

# Facing Violence and War

## *How Mark Memorizes Contemporary History*

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### **The Gospels and the First Jewish-Roman War**

Mark 13 – Jesus’ eschatological discourse – marks the transition from Jesus’ public ministry in Galilee and Jerusalem to the passion events (Mark 14–15). Jesus’ eschatological discourse is, so to speak, at the juncture of the Gospel narrative and is thus fundamental to the Markan interpretation of time and history. In Mark 13 there are a number of images that refer to war, violence, persecution, and martyrdom (especially Mark 13:7–13).<sup>1</sup> Jesus initiates this series of predictions by announcing the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (Mark 13:1–2) and by foretelling the Temple’s desecration (Mark 13:14). Since Jesus’ eschatological speech immediately precedes the passion narrative (Mark 14–15), Mark interconnects – on the macro-level of his narrative – the incidents of war and violence directly to Jesus’ personal fortune: Jesus himself, the Son of God (Mark 15:39), will soon die a brutal death. Already since Mark 8:31ff., or even 3:6, the reader is informed about the upcoming fortune of Jesus’ violent death – a fortune which is, however, interpreted by Mark as a divine “necessity” (δεῖ: Mark 8:31). This article seeks to make sense of Mark’s “narrative agenda” from Mark 3:6 to chapter 15 in historical and historiographical terms by asking: in which way does Mark memorize, reflect, and construe *contemporary* history?<sup>2</sup> And what

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1. On the interpretation of Mark 13, see Eve-Marie Becker, *Der früheste Evangelist: Studien zum Markusevangelium*, Tübingen 2017, 401–428.

2. This question is frequently left aside by, for instance, narratological studies on Mark. See,

significance do the topics of violence and war have in this context? In which form and for what purpose does Mark create *Zeitgeschichtsschreibung*?<sup>3</sup>

### *The Question of Dating Mark*

There is a widespread view among synoptic scholars that the Gospel of Mark, which is considered by the vast majority of scholars to be the oldest Gospel narrative, was written under the influence (direct or indirect) of political and military events around 70 CE.<sup>4</sup> Those events are first of all caused by the First Jewish-Roman War and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. According to the Markan narrative, Jesuanic sayings like the so-called temple-prodigy in Mark 13:1–2 and related traditions (Mark 14:58; 15:29; see also 15:38) follow directly from Jesus' life, mission, and fortune. Even beyond Mark 13–15, Jesus' life and ministry are brought into a context of temple criticism by Mark: the cleansing scene in Mark 11:15–19 and the parable on the vineyard in Mark 12:1–12 reveal massive critique of the Jerusalem Temple and its aristocracy.<sup>5</sup> It seems obvious that Mark offers a perspective on Jerusalem and its temple that is not solely topical, but assumes the renewed destruction of the Jerusalem Temple – in other words, Mark looks at Jerusalem through the lens of the years 66–70/73 CE.<sup>6</sup> Even if the question whether the Markan Gospel has been composed *ante* or *post eventum* 70 CE is still under dispute in synoptic studies,<sup>7</sup> the evidences pointing to a *post eventum* 70 CE dating are dominating.<sup>8</sup> In what follows,

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for example, Scott S. Elliott, “Time and Focalization in the Gospel According to Mark”, in Danna Nolan Fewell (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, Oxford 2016, 296–306, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199967728.013.25>. An overview of important issues in Mark studies is most recently given in the contributions of *Zeitschrift für Neues Testament* 24/47 (2021).

3. On the term and concept, see more extensively Eve-Marie Becker, “Zeitgeschichtsschreibung im entstehenden Christentum (ca. 30–100 n.Chr.)”, in Valérie Fromentin (ed.), *Écrire l'histoire de son temps, de Thucydide à Ammien Marcellin: Neuf exposés suivis de discussions*, Geneva 2022, 241–282.

4. See Udo Schnelle, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 9th ed., Göttingen 2017, 268ff.

5. On the interpretation of Mark 12, see John S. Kloppenborg, *The Tenants in the Vineyard: Ideology, Economics, and Agrarian Conflict in Jewish Palestine*, Tübingen 2006, especially 219–221; John S. Kloppenborg, “The Representation of Violence in Synoptic Parables”, in Eve-Marie Becker & Anders Runesson (eds.), *Mark and Matthew I: Comparative Readings. Understanding the Earliest Gospels in their First-Century Settings*, Tübingen 2011, 323–351.

6. See also various contributions on Mark and the War in Barry S. Crawford & Merrill P. Miller (eds.), *Redescribing the Gospel of Mark*, Atlanta, GA 2017, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1qd8zmm>.

7. See, for example, Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Minneapolis, MN 2007, 11–14, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvb6v7zz>, who herself opts for an *ante eventum* 70 CE dating.

8. I have dealt with the issue of dating Mark and discussing the *pro et contra* arguments for an *ante* or *post eventum* 70 CE dating comprehensively in previous work and will not repeat those arguments here. See Eve-Marie Becker, *Das Markus-Evangelium im Rahmen antiker*

the *post eventum* 70 CE dating is generally presupposed. However, no matter how we date the Markan Gospel, there can be no dispute *that* Mark emerged in the realm of the War events.

It is not only the “level of reference” to the most recent War events – such as Mark 13:14 – which makes such an interconnection of the Markan Gospel with the First Jewish-Roman War plausible. Rather, Mark even connects Jesus’ bodily fate directly to the destruction of the Temple (for example Mark 15:38). The *Christologoumenon* of Jesus’ execution by analogy with the destruction of the Temple is still completely absent from Pauline Christological thinking ten or fifteen years earlier.<sup>9</sup> The inner historical connection between the violent death of Jesus and the end-time imagined destruction of the Temple is, as it seems, first established in Mark (Mark 13, 15; see also 11–12). It was not yet apparent to Paul.<sup>10</sup>

If we hold that the Markan Gospel emerged in the continuity of the events of 70 CE, most probably *after* 70 CE, this would even more so apply to the subsequent Gospel writings. While Matthew (see especially 26:61; 27:40; but also 21:41; 22:7; 24:2, 15–28) and John (see especially 2:19–21) do not provide any further clear or more nuanced hints that would exceed the Markan references to the War events and the Temple-destruction, Luke reports about Jerusalem as being surrounded by military forces which will bring the destruction of the city (Luke 21:20). Luke, hereby, shows most evidently knowledge of historical details, and thus a more clear *post eventum* 70 CE-perspective. Does the more evident *post eventum* 70 CE-perspective in Luke have consequences for dating the Gospels, so that Luke would have to be dated – much more evidently than Mark, Matthew, and John – *after* 70 CE?

The manner in which Luke reveals his historical point of view is a *literary* element in his historiographical concept. This is true in thematic as well as in narrative terms. Thematically, Luke shows a special interest in Jerusalem and the Jerusalem Temple in both volumes (see already in Luke 1:5ff.).<sup>11</sup> In narrative terms, Luke reveals his historical point of view to the reader. Hereby, Luke differs from Mark: in difference to Mark, Matthew, and John,

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*Historiographie*, Tübingen 2006, 77–100; Becker, *Der früheste Evangelist*, 53–75.

9. An exception with regard to the analogy of Christ and temple is the cultic language in Rom. 3:25.

10. Becker, *Der früheste Evangelist*, 259: “Der innere geschichtliche Zusammenhang zwischen dem gewaltsamen Tod Jesu und der endzeitlich vorgestellten Zerstörung des Tempels, wie er bei Markus hergestellt wird (Mk 13 und 15), hat sich für Paulus noch nicht abgezeichnet.”

11. See, for example, Lukas Bormann, “Jerusalem as Seen by Ancient Historians and in Luke-Acts”, in Antti Laato (ed.), *Understanding the Spiritual Meaning of Jerusalem in Three Abrahamic Religions*, Leiden 2019, 101–122, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004406858\\_006](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004406858_006).

Luke makes his hetero-referential point of view as a historian explicit right from the beginning (Luke 1:1–4).<sup>12</sup> Consequently, Luke also expands his narrative account much more evidently *beyond* the time-frame of Jesus’ life and death (= “level of narration”). Regarding the “narrator’s perspective”, Luke can reach out to contemporary history as he does in his second monograph project: Acts.<sup>13</sup>

*Gospel Writings as “Coping Strategies” and “Disaster Management”*

The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple becomes an increasingly important topic in early Christian literature up to the second century CE and even beyond.<sup>14</sup> Adele Reinhartz discusses how much – in historical terms – the event of the “destruction of the Temple in 70 CE was experienced and understood as traumas [*sic*] by at least some Jewish followers of Christ”.<sup>15</sup> “Trauma studies” are a useful tool for interpreting Mark and the subsequent Gospels. In general, trauma studies have proposed a theoretical frame of interpreting historical incidents causing cultural traumata.<sup>16</sup> In light of trauma theory, the emergence and literary development of early Christian literature appear as a “coping strategy”.<sup>17</sup> Reinhartz points out how such a coping strategy might have worked; the destruction of the Temple:

was domesticated through arguments that it was foretold by scripture and by Christ himself; that it was an inevitable punishment for Jewish transgressions such as the killing of Christ, Stephen and James, and that it had no impact at all on the beliefs and practices of Christ-confessors, whose focus had already turned from the sacrificial cult localized in a temple towards Christ as the universal savior.”<sup>18</sup>

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12. Hetero-referentiality is inherent to factual, that is, historiographical narratives. As the author, the narrator examines the tradition. See Becker, *Der früheste Evangelist*, 272.

13. However, even in Acts, Luke only defines Paul’s arrival in Rome (in the early 60s CE?) as the narrative’s historical endpoint.

14. See, for example, Justin, *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 16.4; 51–52; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 4.22; Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 2.23.16ff.

15. Adele Reinhartz, “The Destruction of the Jerusalem Temple as a Trauma for Nascent Christianity”, in Eve-Marie Becker, Jan Dochhorn & Else K. Holt (eds.), *Trauma and Traumatization in Individual and Collective Dimensions: Insights from Biblical Studies and Beyond*, Göttingen 2014, 285.

16. See Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma”, in Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. (eds.), *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Berkeley, CA 2004, especially 12–15.

17. Reinhartz, “The Destruction of the Jerusalem Temple”, 278: “Alexander’s work suggests that the destruction of the temple will be seen as traumatic for nascent Christianity if reliable agents declare that the event violated a fundamental value of the community and therefore required restitution and reparation.”

18. Reinhartz, “The Destruction of the Jerusalem Temple”, 286.

We could even go a step further here and say that Mark took the passion narrative as a mirror of time experience and transformed it like a “disaster narrative” into a salvation story. The Markan Gospel hereby functioned as disaster management.<sup>19</sup>

### *The Markan Gospel as “Literary Memory”*

In light of trauma studies, the emergence of the Markan Gospel appears to be crisis management in a more general sense. Jeffrey C. Alexander emphasizes how crisis management is not only of social but also of cultural relevance: “For traumas to emerge at the level of collectivity, social crises must become cultural crises.”<sup>20</sup> The description of the cultural crisis that caused the emergence of the Gospel of Mark as a memoir in literary form must then be extended. Further questions arise: how much can the rise of the Gospel genre – the emergence of Mark and the subsequent Gospels – be seen as a result of the Jewish-Roman War? How much and what kind of evidence for social and cultural crises do we find among Christ-believers in the last third of the first century CE? How do Mark and his successors deal with experiences of crises through their composition of “literary memory”? Is the emergence of literary memory in the last third of the first century CE restricted to disaster or crisis management?

The concept of “literary memory”<sup>21</sup> enriches the discourse on the Gospels as “memory texts”.<sup>22</sup> It aims to consider the Gospel writings as literary works that grew out of a complex early Christian memorial discourse<sup>23</sup> and are dedicated to the interpretation of history, remembering and interpreting, among other things, (contemporary) history. The concept of literary memory allows for what Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) calls a “thick

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19. Eve-Marie Becker, *The Birth of Christian History: Memory and Time from Mark to Luke-Acts*, New Haven, CT 2017, 111.

20. Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma”, 10.

21. On the definition of the Gospels as “literary memory”, see Becker, *The Birth of Christian History*, 4–5.

22. For a recent debate, see Sandra Huebenthal, “Das Markusevangelium als Gründungsgeschichte verstehen Oder: Wie liest sich das älteste Evangelium als Erinnerungstext?”, *Zeitschrift für Neues Testament* 24/47 (2021), 89–99; Eve-Marie Becker, “Gedächtnistheorie und Literaturgeschichte in der Interpretation des Markusevangeliums”, *Zeitschrift für Neues Testament* 24/47 (2021), 101–106.

23. Samuel Byrskog has done important work on the early Christian memorial and transmission processes that precede the writing of the Gospels. See, for example, Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History*, Tübingen 2000; Samuel Byrskog, Raimo Hakola & Jutta Maria Jokiranta (eds.), *Social Memory and Social Identity in the Study of Early Judaism and Early Christianity*, Göttingen 2016. In this contribution, I ask less about the (oral) transmission processes between 30 and 70 CE and their tradents, but rather about the function of literary memory, which Mark as a pre-historiographical author shapes by interpreting contemporary history.

description<sup>24</sup> of how the Gospel story – as a whole (Mark 1–16) and on a larger scale – reflects and manages various kinds of memories and hereby construes a comprehensive interpretation of contemporary history.

### Interpreting Violence and War in Mark

When applying trauma studies to the interpretation of Mark, the emergence of the Gospel narrative basically appears as a coping strategy of War events.<sup>25</sup> The Gospel narrative functioned as a coping instrument among Christ-believers who were trying to make sense of traumatic experiences which resulted from the sociopolitical and sociocultural impact of the Temple-destruction and the devastation of the city of Jerusalem in 70 CE. However, if we broaden the textual basis beyond Mark 13–15 and 11–12 (see above) and enlarge the perspective on interpretation by asking to what extent the Gospel of Mark reflects history as a literary memory, further factors and historical events come to light as possible Markan reference material for interpreting contemporary history.

#### *Mark and Flavian Ideology*

Some recent studies<sup>26</sup> emphasise the impact of the rise of the Flavian emperors on the writing of Mark's Gospel.<sup>27</sup> They classify themselves as “empire-critical” readings and consider Mark as “Reaktionsliteratur auf einen desaströsen Krieg”.<sup>28</sup> I shall point to two more recently published monographs in particular,<sup>29</sup> which interpret the Markan Gospel as a reaction *against* the political and military setting of the year 70 CE. In both monographs, published in 2016, an attempt is made to reveal semantics and

24. Clifford Geertz, *Dichte Beschreibung: Beiträge zum Verstehen kultureller Systeme*, Frankfurt 1987, 7–43.

25. See also Udo Schnelle, *Die ersten 100 Jahre des Christentums 30–130 n. Chr.: Die Entstehungsgeschichte einer Weltreligion*, 3rd ed., Göttingen 2019, 322ff.

26. On the history of research, see Gabriella Gelardini, *Christus Militans: Studien zur politisch-militärischen Semantik im Markusevangelium vor dem Hintergrund des ersten jüdisch-römischen Krieges*, Leiden 2016, 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004309340>. A critical review of the ideology- and empire-critical approaches is offered by Martin Meiser, “Das Markusevangelium – eine ideologie- und imperiumskritische Schrift? Ein Blick in die Auslegungsgeschichte”, in Michael Labahn & Outi Lehtipuu (eds.), *People under Power: Early Jewish and Christian Responses to the Roman Empire*, Amsterdam 2015, 129–158, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048521999-006>.

27. An overview of the research is provided most recently by Günter Röhser, “Warum eigentlich Markus? Ausgewählte Perspektiven der Forschung”, *Zeitschrift für Neues Testament* 24/47 (2021), especially 19–21. See also, for example, Klaus Scholtissek, “‘Grunderzählung’ des Heils: Zum aktuellen Stand der Markusforschung”, *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 130 (2005), especially 865–867.

28. Gelardini, *Christus Militans*, 1.

29. Heinz Blatz, *Die Semantik der Macht: Eine zeit- und religionsgeschichtliche Studie zu den markinischen Wundererzählungen*, Münster 2016; Gelardini, *Christus Militans*.



ideology, which affiliate the Markan Gospel with Flavian time and imagery. Along the lines of James C. Scott's concept of a "hidden transcript",<sup>30</sup> Heinz Blatz discusses how much Mark functions as a subversive counter-concept to imperial power,<sup>31</sup> and Gabriella Gelardini examines whether Mark – against the background of Flavian ideology – creates his own ideas of political and military power.<sup>32</sup>

Despite their attempt of affiliating the Markan Gospel to the *Zeitgeschichte* of its time, neither of the monographs discuss the historical

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30. See James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven, CT 1990. In various contributions to New Testament exegesis, exceeding by far the field of Gospel studies – as is evident from, for example, Angela Standhartinger, "Letter from Prison as Hidden Transcript: What It Tells Us about the People at Philippi", in Joseph A. Marchal (ed.), *The People beside Paul: The Philippian Assembly and History from Below*, Atlanta, GA 2015, 107–140, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt189tt2d.10> – Scott plays an important role for describing how the earliest Christian groups, classified as subordinate groups, communicate "offstage"-like by means of a "hidden transcript". According to Scott, the term "hidden transcript" characterizes "discourse that takes place 'offstage', beyond direct observation by powerholders. The hidden transcript is thus derivative in the sense that it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or deflect what appears in the public transcript" (p. 4). Scott's basic idea behind the concept of a "hidden transcript" – taken from social and political sciences and empirical studies of communist society – is that like "prudent opposition newspaper editors under strict censorship, subordinate groups must find ways of getting their message across, while staying somehow within the law" (p. 138). In difference to the "hidden transcript", the "public transcript" is used as a shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate" (p. 2). Scott classifies the "hidden transcript" as follows: "The hidden transcript is specific to a given social site and to a particular set of actors [...] it does not contain only speech acts but a whole range of practices [...] Finally, it is clear that the frontier between the public and the hidden transcripts is a zone of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate – not a solid wall [...] The unremitting struggle over such boundaries is perhaps the most vital arena for ordinary conflict, for everyday forms of class struggle" (p. 14).

31. Blatz, *Die Semantik der Macht*, analyzes semantics of power (ἐξουσία, δύναμις, and σημεῖον), which he finds especially in Markan miracle stories and discourses about miracles. In contrast to how the "public transcript" of the Flavians is mediated, Blatz wants to show how the Markan texts entail "Bezüge zur Kaiserideologie" and how they undermine those "auf subversive Art und Weise" (p. 319). As a result, the Markan miracle stories appear to be what James C. Scott calls a "hidden transcript": "Das Markusevangelium [...] besetzt und ändert die römische Herrschaftssprache und stellt eine Gegenideologie zur Kaiserideologie vor" (pp. 331–332). See also my review: Eve-Marie Becker, "Heinz Blatz, Die Semantik der Macht: Eine zeit- und religionsgeschichtliche Studie zu den markinischen Wundererzählungen", *Biblische Notizen* 178 (2018), 155–156.

32. Scott's concept of the "hidden transcript" also informs Gelardini, *Christus Militans*. See also my review: Eve-Marie Becker, "Gabriella Gelardini, Christus Militans: Studien zur politisch-militärischen Semantik im Markusevangelium vor dem Hintergrund des ersten jüdisch-römischen Krieges", *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 143 (2018), 62–64. Gelardini analyzes the Markan Gospel not only in political terms, but also in regard to military semantics as a "hidden transcript". She aims at revealing the political-military "Meta-Thema" of Mark against the background of the military events of the Jewish-Roman War (p. 466). According to Gelardini, there is no episode or narrative scene to be found in Mark, which is not "in einfacher bis hin zu mehrfacher Weise" to be brought in line with the "Kontext dieses ersten jüdisch-römischen Krieges" (p. 27, see also p. 885).

circumstances under which Mark was composed. In historical terms, Mark's *Sitz im Leben* remains rather dark.<sup>33</sup> In my view, the “empire-critical reading(s) of Mark” is deficient in two regards. First, in historical terms it is unclear how much the incidents of the Jewish-Roman War and the rise of the Flavian emperors should be seen as historical “triggers” for the composition of Mark, or whether these historical circumstances (only) function as the “narrative object” or “Meta-Thema” within the Gospel story, in the sense of a hidden subtext. Since empire-critical readings tend to focus on the latter, they actually fail to illuminate the historical context in which Mark and his reading audience have to be placed. Second, the empire-critical readings suggest identifying a consistent “subtext” behind Mark according to which the Markan Gospel narrative from 1:1–16:8 is arranged as “Reaktionsliteratur”, which would either propose resistance, or in any case an anti-Roman attitude. Even though Gelardini votes for a *tertium* here, according to which Mark created his own power-discourse, inspired by Roman military thinking,<sup>34</sup> she does not escape the basic dilemma which is inherent to empire-critical approaches. Independent of literary form, content, and pragmatics, *all* Markan pericopes are read alike in light of empire criticism. But what if the Markan Gospel is a more complex, multi-faceted reflection of contemporary history? My proposal for interpreting the Markan approach to contemporary history points precisely in this direction.

### Mark and the Literary Memory of Contemporary History

Based on how trauma studies and empire-critical readings address and interpret the themes of violence and war in Mark's Gospel, further critical questions arise: should Mark's view on and reflection of contemporary history be restricted to the events of the Jewish-Roman War and Roman political and military history of his time?<sup>35</sup> Do we sufficiently understand Mark's Gospel by only reading it in light of the events of the War and/or the model of empire criticism? In a next step, I will show four research perspectives in which the relationship of Mark's Gospel to contemporary history can be

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33. For a critical examination of form criticism and its concept of the “*Sitz im Leben*”, see Samuel Byrskog, “A New Quest for the *Sitz im Leben*: Social Memory, the Jesus Tradition and the Gospel of Matthew”, *New Testament Studies* 52 (2006), 319–336, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688506000178>; Samuel Byrskog, “A Century with the *Sitz im Leben*: From Form-Critical Setting to Gospel Community and Beyond”, *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 98 (2007), 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ZNTW.2007.001>.

34. See, for example, Gelardini, *Christus Militans*, 25.

35. A more nuanced picture can also be found in Elizabeth E. Shively, “What Type of Resistance? How Apocalyptic Discourse Functions as Social Discourse in Mark's Gospel”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 37 (2015), 381–406, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X15581325>.



described. Finally, four viewpoints of the evangelist on contemporary history can be derived from this.

#### *Four Research Perspectives on Mark and Zeitgeschichte*

(1) *Mark as reference to the Jewish-Roman War*: There can be little doubt that Mark refers to the historical events of the Jewish-Roman War. The Markan Gospel entails motifs and semantics of violence and war, which might point to the historical incidents of the War (see especially Mark 11–15). Mark deals with the topic of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. The destruction of the temple is even transformed into a *Christologoumenon*. The “level of reference” points to a post 70 CE-perspective, even though Mark does not reveal his perspective as a “narrator” explicitly (only Mark 13:14: τότε).<sup>36</sup> However, it is important to note that Mark refers to the *consequences* of the War, rather than depicting or explaining the sequence of events, the motives of its acting protagonists, and so on. To Mark, not the Jewish-Roman War as such, but rather its consequences for the Jesus movement (in and beyond Jerusalem) is of historiographical significance.

(2) *Mark as Flavian narrative*: On the “narrative level” of the Markan Gospel, the amount of language and discourse material, which would critically interfere with the Roman Empire, is more than limited. Does it exist at all? Do we not rather find a slightly sympathetic view on the Romans? In the discourse about whether or not to pay taxes to the emperor, the Markan Jesus supports the Roman authority (Mark 12:13–17). It is a Roman centurion who is the only one who understands who the crucified Jesus “really was” (Mark 15:39), thus contributing to the proper historical interpretation of Mark’s Gospel. Pilate’s political responsibility for sentencing Jesus to death by crucifixion is reduced (Mark 15:1–15). Apart from these occasional references to the Roman Empire and its representatives, which tend to show a rather positive or at least neutral attitude towards it, Mark is hardly interested in placing his Gospel narrative in the context of world politics. Therefore, it could best be said that Mark is written in Flavian times and is – epochally considered – Flavian literature. As such, however, the Gospel of Mark develops neither pro- nor anti-Flavian tendencies.<sup>37</sup>

(3) *Mark as crisis management*: Among other exegetes, Udo Schnelle enlarges the frame of contextualizing Mark and the subsequent Gospels in contemporary history by pointing out that the earliest Christian communities had to deal with a number of different crises – both internal and external

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36. See Becker, *Der früheste Evangelist*, 416.

37. For a more extensive account, see Becker, “Zeitgeschichtsschreibung im entstehenden Christentum”.

– in the last third of the first century CE.<sup>38</sup> Even though the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the collapse of the early Christian community in Jerusalem (for example Acts 8:1b) and the rise of the dynasty of the Flavian emperors might be incidents of crises, these phenomena cannot fully explain the socio-political background of Mark when composing his Gospel narrative. Besides, Schnelle emphasizes that the (brutal) death of founding figures in the earliest Christian communities<sup>39</sup> has to be seen as another eminent factor behind the emergence of the Gospel narrative (see Acts 7:1–8:1a). Another factor that causes uncertainty and instability is the problem of the absence of the *parousia*, which is evident in the theological discourse on the *parousia* delay (see, for example, 1 Thess. 4; Mark 13:21ff.).<sup>40</sup> It is in context of *internal* needs of self-orientation regarding Christian ethics and the interpretation of time then, as much as in light of *external* political and socio-cultural factors, that the literary genre of Gospel writing emerged:<sup>41</sup> “Das frühe Christentum stand vor der Aufgabe, gleichermaßen die Kontinuität zu den Anfängen und eine Bearbeitung dieser aktuellen Probleme zu leisten.” Schnelle goes so far as to claim that the Gospel writing in general appears as an instrument of “innovative Krisenbewältigung” (innovative crisis management).<sup>42</sup> I myself have put this idea in similar terms.<sup>43</sup>

Even if we agree with Schnelle that there are external factors and internal needs that – seen as “historical triggers” – brought about the writing of the oldest Gospel narrative shortly after 70 CE, two further differentiations become necessary. First, trauma studies teach us that traumatic experiences need to have reached a level of collectivity before they can set free cultural products, such as literary texts, which would function as coping strategies.

38. In the field of New Testament studies, see also Markus Öhler, *Geschichte des frühen Christentums*, Göttingen 2018, 299ff., who emphasizes in particular the “innere Krisen”. Dietrich-Alex Koch, *Geschichte des Urchristentums: Ein Lehrbuch*, Göttingen 2013, 302ff., 449ff., rather defines the collisions of Christ-believing communities and their pagan surroundings as “Konflikte”. In the field of Classics, the diagnostics of “crisis” is rather avoided when describing the rise and early development of the Christ-believing movement(s). Manfred Clauss, *Ein neuer Gott für die alte Welt: Die Geschichte des frühen Christentums*, Berlin 2015; Hartmut Leppin, *Die frühen Christen: Von den Anfängen bis Konstantin*, 2nd ed., Munich 2019.

39. See especially James the Zebedee, Peter, Paul, Stephen, and James, the brother of Jesus. Mark 10:35ff.; 1 Clem. 5; Acts 6–8; John 21:15ff.; Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.197–203; Hegesippus, 2.23.4–18, 21–24; Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 2.23.1–19.

40. See Udo Schnelle, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 3rd ed., Göttingen 2016, 352ff.

41. On Mark and genre, see latest various contributions in Jacob P.B. Mortensen (ed.), *Genres of Mark: Reading Mark's Gospel from Micro and Macro Perspectives*, Göttingen 2023.

42. Schnelle, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 361 (both quotations). Schnelle's view on the emergence of the Gospel genre is representative of Gospel studies in general, and Markan studies in particular. If already the Gospel of Mark, which is still seen as the oldest Gospel narrative, written *post quem* 70 CE, should reflect more contemporary history, this would apply even more so to subsequent Gospel writings (Matthew, Luke, and John).

43. Becker, *Der früheste Evangelist*, 216–217.

Can we assume that the Temple's fall already was such a collective trauma shortly after 70 CE, so that the emergence of the Gospel literature could have functioned as a coping strategy? How much did the destruction of the Temple really affect Jesus-followers and Jewish Christians in the end of the first and in the beginning of the second centuries CE?<sup>44</sup> Second, the field of "Historik" as a subject of history and historical theory has taught us to be careful whenever assuming that historiographical writing is caused by incidents of crisis. Ancient historiography has been produced for a number of reasons – it cannot be explained (at least not solely) as a phenomenon of "Krisenbewältigung".<sup>45</sup>

The above-mentioned external and internal factors clearly help us to illuminate the historical background of Mark when composing his Gospel narrative around 70 CE and reflecting upon *Zeitgeschichte*. The internal and external factors mentioned might even have functioned as "historical triggers". However, the way in which Mark reflects contemporary history is more complex than that. Let me add another dimension to Mark's consideration of history by asking: What kind of *contemporary history* does Mark reflect and create in his Gospel?

(4) *Mark's approach to contemporary history*: Mark's approach to (contemporary) history takes its point of departure from his concept of a "fulfilled time" (Mark 1:15) – a concept of time that was already defined by Paul (see Gal. 4:4). According to Mark, Jesus' mission puts an end to an infinite expectation of the arrival of God's kingdom. However, there is still a time span *before* the Son of Man will return and bring an end to cosmos and time (Mark 13:24–27). Being located in this timeframe himself, Mark perceives history in a twofold way:<sup>46</sup> on the one hand, time and history – and this applies up to the final end of this world (Mark 13:31) – still allow for several activities *within* time. Such activities consist in narrating and interpreting the past (via the Gospel narrative), providing ethical guidance to the community/communities, and continuing the kerygmatic mission of the Gospel proclamation throughout the whole cosmos (Mark 14:9; 13:10) in the tension between revealing and concealing. On the other hand, the cosmic

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44. See Beate Ego, Armin Lange & Peter Pilhofer (eds.), *Gemeinde ohne Tempel/Community without Temple: Zur Substituierung und Transformation des Jerusalemer Tempels und seines Kultes im Alten Testament, antiken Judentum und frühen Christentum*, Tübingen 1999.

45. See various contributions in Eve-Marie Becker (ed.), *Die antike Historiographie und die Anfänge der christlichen Geschichtsschreibung*, Berlin 2005, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110919530>.

46. See Oda Wischmeyer, "Konzepte von Zeit bei Paulus und im Markusevangelium", in Oda Wischmeyer, David C. Sim & Ian J. Elmer (eds.), *Paul and Mark: Comparative Essays Part I. Two Authors at the Beginnings of Christianity*, Berlin 2014, 375ff., <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110272826.361>.

end of the world can already now be prepared and insofar anticipated by eschatological and/or apocalyptic thought and admonition (Mark 13:3–37; 9:1).

### *Mark's Fourfold View on Zeitgeschichte*

As just seen, Mark has a fourfold view of the so-called “intra-temporal” activities that likewise guide his interpretation of time and history. Those four types of intra-temporal activities contribute to the shape of an “early Christian identity”.<sup>47</sup> In a final step, I shall briefly look at these four activities as lenses through which Mark perceives and interprets contemporary history.

(a) Mark puts the storyline about the past events and the beginnings of the history of the Gospel proclamation (Mark 1:1–3) into a narrative sequence that is organized by temporal and causal structures. The narrative is shaped as a story and interpreted plot-wise. In this account, contemporary history and world politics only matter when the protagonists of the story – primarily John the Baptist, Jesus, and the group of disciples – run into conflict with opponents, controversy partners, or enemies (see especially Herod, Pontius Pilate, scribes, Pharisees, and so on). Otherwise, the Markan story is focused on the inherent parameters of the Gospel proclamation as set and defined programmatically by Jesus himself (Mark 1:14–15).

(b) The inner-temporal period that Mark creates – that is, the period of time *after* Jesus’ death and *before* his return – requires ethical guidance and cultic or ritual regulations, such as dietary laws (especially Mark 7:1–23) or reflections on marriage law (especially Mark 10:2–12; 12:18–27). Mark 10–12 are filled with teaching sections in which Jesus, who is mostly shown in controversy with Jewish contemporaries, approves the Torah (for example Mark 12:28–34) in light of the *ethos* that defines the living conditions in God’s kingdom (for example Mark 10:17–27). Mark 12:41–44 – the passage on the generous offering of the widow in the temple<sup>48</sup> – gives insight into socio-economic discourses among Christ-believers. The insecure social position of widows – for example, in matters of marriage (1 Cor. 7) or financial support (Acts 6:1) – gives the historiographical writer occasion to show how Jesus authorizes their autonomous way of life. In other words, Mark uses a wide range of Jesus traditions in various didactic scenes to comment on contemporary issues of communal living of Christ-followers. In the Markan

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47. See Eve-Marie Becker, “Shaping Identity by Writing History: Earliest Christianity in its Making”, *Religion in the Roman Empire* 2 (2016), 152–169, <https://doi.org/10.1628/219944616X14655421286013>.

48. See Eve-Marie Becker, “Was die ‘arme Witwe’ lehrt: Sozial- und motivgeschichtliche Beobachtungen zu Mk 12,41–44par.”, *New Testament Studies* 65 (2019), 148–165, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688518000346>.

Gospel, Jesus traditions are remembered in such a way that contemporary history (*Zeitgeschichte*) is reflected and contemporary historiography (*Zeitgeschichtsschreibung*) is created in the mirror of memorizing Jesus.

(c) Mark further works out conceptual ways of engaging in the spreading of the Gospel proclamation. Jesus himself had already selected his group of disciples (Mark 1:16ff.) and had sent them afterwards into missionary work (Mark 6:7–13) in order to preach “repentance” (μετάνοια: Mark 6:12). However, there remained a constant paradox regarding the disclosure of Jesus’ Messianic identity. Jesus commanded his followers not to reveal his identity but to keep the Messianic secret – a command that was frequently ignored or refused (for example Mark 1:44–45). The angel-like figure at the empty tomb, in contrast, instructed the women to announce the upcoming revelation of the risen Jesus in Galilee among his disciples – an instruction which, in turn, was initially not followed (Mark 16:7–8). By presenting this paradox of Gospel proclamation during Jesus’ earthly ministry, where Jesus’ identity was a constant matter of revealing *and* hiding, announcing *and* concealing – a paradox that extends even to the narrowest circle of Jesus’ disciples (see Mark 8:29; 14:66–72) – Mark reflects on the principles and obstacles of proclaiming the Gospel message. Probably, in the early history of Christian missionary propaganda, there were corresponding obstacles in announcing and concealing the Gospel message. The so-called Messianic secret is – seen in this way – not merely due to the abstract redactional activity of the evangelist Mark, but rather an expression of his reflection of contemporary history. In a sense, Mark’s reflection on contemporary history and on Jesus’ (Messianic) identity serves the pragmatic purpose of community building and leadership.<sup>49</sup>

(d) It is important to see how Mark shows various options of accelerating time and anticipating the cosmic “end” of time. The hastiness in his narrative depiction corresponds to Mark’s overall idea of an “acceleration” of time in order to anticipate the *parousia* – an idea that characterizes various early Christian writings of the second and third generation in and beyond apocalyptic genres,<sup>50</sup> and particularly a literary writing, like Mark, that is close to an “eschatological historical monograph”.<sup>51</sup> Not only the “delay of the *parousia*” has caused the need of accelerating time in early Christianity.

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49. See Gerd Theißen, “Evangelischreibung und Gemeindeleitung: Pragmatische Motive bei der Abfassung des Markusevangeliums”, in Bernd Kollmann, Wolfgang Reinbold & Annette Steudel (eds.), *Antikes Judentum und Frühes Christentum: Festschrift für Hartmut Stegemann zum 65. Geburtstag*, Berlin 1998, 389–414, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110806069.389>.

50. See Becker, *The Birth of Christian History*, especially 147.

51. Yarbrow Collins, *Mark*, 42ff.

Mark – and contemporary Jewish as well as Greco-Roman authors – also shared a widespread attitude of fear and anxiety in the early Roman Imperial period.<sup>52</sup> This attitude of fear and anxiety was primarily not caused by concrete experiences of crisis, but rather mirrors a certain “Zeitgefühl” during Neronian and Domitianic time (in contrast to the “Golden Age” idea), a so-called *metus temporum* (see Tacitus, *Historiae* 1.49.3; 2.72.1; Pliny, *Epistulae* 5.1.7; 7.19.6; 9.13.3).<sup>53</sup> Peter’s denial of Jesus (Mark 14:66ff.) and the escape of the naked young man (Mark 14:51–52) can be seen as narrative configurations of such an attitude of partly diffuse fear, fright, or anxiety which we even find expressed in the final Markan scene about the women at the empty tomb (Mark 16:8). Reading the Markan Gospel against the background of the *metus temporum* would even allow for moving *beyond* the identification of concrete historical crises without leaving aside the impact of contemporary history on Mark’s composition.

## Conclusion

Mark reflects the history of his time and creates contemporary history by remembering Jesus and interpreting the traditions of Jesus. In other words, Mark creates a literary memory. In Mark 13 and beyond, the themes of violence and war play a special role (see also Mark 10:41–45). Here, references to the immediate contemporary history of the Jewish-Roman War resound. However, the literary processing of traumatic experience, crisis, or violence takes time. It is no coincidence that the interpretation of Jesus’ suffering and death is at the center of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus’ violent death is, so to speak, the collectively developed “cultural foil” in earliest Christianity, against which the evangelist as literary author interprets contemporary history.

The way in which the earliest Gospel writer approaches contemporary history is multi-dimensional and manifold. Even if phenomena of socio-political crisis and trauma might rightly stay on our list of possible “historical triggers” which illuminate the composition process of the Markan Gospel and Mark’s view on contemporary history, the interpretive framework should be broadened in the classification of Mark’s Gospel. We should assume various *inner* needs of the Christ-believing communities (beyond, for example, the enumeration of Schnelle) caused by mission history as well as the effects of a widespread, perhaps even diffuse “sense of time” (*Zeitgefühl*) of a *metus temporum* that compelled *and* inspired Mark in writing his Gospel narrative. ▲

52. See Alfred Knepe, *Metus temporum: Zur Bedeutung von Angst in Politik und Gesellschaft der römischen Kaiserzeit des 1. und 2. Jhdts. n. Chr.*, Stuttgart 1994, especially 77ff.

53. Knepe, *Metus temporum*, 49.



## SUMMARY

Mark 13 marks the transition from Jesus' public ministry in Galilee and Jerusalem to the passion events (Mark 14–15). Jesus' eschatological discourse is at the juncture of the Gospel narrative and is thus fundamental to the Markan interpretation of time and history. By discussing the reading paradigms of traumatology and empire criticism, this article seeks to make sense of Mark's "narrative agenda" from Mark 3:6 to chapter 15 in historical and historiographical terms. I shall ask: in which way does Mark – the creator of early Christian literary memory in a narrative sense – memorize, reflect, and construe *contemporary* history? And what significance do the topics of violence and war – crucial for Mark 13 – have in this context? In which form and for what purpose does Mark create *Zeit-geschichtsschreibung*? It will be argued that the way in which the earliest Gospel writer approaches contemporary history is multi-dimensional and manifold. Even if phenomena of sociopolitical crisis and trauma might stay on our list of possible "historical triggers" which illuminate the composition process of the Markan Gospel and Mark's view on contemporary history, the interpretive framework should be broadened.