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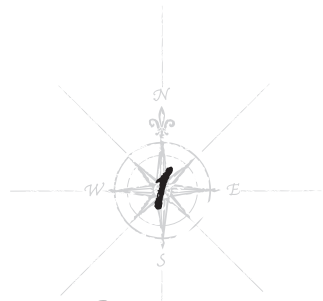
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Mark as Biography and Memorized Witness Account

Mark's Use of the Ancient Genre of Bios

In antiquity, the general maxim held true that “form serves content.” This means that formal analyses guide the reader in the proper understanding of content. Determining the genre of Mark's account thus serves to identify how the hearer or reader is meant to interpret the content. Should the text be taken as a fictitious story, a philosophical treatise, an historical novel, or a biographical sketch? This determination guides the audience in its author-intended expectation, since the author conveys objective hints by means of his selection of genre.

Mark identifies his account in 1:1 as “good news” (gospel). In the following discussion, we must briefly clarify what Mark's explicit description “good news” signifies and what the literary character (genre) of this “gospel” is.

Simply put, Mark's Gospel is an account of “good news”¹ containing both descriptions of events and messages. As the Markan Gospel account is analyzed in terms of its specific characteristics,² it fits best the general genre of ancient bios. In other words: Mark claims to present a biographical sketch (*bios*) of a hero, containing descriptions of events and messages as good news.

1. In the Greco-Roman world the term conveys an imperial proclamation, e.g., of a military victory.

2. Genre can be defined in simple terms as a recurring, recognizable literary pattern.

Typically, the ancient format of bios includes a brief introduction (with an optional infancy section), then proceeds to give select anecdotes (stories, dialogues, special events, characteristic statements) depicted from the mature years of the main character, and ends with a description of how the main character died, often asking whether or not he denied what he stood for during his lifetime. What is unique in the type of bios Mark presents is the fact that the (innocent) death of the main character is not only mentioned but featured as the character's life goal. The fact that the hero dies by shameful crucifixion is a problem only if his innocence is uncertain.

It would be wrong to compare such an ancient bios-account with the literary form of a modern comprehensive biography. What this ancient genre indicates is that Mark functions within Greco-Roman and Jewish conventions of his time which intend to give reliable biographical data while not giving an exhaustive life story.

Unlike historical-critical scholarship, which often denies that much of Mark's account is historically authentic, the term "good news" and the genre of Mark's Gospel account both claim historical authenticity and an authoritative message. The good news, cast in the genre of bios as ancient biography, suggests that Mark intends to convey both a credible historical witness account and an appeal (in fact, Christ's appeal), drawing attention to the significance of the recounted events. The gospel genre of bios, conveying good news, portrays itself as proclamation through historical witness.³

In an extensive study, Richard Burridge⁴ analyzes ten differently dated Greco-Roman biographies and concludes that the Gospels conform to the (rather flexible) literary genre of

3. See Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1977).

4. Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992). A summarizing essay, "About People, by People, for People: Gospel Genre and Audiences," by Burridge appeared in Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 113–45. See also Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity. A History of New Testament Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 137.

(religious) *bioi* rather than to alternate genres such as “philosophical treatises,” “deeds of heroes,” “memoirs of heroes,” the genre of the “Jewish apocalyptic drama,” or accounts of “divine men.”⁵ Accounts of “divine men,” for example, narrate their subject’s miracles, martyrdoms, and metamorphoses into divine beings, thus displaying significant differences from the approach of the canonical Gospels. Among them are: (1) the genre of these accounts is difficult to determine; (2) many of these collections postdate the canonical Gospels; and (3) parallels to the canonical Gospels are limited to superficial analogies.⁶ While Jesus also performs miracles, his kingdom-mission provides a context and purpose for his miracles. This aspect is conspicuously missing in the accounts of “divine men.”

Bioi in antiquity primarily describe the mature life of key persons who are mentioned at the beginning of the accounts. A simple chronological sequence, especially noticeable at the beginning and end of an account, is complemented by various thematic insertions in the middle section. *Bioi* rely on oral and written sources concerning the hero’s actions and words to provide an anecdotal biographical sketch of the hero. These biographical descriptions are mostly serious in tone and display respect for the hero.

Paul Barnett⁷ further differentiates Burridge’s conclusions by stating that the canonical passion accounts run, to a degree, counter to the general bios genre. While classical bios-accounts observe the way in which an important figure dies,⁸ including the dying person’s last words, nowhere besides the canonical Gospels is there the notion that the goal of the main character’s life was to die. Nor is there an explicit acknowledgment elsewhere of the most shameful and offensive

5. See Burridge, “About People,” in: Richard Bauckham, *The Gospels*, 113–45.

6. See W. R. Telford, *Mark* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 97, and especially Barry Blackburn, *Theios Aner* (Philadelphia: Coronet Books, 1990), 13–72.

7. Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 159.

8. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?*, 142–49.

form of execution by crucifixion. And finally, there is no parallel in other bios-accounts to the liberating and reconciling effect of the hero's death. Barnett's observations also support the notion that the Gospel account as bios is both historical witness and proclamation.

A final important observation regarding bios is that the character of its hero is often intended to be imitated by the reader/hearer.⁹ This raises the intriguing question as to what degree the very genre of Mark's account hints that Jesus' person and actions are to be imitated by his followers. We will argue that Jesus teaches, exemplifies, and above all enables "pattern-imitation" among his followers rather than simply calling for a simplistic, self-generated "copying of Christ." But we must take note of a "pattern-imitation theme" embedded in the genre itself.

Mark as a Systematically Memorized Witness Account

Mark's account of the "good-news-about-(and from)-Jesus" seems to fit well into the ancient genre of bios. Mark was thus written with the intent of providing a reliable sketch of Jesus' public appearances with the additional aim of engendering a form of pattern-imitation. As we will see, the kind of imitation contained in the message of this bios-account is solidly based on Jesus' own teaching and work as he enables his followers to grow in core values, attitudes, and actions.

Under Jesus' tutelage, the first disciples underwent a systematic memorization and training period in order to retain core elements of his teaching and actions. He also gave them a grid of interpretation for understanding his significance and that of his mission.

Jesus was an intentional teacher. The contents of his "curriculum" focused on a true understanding of both God's messianic rule and the identity and function of God's Messiah. The

9. David B. Capes, "Imitatio Christi and the Gospel Genre," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 13.1 (2003): 1-19.

disciples, who had already been trained biblically in their own homes and especially in synagogue schools (from about age 7 to age 14), learn from Jesus in the same way they learned in their synagogue schools—by memorization. In each case, memorization preceded understanding.

However, Jesus' teaching style exceeds that of the synagogue teachers by:

1. his contextualizing the learning process in real-life settings and dialogues, life-on-life teaching, and mentoring;
2. his authority further accentuating his teaching and embedding truths in the disciples' minds and hearts long before they truly understand;
3. his complementing this memorization process through the agency of the Holy Spirit (John 14:15–31; 16:4–24), who assists the disciples in recalling what Jesus had previously taught them.

Following is a brief overview of some of the elements that scholars¹⁰ have presented to illuminate the elementary educational pattern in first-century Palestine. They argue that this furnishes the most convincing background for “Jesus as teacher” and thus for schematic and stereotyped oral transmission of the gospel witness prior to its written fixation. Jesus used among his initial disciples pedagogical principles similar to those used in elementary school education, in synagogue services, and in Jewish homes.¹¹ He did so in order to embed a memorized body of information in his disciples. The Gospel of Mark was then composed from a relatively wide pool of systematically memorized material.

10. Cf., e.g., Rainer Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer: Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien-Überlieferung*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988); Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1964 [Eng. trans.]); idem., *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (Lund: Gleerup, 1964); idem., *The Origins of the Gospel Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); Henry Wansbrough, ed., *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991).

11. See Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*, 151–206, 137–51, and 102–18, respectively.

*Elementary School Education in First-Century Palestine*¹²

Elementary school education in first-century Palestine focused on oral transmission and retention of mainly written tradition (especially the Hebrew Old Testament).

The Schoolhouse. By the time Jesus taught in Palestine, Pharisees (and their predecessors) had long-established schools for the purpose of teaching the Torah to young boys. In Tiberias alone, some thirteen schools existed. The general pattern in first-century Judaism was to operate an elementary school in each of the widely spread synagogues, as well as, at times, an advanced school for students of the Torah and oral traditions.

The Teacher. Besides the task of teaching, the elementary school teacher was, at times, expected to serve as the synagogue attendant as well as a scribe (a copyist of manuscripts). Usually these elementary teachers received some recompense for their work, while the advanced teachers of the law had begun the habit of refraining from accepting pay several decades prior to Christ. In the eyes of advanced Torah teachers, elementary school teachers were thus inferior. This may have contributed to the trend in Jewish society to view elementary school teachers as part of the lower class of society.

The Student. Most boys in Jewish Palestine began their formal education at age seven and ended it by age fourteen.¹³ School was held every day from sunup to sundown, except on the Sabbath. In the afternoon of each Sabbath, however, fathers would examine their sons on material learned during the previous week.

Contents to Be Learned. Learning various sections of the Hebrew Bible by heart lay at the center of elementary school edu-

12. For this and the following description of synagogue elementary education, see Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*.

13. See, e.g., Josephus, *Life*, 7-9, who apparently completed elementary education at age fourteen.

cation. Of great importance was the memorization of liturgically important sections of Scripture (such as the “Shema” in Deuteronomy 6:4 and the Hallel Psalms 114–18), as this became useful for both the life of an adult Jew and his future participation in synagogue services.¹⁴ At times, even Greek was taught in these schools. Tiberias and Sepphoris (a few miles north of Nazareth), for instance, had Greek-speaking members in their respective synagogues.

Methods of Instruction. Learning by heart¹⁵ constituted the focus of education. Therefore, rote memorization was much more emphasized than creative, independent combination of facts or independent thinking. Proverbs 1–9, for instance, had to be memorized mechanically long before the message these chapters convey was understood and applied. The key to success was repetition.¹⁶ Tradition holds that Hillel once remarked: “He who repeats his passage one hundred times is not to be compared with him who repeats his passage a hundred and one times.”¹⁷ Various mnemonic aids were employed to reach the stated goal. A good number of biblical texts already contained such aids, such as alliteration (cf. Prov. 18:20–22) and acrostic poetry (cf. Prov. 31:10–31; Ps. 119). Further aids were metric structure as well as the use of paronomasia (wordplay) and cantillation (murmur). Additional mnemonic devices, such as “question and answer” or having the teacher begin a verse and letting the student finish, were common. All this was carried out with strict discipline.

Similarities and Dissimilarities with Jesus’ Approach to Teaching

Similarities. There are striking methodological parallels between elementary school education in the first century A.D. and Jesus’ pedagogical approach. This suggests that he intentionally

14. Furthermore, learning the skills of reading and writing (by copying and dictation) was likewise accomplished by the use of Scriptures. Learning how to read often began with Leviticus, since it contained difficult texts. This was to prevent the pupils from guessing.

15. See also the oral traditions in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome.

16. Cf. Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.178.

17. Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*, 194.

utilized these familiar methods of instruction. On account of this correspondence, the historical reconstruction of how the Gospels came into existence may be explainable in terms of the Gospel writers making use of fixed, stereotyped oral (and partially written) learning. Riesner points especially to the following facts:

- Jesus employs these methods of instruction in order to assure faithful transmission. The stereotyped method is visible in Jesus' references to and interpretations of Scripture, his use of summaries, and the rich employment of various Jewish figures of speech (*mašal*). Jesus' teaching style includes brevity, imagery, and the use of vivid language. He uses parallelism, rhythm, rhyme, chiasm, pairs, alliteration, assonance, and aphorisms. He also connects events with instruction and involves himself in memorable dialogues and controversial discussions.
- The disciples provide the personal continuity of tradition between Jesus' life and teaching and the beginnings of the messianic church. We note in this context the movement from "disciple" to "apostle," or "sent one."¹⁸ The intent of all this is to facilitate memorization and preserving the continuity of witness-tradition.

*Dissimilarities.*¹⁹ The following additional elements employed by Jesus are not typical for elementary school education, yet they accentuate Jesus' intent to embed stereotyped memory in his initial followers.

- The community which Jesus develops with his disciples surpasses that of the (sometimes close) pupil-teacher relationships. This intensifies the learning process.

18. See Herman Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Canon of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1988), concerning the kerygmatic, apostolic, and teaching ministry of the disciples of Christ, all elements of which point back to the Christ of history.

19. For the following, see Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*, 297–496.

- Jesus calls his pupils prophetically;²⁰ they do not simply come to him as was the case in advanced Torah schools (e.g., Saul of Tarsus seeking to be trained under Gamaliel). This factor emphasizes the initiative of the teacher to form and shape the pupil.²¹
- Parallel to this, Jesus' unusual authority (including his "I am" and "Amen" sayings) is without analogy in Judaism.
- The fact that Jesus sends out his disciples in pairs to teach and practice his instruction deepens learning and relationships while the message is being spread.
- A further factor in stereotyped memorization is the fact that the disciples report to Jesus what they had taught, accomplished, and failed in (Mark 6:30).
- Jesus teaches as an itinerant teacher and prophet, thus exposing the disciples to extensive repetition with slight variations. John Wenham notes: "It is inevitable that an itinerant preacher must repeat himself again and again, sometimes in identical words, sometimes with slight variations, sometimes with new applications; sometimes an old idea will appear in an entirely new dress."²² Part of the literary symmetry and variation of the Gospels may thus be traceable to verbatim or near-verbatim repetitions and variations by Jesus himself.

The above-mentioned circumstances of stereotyped oral transmission are fundamental for reliable transmission of Jesus' teaching. Conservative collection and systematic transmission through oral and written means thus mark the general attitude toward his teaching (see Acts 20:35; 1 Cor. 7:10; 1 Cor. 11:23–25).²³

20. Cf. Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*, 140.

21. Ibid.

22. John W. Wenham, "Synoptic Independence and the Origin of Luke's Travel Narrative," *New Testament Studies* 27 (1981): 507–15 [509].

23. Cf. Earle Ellis, "Preformed Traditions and Their Implications for Pauline Christology," in *Christology, Controversy and Community*, ed. David Horrell and Christopher Mark Tuckett (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 303–20, esp. 310.

It must also be noted that there is considerable evidence that at least some of the disciples were bilingual, speaking Aramaic and Greek. This provides the assurance that Jesus' "curriculum" was safely transmitted from Aramaic to Greek. In appendix A, we provide a brief description of how the Gospel of Mark was most likely composed from such stereotyped oral learning of the disciples and cast in the genre of ancient bios.

Conclusion

We can summarize by stating that John Mark, by way of Peter,²⁴ receives selections from a stereotyped and systematically memorized body of material containing "good news" about and from Jesus. The selections are cast in the genre of an ancient biographical account (bios), all of which is to shape and influence the readers/hearers in a significant way. Their lives are to be profoundly transformed by what they hear and read in Mark's Gospel.

24. See appendix A.