

The Gospel of Mark in Context

A Social-Scientific Reading of the First Gospel

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THE GOSPEL OF MARK IN CONTEXT
A Social-Scientific Reading of the First Gospel

Matrix: The Bible in Mediterranean Context 14

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about which the text speaks (when the reading scenario has explanatory capacity), and when it allows us to discover aspects of the text and its world that are not evident at first sight (when the reading scenario has heuristic potential). To possess these two qualities, the reading scenario must be elaborated from studies of societies similar to the society presupposed by the text.

Once the pertinent model is identified, we can use it to reconstruct the particular portion of the social life presupposed in the text we want to read. The result will be a first draft of the reading scenario, which we can use to determine the meaning of that particular text in its original context. We may also confront this initial reading scenario with other texts or data contemporary with it. This confrontation has a double objective: it serves to test the pertinence and utility of the models selected and, at the same time, contributes to improving the reading scenario by adjusting it to the concrete situation presupposed by the text.¹² If possible, it might be helpful to confront the model with data external to the text since that helps to reduce the risk of circularity—that is, the risk of constructing a scenario from a text to explain, then, with this scenario, that same text.

This validating process can be repeated until the resulting scenario is refined. This scenario will facilitate reading the text in a social context close to that in which it originated, and recovering the meaning it originally had. So the contextual analysis contributes to explaining the meaning of the text in its original context.¹³

Theme and Content of This Book

The studies collected in this book provide some examples of how the use of models from the social sciences can contribute to a more accurate and considerate reading of the Gospel of Mark. They are revised and updated versions of papers previously published. I have collected them in this book because I am convinced that they can offer some clues to understanding particular aspects of the Gospel of Mark and show the advantages of using appropriate reading scenarios. As will become apparent to the attentive reader, I resort in them to *emic* and *etic* models, sometimes combining both

12. This confrontation is realized with the help of the logical process known as *abduction*, which has as its source successive confirmations of an initial hypothesis; see Douven, “Abduction.”

13. Neyrey, ed., *Social World of Luke–Acts*; Neyrey and Stewart, eds., *Social World of the New Testament*.

INTRODUCTION

types of social models to understand a particular text. I adopt this eclectic approach because I think that exegetical methodology is instrumental, and therefore should serve the purpose of exegesis, which is explaining the original meaning of the text.

The studies are arranged following the sequence of Mark's narrative, but the reader can choose to read them in a different order because each chapter is complete and self-contained. Nonetheless, reading them in the order in which they have been arranged is also a good choice. In any case, I offer here a brief presentation so that the reader can make up his/her mind on how to proceed.

The first chapter has an introductory character. It intends to inform the reader how I understand the compositional process of Mark's Gospel and its historical location.¹⁴ Some aspects, such as the critical role played by the pre-Markan passion narrative, the choice of the biographical genre, and the historical location of the Gospel, lay the foundation for discussion in the following chapters. Hence, it would be advisable to start with this chapter.

The second chapter deals with a particular aspect of Mark's literary genre.¹⁵ In this sense, it complements the previous chapter because it concentrates on the main objection presented to the biographical hypothesis, namely, that the Gospel does not begin narrating the infancy of the protagonist as Hellenistic biographies usually did. This objection to the hypothesis that the Gospel of Mark is a biography has not yet been answered adequately, and I think the reading scenario proposed in this chapter can explain this fact.

The third chapter is unique in this collection because it does not study a Markan text. Instead, its purpose is to reconstruct a collection of controversies used by the evangelist in the composition of his *Life of Jesus*.¹⁶ I finally decided to include this chapter for two reasons. The first is that it makes present in the book the complex history of the traditions behind Mark's Gospel. The second is that this Galilean collection connects us with the group of Jesus believers who elaborated and transmitted those traditions.

Chapter 4 can be read in connection with Chapter 2 because both of them explore different aspects of Jesus' baptism. This study focuses on

14. The first four paragraphs are a revised version of Guijarro, "Composición del evangelio de Marcos." The last paragraph on the historical location of the Gospel is from Guijarro, "Cultural Trauma," 141–46.

15. Originally published as Guijarro, "Why Does the Gospel?"

16. Originally published as Guijarro, "First Disciples."

Jesus' vision in that passage and in the transfiguration story.¹⁷ It combines recent *etic* studies on the visual process with the *emic* understanding of the eyes and the visual in traditional Mediterranean societies to construct a reading scenario that helps understand the complexity and significance of visions in the Gospel of Mark.

Chapter 5 goes a step further on the path opened by the previous, in order to grasp the meaning of some unfamiliar aspects of Mark's narrative. If the previous chapter introduces the reader to the world of visions, this one aims at providing readers with adequate lenses to understand Jesus' healings.¹⁸ The way critical exegesis has explained these stories reveals that modern Western readers do not have the appropriate conceptual framework to understand them. Resourcing to medical anthropology, this chapter intends to provide such a conceptual framework.

Chapter 6 concentrates on one momentous event in Mark's narrative: Jesus anointing in Bethany. This is the only place in the whole gospel where Jesus commands those present in the story and those reading or hearing it to remember something.¹⁹ This command invites the reader to consider what is being narrated in the story. Nevertheless, if the reader does not have the right clues, he or she will not be able to grasp the message implied in the woman's action. Once more, having an adequate reading scenario may help to retrieve meanings presupposed in a text produced in a high-context society.

Finally, Chapter 7 proposes reading the last part of Mark's narrative in a scenario that combines historical information about Mark's audience with a social model elaborated to understand how groups deal with the experience of trauma.²⁰ From a different point of view, the reading proposed in Chapter 7 confirms some of the aspects of Mark's Gospel presented in the first chapter, such as the centrality of the passion narrative in the composition of the Gospel and the importance of contextualizing Mark's Gospel in the aftermath of the Jewish War. Chapter 7 also contributes to explaining the role of the Olivet Discourse (Mark 13) in the Gospel of Mark.

A brief conclusion will illustrate how contextual exegesis can contribute to a better understanding of Mark's Gospel and other biblical texts.

17. Originally published as Guijarro, "Visions of Jesus."

18. Originally published as Guijarro, "Healing Stories."

19. Originally published as Guijarro and Rodríguez, "'Messianic' Anointing."

20. Originally published as Guijarro, "Cultural Trauma."