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## The Gospel of Mark: Who was the Reader?

Ernest Best

It is a curious fact in relation to Mark 13.14 that few commentators ask what reader Mark has in mind when they come to interpret the little clause 'Let the reader note, understand, pay heed, observe' (the verb is variously rendered). Judging by what they write most appear to assume that Mark has in mind the solitary reader; an assumption they make probably because this is the way they read or study the Gospel and presume the same would be true of first century Christians. Today however there is a growing consensus which believes Mark wrote his Gospel for public reading; the reader would then be someone taking part in some kind of church service. /1/

This brief clause referring to the reader was one of the principal factors which led Colani to suggest /2/ that behind Mark 13 lay a written document, the so-called Little Apocalypse, which did not go back to Jesus (Colani was attempting to preserve Jesus from being seen as an apocalyptic who had wrongly prophesied an imminent parousia); after editing it Mark incorporated it into his Gospel./3/ Whether they adopt Colani's theory or not few commentators however envisage Mark as creating the whole of Chapter 13. Some tradition, whether Jewish or Christian, whether from Jesus or from the early church, is presumed to lie behind it. The extent of this tradition and the nature of Mark's redaction are however variously evaluated; these matters do not concern us. Equally we do not need to discuss the precise reference of the phrase 'abomination of desolation' (I use the familiar English translation though it is not the most accurate rendering). It is sufficient to note that Mark identifies it with a person and instructs his readers when it (he) is seen to flee to the mountains. The historical reference in Mark is probably to the defiling of the Jerusalem Temple at the time of the Jewish war but this is not certain and it was probably not the reference in the pre-Markan tradition. Many books and articles have been devoted to untangling the mysterious phrase. With the majority of writers we assume that it was not clear even to Mark's first readers. While for our purposes we can leave aside questions of this nature we do need to enquire whether the tradition came to Mark in written or oral form.

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If as was traditionally assumed Mark received his information about Jesus directly from Peter and not from some anonymous oral fund of memories then the pre-Markan form of Chapter 13 would not have been written but oral. However there are few scholars today who view the composition of Mark so simply. Yet even if Mark did receive his information directly from Peter or through an intermediary and composed his Gospel in Rome this still leaves a gap between the time of the death of Peter, probably in 64 AD, and that of the writing of the Gospel which was either just before or directly after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Various sections, among them Chapter 13, might then have been written down prior to the composition of the Gospel. Have we any means of knowing? Apart from the reference in 13.14 to the reader there is nothing else in the Gospel which directly suggests that any of its pericopae existed in written form, and there is much to suggest they did not./4/ Oral tradition uses catch words to assist the memory; we find these in 9.33-50: child-name-receive-little ones-throw-better-stumble-fire-salt; 'sowing' links together the parables of Chapter 4. These sections of the Gospel cannot then be far from the period of oral transmission. Mark has also a considerable number of parentheses. In good written Greek these are indicated by the use of some of the rich fund of particles which the language possesses; there were no brackets such as we use to mark them off from the surrounding context. Mark however makes no attempt to indicate their presence with particles. Matthew and Luke in their rewriting of Mark generally alter the material in such a way as to eliminate them and so avoid any difficulty. In oral material speakers convey their presence and show that they do not belong to the main narrative through a change in voice tone. All this suggests Mark probably represents the end of the period of oral transmission of the tradition and the beginning of the written. That the pre-Markan material was oral does not of course imply that it did not possess a fixed form.

The only indication that Chapter 13 existed in written form prior to Mark's use of it lies in the few words of v.14. Are there however any signs that the material in the chapter in its pre-Markan form may have been oral? Parentheses, as we have said, are a sign of orality and Chapter

13 contains at least one, viz. v. 10. The succession of temporal notes through the chapter would also facilitate memorisation (vv. 7,8,11,14,19,21,24,26,27).

It was Mark's achievement to bring together the great majority of the separate pericopae of the tradition, though some of them, e.g. the parables of Chapter 4, may already have been linked. When he drew the material together he did so for the benefit of his community and the Gospel once composed would have been read aloud in its various gatherings either in small house groups or when the whole community came together, and there is no reason to suppose that it was not at times read through as a connected whole. This would have taken less than two hours. If this seems unduly long we should remember that our grandparents and great grandparents regularly listened to sermons lasting considerably more than an hour. The reading of the Gospel would have formed part of a eucharistic or instructional service, almost certainly not of a charismatic service if 1 Cor. 14 is anything to go by; the reader would have been interrupted before he would have finished the first chapter!

The clause about the reader is an insertion for it interrupts the flow of the argument in v.14; the 'then' of v.14c must link back to v.14a, 'When you see the abomination of desolation set up where he should not be then let those in Judea flee to the mountains.' How did the clause come to be inserted? Even if most of chapter 13 goes back to Jesus he can hardly have been responsible; shorthand writers did not follow him round copying down what he said and even if they had there is nothing to suggest he was aware of such a process or envisaged what he said as immediately taking written form. Many scholars have believed that he instructed his disciples in such a way that they could memorise his teaching. The clause must then have been added at a later stage of the transmission of the tradition. If the tradition existed in written form prior to Mark (the Little Apocalypse theory) it could have been inserted then, but few of those who have adhered to this theory have thought this likely since they normally assume that Mark inserted the clause to indicate that the material of the Little Apocalypse needed reinterpretation. Mark will then have inserted the clause at the time of writing or he, or someone else, will have added it later, perhaps

as a marginal gloss. Parenthetical clauses as we have seen are a feature of his style. /5/ For the moment we leave unresolved the decision between parenthesis and gloss.

If the clause is an insertion to what does it refer? The immediately preceding words, 'where he should not be', may seem the best candidate yet when we examine Mark's procedure in inserting parentheses /6/ we see that he by no means connects them to a directly preceding word but regularly links them to the thought of lengthy clauses, e.g. 2.10 ('he says to the paralytic'); 2.22; 6.14f; 7.3f; 7.18f; 7.26a; 12.12 ('and they feared the crowd'); 13.10; 16.3,4a. In 2.15; 2.26b; 7.2; 14.36 the parentheses refer back to a preceding noun but several words may intervene between it and the parenthesis (cf. 7.2). There is no noun in 'where he should not be' and this makes it probable that if Mark made the insertion he intended it to refer to the whole of v.14a. If the clause already existed in the Little Apocalypse we have no stylistic guidance as to its reference but it would still probably have been to the whole of 14a provided all of it was present at that stage; if it was not we are at a complete loss as to its reference. However since in Mark it refers to v.14a we simply have to assume that this was its reference from the outset.

This by no means clears up the matter. 'The abomination of desolation' is drawn from Daniel (11.31; 12.11) and many commentators believe Mark uses the clause to indicate that what he says is to be understood with the help of Daniel. Since Mark does not mention Daniel or refer to the OT at this point it is difficult to believe that he is directing readers to Daniel for enlightenment. In saying that Mark does not refer us directly to Daniel that is not to say that he has not got Daniel in mind. Daniel's phrase is to be understood in a new way, a way other than that in which it was understood in Daniel and almost certainly also in a way other than it was understood in the Little Apocalypse or the pre-Markan tradition. In the two last cases it may have referred to the attempt by Caligula to have his image set up in the temple. /7/ Many other suggestions have been made, indeed so many that it is impossible to list them; most commentators come down in terms of a contemporary reference to the temple in Jerusalem and its defilement at the close of the Jewish war. Readers should be aware of

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the significance of what is happening, or about to happen, in Jerusalem. They should 'read between the lines' /8/ of what is openly written. Why however should Mark as he wrote not have made his meaning clear? It would not have been difficult to do so. Perhaps he refrained from doing this lest his document fall into the hands of the Roman police, assuming he wrote in Rome. Had he written clearly it might have been taken to be treasonable and Christians been arrested. /9/ Not all commentators are as precise as this. Marxsen, for example, says that the clause instructs readers to discern the signs of the times so that they will know when to flee to the mountains. /10/

If the clause is an invitation to readers to read between the lines there is one difficulty: from where are they to obtain the information to enable them to do this? If they know that the phrase 'the abomination of desolation' is now to be understood in relation to an event about to happen in the temple, they know this and there does not seem to be any need to remind them to apply their knowledge. If they do not possess the necessary information from where are they to draw it? Rev. 13.18 and 17.9 are often introduced here as parallels. They are not exact parallels. In Rev. 13.18 readers are told that the number of the beast is 666; the evaluation of names in terms of numbers was well known in the ancient world so readers are given a clue as to how to unravel the secret of the identity of the beast. In 17.9 readers are again challenged though in a different way; they need to work out a succession of kings if they are to penetrate to the truth; again a clue has been provided. But in Mark 13.14 no clue is offered, and only in Mark is there a reference to the reader!

There is one feature in the verse to which we have not yet drawn proper attention, viz. the grammatical solecism. 'The abomination of desolation' is a neuter phrase probably originally indicating in Daniel some object such as the altar set up in the temple at Jerusalem at the behest of Antiochus Epiphanes. The object, whatever it is, is said to stand but Mark expresses this with a masculine participle indicating a human being. /11/ Can the writer of the clause then be drawing the attention of readers to the solecism? Let them note that a person and not an object or

an event is intended. A modern parallel jumps to mind. The British Prime Minister recently said 'We have become a grandmother'. Biographers and historians a hundred years from now can be imagined as puzzled how a double university graduate could commit such an obvious grammatical howler, but having satisfied themselves that there was no reason to doubt the evidence for it when they came to quote it they would add in brackets sic so that their readers would know that the howler was not theirs. May not Mark's clause be the equivalent of sic and Mark be defending himself against having made a grammatical howler? What he has written he has written deliberately. Alternatively if he is using a piece of traditional material he may be indicating that he has spotted the solecism, sees it is important for a true understanding of the text and wishes to drive this home to his readers.

But those reading by themselves would have time to reflect on what they read and could be expected to observe the solecism and realise it was an important clue. The clause however takes on a fresh aspect if we regard the reader as the public reader; the latter does not have time to reflect as he reads and might unconsciously correct the text and eliminate the solecism. A few commentators have assumed a public reader was in mind but this has landed them in difficulties because they have then been forced to understand the clause as if it said 'Let the reader explain'; /12/ none of them however has gone on to relate the clause to the solecism. So far as I am aware this suggestion has only been made by H.A. Guy /13/ and ever since has been almost universally ignored by commentators./14/ Guy argued that the clause was a gloss supplied by Mark or someone else so that the text should be correctly rendered. A gloss seems much more probable than a Markan parenthesis even though Mark liked parentheses. It was never intended that the clause should be read aloud which would have happened if it had been part of the text. It was a private note to the public reader! Since it appears in Matthew it must have been present in Mark from almost the beginning. It is not inconceivable that Mark himself added it as a direction. Putting it in modern idiom the verse might be rendered 'But when you see that thing, the abomination of desolation, standing where he [sic] should not then let

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those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.'

With the distinction between public and private reading in mind we can go a little further and see how this distinction can help us to understand how some of the phrases which cause difficulty in exegesis may have arisen, though what we are about to suggest does nothing to help us to solve the difficulties themselves. An illustration will show what is meant. The question of Pilate to Jesus (John 18.38), 'What is truth?', has led to endless speculation about Pilate's meaning. Was he being cynical, careless or wistful? Did he actually wish to know the nature of truth? Those who read the passage in public can convey completely different understandings of Pilate's meaning by the tone of voice they use. If we had a tape of the Evangelist either dictating his Gospel or reading it in a church gathering we would know what he meant; we have neither and so we are reduced to trying to deduce from the general flow of John's story what he understood Pilate to mean. Knowing that the text was originally a spoken text brings us no nearer solving the problem of his meaning but at least we can realise why the difficulty exists for us.

Knowledge that the text was originally spoken can also help us to understand how some of the problems set by punctuation may have arisen. Most early manuscripts lack punctuation; punctuation however is something which is easily conveyed by the voice. So long then as a living tradition of the way a text was read still existed punctuation was unnecessary. John 14.1,2 provides several examples of the way in which the choice between question, imperative, indicative, can affect the meaning of the text; questions, imperatives and indicatives are voiced differently. G.D. Kilpatrick /15/ once proposed removing the period at the end of Mk 13.10 and inserting it after 'Gentiles' in v. 10 and sought thereby to remove any idea of a Gentile mission in the Gospel; his claim would be indisputable if we possessed a record showing that Mark spoke the passage in that way. If we had heard Paul dictating Gal. 1.19 we would know where he laid the stress in the verse and so know whether he included James among the apostles. In exactly the same way if we knew where to lay the stress in Gal. 2.3 we would know if Paul was forced to have Titus circumcised. Knowledge again of the way Paul dictated

would give us certainty as to whether 'according to the scriptures' in 1 Cor. 15.3 should be connected to 'sins' or 'died'. (Had the person who carried Paul's letters from him to his churches heard him dictate them? Was he on occasions the actual scribe?) To take a final example: we would understand better the attitude of Jesus to Gentiles when he called them 'dogs' (Mark 7.27) if we could have seen if there was a 'smile' in his voice as he spoke as many commentators and more preachers have suggested. Our inability to have access to the living voice of the original writer is a great loss yet a realisation that texts were read aloud may save us from unduly criticising NT writers for being obscure at points.

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1. The issue is not settled by the particular verb Mark chose; ἀναγινώσκων may carry with it the implication of reading aloud but this tells us nothing because even solitary readers in those days read aloud.
2. T. Colani, Jésus Christ et les croyances messianiques de son temps, 2nd edn. Strasbourg, 1864.
3. G.R. Beasley-Murray, Jesus and the Future, London, 1954, pp. 1-112, provides a full account of the history of the idea and of its modification or rejection by Colani's successors.
4. See Best, 'Mark's Narrative Technique', to appear in JSNT, Issue 37, 1989.
5. Cf. C.H. Turner, 'Markan Usage: Notes, Critical and Exegetical, on the Second Gospel', JTS 26 (1925) 145-156.
6. I have used the list given by Turner, art.cit., apart from 1.2; 8.14-17; 9.36-42; 16.7 where I am not convinced we have genuine parentheses.
7. Cf. W. Marxsen, Der Evangelist Markus, 2nd edn, Göttingen, 1959, p. 110.
8. So Turner, art.cit., followed by many.
9. So V. Taylor, ad loc.; cf J. Jeremias, The Eucharistic Words of Jesus, London, 1966, p. 131.
10. Op.cit., p. 123.
11. It is highly unlikely that the participle should be taken as a neuter plural; in that case it would fail to

- agree in number with the noun to which it applies.
12. So A.B. Bruce in Expositor's Greek Testament, ad loc.
  13. 'Mark xiii.14: ὁ ἀναγινώσκων νοεῖτω ' Exp.T.. D. Daube, The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism, London, 1956, pp. 418, also connects the clause to the grammatical peculiarity, regarding it as a Markan parenthesis in the Rabbinic manner.
  14. Only J. Lambrecht, Die Redaktion des Markus-Apokalypsen. Literarische Analyse und Strukturuntersuchung (An. Bib. 28), Rome, 1967, discusses Guy's suggestion; he however dismisses it without considering the probability of public rather than private reading. Most scholars do not even bother to give the reference to Guy!
  15. 'The Gentile Mission in Mark and Mark 13.9-11' in Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R.H. Lightfoot (ed. D.E. Nineham), Oxford, 1955, pp. 145-158.