

“This approach exposes the meaning in each pericope with powerful and remarkable insight.” —Michael S. Horton

MARK

BY THE

BOOK



A NEW MULTIDIRECTIONAL METHOD FOR
UNDERSTANDING THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

P. W. SMUTS

“We are blessed with scholarly commentaries on Mark’s Gospel, as well as with more popular surveys. Rarer are those that bring out the richness of the text with the research of the former and the pastoral sensitivity of the latter. One feature distinguishing *Mark by the Book* is the rubric applied to each story: reading it downward (Christ-centered focus), sideways (parallel Gospel accounts), backward (Old Testament prophecy), and forward (future fulfillment). This approach exposes the meaning in each pericope with powerful effect and remarkable insight. I highly recommend this exploration of Mark.”

—**Michael Horton**, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

“What a wonderful idea—a commentary for redemptive-historical preaching! Here we have a skillful unfolding of the message of Mark, first by close examination of the text, not verse-by-verse, but by looking intently at the Gospel’s crucial, life-changing stories—stories that reveal to us the character, person, and deeds of Jesus. Smuts then compares Mark’s telling with other Gospels to underscore Mark’s special interests, takes note of how Jesus fulfills the hopes of Israel flowing from the Old Testament, and finally shows us how Jesus affects the future, the rest of the New Testament, and the church. Dr. Smuts has clearly immersed himself in Mark, not as an isolated text but as part of God’s whole Bible, addressed to God’s whole people, and here is the fruit of his study: informed, accessible, enthusiastic, and pastoral.”

—**Dan G. McCartney**, Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Redeemer Seminary, Dallas

“Premised on the redemptive-historical character of biblical revelation, Smuts’s studies in Mark’s Gospel provide instructive examples of his ‘multidirectional’ hermeneutic that also demonstrate the potential of his approach for a sound understanding of the other Gospels. Without necessarily agreeing with the author’s exegetical conclusions at every point, not only his intended audience of college students but others—seminarians, pastors, college and seminary teachers, and

other interested persons—will benefit from this carefully researched and clearly conceived and written volume.”

—**Richard B. Gaffin Jr.**, Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology,
Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

“I commend *Mark by the Book* for four reasons. First, experience: it is the product of years of teaching students. Second, focus: it is crystal clear, insightful, and Christ centered. Third, practicality: it works. The author has successfully used it to train students how to interpret Scripture better. Fourth, fruit: the result is better handling of God’s Word, more love for Jesus, and a greater zeal to spread the good news—four very good things!”

—**Robert A. Peterson**, Professor of Systematic Theology, Covenant
Theological Seminary, St. Louis

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A NEW MULTIDIRECTIONAL
METHOD FOR UNDERSTANDING
THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

P. W. SMUTS


P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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I dedicate this book to the wife of my youth, Dagmar, my best friend, a true “helpmeet,” a fellow disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ, and an heir with me of the gracious gift of life.

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FOREWORD

SERIOUS STUDY of the four Gospels is a rich and rewarding enterprise. In these documents—attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John from the earliest centuries of the church—the Spirit of God gives us a three-dimensional portrait of the most appealing and alarming, comforting and confrontational, majestic and meek and mystifying person ever to walk the earth: “Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” as Mark introduces him (Mark 1:1).

Serious study of the Gospels is not only spiritually enriching, but also a daunting challenge. The person of Jesus reaches out from the page to take hold of us in disconcerting ways. He does not let us distance ourselves as aloof readers or scholars, but insists on addressing us as fallen and alienated image-bearers of God, in need of the redemption that he came to earth to achieve, at the highest cost to himself. Moreover, in order for us to grasp the meaning of the accounts that make up any of the four versions of the good news, we need to pay attention to the setting of any passage within several contexts simultaneously. Of course, for any text anywhere in Scripture, our interpretation must consider its various contexts. We will hear its message most truly and most fully when we notice its location in its own book and historical situation, and then in the broader flow of the Bible’s unfolding history of redemption and revelation. But for the Gospels, even more contexts demand our attention, if we are going to hear all that the Spirit of truth says in his testimony to the incarnate Son and Servant of God through these inspired good-news-tellers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Learning to read the Gospels is somewhat like learning to ride a bike. To make progress, or even to survive without bruised elbows and skinned knees, you need to pay attention to many things at once:

pedaling, gripping the handlebars, steering, keeping your balance, leaning on the turns (but not too far), avoiding obstacles ahead, staying out of the path of approaching vehicles behind, and keeping an eye out for cross-traffic from the side. Similarly, as Dr. P. W. Smuts shows, to read the Gospels well and to savor the richness of their revelation of Jesus the Christ, we must pay attention in four directions at once, or at least in close and intentional succession. In the introduction to a multidirectional hermeneutic for exploring the Gospels, Dr. Smuts explains why and how we need to read each passage *downward* (seeing its depth in the context of the evangelist's whole document), *sideways* (comparing it with parallel accounts, particularly in the other two Synoptic Gospels), *backward* (discerning allusions to previous revelation in the Old Testament), and *forward* (tracing motifs in Jesus' ministry as they are developed in the rest of the New Testament, for the church this side of the cross, the resurrection, and the descent of the Spirit).

Just as a young child taking her "maiden voyage" on a two-wheeler takes comfort and courage from knowing that Dad is trotting alongside, his hand stabilizing the bike and its rider and his voice of experience offering coaching and encouragement, so in *Mark by the Book* a seasoned New Testament scholar and teacher runs with us through Mark's compact, yet fully packed witness to the good news. Dr. Smuts teaches us how to read the Synoptic Gospels for all they are worth by showing us how it is done. His blend of coaching and modeling makes sound hermeneutical theory concrete in practice. But he does more than this. Each chapter is not merely a hermeneutics lesson or lab. An aroma of worship and a summons to trust in the suffering and risen Messiah pervade the exposition, even as we watch multidirectional reading performed soundly and soberly.

Another feature that distinguishes *Mark by the Book* from some approaches to the Synoptics, in both evangelical and historical-critical circles, is the way in which Dr. Smuts's confidence in the divinely imparted theological *unity* of the whole biblical canon—Old Testament and New Testament—enriches his backward and forward readings. Fully mindful of the historical contrasts that distinguish the Scriptures conveyed to Israel in the age of anticipation from the far fuller, semi-eschatological revelation that accompanied the coming of Christ, Dr. Smuts shows—through the numerous Old Testament allusions embedded in Mark's

Gospel—that the same God of truth who spoke of old through prophets has now spoken at last in the Son (Heb. 1:1–4). Promise and fulfillment are related to each other by both continuity and progress. Dr. Smuts’s forward readings likewise remind us that the teaching and events that Mark conveys to the post-Pentecost church actually occurred before Pentecost, in Jesus’ humble and powerful kingdom-inaugurating ministry, which led to his death and resurrection. The rest of the New Testament—both the continuing narrative of the book of Acts and the Epistles’ doctrinal and ethical instruction—provides the perspective that we need to “translate,” for example, Jesus’ heart-searching challenge to a rich young man into the Spirit’s word to the whole church throughout time and around the world (Mark 10:17–31). As with the movement from Old Testament anticipation to the dawn of God’s kingdom in Christ’s earthly ministry, so also as particular passages in Mark are read in the wider and later horizon of the whole New Testament, we see a beautiful blend of continuity and elaboration in the fullness of God’s Word that now addresses the church.

With pleasure I invite you to learn a wise and full-orbed approach to interpreting the Synoptic Gospels by following Dr. Smuts’s lead as he reads Mark “by the Book”—the *whole Book* that God’s Spirit has breathed out in his witness to Jesus the Son. Listen to the voice of the second evangelist in his quartet with the others, pick up the echoes of God’s earlier words through Israel’s prophets, and attend to the Spirit’s commentary in Acts and the Epistles. As your reading skills grow, may your trust in Jesus, the Servant-King to whom Mark testifies, grow as well.

Dennis E. Johnson, PhD
 Professor of Practical Theology
 Westminster Seminary California

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I AM CONSCIOUS that in writing this book, my first, I stand on the shoulders of many others. I am grateful to the Lord God for his providential guidance that has brought me into contact with teachers and pastors—both in the present and from a bygone era—and colleagues and friends, who have inspired me to love and serve the Lord Jesus Christ, the subject matter of this book. I am reminded of the words of J. C. Ryle, a nineteenth-century churchman, who wrote as follows in his classic work *Holiness*:

It would be well if professing Christians in modern days studied the four Gospels more than they do. No doubt all Scripture is profitable. It is not wise to exalt one part of the Bible at the expense of another. But I think it should be good for some who are very familiar with the Epistles, if they knew a little more about Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Now why do I say this? I say it because I want professing Christians to know more about Christ. It is well to be acquainted with all the doctrines and principles of Christianity. It is better to be acquainted with Christ Himself. It is well to be familiar with faith, and grace, and justification, and sanctification. They are all matters “pertaining to the King.” But it is far better to be familiar with Jesus Himself, to see the King’s own face, and to behold His beauty. This is one secret of eminent holiness. He that would be conformed to Christ’s image, and become a Christ-like man, must be constantly studying Christ Himself.¹

It would be a worthy outcome if this book, in any measure, inspired the reader to constantly study Christ himself.

1. J. C. Ryle, *Holiness* (Welwyn, UK: Evangelical Press, 1979), 191.

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I want to thank the Board of the Bible Institute of South Africa for granting me a sabbatical during which a substantial portion of this book was completed. I also want to acknowledge the prayers of friends, on both sides of the Atlantic, that have sustained and encouraged me during the writing process. A special word of thanks must go to Robert Peterson, whose guidance and assistance, particularly in the early stages of this writing project, were of enormous help in bringing this book to publication.

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INTRODUCTION TO A MULTIDIRECTIONAL GOSPEL HERMENEUTIC

THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS play an important role in the Christian faith. These Gospels are all about Jesus, the cornerstone of the Christian faith. It is therefore important that the Christian reader have a clear understanding of this part of the Bible. But the interpreter of the Gospels is faced with several challenges that include the relationship between the Old Testament and the Gospels, the relationship between the various Gospels, and the relationship between the Christian and the Gospels. In the case of the Old Testament, how does Jesus fulfill these Scriptures? In the case of the other Gospels, should the goal be to harmonize the Gospels or preserve their distinctives? In the case of the believer, can the teaching of the Gospels simply be applied to the Christian? For many Christians, the approach to these questions can be uncritical, or hit and miss; no model or set of principles is in place to address them. Commentaries, generally speaking, are not much help. The reader is left to guess at the principles that govern a commentator's interpretation or exegesis of the text. Books that describe the process of interpreting the Gospels sometimes discuss this matter under the general heading of interpreting narrative literature; they do not always take into account some of the distinctives of interpreting the Gospels. Even books that do focus exclusively on Gospel exegesis can be overtechnical and theoretical, with little practical application of the principles taught. The reader of the Gospels is all too often left to his or her own devices. Consequently, the Gospels are easily misinterpreted and misap-

plied in the modern context. The purpose of this book is to address this problem by describing and applying a straightforward approach to the interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels that can benefit any interpreter of these Scriptures.

A traditional evangelical model of biblical interpretation draws a distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics. The goal of exegesis is to determine what the biblical text *meant* in its original historical context, while the goal of hermeneutics is to determine what the biblical text *means* for the reader today. To achieve this goal, as a first step, interpreters must place themselves in the shoes of the original readers, so to speak, as they analyze the details of the text in its immediate literary context, sometimes referred to as the *co-text*. This places the focus firmly on the details of the text. In the case of narrative material such as the Gospels, these details include the setting, characters, story line, and flow of the text, which the interpreter should factor in to determine the author's intended meaning in the historical context. On occasion, an introductory or concluding statement in a unit of text will clue the reader to the author's intended meaning. Accurate exegesis will adequately explain all the details of the text.

In the case of the Synoptic Gospels, we argue that this traditional model of interpretation should be expanded to include an approach that grounds the Gospels in the entire canon of Scripture. Simply put, the proper literary context of the text of the Gospels is the whole Bible. This perspective on the Gospels reflects the progressive nature and organic unity of biblical revelation. Old Testament quotations, allusions, or motifs are scattered throughout the Gospels, alerting the reader to the need to factor in the broader Old Testament or redemptive-historical context of the text. Moreover, in the case of so-called Gospel double or triple traditions (i.e., parallel accounts in two or three of the Synoptic Gospels), a comparative reading of the parallel accounts can help the reader to better discern the purpose of a particular Gospel account. A consideration of the rest of the New Testament writings will enable the Christian reader to identify any subsequent teaching or developments that may qualify the contemporary application of the Gospels on a particular motif or theme. Consequently, the ideal reader of the Gospels is one who interprets them in the broader flow of redemptive history—what precedes and

what follows—thereby detecting connections, contrasts, and developments found elsewhere in Scripture that relate directly to the interpretation and application of the text being interpreted. This, in a nutshell, is the model that we will apply to the interpretation of the Gospels. We have dubbed this model a *multidirectional* approach to the interpretation of the Gospels to reflect the dynamics of reading the Gospels from the various perspectives—downward, sideways, backward, and forward—alluded to above.

A brief historical perspective on this matter may be helpful at this point. With the advent of redaction criticism during the last century that construed the Gospel writers as theologians, rather than “cut-and-paste” editors of traditions, it became the practice, even among evangelicals, to seek to establish the distinctive theology of each of the Gospels. The goal was to preserve the theological distinctives of each Gospel rather than to attempt to harmonize the different accounts. So it became commonplace to speak of Matthean or Markan or Lukan theology, each with its own distinctive portrait of Jesus.¹ The publication of various synopses of the canonical Gospels presented parallel material side by side to facilitate a comparative reading of the Gospels as a strategy to identify the particular distinctive(s) of each synoptic account.

We recognize that the Synoptic Gospel writers did each compose their narratives with a distinct purpose in mind. Luke is the most explicit in this regard (Luke 1:4; cf. John 20:31). In the case of Matthew and Mark, whose Gospels contain no explicit purpose statements, the sense of purpose can be detected in the narrative details of each Gospel, and should guide the interpretation of these writings. There is no doubt that a comparative or *sideways* reading of the Gospels can be of considerable help when attempting to discern the particular purpose of any Gospel text. Agreements and differences in the wording and arrangement between parallel materials will alert the reader to the distinctives of each Gospel.² The meaning of any text should be grounded in all the

1. In the Gospels, you have Jesus on the move. Therefore, in this digital age, it is probably more accurate to think of the Gospels as edited video clips of Jesus' life, with each Gospel writer selecting the same or different camera angles of the same incidents, or selecting different video material to narrate his distinctive record of the life and ministry of Jesus.

2. The redaction critic may ask how one Gospel writer changed or adapted a parallel tradition as a clue to determining the theological perspective of a particular Gospel text. This question

narrative details, however, not just in those details that are unique to it. The goal of a sideways reading is to view all the details of the text in the light shed by the other Gospel writers. Parallel accounts should not be blended so as to distort the meaning of a particular Gospel text.³ The literary integrity of each Gospel should be preserved. The immediate literary context of any Gospel text should therefore remain primary in any hermeneutical endeavor, a process that we refer to as a *downward* reading of the Gospel, reflecting the motion of interpreting the text in light of what precedes and what follows it.

This sideways and downward Gospel reading strategy should, in our opinion, be expanded to include a so-called *backward* reading of the Gospels that factors in their Old Testament background. The fingerprints of the Old Testament are all over the pages of the Gospels. One writer highlights the foundational role of the Old Testament in the Gospels as follows:

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of the function of the OT in the Gospels. It is readily apparent that the Jewish Scriptures were foundational to many of Jesus' teachings and probably to his self-understanding as well. Specific OT passages and themes lie behind many of the parables and often lie at the center of debate between

usually assumes a particular chronological sequence for the composition of the Gospels based on an analysis of the possible literary interdependence between them. The exact nature of any literary interdependence remains a point of contention, referred to as the *synoptic problem* by modern scholarship. Today many scholars would argue for Markan priority, that is, that Mark was the first to write his Gospel. A few scholars, however, continue to insist that Matthew was the first to pen his Gospel. The facts are such that it is unwise to be dogmatic about any of the proposed solutions to this problem. Consequently, it becomes precarious to base an interpretation of a Gospel text on any particular composition sequence or source-critical theory. In our opinion, however, this state of affairs does not undermine the legitimacy of a sideways reading of the text, as long as the reader uses a parallel tradition to illuminate the significance of the details of a Gospel text without importing details that are foreign to that particular Gospel. The Gospels scholar Robert Stein contends that even if Mark's Gospel, the focus of our study, was the first to be composed, the reader of this Gospel is still given clues to Mark's particular theological perspective in the so-called Markan seams, insertions, summaries, arrangement of material, introduction, choice of vocabulary, Christological titles, modifications, selection and omission of material, and conclusion. Our proposed sideways reading of the Gospel will help the reader to identify the presence and significance of some of these details in the text. Robert H. Stein, "Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels," in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 349–51.

3. We will not attempt to reconcile all the differences between the parallel accounts; other resources address this issue. E.g., Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987). Rather, our focus will be on interpreting the details of the text.

Jesus and his opponents. The relationship of Jesus to the OT was not lost on the Evangelists. They sought in various ways to show how Jesus understood Scripture, fulfilled Scripture and was clarified by Scripture. In fact there is no significant idea developed in the Gospels that does not in some way reflect or depend on the OT.⁴

The Gospel writers assumed a knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures on the part of their readers when they composed their narratives. Consequently, any interpreter who ignores this broader literary context runs the risk of misconstruing the meaning of the Gospels. The reader of the Gospels will be prompted to engage with the Old Testament by the presence of Old Testament quotations, by the recognition of Old Testament allusions or motifs, or through word studies that reveal an Old Testament pedigree. This exercise is not without its difficulties. Much exegetical insight may be gained, however, if the reader simply takes the step to access and reflect on the literary context of the Old Testament quotation, allusion, or word occurrence, to ascertain how it may affect the meaning of the Gospel narrative in which it occurs.⁵ Our backward analysis of Mark 1:1–8, in chapter 2, will provide some additional guidelines regarding this component of the exegetical process.

Finally, we argue that it is also necessary to employ a so-called *forward* reading of the Gospels. Although Jesus Christ is the One who fulfills the Old Testament Scriptures (Matt. 5:17), this should not be

4. C. A. Evans, "Old Testament in the Gospels," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 579.

5. According to Craig Evans, "to assess properly the function of the OT in the NT, the following questions must be raised: (1) What OT text(s) is (are) being cited? . . . (2) Which text-type is being cited (Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic)? . . . How does the version that the NT has followed contribute to the meaning of the quotation? (3) Is the OT quotation part of a wider tradition or theology in the OT? If it is, the quotation may be alluding to a context much wider than the specific passage from which it has been taken. (4) How did various Jewish and Christian groups and interpreters understand the passage? . . . (5) In what ways does the NT citation agree or disagree with the interpretations found in the versions and other ancient exegeses? Has the Jesus/Christian tradition distinctively shaped the OT quotation and its interpretation, or does the NT exegesis reflect interpretation current in pre-Christian Judaism? (6) How does the function of the quotation compare to the function of other quotations in the NT writings under consideration? Has a different text-type been used? Has the OT been followed more closely or less so? (7) Finally, how does the quotation contribute to the argument of the NT passage in which it is found?" *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 6–7. Some of these legitimate questions that Evans raises demand a level of expertise that eludes all but a few in the field. By focusing on questions 1, 3, and 7 of Evans's list, our approach to the Old Testament background is designed to make it accessible to the average reader of the Bible.

misunderstood to mean that the canonical Gospels, which record his ministry, represent the pinnacle or completion of redemptive revelation. Rather, the Gospels reflect a time of transition in redemptive history that bridges the old and new covenants. The Gospels deal with the inauguration of God's kingdom that leads into the church age, signaled by the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–21). This subsequent church age, sometimes referred to as “the last days” (e.g., Acts 2:17, quoting Joel 2:28), ushers in the end of the age and the consummation of God's kingdom. The church's infancy is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, its struggles addressed in the New Testament Epistles, and its glorious climax spelled out in the Apocalypse of John. The point is that the Gospels and the rest of New Testament revelation represent two different periods in redemptive history.⁶ The Christian reader lives in this church age, and not in the redemptive-historical era of the Gospels. Accordingly, we argue, the interpreter of the Gospels cannot insist on a simple and straightforward application of the Gospels in the church age; the progress of redemptive history may have brought changes or introduced elements of discontinuity.

Jesus' instruction to the man healed of his leprosy illustrates the point: “See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them” (Mark 1:44). This command cannot simply be applied to the believer today; it cannot be obeyed as it stands, whether by a Jewish or Gentile believer in the church today. Consequently, the Christian is compelled to ask how developments in the subsequent New Testament-era canonical writings may qualify or modify Jesus' teaching for the churchgoer.⁷ We call this process a forward reading of the

6. We cannot date the New Testament writings with any degree of precision. But even if the Synoptic Gospels were written later than some of the New Testament Epistles, this does not alter the fact that they reflect an earlier and different stage in redemptive history. Contrary to some critical scholarship, we are assuming at this point that the Gospels reflect the life of the historical Jesus rather than later developments within the early church.

7. A text such as 2 Timothy 3:16–17 makes the point that all Scripture has applicatory relevance to the believer in the church age. So truths or principles may be gleaned from earlier stages of redemptive history to inform the Christian believer's behavior today (see Heb. 11:1–40; 12:16–17). But this should not be misunderstood to mean that all Scripture can simply be applied without modification to the believer today. For example, the Christian no longer offers Old Testament animal sacrifices because of the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. The flow of the story of salvation makes this obvious, a point reinforced by the teaching of the letter to the Hebrews (Heb. 9:26). Yet the principle of sacrifice still applies to the Christian, a truth taught by an oft-

Gospels. This step applies even when we may deem obedience to a particular command of Jesus possible. So, for example, a straightforward application of Jesus' command to the so-called rich young ruler would require that every seeker "go, sell everything you have and give to the poor" (Mark 10:21). A forward reading of the Gospels, however, reveals that this command is not applied to other seekers or disciples in the early church, although the voluntary practice of selling one's possessions and helping the needy is evident on occasion (e.g., Acts 2:45; 4:34–35). Consequently, the church has traditionally viewed Jesus' command to this rich young ruler as specific to this encounter, but not prescriptive for every Christian—rightly so, in our opinion. Thus, we may properly speak of the need to engage in this kind of forward reading of the Gospels.⁸ On occasion, this hermeneutic may well affirm that at many points the teaching of the Gospels can simply be applied to the Christian without qualification or modification. Nevertheless, this step will function as an important safeguard to ensure the valid application of gospel truth to the Christian.⁹

We have argued above for a multidirectional hermeneutic to accurately interpret the Synoptic Gospels and apply them to the

quoted verse in the New Testament (Rom. 12:1). We are simply arguing that the same principle, as a matter of course, should be applied to the interpretation and application of the Gospels to ensure a valid application of the truths taught.

8. McCartney and Clayton, in harmony with our proposed forward reading of the text, recommend the following steps to safeguard accurate application of the biblical text: establish how the biblical text transcends its original historical setting; identify the ways in which earlier events and institutions point to the later and fuller fulfillment; observe the context of the canon as a whole, or application of the so-called analogy of faith; and finally, identify how changes in the redemptive-historical situation may have affected the text's applicability in the present situation. Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Bridgepoint, 1994), 151. In a similar vein, authors Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard list a series of ten questions to determine whether the specific elements of a biblical passage can be applied unchanged to the Christian today. Most relevant for our purposes are the following two questions, which essentially affirm our forward reading of the Gospels: Does subsequent revelation limit the application of a particular passage even if the book in which it appears does not? Is the specific teaching "contradicted" elsewhere in ways that show that it was limited to exceptional situations? William W. Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 488–89.

9. As a general rule of biblical application, the Christian reader may helpfully ask as a safeguard, "What does the whole Bible teach on this matter?" before applying any text. This step will help to reduce the erroneous application of biblical truth by ensuring that the reader has the whole picture of what the Bible teaches on a particular point. Of course, in applying this maxim, the Christian reads not from the perspective of the Old Testament believer, but from that of the New Testament saint.

Christian reader—a downward, sideways, backward, and forward reading of any Synoptic Gospel text. A downward reading of the text focuses on the text within the context of the particular Gospel; a sideways reading focuses on all the Gospel parallel traditions. A backward reading focuses on the Old Testament background, while a forward reading focuses on a motif in the rest of the New Testament. The dynamics of this Gospel hermeneutic may be graphically represented as follows: **Text** \leftrightarrow Gospel \leftrightarrow Gospels \leftrightarrow Old Testament \leftrightarrow New Testament = accurate interpretation and application of the text to the Christian reader today!

Clearly, this model compels the reader to reflect on the Gospels against the broader sweep of redemptive history taught in the entire Bible. All of this may be neatly summarized in the principle: “The better you know the whole Bible, the better you will be able to interpret any part of the Bible!” While not limited to the interpretation of the Gospels, this principle has particular relevance to this type of literature. In this book, this multidirectional hermeneutic will be applied to Mark’s Gospel. The dynamic of this hermeneutic leads most naturally to the title of the book—*Mark by the Book!*

WHY MARK’S GOSPEL?

The value of this multidirectional model of interpretation is that it can be applied with benefit to the interpretation of any of the Synoptic Gospels.¹⁰ But why, then, focus on Mark’s Gospel? There are a number of reasons for this; let me mention just two of them. First, approximately 90 percent of Mark’s Gospel is reproduced in Matthew’s Gospel, and over 50 percent in Luke’s Gospel, facilitating a sideways reading of Mark’s narrative. Second, although Mark’s Gospel has relatively few Old Testament quotations compared to Matthew’s Gospel, a backward reading of Mark’s narrative will reveal a surprising number of Old Testament allusions, with the consequent need to factor in these Scriptures when interpreting this particular Gospel. Simply put, even Mark’s Gospel can benefit from a backward reading.

10. On occasion, of course, not all steps of this proposed model will apply—where, for example, no parallel traditions or Old Testament quotations or allusions are present in a particular Gospel text.

THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

The purpose of this book is to demonstrate to the Christian reader both the validity and the significant benefits of consistently applying this multidirectional model of interpretation to the Gospels. The reader expecting a complete commentary on Mark's Gospel will be disappointed. Our goal is not to write a commentary *per se*, or to insist on a particular interpretation of this Gospel; the focus of our study will rather be on the "how-to" of interpreting the Gospels. It should be obvious that this model is not dependent on any particular interpretation of the Gospel; the reader can disagree with our exegesis on a particular text without this invalidating the model as an approach to interpreting the Gospels. Indeed, in our opinion, there is nothing controversial about this model; rather, it is a repackaging into a single model of various accepted principles of how to interpret the Gospels that are not always held together, or consistently applied, when the Synoptic Gospels are interpreted.

THE PLAN AND STYLE OF THE BOOK

We will apply this multidirectional hermeneutic to a select number of passages from Mark's Gospel to illustrate the various steps of this model of interpretation. It is important that these passages be drawn from the entire Gospel to underscore the validity of this model as a Gospel hermeneutic. To achieve this goal, we have selected passages from each chapter of Mark's Gospel. The sequence in applying the steps of the model will be logical, rather than redemptive-theological—that is, first the downward, then the sideways, followed by the backward and forward readings of the text. In our analysis of each of these texts, the intention is to demonstrate the necessity and value of applying this model to the interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels, rather than to provide an exhaustive commentary on the details of the text.

The style of the book is accessible, rather than scholarly. It is designed for the college layperson, rather than the seminarian.

THE SOURCES FOR THE BOOK

As the title of this book suggests, the focus of this hermeneutical model is on the Bible as the primary resource for interpreting the Gospels.

The goal is to encourage the reader to pay close attention to the details of the text in a broader canonical context, to demonstrate that the Bible is essentially self-interpreting. This is not to deny the role or value of research into the secondary literature. In fact, the use of secondary literature is always recommended as a means to confirm or correct one's interpretation of the text, if not also to enrich one's understanding of it.

A number of excellent commentaries on Mark's Gospel can be consulted with benefit, ranging from the popular to the more scholarly commentators, such as James R. Edwards,¹¹ R. T. France,¹² David E. Garland,¹³ Robert H. Gundry,¹⁴ William Lane,¹⁵ and Robert H. Stein.¹⁶ I want to acknowledge my indebtedness to these commentators in particular.

Other useful sources that may help with the implementation of our hermeneutical model include a *Synopsis of the Four Gospels*¹⁷ that is designed to facilitate a sideways reading of the text. The recently published *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*¹⁸ is a comprehensive, helpful, albeit technical, resource that will facilitate a backward reading of the text. A comprehensive or complete concordance, such as *The NIV Complete Concordance*,¹⁹ will provide useful information for a forward reading of the text, supplemented by the cross-references contained in the well-known *Treasury of Scripture Knowledge*.²⁰ Indeed, a Bible with a good cross-referencing system will provide the Gospel reader with the basic information needed to implement our model of interpretation. In addition, a number of electronic Bible programs (for example, *BibleWorks*, *Logos*) incorporate useful

11. James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

12. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

13. David E. Garland, *Mark*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

14. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

15. William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

16. Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

17. Kurt Aland, ed., *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1987).

18. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

19. Edward W. Goodrick and John R. Kohlenberger III, *The NIV Complete Concordance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981).

20. R. A. Torrey, *The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990).

features and resources that can help the interpreter with this hermeneutical enterprise.

While the primary *resource* for this model of interpretation is the Bible as a whole, the primary *inspiration* of this approach is the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. This hermeneutical model not only underscores the centrality of Christ in the redemptive purposes of God, but also highlights both his Old Testament roots and his contemporary relevance for the Christian believer. May he receive all the honor and glory!

1

AN INTRODUCTION TO MARK'S GOSPEL

JESUS DID NOT put pen to papyrus to record his ministry and teaching. He entrusted this task to his disciples and ensured that they would succeed in the endeavor (e.g., John 14:26). The four canonical Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—bear eloquent testimony to this truth. Our focus will be on Mark's Gospel. As a first step, it is worthwhile to ask a number of basic questions relating to Mark's Gospel. These so-called questions of special introduction—the *who*, *what*, *when*, and *why* of this Gospel—will not only help to anchor Mark's Gospel in history, but also give us a handle to help us interpret it.

We know very little about Mark, other than the few references to him in the New Testament (see Acts 12:12, 25; 13:5, 13; 15:36–39; Col. 4:10–11; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 24; 1 Peter 5:13). He was not one of the Twelve who followed Jesus, although the New Testament links him to the apostle Paul and Barnabas (Acts 12:25; cf. 15:36–40), and tradition links him to the apostle Peter. Significantly, an oft-quoted early tradition states that Mark's Gospel is based on Peter's recollection of Jesus' words and deeds that Mark, as "Peter's interpreter," wrote down "accurately though not in order."¹ This apostolic connection bolsters our

1. A report by the church historian Eusebius quotes a lost document written by Papias (about A.D. 140), who in turn cites the apostle John as authority for the following information about this Gospel: "Mark, who became Peter's interpreter, wrote accurately, though not in order, all that he remembers of the things said or done by the Lord. For he had neither heard the Lord nor

confidence in the historical accuracy of Mark's Gospel and explains in part the wide circulation and acceptance that this Gospel has always enjoyed in the church.

Some scholars contend that Mark was the first to write a Gospel, but this contention is disputed.² What is certain is that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke paint similar portraits of Jesus. Their similarities become most apparent when they are compared with John's Gospel, which is quite different in character. Thus, they are usually referred to as the *Synoptic Gospels* because they literally "see together" Jesus' ministry and teaching. Yet in a historical context where, Luke tells us, many accounts of Jesus' words and deeds were circulating (Luke 1:1), not all necessarily accurate, these three Gospels also provide multiple witnesses to the life of Jesus that function as a yardstick to help non-eyewitnesses such as us distinguish the true portrait of Jesus from the false (cf. Deut. 19:15).

Mark's Gospel has been described as a "Passion narrative with an extended introduction,"³ reflecting the disproportionate amount of narrative space devoted to the last week of Jesus' life. Simply put, the cross looms large in Mark's portrait of Jesus; he cannot be understood apart from his suffering and death at Calvary. Mark writes a fast-paced account of Jesus' ministry. This is reinforced by his narrative style, which one commentator summarizes as follows:

Mark is the briefest, and in some ways the most attractive, of the four Gospels. Its sparse, unpretentious prose provides uniquely vivid images of Jesus as a Man of action. Mark's narratives are marked by the frequent use of "immediately," which carry us along from scene to scene up to the culminating act of Jesus' courage in

been one of His followers, but afterwards, as I said, he had followed Peter, who used to compose his discourses with a view to the needs of his hearers, but not as though he were drawing up a connected account of the Lord's sayings. So Mark made no mistake thus recording some things just as he remembered them. For he was careful of this one thing, to omit none of the things he had heard [from Peter] and to make no untrue statements therein." *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15, quoted in Lawrence O. Richards, *The Bible Reader's Companion*, electronic ed. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1991), 630.

2. This dispute is evident in discussions regarding the solution to the so-called synoptic problem.

3. Martin Kähler, quoted in Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels* (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1997), 116. Kähler's comment refers to the structure of all the Gospels, but is most commonly quoted with reference to Mark's Gospel.

boldly facing the cross. His use of the present tense draws us into the scenes he sketches and helps us see events as the writer does, as an eyewitness.⁴

We cannot be certain when Mark recorded his Gospel, but most contemporary commentators argue for a date in the middle to late A.D. 60s.⁵ An early tradition places Mark in Rome when he composed his Gospel. It is commonly argued that Mark's Gospel was also written to the predominantly Gentile church in Rome. The following evidence in his Gospel is sometimes harnessed to support this view:

- Its frequent transliteration (instead of translation) of Latin words (e.g., Mark 12:15; 15:16).
- Its scarcity of Old Testament quotations, and its omission of parables meaningful mainly to Jews (e.g., Good Samaritan; Pharisee and tax collector).
- Its explanations of Jewish words (3:17; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 14:36) and customs (7:3; 14:12; 15:42).

In our opinion, however, it is speculative to limit Mark's target audience to Rome. At best, these features suggest an audience that includes these readers. In fact, the many geographical references and Old Testament quotations and allusions that introduce Mark's Gospel (e.g., Mark 1:1–13, 40–44) could just as easily suggest a possible Jewish Palestinian audience, rather than a Gentile Roman set of readers. We are on firmer ground if we simply conclude that Mark wrote his Gospel for wide circulation, and that his intended audience included both Jewish and Gentile readers. Moreover, it should also be pointed out that undue emphasis on Mark's intended audience can deflect the Gospel reader from a proper focus on the person of Jesus Christ. It should always be remembered that the Gospels, "rightly divided," are primarily portraits of Jesus Christ (e.g., 1:1), and not windows into the problems faced by the early church, as some argue. For that matter, the Gospels were not written to solve our problems, although they do on occasion provide explicit guidance

4. Richards, *The Bible Reader's Companion*, 630.

5. See, for example, the discussion in D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 2005), 179–82.

for Christian living (e.g., 8:31-38; 9:33-37; 10:32-45). The challenge, as the Christian reader interprets and applies the Gospels, is not to lose a proper focus on Jesus Christ.

We are now ready to commence our study of Mark's Gospel. In our analysis of this Gospel, we will implement our multidirectional model of interpretation, beginning with a downward reading of the text followed by a sideways, backward, and forward reading, with a concluding summary section.

Foreword by Dennis E. Johnson



P. W. Smuts uses the gospel of Mark as a springboard to compel readers to interpret the Synoptic Gospels against the broader sweep of redemptive history by advocating a “multidirectional” hermeneutic—one that looks downward into the immediate context, sideways into parallel traditions, backward into the Old Testament background, and forward into relevant New Testament passages.

“What a wonderful idea—a commentary for redemptive-historical preaching! Here we have a skillful unfolding of the message of Mark. . . . Dr. Smuts has clearly immersed himself in Mark . . . and here is the fruit of his study: informed, accessible, enthusiastic, and pastoral.”

Dan G. McCartney, *Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Redeemer Seminary, Dallas*

“Dr. Smuts’s studies in Mark’s gospel provide instructive examples of his ‘multidirectional’ hermeneutic that demonstrate the potential of his approach for a sound understanding of the other gospels.”

Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia*

“I commend *Mark by the Book* for four reasons. First, experience: it is the product of years of teaching. Second, focus: it is crystal clear, insightful, Christ centered. Third, practicality: it works. The author has successfully used it to train students how to interpret Scripture better. Fourth, fruit: the result is better handling of God’s Word, more love for Jesus, and a greater zeal to spread the good news—four very good things!”

Robert A. Peterson, *Professor of Systematic Theology, Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis*

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