The Gospel According to Mark

Mark is the shortest, probably the earliest, and stylistically the simplest of the four Gospels. It was written in Greek. It has the smallest vocabulary of all the Gospels (only 1330 distinct words). Its style is the simplest, relying on the rhetorical device of parataxis: that is, the repetition of sentence forms beginning with “and” (Greek kai), where each sentence in the series is not necessarily subordinated or causally related to another (as opposed to sentence structures which have structures such as, “since . . . then,” or “because . . . therefore” or “if . . . then”). Mark says nothing about the birth and early life of Jesus, beginning only with the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus’s appearance (1:9). He tells many stories of Jesus’s experience, retells many of the parables, and reports Jesus’s teachings. But he does not do so in ways which create an order beyond that of a compilation (that is, there is little sense of why some stories come before others, or whether there is a narrative arc to the stories). It is believed by many scholars to have served as a source for other Gospels, especially Luke.

The key point, therefore, about the Gospel of Mark is that it comes off as a simple set of stories, with the feel (if not the fact) or oral transmission, written in an accessible language. It has the literary effect of legend rather than of epic, romance, sermon, or epistle.

One way of approaching the collection of tales about Jesus in Mark is to see them as stories of cleansing, healing, and making whole. Thus, stories about people with unclean spirits, leprosy, lameness, madness, withered limbs, hunger, anger, greed, etc. predominate. Jesus cleanses the Temple; he causes the fig tree to wither; he makes the blind see; he calms the oceans.

Some key things to consider:

What is the importance of sailing in the Gospel? How does Mark begin with

the story of the four fishermen and move through the stories of ship-travel?

what is the importance and effect of the story of calming the storm (4:35)?

How do these episodes compare with the narratives of travel in the Aeneid?

What is the nature of the human body in Mark? How are bodies ill or maimed

or in need of healing? How can we read these stories as parables of the body

politic, as well as of the human body? How do they resonate with Paul’s

notions of the body? How does the story of the withered hand (3:1-6)

resonate with discussions about circumcision?

What is the imagery of eating, fasting, feeding, and drinking in Mark?

How are so many of the miracles and parables keyed to stories of food

(e.g., sowing the grain, fasting, the fig tree, etc.)? How does this concern with

food and ingestion fit in with the very idea, and the story of, the Last Supper

as the Passover Seder in Mark?

How does Mark tell the story of the Passion: the trial, the crucifixion, and the

resurrection? What are his literary and emotional effects here?

The Gospel According to Luke

Unlike the Gospel According to Mark, Luke is written in a complex style that draws on the language of history, epic, and romance. The first sentence of the Gospel (1:1-4) has been called by one scholar “the most finely composed sentence in the whole of post-classical Greek literature.” NOTE: what do you think is meant by that statement?

Luke is written after Mark, and clearly relies on Mark for material. It is longer and fuller than Mark, containing accounts of the birth of John the Baptist, the Annunciation, and the birth of Jesus (Nativity). It highlights not just the parable-like stories but, more explicitly, the miracles of Jesus (and many of the best known parables are unique in Luke). Luke calls attention to the women in Jesus’s life, offering finely-drawn portraits of Elizabeth, Mary, and Mary Magdalene in particular. Finally, he offers a more nuanced version of the trial and crucifixion than Mark does, and he adds the scene on the road to Emmaus as a post-Crucifixion appearance (and as another scene of eating; Luke 24:13-32).

The key point about Luke is that it comes off as literature rather than as legend: it develops characters and motives; offers sub-plots and back stories; creates a sense of anticipation, development, and climax; presents dialogue in vivid ways; and makes it clear, at the very beginning, that it is a composed and crafted piece of writing drawing on, but also revising, pre-existing materials (this is the heart of 1:1-4).

One way to approach Luke, for example, is to compare his handling of the material that Mark handles: e.g., the withered hand, the leper, the man with the unclean spirit, etc. Another is to look at what is unique in Luke: e.g., the visit to Martha and Mary (10:38-42), the prodigal son (15:11-32), the Good Samaritan (10:25-37). What makes these stories different from those in Mark? Do they paint a different kind of portrait of Jesus than Mark does?

Look, too, at Luke’s version of the Last Supper – indeed, look at the entirety of Luke 22. What are the aspects of this version that make it dramatic, emotional, literary, etc?