

NEW  
TESTAMENT  
THEOLOGY

**THE THEOLOGY  
OF THE  
GOSPEL OF MARK**

W. R. TELFORD



This book presents the reader with a comprehensive view of the theology underlying the first narrative account of the life of Jesus. In chapter one Dr Telford introduces the background of the text and its general message, attempting briefly to place the Gospel (and therefore its theology) in its historical setting. In the second chapter, he describes and analyses the Gospel's theology, again from an historical perspective and with particular regard to its original context. In the third chapter, Telford goes on to examine the Gospel in relation to other relevant writings of the New Testament. Briefly reviewing this larger corpus and highlighting parallels and contrasts, where appropriate, he seeks to locate the Gospel's theology in its wider canonical context. The fourth and final chapter ranges even further afield, commenting on the Gospel's history of interpretation and on its significance in the contemporary context.

W. R. TELFORD is lecturer in Christian Origins and the New Testament in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Newcastle in the United Kingdom. He has written two books: *The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree: a Redaction-Critical Analysis of the Cursing of the Fig-tree Pericope in Mark's Gospel and its Relation to the Cleansing of the Temple Tradition* (1980), and *Mark* (1995). Editor of *The Interpretation of Mark* (1985, 2nd edn 1995), he has also contributed to a variety of edited works and journals, including *Theology*, the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, the *Epworth Review*, the *Journal of Biblical Literature* and the *Journal of Theological Studies*.

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## NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

General Editor: James D. G. Dunn,  
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This series sets out to provide a programmatic survey of the individual writings of the New Testament. It aims to remedy the deficiency of available published material which concentrates on the New Testament writers' theological concerns. New Testament specialists here write at greater length than is usually possible in the introduction to commentaries or as part of other New Testament theologies, and explore the theological themes and issues of their chosen books without being tied to a commentary format, or to a thematic structure provided from elsewhere. When complete, the series will cover all the New Testament writings, and will thus provide an attractive, and timely, range of texts around which courses can be developed.

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*For Andrena*

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## *Editor's preface*

Although the New Testament is usually taught within Departments or Schools or Faculties of Theology/Divinity/Religion, theological study of the individual New Testament writings is often minimal or at best patchy. The reasons for this are not hard to discern.

For one thing, the traditional style of studying a New Testament document is by means of straight exegesis, often verse by verse. Theological concerns jostle with interesting historical, textual, grammatical and literary issues, often at the cost of the theological. Such exegesis is usually very time-consuming, so that only one or two key writings can be treated in any depth within a crowded three-year syllabus.

For another, there is a marked lack of suitable textbooks round which courses could be developed. Commentaries are likely to lose theological comment within a mass of other detail in the same way as exegetical lectures. The section on the theology of a document in the Introduction to a commentary is often very brief and may do little more than pick out elements within the writing under a sequence of headings drawn from systematic theology. Excursuses usually deal with only one or two selected topics. Likewise larger works on New Testament Theology usually treat Paul's letters as a whole and, having devoted the great bulk of their space to Jesus, Paul and John, can spare only a few pages for others.

In consequence, there is little incentive on the part of teacher or student to engage with a particular New Testament document, and students have to be content with a general overview, at best complemented by in-depth study of (parts of) two or

three New Testament writings. A serious corollary to this is the degree to which students are thereby incapacitated in the task of integrating their New Testament study with the rest of their Theology or Religion courses, since often they are capable only of drawing on the general overview or on a sequence of particular verses treated atomistically. The growing importance of a literary-critical approach to individual documents simply highlights the present deficiencies even more. Having been given little experience in handling individual New Testament writings as such at a theological level, most students are very ill-prepared to develop a properly integrated literary and theological response to particular texts. Ordinands too need more help than they currently receive from textbooks, so that their preaching from particular passages may be better informed theologically.

There is need therefore for a series to bridge the gap between too brief an introduction and too full a commentary where theological discussion is lost among too many other concerns. It is our aim to provide such a series. That is, a series where New Testament specialists are able to write at a greater length on the theology of individual writings than is usually possible in the introductions to commentaries or as part of New Testament Theologies, and to explore the theological themes and issues of these writings without being tied to a commentary format or to a thematic structure provided from elsewhere. The volumes seek both to describe each document's theology, and to engage theologically with it, noting also its canonical context and any specific influence it may have had on the history of Christian faith and life. They are directed at those who already have one or two years of full-time New Testament and theological study behind them.

*University of Durham*

JAMES D. G. DUNN

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## *Preface*

My interest in the Gospel of Mark began when in 1972 I embarked on doctoral work at Cambridge (England) under the expert supervision of Dr Ernst Bammel, whose recent death has brought great sadness to all those who knew him and benefited from his immense erudition and scholarship. My fascination with the Gospel has further developed during my time of teaching and research in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Newcastle. My thanks, in the first instance, therefore, go to those students of mine whose diligence and enthusiasm has always made the business of teaching such a pleasant and stimulating one for me. This book was written over a period of two years, and for the most part in a number of concentrated sessions spent in Cambridge and in Hawarden. I should also like to thank, therefore, the Staff of the Cambridge University Library (that venerable institution within whose redoubtable walls I have spent so many productive hours!), the Bursar and Staff of Westcott House, Cambridge, and the Trustees, Warden, and Staff of St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden (this unique institution which offers such a welcome and such a service to all those engaged in the pursuit of what Gladstone himself described as 'divine learning'). All of these have given me in my limited periods of research the facilities and the incentive to finish the book. Particular thanks go to the Trustees of St Deiniol's for awarding me a Murray McGregor Fellowship, and to Dr Peter Jagger, and his worthy successor as Warden, Revd Peter Francis, for their friendship and encouragement. For making it possible for me to have a period of study leave, my appreciation goes to my colleagues at

Newcastle, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and the University Research Committee, and for general encouragement as well as helpful advice, thanks are due to my colleagues in Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas (SNTS) and at the British New Testament Conference. A particular word of thanks should be given to Professor Jimmy Dunn, the Editor of this series, for his infinite patience. This quality was also exhibited in no small measure by my loving wife, Andrena, whose enduring forbearance and cheerfulness have been a constant source of strength.

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## *Abbreviations*

BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
<i>BjRL</i>	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands Library</i>
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>DBI</i>	<i>The Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation</i> , eds. R. J. Collins, J. L. Houlden (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990)
<i>ETL</i>	<i>Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses</i>
<i>EvTh</i>	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
<i>ExpT</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>IDB</i>	<i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> , ed. G. A. Buttrick (New York and Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1962)
<i>IDB(S)</i>	<i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Supplementary Volume</i> , ed. K. Crim (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976)
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JTSouthAfr</i>	<i>Journal of Theology for South Africa</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSNTSS</i>	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>

<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NTA</i>	<i>New Testament Abstracts</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>PerspRelSt</i>	<i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
<i>SJT</i>	Scottish Journal of Theology
SNTSMS	Society of New Testament Studies Monograph Series
<i>TZ</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZThK</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

*The historical setting of the Gospel of Mark*

## INTRODUCTION

The words ‘The Theology of the Gospel of Mark’, in the title of this book are deceptively simple. The three major expressions of which the title is composed, however, are far from straightforward. They beg a number of important questions. Firstly, what do we mean by the word ‘Theology’ in connection with the Gospel of Mark? In focusing upon Mark as ‘theology’ rather than as ‘history’ or as ‘literature’, what aspects of the Gospel have we in mind? Secondly, what is intended by the use of the term ‘Gospel’ as applied to this first century text? What does the word mean, and how appropriate a description is it from a historical, literary or theological point of view? Thirdly, who is meant or what indeed is conveyed by the traditional attribution ‘Mark’? Was the Gospel written by the John Mark of the New Testament, as tradition claims, or is this a fiction? Where the theology of the Gospel is concerned, does it matter?

An act of literary communication involves, in essence, an author, a text and a reader, and the process of interpreting that text must take into account all three. What then do we mean in overall terms by ‘The Theology of the Gospel of Mark’? Do we mean the theology of the *author* – in other words, the religious ideas, the philosophical perspective, the theological convictions, in short, the ideology which motivated the evangelist to write, which was a product of his own age, culture and tradition, and which influenced the treatment of his sources? Do we mean the theology of the *text* itself, considered as a whole – in other words, the religious message which it conveys, irrespective of its

historical context, of the sources it draws upon or of the intention of its original author? Is ‘The Theology of the Gospel of Mark’ a theology constructed by the *reader* (or the ‘interpretative community’) from the text – in other words, a product of ‘engagement’ between the reader and the text, a religious dialogue or ‘revelation’ engendered by the interaction of the text with the reader’s experience past or present?

Given the Gospel’s use of sources, we might even ask, furthermore, whether the Gospel of Mark has a unified theology at all! One relatively conservative critic issues the following warning:

If Mark has preserved material which does not fully correspond to the view which he himself holds then are we at liberty to speak of a theology of the Gospel of Mark? Must we not rather speak of Mark’s theology? If a valid distinction can be drawn between these two then it may be that we should not look for a coherent and consistent theology in the Gospel but be prepared to find unevenness since he laid his theology over an existing theology, or theologies, in the tradition he received.<sup>1</sup>

If, on the other hand, there is a consistent theology in the Gospel – and a considerable body of recent Markan scholarship, one notes, is now highlighting the literary and theological features which integrate the Markan text<sup>2</sup> – the question remains as to how we might gain access to ‘The Theology of the Gospel of Mark’? If the theology resides in the mind of the evangelist, then is it to be recovered, as many insist, by using the historical-critical tools of source, form and redaction criti-

<sup>1</sup> E. Best, ‘Mark’s Preservation of the Tradition’ in W. R. Telford (ed.), *The Interpretation of Mark* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), pp. 163–4.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. T. J. Geddert, *Watchwords. Mark 13 in Markan Eschatology* (JSNTSS 26; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989); J. D. Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark’s Gospel* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1983); J. D. Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark. Jesus, Authorities, Disciples* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1989); B. L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence. Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1988); C. D. Marshall, *Faith as a Theme in Mark’s Narrative* (SNTSMS, 64; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); D. Rhoads and D. Michie, *Mark as Story. An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1982); J. Sergeant, *Lion let Loose. The Structure and Meaning of St Mark’s Gospel* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1988); M. R. Thompson, *The Role of Disbelief in Mark. A New Approach to the Second Gospel* (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989); M. A. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark’s World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989).

cism, that is, by separating tradition and redaction and so determining Mark's contribution to the developing Jesus tradition?<sup>3</sup> If the theology is rooted in the text as a whole, then is it best approached, as others argue, by holistic methods such as narrative criticism (and its sister discipline narrative theology)?<sup>4</sup> If the theology, on the other hand, is a construct arising out of the reader's engagement with the text, then should not other literary approaches such as reader-response criticism be employed to illuminate this process?<sup>5</sup>

So much for some of the questions raised by our title. It is time now to offer some answers, or at least to indicate what I myself understand by 'The Theology of the Gospel of Mark', what aspects of the subject I plan to cover in this book, and what approach I shall be taking to it. The term 'theology' comes from two Greek words, *theos* meaning 'God' and *logos* meaning 'word', or, by extension, 'rational discourse'. In its narrow sense, 'theology' means 'rational discourse about God'. In its broader sense, it refers to a complex of related subjects in Christian doctrine, subsuming such topics as Christology (from *Christos* meaning 'Christ' or 'Messiah'; and hence doctrine or understanding concerning the person or nature of Christ), soteriology (from *sōtēria* meaning 'salvation'; and hence doctrine or understanding concerning the work of Christ), pneumatology (from *pneuma* meaning 'spirit'; and hence doctrine or understanding concerning the Holy Spirit), cosmology (from *kosmos* meaning 'world' or 'universe'; and hence doctrine or

<sup>3</sup> For these methods, see C. E. Carlston, 'Form Criticism, NT' in *IDB(S)*, pp. 345–8; R. T. Fortna, 'Redaction Criticism, NT' in *IDB(S)*, pp. 733–5; K. Grobel, 'Form Criticism' in *IDB*, pp. 320–1; J. Muddiman, 'Form Criticism' in *DBI*, pp. 240–3; E. P. Sanders and M. Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1989), pp. 51–223; S. S. Smalley, 'Redaction Criticism' in I. H. Marshall (ed.), *New Testament Interpretation* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1977), pp. 181–95; W. R. Telford, *Mark* (New Testament Guides; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 37–85; S. H. Travis, 'Form Criticism' in Marshall (ed.), *Interpretation*, pp. 153–64; C. M. Tuckett, *Reading the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1987), pp. 78–135; C. M. Tuckett, 'Redaction Criticism' in *DBI*, pp. 580–2; C. M. Tuckett, 'Source Criticism (NT)', in *DBI*, pp. 646–8; D. Wenham, 'Source Criticism' in Marshall (ed.), *Interpretation*, pp. 139–52.

<sup>4</sup> See D. F. Ford, 'Narrative Theology' in *DBI*, pp. 489–91; R. C. Tannehill, 'Narrative Criticism' in *DBI*, pp. 488–9; Telford, *Mark*, pp. 90–2.

<sup>5</sup> See M. Davies, 'Reader-Response Criticism' in *DBI*, pp. 578–80; Telford, *Mark*, pp. 92–3.

understanding concerning the world), eschatology (from *eschatos* meaning 'last' or 'final'; and hence doctrine or understanding concerning the end of the world or final matters), anthropology (from *anthrōpos* meaning 'man'; and hence doctrine or understanding concerning the nature of man), ecclesiology (from *ekklesia* meaning 'assembly' or 'church'; and hence doctrine or understanding concerning the church or believing community) and ethics (from *ethos* meaning 'custom' or 'usage'; and hence doctrine or understanding concerning the moral behaviour governing the relationship between the Christian believer, the believing community and the world).

Although these categories belong to the vocabulary of Christian doctrine in its later and more developed state, and are hence familiar to those steeped in systematic theology, they are nevertheless convenient to some extent for the analysis of first-century Christian texts like the Gospel of Mark provided they are used with caution. The Gospel of Mark reflects Christian tradition at an early stage of development and does not present us with anything approaching a systematic theology. The 'Theology' of the Gospel of Mark (as I intend to use the term) refers in a broad sense to the religious understanding, ideas and beliefs entertained by this ancient writer concerning the nature of God, the person and work of Jesus, the role of the Spirit, the nature of man and the world, the end of that world and so on. A major emphasis in this book therefore will be on theology as 'religious ideology', that is, on what was believed by the evangelist, as reflected in his narrative, and, in particular, to what extent these beliefs were a product of, a development from or even a challenge to the religious culture and tradition to which he was indebted.

Our second term 'Gospel' also requires some comment. The word (Old English, *godspel*) is a literal translation of the Greek term *euangelion*, which in ordinary usage meant 'good news', such as that announced when a battle was won or a Roman ruler was enthroned.<sup>6</sup> The expression is a favourite one of the evangelist, and is used by him to describe Jesus' teaching

<sup>6</sup> R. P. Martin, *Mark – Evangelist and Theologian* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1979), p. 22.

(1.14–15; 8.35; 10.29; 13.10; 14.9) without, however, specifying its precise content. The text actually begins with the word (1.1 ‘The beginning of the *gospel* of Jesus Christ’) but it is not clear whether it is used in Mark with its usual connotation of ‘good news’ or as a technical term for the religious or doctrinal content of the message preached by (or perhaps about) Jesus (see Rom. 1.1–4).<sup>7</sup> It has been suggested, although this is less likely, that in 1.1 it may even refer to the literary genre in which that oral proclamation is contained. What is clear, however, is that the term ‘Gospel’ was being used in a generic sense by Christians in the second century, the earliest datable example of its functioning as a literary type occurring in the writings of Justin Martyr.<sup>8</sup> In a similar way perhaps to the process by which the term ‘apocalypse’, which occurs in Revelation 1.1, came to be transferred to other texts bearing the characteristic features of the Revelation of John, the term ‘Gospel’ was derived from the use of the term *euangelion* in the text of Mark and subsequently employed as a generic description for texts in which that ‘good news’ was to be found.

Its appropriateness as a description of the text, at least from a theological point of view, is apparent. If the ‘Gospel’ genre was a unique one in the ancient world, and Mark, as has been suggested, was the originator of it, the term adequately describes its special features, namely, that it is ‘kerygmatic in nature and evangelical in design.’<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, from a literary point of view, it is inappropriate, derivative and even misleading as a generic description of the text. No genre can be said to be without roots in antecedent literary types and treating Mark as unique draws attention away from a number of potential models in the ancient world by which Mark could have been influenced in the overall conception of his work. Much recent research has been conducted on this subject, and discussion can be found elsewhere<sup>10</sup> but it is worth here

<sup>7</sup> R. A. Guelich, ‘“The Beginning of the Gospel”’. Mark 1:1–15’, *Biblical Research*, 27 (1982), pp. 5–15; K. Kertelge, ‘The Epiphany of Jesus in the Gospel (Mark)’ in Telford (ed.), *Interpretation*, pp. 106–7; Martin, *Mark*, pp. 24–8.

<sup>8</sup> *Apology*, 66 (c. 150 CE) and Martin, *Mark*, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Martin, *Mark*, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> D. E. Aune, *The New Testament and its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster-

commenting on the implications of the question of genre for theology.

Establishing the genre of a literary work provides us with our first clue as to its origin, meaning and purpose, and without such indications, the theology cannot be fully appreciated. Two conflicting models for the emergence of the Gospel are currently espoused. The first has been described as the model of 'aggregate growth'. Based on the results of form criticism, this sees the Gospel text as an 'evolutionary'<sup>11</sup> document, the end result of a somewhat impersonal, collective, immanent process by which the diverse oral traditions of the early Christian community came eventually to be written down. This approach often anchors the text in a cultic rather than literary tradition and as a result tends to diminish not only the literary but also the theological creativity of the one(s) responsible for its final form. Based on the results of redaction criticism and the newer literary methods, the second model sees the Gospel text as a 'revolutionary' document, the result of authorial creativity adopting or adapting existing genres (Graeco-Roman biography, Hellenistic romance, Greek tragedy, or, within the Jewish field, apocalyptic or wisdom literature have been some of the parallels cited). By anchoring the text to a self-conscious literary tradition and enterprise, this approach tends by contrast to elevate the literary and theological creativity of the author.

But who was the 'Mark' who was ultimately responsible for 'The Theology of the Gospel of Mark'? This third question will be addressed in my next section but here let me anticipate the discussion by stating that I, in common with many Markan scholars nowadays, regard the available evidence as insufficient

ster Press, 1987); R. A. Guelich, 'The Gospel Genre' in P. Stuhlmacher (ed.), *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien. Vorträge vom Tübinger Symposium 1982* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1983), pp. 173–208; W. H. Mare, 'Genre Criticism and the Gospels' in J. H. Skilton (ed.), *The Gospels Today. A Guide to some Recent Developments* (Philadelphia, PA: Skilton House, 1990), pp. 82–101; Sanders and Davies, *Gospels*, pp. 25–47; M. J. Suggs, 'Gospel, genre' in *IDB(S)*, pp. 370–2; C. H. Talbert, *What is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* (London: SPCK; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978); W. R. Telford, 'The Interpretation of Mark: a History of Developments and Issues' in Telford (ed.), *Interpretation*, pp. 15–17; Telford, *Mark*, pp. 94–100.

<sup>11</sup> L. W. Hurtado, 'The Gospel of Mark: Evolutionary or Revolutionary Document?', *JSNL*, 40 (1990), pp. 15–32.

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