencing a coin with the imprint of the Caesar's head, is to 'give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor's and to God the things that are God's'. He follows this, a little later, with the observation that the greatest commandments are to love God and to love one's neighbour as one self.

Mark often used the same or similar language to Paul. He was aware of and would have consulted Paul's letters, which were then in circulation. Writers at the time had no scruples about making up appropriate dialogue for their characters, when this was otherwise not available. The Jewish historian Josephus did this frequently. Mark did the same, sometimes making it match with what had been written by Paul.

There are therefore a variety of sources for the narrative and dialogue in Mark, including possibly a pesher commentary originating from a Nazarene/Essene source. There are a number of characters featuring in the story including the first recruited followers, the full complement of disciples/apostles, family members, officials and incidental bystanders. But it has to be said that, apart from Pilate, significant figures are either absent or, as in the case of the High Priest at the time, unnamed. Mark is not sure of his Jewish history.

It may be that the key follower Simon originates from, and was mentioned in, an original pesher that provided the core passion narrative. It could well be that this character is reflected in Acts as the leader of a continuing Nazarene community and also in Josephus as the leader of an ekklesia (gathering), in both cases described as coming into conflict with King Herod Agrippa I.

For most of the characters, there is insufficient evidence to see or to reconstruct where these may have come from. In some instances, however, there are indications that the author was just as free with his cast as he was with other elements of the story.

The named brothers of Jesus feature at the point in Mark where Jesus is given to preach in the synagogue in his home town (not Nazareth but Capernaum!), astonishing the congregation with his knowledge. They wonder, 'Is this not the builder (teton), the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon?' Matthew repeats the story, with Joseph in place of Joses.

Then, in what follows in the text, these brothers individually take little or no part in the action. It appears as if the author of Mark had no more than a list to go on, with no actual information on the deeds or words of any of the named brothers. This is a suspicion which is amplified in considering the list of the apostles given in Mark and in other sources.

In Mark, and in the other synoptic gospels, a core of first-recruited followers of Jesus feature at the beginning of the list of twelve, with the disgraced Judas as the very end. But just before the end there are three characters: 'James the [son] of Alphaeus', Simon, described as 'the Cananean' in Mark and Matthew and as 'the zealot' in Luke, and Judas the [brother] of James in Luke, paralleled by Thaddeus in Mark and Lebbaeus called Thaddeus in Matthew.

Two further pieces of evidence provide a clue as to who these may have been (or been believed to have been). John's gospel provides a description of the three women standing by the cross as – when the Greek is correctly read – Jesus' mother, Mary the wife of Clopas, his mother's sister (Salome in the other lists) and Mary Magdalene. An entry in an eleventh century manuscript, possibly by a lexicographer called Papias, reads 'Mary, the wife of Cleophas or Alphaeus, was the mother James the bishop and apostle and of Simon and Thaddeus and of one Joseph'.

The first point is that we do not have evidence in Mark as to who the natural father of Jesus was. Matthew and Luke later add, quite likely invented, nativity stories. It is possible that a rebel character Jesus, if historical, had a mother Mary (the most common female name at the time), married to someone called either Joseph (another common name) or Clopas/Cleophas or even, since the latter is not a forename but a title, Joseph (called) Clopas/Cleophas. (Greek had two letters pi and phi to render Aramaic peh).

The second point is that the three penultimate characters in Mark's list of the apostles read, through the link provided by Alphaeus, as three of the brothers of Jesus, all sons of Mary married to Clopas/Alphaeus and mother to Jesus, James, Simon and Judas. John names Mary married to Clopas/Cleophas as the mother of Jesus and Papias fills in by describing her other children.

Mark has again recycled material in making up his list of the apostles. Such recycling was not uncommon. This same author, for example, tells two stories of mass feedings, of five thousand and four thousand people, similar in all their details and so perhaps deriving from the same incident. Matthew twice uses Mark's story of the blind beggar, increasing the number to two beggars because he failed to recognise that Mark's reference to Bartimaeus as 'the son of Timaeus' was an explanation of his quote in Aramaic, rather than an additional character!

The author of Mark could perhaps have consciously reused names of the attributed brothers of Jesus in his list of the apostles. However, because the names have been modified in transmission, he may have failed to recognise that he was doing just this.

The brothers of Jesus were not individually essential to Mark's story. As much as fifty years on, he was writing in the context of considerable antagonism between the Christianoi and the Nazarene Jews from whom they had split. He had, as has been demonstrated, poor knowledge of the culture, customs and law and even the geography of Jews in Judea. He probably had no knowledge of who any of the brothers of an historical Jesus were.

Seeking information, Mark had come across a family with a number of brothers, quite likely with one named Joshua (Jesus) and another called James (Jacob). This, if the associations noted above are valid and relevant, was James who was the first of a line of administrators (episcopoi) who then looked after the interests Jews in the aftermath of the Jewish war. This James, also known as the Just, could not have risen to a prominent position in the Jewish

priestly hierarchy, had he actually been the brother of a messianic rebel who had caused considerable trouble to the Jewish and Roman authorities and had been captured and crucified.

James was sufficiently prominent to be able to set out the rules that should be observed by Gentile god-fearers and to have disciplined Paul for teaching Jews that they need not observe all the requirements of Jewish Law.

Mark's borrowing of a particular family of brothers for the family of Jesus, and perhaps then inadvertently doing something similar to make up his list of disciples, was the initial cause of a lot of confusion. But this family was not all that he borrowed.

He went looking in Paul's letters, which also provided material for dialogue, for a character Mark believed for good reason to have been real. Paul had been there, active in Judea, in the mid first century. Jesus' fiery key follower Simon had continued about this time as a Nazarene leader. Mark reasoned that Paul must have known him, encountered him and written about him in his letters.

All Mark thought he needed to do was read the letters and find the right Simon. So, that is what he did; he found a Simon and imported him back into his narrative.

But Mark was, as we shall see, wrong in believing that Paul must have known the Jewish Nazarene leader Simon. He was wrong in another way too. He identified and consolidated into his story someone who was actually a different character.

This, of course, has led to further confusion. When this is unpicked, it will help our understanding of Judean religion and politics in the first century. It will point up another, major way in which Christianity has got it wrong.