

## THE “HERETICAL” RECEPTION OF THE GOSPEL OF MARK

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### Abstract:

This article is devoted to the reception of the Gospel of Mark among certain heterodox early Christian groups. It takes its departure in the hypothesis forwarded by some scholars – supported by an interpretation of Irenaeus – that the Gospel of Mark was well received among Valentinians, Basilideans and Carpocrateans. This, it has been claimed, pushed the need for adding a new beginning and end to the Gospel of Mark. The present article begins with a recapitulation of the scholarship on the reception of the Gospel of Mark and then aims to scrutinize the modern interpretations of Irenaeus, which claim that particular heterodox groups were drawn to Mark. The article ends by looking at what can actually be discerned from Valentinian texts as well as the scant sources of Basilidean and Carpocratean theology. The conclusion presented here is that there are some indications that Mark could have been of importance for Basilidean followers, but nothing that would suggest that Mark retained any particular standing among Valentinians or Carpocrateans, a notion chiefly supported by a flawed reading of Irenaeus.

### Key Words:

reception of the Gospel of Mark, early Christian heterodoxy, heretical exegesis, Valentinians, Basilideans, Carpocrateans

The reception of the Gospel of Mark in the writings of early Christian writers creates interesting problems and possibilities for a historiography of early Christianity. The text was recognised as authoritative in influential circles from early on, about the early 2nd century CE. On the basis of its affiliation with the apostle Peter, it was arguably sanctioned for wide use in the growing Christian movement, compared to other texts which were more contested, like the Book of Revelation or the Letter to the Hebrews. However, even though Mark enjoyed this acceptance, the peculiar gospel-version was simultaneously strangely neglected.<sup>1</sup> It is the canonical Gospel which is by far the least cited by the formative Christian theologians during the 2nd–3rd centuries CE, such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyon, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen of Alexandria.

Scholarship on the reception on Mark pertains chiefly to proto-orthodoxy, patristic writers' attitude toward the text.<sup>2</sup> A few have, however, commented on the reception of Mark within heterodoxy. Francis Watson has spearheaded an interesting argument suggesting that Valentinians were particularly drawn to Mark for the similar reasons that it was ignored by proto-orthodox Christians: due to its poor theological finesse and low Christology.<sup>3</sup> Michael Kok concurs with Watson, and writes that according to Irenaeus "Valentinus, Basilides and Carpocrates were invested in Mark" because these groups "seemed to some interpreters

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<sup>1</sup> See the chapter "Present but Absent: Mark as Amanuensis and Abbreviator" in Brenda Deen Schildgen, *Power and Prejudice: the Reception of the Gospel of Mark*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1999, for a helpful review of a Christian reception of the Gospel according to Mark, over the millennia. Schildgen summarizes the text's reception in early Christianity with the following comment: "The virtual absence of Mark in the first centuries of Christian writing demonstrates that despite the gospel's presence in the canon, it was not treated equally with the others, let alone with any special deference." Schildgen, *Power and Prejudice*, 41.

<sup>2</sup> We use the term "proto-orthodoxy" to refer to the diverse ideas, practices and beliefs attached to early Christian writers whom later, when the Church became more solidified around the fourth century onward, were posthumously counted as belonging to orthodoxy, i.e. people who were of right opinion before there was a clear idea and consensus concerning what constituted it.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Watson, *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2013, 496.

to distance Jesus from the divinity and support a separationist Christology where a celestial entity possessed Jesus at the baptism and vacated the premises at the crucifixion.”<sup>4</sup>

Both Watsons and Kok’s assessments lean heavily on Irenaeus’ own account of heretical exegesis and part of the aim of this article is to scrutinize this hypothesis concerning the reception of Mark in the groups Irenaeus mentions. The article is divided into three parts. After an initial overview of the general reception of Mark in early Christianity we turn to scrutinize what Irenaeus actually says about a heretical reception and exegesis of Mark. We conclude that, without basis in first-hand sources, there is little to support the conclusions forwarded by Watson and Kok, particularly in light of the polemical style of Irenaeus’ writing. The article ends by scrutinizing the heterodox first- and second-hand sources mentioned by Irenaeus and review what can actually be discerned from them regarding an attitude toward the Gospel of Mark. We conclude that the so-called “heretical reception” of the Gospel of Mark was more diverse than either Irenaeus or his modern interpreters have previously acknowledged.

## Toward a General Reception of Mark in the 2nd–3rd Centuries

When attempting to construct the reception of Mark during the first couple of centuries of the Common Era, one is struck by a fundamental and paradoxical problem. This gospel version, and particularly its ending, is the cause of intense negotiation during the first centuries, for instance, that the gospel story accumulated up to *four* different endings during the rather limited time-period of the first couple of centuries.<sup>5</sup> Despite the wide and highly engaged ancient usage of the text, Mark’s version of the gospel story is on the periphery of patristic discourse in terms of its influence and theological significance. Furthermore, Mark is attested only rarely in ancient papyri and MSS prior to the 5th century.<sup>6</sup> Thus,

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Kok, *The Gospel on the Margins: The Reception of Mark in the Second Century*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers 2015, 264–265.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Larsen, *Gospels Before the Book*, New York: Oxford University Press 2018, 114–21.

<sup>6</sup> For a recent discussion, see Kok, *Gospel on the Margins*, 6–7; for a substantial review, see James A. Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission: The Authentication of Missionaries and their Message in the Longer Ending of Mark*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1999. In this article, we are not making a claim about the originality of a particular Markan ending.

there is a disjunction between the reception of Mark — as a material source for theological paraphrases (e.g., in the canonical Gospels, and textual interpolation of Mark and its ending) — and the ideological and theological appreciation of Mark in an ante-Nicean patristic discourse.

This tension is effectively displayed by Bart Ehrman, in a comparison between the popularity of the Shepherd of Hermas and Mark in late antiquity:

The Shepherd of Hermas... is relatively well attested in the early centuries. Its only nearly complete witness, it is true, is Codex Athous of the fifteenth century. But up to the sixth century, it is better attested even than some of the books of the New Testament, being partially found in the Codex Sinaiticus (the last quarter of the book), the Michigan papyrus of the third century (most of the Parables), the Bodmer papyrus 38 (the last three visions), and nearly twenty other fragmentary papyri, most of them from the third to the fifth centuries. One could argue on strictly material grounds that the Shepherd was more widely read than the Gospel of Mark in the early centuries of Christendom.<sup>7</sup>

Indirect evidence for a widespread “Markan problem” in late antiquity can also be inferred from the different sequences of the gospel texts, where a Western ordering (e.g., in Codex Bezae and the theologian Tertullian) puts Luke and Mark *after* John and Matthew.<sup>8</sup> Could this seemingly open “serialization” of the canonical Gospels also mean that Mark was a possible cornerstone for heretical groups, who in turn prioritised Mark when interpreting the Gospels?<sup>9</sup>

For a host of reasons, the Markan material is frequently read in harmony with the Gospels of Matthew, Luke (and John), in effect treating

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<sup>7</sup> Bart Ehrman, “Textual Traditions Compared: The New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers,” in: A. Gregory and C. M. Tuckett (ed.), *The Reception of the New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005, 9–28 (10–11).

<sup>8</sup> The idea of Markan priority is at present axiomatically accepted. Yet, there is no need to give similar value to either the two-source hypothesis or the Farrer-thesis to follow the argument of this paper.

<sup>9</sup> This is the hypothesis of Francis Watson (Watson, *Gospel Writing*, 518–519). That is, Watson finds reason to use the marginality of Mark to hypothesise Christian groups that would valorise the strangeness of Mark.

this gospel-version as a mere pre-stage to these rhetorically and theologically “richer” portrayals of Jesus’ ministry and death. Is there also reason to treat an isolated or non-Synoptical reading of Mark as potentially dangerous on account of its origin with a *disciple* of an apostle (*apostolici*) rather than stemming directly from an eye-witness? Since the status of *apostolici* (i.e., from an indirect authority of an apostle) is shared with Luke (traditionally associated with Paul of Tarsus), this label itself does not single out Mark as particularly problematic. However, since the aforementioned ordering of the canonical Gospels also downplays the importance of Luke (among other things, bringing out a historical memory of Marcion’s infamous prioritization of the Lukan text), the problem remains, albeit as one of degree rather than kind, in relation to this group of Gospels.

The more pressing problem with Mark during the 2nd–3rd centuries is presented in an interesting way by Michael Kok, in *A Gospel on the Margins: The Reception of Mark in the Second Century* (2015). Kok demonstrates that the 2nd-century patristic theologians — Papias, Justin, Clement, Origen, and Irenaeus — share a particular tendency to (1) undermine the theological value of Mark while simultaneously (2) underscoring its authority as being from the apostle Peter. From the perspective of a patristic tendency and critique, we find Mark in a marginal position within the Christian canon, particularly among the Gospels, while still holding a more or less clear position within the canonical sphere, according to said early Christian writers. Following this analysis, one is prone to ask: why does Mark end up in the Christian canon at all?<sup>10</sup> Kok defines Mark’s characteristic dialectic of presence and absence in the 2nd–3rd centuries CE:

Given Mark’s lackluster reception in the patristic period, it is astounding that it survived at all once its contents were almost

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<sup>10</sup> Watson defines and responds to Kok’s formulation (of the same problem) thus: “The Gospel of Mark has a secure place within the canonical four gospel collection. Once it was established there, no-one seems to have declared it to be redundant on the grounds that it contains little more than mere repetition of material already available in Matthew and Luke.” Francis Watson, “How Did Mark Survive?,” in: K. A. Bendoraitis & N. K. Gupta (ed.), *Matthew and Mark Across Perspectives: Essays in Honour of Stephen C. Barton and William R. Telford*, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark 2016, 1–17 (1).

completely reabsorbed in Matthew and Luke. It could have disappeared without a trace like the other Synoptical sources lost to the dust of antiquity.<sup>11</sup>

Kok goes on to locate the origins of the abovementioned double move towards the Gospel, with Bishop Papias of Hierapolis' lost five-volume *Λογίων Κυριακῶν Ἐξηγήσεις*; i.e. (1) undermining the text's value, and (2) affirming *its origin* with Peter, at the same time.<sup>12</sup> After Papias, the discourses of Clement, Origen, and Irenaeus consistently repeat this particular posture toward the Gospel of Mark. Kok writes that "[o]n one level, Mark is a trustworthy record of the life of Jesus substantiated by Peter's witness. At another level, Mark did not measure up to a Gospel like Matthew (Papias, Irenaeus, Clement) or John (Clement)... [and in comparison] seemed substandard, rhetorically and theologically."<sup>13</sup> The patristic evidence leads Kok to a unanimous verdict: as a stand-alone version of "the Gospel," Mark was not believed to be theologically, or rhetorically, trustworthy in late antiquity. Regarding heretical groups in particular, he states the following:

The difficulty with any thesis on the reception of Mark in the second century is the limited evidence. The editorial changes made to Mark by evangelists and scribes alike disclose the passages they were concerned were liable to be misinterpreted, but that does not necessarily entail the existence of an opposing exegete who drew the opposite conclusion... Yet the vague hints in Papias and Justin that Christians were caught up in a war over the ownership of Gospel texts in which specific apostolic authorship was a weapon in their arsenal gives way to the naming of alternative interpretive communities in Irenaeus. Irenaeus reveal that the students of Valentinus, Basilides and Carpocrates were invested in Mark. Some of the recurrent texts in the debate, such as Mark

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<sup>11</sup> Kok, *Gospel on the Margins*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Papias is a particularly interesting candidate for a *causa sui* of the widespread reception of Mark during late antiquity. The unanimous association juxtaposing Mark with the apostle Peter in the 2nd century probably goes back to an early and influential attestation by Papias of Hierapolis (ca. 60–130 CE). See the discussion in Watson, *Gospel Writing*, 462f.

<sup>13</sup> Kok, *Gospel on the Margins*, 227.

1:9–11, 10:17, or 15:34, seemed to some interpreters to distance Jesus from the divinity and support a separationist Christology where a celestial entity possessed Jesus at the baptism and vacated the premises at the crucifixion.<sup>14</sup>

As we shall see, this evaluation by Kok of Irenaeus' testimony is much inspired by Francis Watson. Let us now turn to scrutinizing what Irenaeus actually says regarding heterodox use of Mark.

### Interpreting Irenaeus' Portrayal of Valentinian Use of Mark

In chapter nine of Francis Watson's book *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* (2013) he discusses heretical uses of the canonical Gospels in an attempt to discuss the canonization processes of late 2nd-century Christianity. Watson claims that the emerging consensus of a fourfold Gospel is to be understood not against "Marcionites, countering one version of a canon of Christian scripture with another." Rather, one should shift attention to Valentinians and post-Valentinian theology ("post" in the sense of following Valentinus) since "heresy is dangerous not because it uses the wrong Gospels but because it uses the right ones."<sup>15</sup> Valentinians were purportedly already using the four canonical Gospels separately and as "inspired scripture," which meant that it was up to heresiologists like Irenaeus to, in a sense, theologically undermine a distinct Valentinian interpretation and grab "the four" Gospels from their hands for the cause of uniting "the Church." In this context, Watson is therefore interested in how Irenaeus treats the Gospel of Mark and its *heretical reception* by Valentinians.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Kok, *Gospel on the Margins*, 264–265.

<sup>15</sup> Watson, *Gospel Writing*, 496.

<sup>16</sup> See for instance Watson, *Gospel Writing*, 503–504 where Watson draws on Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.11.7 and provides a speculative exegesis of Markan themes and passages, without reference to Valentinian sources: "If [the Gospel of Mark] is read without this love of truth, that is, in light of the Valentinian theology, it will seem to contain a cacophony of voices: for between the advent and the departure of the Saviour from above, Jesus is variously the mouthpiece either of the Saviour, or of the mother (Achamoth), or the creator." However, in light of the complete absence of any reading of these themes in the Gospel of Mark in particular, it is impossible to value Watson's suggestion. Here as elsewhere, Watson is uninterested in Valentinianism as Christian theology, and ends up siding with Irenaeus' polemical views against ancient "heretics."

The hypothetical locating of a problematic, Markan reception in Watson's *Gospel Writing* actualizes the larger, interesting issue of early Christian politics in relation to the Valentinians as well as unspoken assumptions about "heresy" and "heretics," in contemporary exegesis.<sup>17</sup> But what does Irenaeus actually say regarding the Valentinian use of Mark?

In *Adversus Haeresis*, Irenaeus is devoted to prove in particular Valentinian theology as faulty, and in one passage he writes the following:

Now the passion experienced by the twelfth Aeon is pointed out, they say [the Valentinians], by the apostasy of Judas, the twelfth of the apostles, when the betrayal took place. Also by the fact that [Jesus] suffered in the twelfth month; for they profess that he preached one year after his baptism. Furthermore, this is most clearly manifested by the case of the woman with the hemorrhage, since, *after she had suffered for twelve years, she was healed by Savior's coming, when she touched the hem of his cloak. And because of that, Savior said: "Who touched me?"* By this he taught the disciples the mystery that had taken place among the Aeons and the healing of the Aeon that had suffered passion. For that power was pointed out through her who had suffered for twelve years, inasmuch as she was straining forward and her material substance was flowing out into immensity, as they say. And unless she had touched that Son's cloak, that is, the Truth of the First Tetrad, which is indicated by them, she would have been resolved into the universal substance. But she stopped and rested from her passion; for, when the power of the Son went out – this they hold is

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<sup>17</sup> Watson's *Gospel Writing* is presently treated as initializing and opening a conversation about early Christian reception of the Gospel of Mark and the label "heretic." Watson's treatment of Mark in this context tries to establish a (post)Valentinian reading of significant narrative events, such as Jesus' baptism (Mark 1), the bleeding woman (Mark 5) and Jesus' execution (Mark 15) that seems, we argue, to presuppose that any reading of said passages are problematic *per se*. The Valentinians' reading of Mark is treated as "heretical" until proved otherwise, as it were. Our point is, however, that there is no evidence to support that Valentinians' looked on Mark any more or any differently than other Christians, or that they used Mark when developing what Irenaeus considered to be Valentinian heretical theology. In short, Valentinian readings and use of the Gospel according to Mark are more or less completely lacking in ancient sources. Similar to the situation with other groups of second century Christians.



the power of Limit – he healed her and removed the passion from her.<sup>18</sup>

Via this section, Francis Watson has argued that Mark is singled out by Irenaeus, since this Gospel-version alone contains details about the haemorrhaging woman which are left out from the other Synoptics. Watson states that “[t]he question τίς μου ἥψατο [“Who touched me?”], cited here, occurs only in Mark 5.30,”<sup>19</sup> focusing his decoding of Irenaeus to demonstrate a number of things that Valentinians saw in Mark 5.

Watson claims that the *pneumatikoi* among the (Valentinian) groups would purportedly have been drawn to Mark 5 and that the linkage of the twelve-year-old girl and the haemorrhaging woman (bleeding for twelve years) parallels two forms of Sophia-figures. Secondly, Watson suggests that an emphasis on the number twelve highlights the importance of the twelfth aeon (Sophia). Thirdly, the flow of blood is said by Watson to narrate the healing from the passion of the twelfth aeon, which caused her fall.<sup>20</sup>

Other than the inquiry τίς μου ἥψατο, Mark 5 is not alone in the details required to create this overall connection between the Synoptic pericope and the Sophia theology that Irenaeus discusses. While it seems plausible that Irenaeus refers to the particularities of a known Markan pericope, nothing in the passage above indicates by necessity that he was aware of this reference’s origin in Mark. After all, Irenaeus does not mention Mark by name in this chapter.<sup>21</sup> It is fully possible and even probable that he did not consider this passage to be distinctly Markan.

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<sup>18</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus Haeresis* 1.3.3.; in: St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies*, translated and annotated by Dominic J. Unger; with further revisions by John J. Dillon, vol. 55, New York: Newman 1992, 64–65.

<sup>19</sup> Watson, *Gospel Writing*, 497, n.187.

<sup>20</sup> Watson, *Gospel Writing*, 497.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Head argues that out of 626 quotations from the Gospels, there are only three explicit references to Mark in 1) *Haer.* 3.10.5 on Mark 1.1–3 and 16.19; 2) 3.16.3 on Mark 1.1; and 3) 4.6.1, which is a misattribution and actually refers to material in Matt 11.27//Luke 10.22: see Peter M. Head, “The Early Text of Mark,” in: J. M. Kruger and E. C. Hill (ed.), *The Early Text of the New Testament*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012, 108–120 [112, 112 n.14]. In short, Irenaeus correctly references Mark only twice in the entirety of *Haer.* Given the peripheral status of Mark in patristic theology, this is not a surprising fact. On the contrary, the marginality of Mark is to be expected.

Since only Jesus' question stands out as particularly Markan, and Irenaeus *does not* make a point that Valentinian pneumatics used this detail in their spiritual interpretation,<sup>22</sup> more analysis is needed if one wants to claim a connection between Mark 5.23–43 and Valentinians as important for Irenaeus.

Rather, Watson's point directs our attention to a general problem of Synoptic reading of the Gospels, both in late antiquity and for contemporary readers, where Gospel material can reside *nameless* in the memory of the theologian. On this point, Peter Head has argued that Irenaeus' general use of Mark exemplifies a tendency to synthesise the Synoptics, neglecting and even displaying ignorance of Markan peculiarities.<sup>23</sup> And if Watson's general hypothesis that Irenaeus did highlight Mark as a valuable theological source for a particular Valentinian inclination is worth pursuing more, what does this say about a possible re-production of a (post) "Valentinian theology"? Does *Haer.* 1.3.3 exhibit a particular preference to Markan material?<sup>24</sup> Again, since Watson's case stands or falls on a brief three-word phrase which is unique to Mark 5.30 (which is not even mentioned as important to Valentinian theology as such in Irenaeus' discourse), more work needs to be done in order to convincingly establish the relation.

Another locus used by Watson is seen where Irenaeus comments on Jesus' cry on the cross:

How much, likewise, they attempt to appropriate from the Scriptures to the things outside of their Fullness is [clear from] the following. The Lord, they say, in the last times of the world came to suffer for this reason, that he might manifest the suffering that came upon the last of the Aeons and, by this end make visible the purpose of the dealings concerning the Aeons. They tell us that

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<sup>22</sup> Irenaeus notes that "on this account the Saviour said, 'Who touched me?' – *teaching his disciples the mystery which had occurred among the Aeons, and the healing of that Aeon who had been involved in suffering*" (our italics). Although an interesting passage, it does not stress Jesus' inquiry as such.

<sup>23</sup> Head, "Text of Mark," 120.

<sup>24</sup> This issue is raised by Watson's quotation of *Haer.* 3.11.7., mentioned above, where Irenaeus (and Watson) evokes the entire Gospel of Mark (as those who "separate Jesus from Christ, and claim that Christ remained impassible whereas Jesus suffered") in relation to the Valentinians. Watson, *Gospel Writing*, 504.

the twelve-year-old virgin, the daughter of the ruler of the temple, whom the Lord visited and raised from the dead, is a type of Achamoth, to whom their Christ stretched himself forward and gave her form, and led her to the perception of the light which had forsaken her... Also the sufferings which she endured, they assert, the Lord pointed out on the cross. In this way, when he exclaimed "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" he recalled that Wisdom was deserted by the light and was hindered by Limit from advancing any farther. Her grief he manifested when he said: "My heart is very sorrowful", even to death; her fear when he said: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me", and her perplexity when he said: "And what shall I say", I do not know.<sup>25</sup>

Again, we see the connection made by Irenaeus to the importance of the twelve-year-old girl. Here, stress falls upon Jesus' raising her from the dead, pointing forward to the event of resurrection. But more importantly for present purposes, in the passage above Watson notices that Irenaeus uses the Markan version ὁ θεός μου... εἰς τί ἐγκατέλιπές με (Mark 15.34) rather than the Matthean θεέ μου... ἵνατί με ἐγκατέλιπες (Matt 27.46).<sup>26</sup> Mark's cry of dereliction is said to have suggested to "Valentinian exegetes" a "tragic earthly occurrence [and] the heavenly tragedy of Sophia's abandonment by the divine Christ, who left her in the dark and with no immediate possibility of return to the Plērōma."<sup>27</sup>

As before, Watson's argument about a reception of Mark among Valentinians (now understood as a group of "exegetes") does not establish enough evidence that Irenaeus was arguing for their importance of a Markan version of the crucifixion events. Surprisingly, Watson does not discuss the role of Matthew's paraphrase of Mark 15.34 for the overall hypothesis, other than to say that Irenaeus cites the Markan *Vorlage*. The mere occurrence of the unique Markan wording is presented as evidence for the connection between Irenaeus and the problematic use of Mark by Valentinians. Again, a reference to Mark could have been made for a number of reasons. One needs, first of all, to argue that Irenaeus *was actually aware* of the Gospel-version he was citing. This is not a given,

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<sup>25</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.8.2.

<sup>26</sup> Watson, *Gospel Writing*, 497, n.189.

<sup>27</sup> Watson, *Gospel Writing*, 498.

particularly when we consider the aforementioned article by Head and the background that Irenaeus in *Haer.* 4.6.1 wrongly attributes material found in Matthew and Luke to Mark.

However, if Watson is correct to assert that the citation of the Greek phrase from Mark 15.34 signifies something crucial, what are the actual particularities of the Markan passion-passages that Irenaeus located in Valentinian exegesis? If they really exist, they are difficult to track down. For instance, the explicit Gethsemane excerpts found towards the end of the passage above, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death,”<sup>28</sup> is actually shared by both Mark and Matthew, and in an identical Greek phrase. The sentence “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me”<sup>29</sup> has the definite shape of stemming from a Matthean version and does not seem to originate in a Markan rendition.

The case for the importance of a connection between Mark and Valentinians is, again, built from Irenaeus’ use of a Markan *Vorlage* of *shared* Synoptic material. If the wording of Jesus’ cry of dereliction in Mark is of such importance, why does Irenaeus not make a bigger issue out of it? Is the wording in Mark 15.34 (and ὁ θεός μου... εἰς τί ἐγκατέλιπές με) so different from Matt 27.46 (and θεέ μου... ἵνατί με ἐγκατέλιπες) that one can build an entire (Valentinian) theology from it? Is it enough to simply point to the mere occurrence of particularities in the Markan Greek phraseology in order to establish that Irenaeus was correct in juxtaposing the Gospel of Mark and the Valentinians? Most likely not. The passages above from *Haer.* are used by Watson to manufacture a conjunction of specific Markan Gospel material and a Valentinian theology. In a word, if the critical reader is not already invested in maintaining Irenaeus’ general portrayal (for whatever reason), the evidence Watson presents is not sufficient to convincingly bond the Gospel of Mark and the Valentinians.

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<sup>28</sup> Mark 14.34 and Matt 26.38 cite the same psalm “περίλυπός ἐστιν ἡ ψυχὴ μου” and both add “ἕως θανάτου” (“I am [or: my soul is] deeply grieved, even unto death”).

<sup>29</sup> Mark 14.36 reads “Abba, father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me.” Matt 26.39 reads “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” What is lacking for a Markan reference is the initial “Abba” and the claim that, for God, “all things are possible.”

## Searching for Mark in “Heterodoxy”

There are some general problems when looking for heterodox mentions of Mark which has to do with representativity. We should be aware already at the outset that many of the names attributed to so called heterodox groups, such as *the* Valentinians, are categories stemming from polemical contexts. We do not have any evidence suggesting that so called Valentinians, Basilideans, Carpocrateans or any other “heresy” viewed themselves as something “other” or “apart” from Christianity.<sup>30</sup> It was a term applied to them by some early Christian writers whom we today view as orthodox, and their name should not be attached to a fixed theological system, but rather a collection of theological motifs of sorts, some of which could possibly be traced back to an originator.<sup>31</sup> Considering this background, it is problematic to classify texts, people, and theological features as Valentinian, Basilidean, or Carpocratean, but even more so to treat these phenomena as homogenous movements.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, it might very well be true that *some* Christians who were inspired by the specific theology which is associated with Valentinus, Basilides, and other charismatic theologians and leaders were particularly interested in and inspired by Mark. Let us turn to the sources themselves, beginning with the Basilidean and Carpocratean evidence, ending with scrutinizing the larger corpus of Valentinian texts.

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<sup>30</sup> Frederik Wisse, “Prolegomena to the Study of the New Testament and Gnosis,” in: A. H. B. Logan & A. J. M. Wedderburn (ed.), *The New Testament and Gnosis: Essays in Honour of Robert McL. Wilson*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1983, 138–145.

<sup>31</sup> For details on Valentinus’ life and works, see Christoph Marksches, *Valentinus Gnosticus? Untersuchungen zur valentinianischen Gnosis mit einem Kommentar zu den Fragmenten Valentins*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1992.

<sup>32</sup> Michel Desjardins, “The Sources for Valentinian Gnosticism: A Question of Methodology”, *Vigiliae Christianae* 49 (1986): 342–347. David Brakke rightly points out that in using terms like *Gnosticism* (and this applies to Valentinianism also), there is a risk that peripheral “Gnostic” features of a text/group (for example, belief in a demiurge) take precedence in terms of importance at the expense of something that could have been more central, for example, the saving message of Jesus (David Brakke, *The Gnostics*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2010, 1–28). See also Michael Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996, 51, who acknowledges the usefulness of using terms like “Valentinian” to highlight specific sub-traditions within the broader category of Christianity.

According to some early Christian writers, Basilides was allied with a disciple to the apostle Peter, a man named Glaucias.<sup>33</sup> Origen claimed that Basilides had also composed his own Gospel in addition. But it is unclear how Basilides positioned his own writings in relation to the four Gospels, especially with regard to their theological authority.<sup>34</sup> According to Irenaeus, Basilides taught that Jesus did not suffer on the Cross and also denied Jesus' bodily resurrection,<sup>35</sup> which would go well with the earliest versions of Mark which leave out the resurrection.<sup>36</sup> The majority of the few fragments of Basilides' own writings come from the book Clement calls *Exegetica*, a voluminous work with unclear content.<sup>37</sup> Nothing here, though, suggests that the Gospel of Mark is favoured or neglected; no specific quotations from Mark can be detected, only one from Paul (1 Thessalonians 4.3–8).<sup>38</sup> It therefore remains unclear whether Mark played a central role for Basilides.<sup>39</sup> There are too few extant first- and second-hand sources to draw any firm conclusions regarding Basilides' relation to the Gospel of Mark.

Sources on the Carpocrateans are even rarer, and no direct quotes remain. Irenaeus is the most detailed in his references to their theology; other references seem to rely on his claim that the Carpocrateans saw

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<sup>33</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7.17.

<sup>34</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Luke* 1.2.

<sup>35</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.24.4.

<sup>36</sup> James A. Kelhoffer, "Basilides's Gospel and Exegetica (Treatises)," *Vigiliae Christianae* 59 (2005): 115–134. Kelhoffer points out that Irenaeus' depiction of Basilides' theological outlook concerning Jesus' death, where he gives the cross to Simon of Cyrene who is crucified in his place, echoes Mark 15:21 mentioning a Simon of Cyrene, or possibly Matthew 27:32. Kelhoffer, rightly in our opinion, questions the trustworthiness of Irenaeus' rendering of Basilidean theology at the point of Jesus' escaping death.

<sup>37</sup> It is often thought to be a text commenting on the gospels, but this is unclear, as Kelhoffer has argued. It might just as well be a text expanding on Basilides' theology. Kelhoffer, "Basilides's Gospel," 115–134. See also Birger A. Pearson, "Basilides the Gnostic," in: A. M. P. Luomanen, *A Companion to Second-Century Christian "Heretics"*, Leiden: Brill 2008, 1–31.

<sup>38</sup> Clement, *Strom.* 4.12. See also Hegemonius, *Acta Archelai* 38, 55, in: M.J. Vermes, *Acta Archelai*, Turnhout: Brepols 2001.

<sup>39</sup> Bentley Layton has previously suggested that Basilides' take on the resurrection was inspired by Mark. Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, New York: Doubleday 1987, 417–444; Bentley Layton, "The Significance of Basilides in Ancient Christian Thought," *Representations* 28 (1989): 135–151.

Jesus as a philosopher man rather than as a god, and that they kept a picture of Jesus along with other philosophers they revered. Clement speaks of Carpocrates' son, Epiphanes, and accuses him of libertinism (in relation to the opposite sex), and further mentions a book Epiphanes is supposed to have authored (but does not quote from it).<sup>40</sup> There are too few first- and second-hand sources to draw any conclusions regarding the Carpocratean relation to the Gospel of Mark. Thankfully, in the case of our final group, the Valentinians, the evidence is much more voluminous.

There are a number of texts and textual fragments extant today which are associated with the Valentinians. There is no scholarly consensus regarding exactly which of these texts should be classified as Valentinian. Here, we will discuss those texts and fragments that are less contended.<sup>41</sup> Most obvious are the seven fragments of Valentinus himself, quoted by Clement and Hippolytus. In these fragments there is nothing to suggest that Valentinus preferred Mark.<sup>42</sup> Clement also quotes a compilation of different Valentinian texts which he titled "Excerpts of Theodotus", another text collection of Valentinian derivation missing an overtly Markan influence. Clement's productive junior, Origen, was also intimately familiar with the Valentinians and actually put a lot of effort into refuting Valentinians' uses of a particular Gospel version important to them. However, it does not seem to have been the Gospel of Mark that Origen depicts as the Valentinians' gospel of choice, but rather John's. The earliest commentary to the Gospel of John extant today came from the hand of a Valentinian (though unfortunately only in piecemeal form), a man named Heracleon. Again, there is no mention of Mark in this context either.<sup>43</sup>

What about the Nag Hammadi texts? A brief look at the extremely thorough concordance of Bible passages in the different Nag Hammadi texts makes it obvious that, compared to other Gospels and texts of the

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<sup>40</sup> Clement, *Stromata* 3.2.

<sup>41</sup> To this list we include the fragments of Valentinus, *Excerpts of Theodotus* quoted by Clement, the fragments of Heracleon quoted by Origen, and the following Nag Hammadi texts: *A Valentinian Exposition*, *The Tripartite Tractate*, *The Gospel of Truth*, *Prayer of Paul*, and *The Interpretation of Knowledge*.

<sup>42</sup> Marksches, *Valentinus Gnosticus?*, 337–407.

<sup>43</sup> Elaine Pagels, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis: Heracleon's Commentary on John*, Nashville: Abingdon 1973.

Bible, Mark actually occurs very infrequently in the Valentinian material (as well as in other Nag Hammadi texts).<sup>44</sup> The main inspiration for Valentinians seems rather to have been the apostle Paul. This has already been argued by Elaine Pagles in her book *The Gnostic Paul*.<sup>45</sup> Paul is cited as the great apostle, and has a text named after him in Codex I, and he is also frequently quoted.<sup>46</sup> Paul's taxonomy of pneumatic, psychic, and material knowledge of God discussed in 1 Cor 2–3 was probably foundational for traits often deemed typical for Valentinianism.<sup>47</sup>

The problem is not that one cannot find Markan references in the Valentinian Nag Hammadi texts; the problem is that they are impossible to separate from the Gospel of Matthew. Passages unique to Mark do not occur, so we are left with references that could just as easily have been references to Matthew. Let us take an example from the second text in Nag Hammadi Codex XI, *A Valentinian Exposition*. This is a fitting text to choose because it is the only Valentinian text extant today that clearly portrays a theology similar to that which Irenaeus was most interested in rejecting, what sometimes is called the Western version of Valentinianism.<sup>48</sup> Evans and his colleagues identify no references to Mark in the text itself. What about the ritual fragments that follow directly after this text? On page 41, we can read the following concerning baptism:

Moreover, the first baptism is the forgiveness of sins. We are brought from those of the right, that is, into the imperishability which is the Jordan. But that place is of the world. So we have been sent out of the world into the Aeon. For the interpretation of

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<sup>44</sup> C. Evans, R. Webb and R. Weibe (ed.), *Nag Hammadi Texts and the Bible: A Synopsis and Index*, Leiden: Brill 1993.

<sup>45</sup> Elaine Pagles, *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters*, Philadelphia: Fortress 1975.

<sup>46</sup> Evans et al, *Nag Hammadi Texts*.

<sup>47</sup> Ismo Dunderberg, *Gnostic Morality Revisited*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2016, 137–148.

<sup>48</sup> This form of Valentinianism focuses much on protological details and on the relations among the multitude of Aeons in the Pleroma. For a discussion of the usefulness of this division of Valentinianism, see Joel Kalvesmaki, "Italian versus Eastern Valentinianism?," *Vigiliae Christianae* 62 (2008): 79–89.



John is the Aeon, while the interpretation of that which is the upward progression, that is, our Exodus from the world into the Aeon.<sup>49</sup>

In this passage, we are offered an interpretation of the more common stories of John the Baptist found in Mark 1.4f., Matt 3.13f., and Luke 3.3f. But which one is used as reference and inspiration? There are no apparent differences between Mark 1.4, Matt 3.13, and Luke 3.3 which help us to exclude Luke or Matthew from being the referenced text in this passage.

This situation is repeated with the other Valentinian Nag Hammadi texts as well, like *The Tripartite Tractate*, *The Gospel of Truth*, and *The Interpretation of Knowledge*. There are no first-hand Valentinian sources that make specific reference to the few passages that are unique to Mark.<sup>50</sup> Let us conclude the findings next.

## Concluding Discussion

Kok's analysis of early 2nd–3rd-century patristic critique of Mark, for instance in Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*, rightly accentuates the general nature of Mark as an ancient theo-political problem text. However, does this context entail that “allowing” this Gospel-text to fall into the hands

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<sup>49</sup> *A Valentinian Exposition* 41.20–38, in: “A Valentinian Exposition,” text and translation from John Turner,” in: C. H. Hedrick (ed.), *The Coptic Gnostic Library: Nag Hammadi Codices XI, XII, XIII*, Leiden: Brill 1990, 144–145: πωρπ̄ σ̄ε̄ ν̄β[απ̄τ̄ις̄ η̄ᾱ π̄ε̄ε̄]ῑ π̄ε̄ π̄κω̄ε̄ [ᾱβαλ̄ ἰ̄ν̄ναβ̄ι] σ̄ε̄ῑνε̄ ἰ̄ν̄[ᾱν̄ ᾱβαλ̄ ἔ̄ν̄ ν̄ε̄τ̄ῖν̄]ε̄γ̄ ᾱβαλ̄ ε̄[τ̄οο̄τ̄ῑ ᾱρο̄]γ̄ν̄ ᾱναγ̄νε̄μ̄ [ε̄τε̄ π̄ε̄ε̄ῑπ̄ε̄ ᾱρ̄]ο̄γ̄ν̄ ᾱτ̄ῖν̄[τᾱτ̄τε̄κο̄ε̄τε̄ π̄ε̄]ε̄ῑ [π̄ε̄ π̄ο̄[ρ̄ᾱν̄η̄ς̄ ᾱλλ̄]ε̄ π̄ῑτο̄πο̄[ς̄] π̄ε̄ [π̄η̄ ἡ̄τε̄π̄]ε̄[ο̄]ς̄μο̄ς̄ ἡ̄τ̄ᾱ[γ̄τ̄ῖν̄ᾱγ̄] σ̄ε̄ ἰ̄ν̄ᾱν̄ ᾱβα[λ̄] ε̄[ἰ̄ π̄κο̄ς̄]μο̄ς̄ ᾱρο̄γ̄ν̄ ᾱπᾱω̄[ν̄ ο̄ε̄ρ̄]ἡ̄ν̄η̄ιᾱ γ̄αρ̄ ἡ̄ἰ̄ω̄ε̄[ᾱν̄η̄ς̄] π̄ε̄ π̄ᾱω̄ν̄ ο̄ε̄ρ̄η̄[ἡ̄ν̄η̄ιᾱ ἡ̄]δε̄ ἡ̄π̄η̄ ε̄τε̄ π̄ο̄ρ̄ᾱ[ᾱν̄η̄ς̄ π̄ε̄] π̄ε̄ τ̄κᾱτᾱβ̄ᾱς̄ ε̄τ̄ε̄ [π̄ᾱνᾱβ̄ᾱς̄]μο̄ς̄ π̄ε̄ ε̄τε̄ π̄ε̄ε̄ῑ [π̄ε̄ ἡ̄π̄η̄] ᾱβαλ̄ ἔ̄ν̄ π̄κο̄ς̄μο̄[ς̄ ᾱρο̄γ̄ν̄] ᾱπᾱω̄ν̄.

<sup>50</sup> There are those who consider *A Treaty on the Resurrection* (NHC I,4) (also known as *Letter to Rheginos*) a Valentinian text. In this text there is a possible reference to Mark in particular, at 48.6–10 mentioning Elijah and Moses in connection to the resurrection. In Mark, Elijah is mentioned before Moses in this sequence, while Matthew and Luke mention Moses first, then Elijah. We are grateful to the anonymous reviewer who pointed this out to us. Even if *A Treaty on the Resurrection* is considered a Valentinian text, which it may in fact be, even though this text seldom is counted among those featuring clear Valentinian traits, this argument constitutes a weak basis on which to draw the conclusion that Valentinians in general held Mark to their gospel of choice.

of the wrong crowd – 2nd-century Christian theologians such as Valentinus – means the establishment of a lasting theological divide among the early Christian congregations, by way of producing a problematic theology via a privileging of Mark as a theological source?<sup>51</sup> If Mark was already problematic to “orthodox” theologians, the reception of Mark in the enemy camp, so to speak, would threaten to make matters worse, following this hypothesis. Kok argues that if heterodox theologians, such as Valentinus of Alexandria (ca. 100–160?), found theological authority among the problematic tendencies of Mark, the broader Jesus-movement could end up even more fragmented as a result – a prospect clearly bothering a centrist and “peacemaker” theologian, such as Irenaeus.<sup>52</sup>

Kok’s study highlights intriguing problems surrounding the Gospel of Mark during the 2nd–3rd centuries. Watson’s argument concerning Valentinian interest in Mark strengthened Kok’s reading of Mark’s reception during the 2nd century. We have demonstrated that both Kok and Watson overlook the heterodox sources themselves and mainly rely on Irenaeus’ one-sided testimony.

As is well known, referencing apostolic succession and attaching oneself to the evangelists were just as strong legitimation techniques among so called heretics as proto-orthodox writers.<sup>53</sup> If Irenaeus really tried to protect Mark from being overtaken by “heretics” (in particular, Valentinians), one would have expected him to have stated this less obliquely, or at least mentioned it in chapters 8 and 9 of Book I of *Haer*. In these two chapters, Irenaeus deals exclusively with the question of how the Valentinians, in his opinion, distorted Scripture for their own purposes. But Mark is not discussed in detail, nor does it seem to make

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<sup>51</sup> Kok, *Gospel on the Margins*, 265.

<sup>52</sup> Kok, *Gospel on the Margins*, 200–201. Through the use of terms such as *centrism* and *radicalism*, with regards to proto-orthodox and “heretical” theologians of ancient Christianity, Kok theoretically bypasses a value-laden debate on the naming of theologians. To be clear, the terminology of “orthodoxy and heresy” is inherently problematic to explorative readings of ancient religious material of any kind and is therefore avoided in the present study. See the conclusion to Kok, *Gospel on the Margins*, 267–270 (“Conclusion: The Centrist Christian Approach to Mark”) succinct a treatment of said terms.

<sup>53</sup> Recently, Candida Moss, “Fashioning Mark: Early Christian Discussions about the Scribe and Status of the Second Gospel,” *New Testament Studies* 67 (2021): 181–204, has engaged with the legitimation of the Gospel of Mark via Papias and Irenaeus from the perspective of literacy and ancient practices of enslavement.

up the foundations for the theology developed by those Valentinians who Irenaeus opposed. Rather, it is the interpretations of Paul's writings which Irenaeus tries to protect, and he does so by painstakingly going through the errors Valentinians have committed when extracting their theology from Paul.<sup>54</sup>

There is little to suggest that Valentinians favoured the Gospel of Mark in the way Watson and Kok read Irenaeus. There is more hope for Basilides and possible Carpocrateans, but the evidence is scant, to say the least. This does not mean that there were no ancient heterodox groups particularly drawn to the Gospel of Mark. During the 4th century a controversy arose involving a more straightforward "heretical" use of the Gospel of Mark.<sup>55</sup> Arian trinitarian theology was drawn to enigmatic Markan sections and its peculiar theology, and thus presents a later and more effective example analogous to Watson and Kok's reading of a more ancient heretical reception of Mark. Similar to how the theological tendencies of the beginning of the Gospel of Mark and the "adoption-scene" at the baptism of Jesus became a problem text for proto-orthodox, Mark 13.32 worried Arians since Jesus – the son – here explicitly denies exact knowledge of the eschaton's chronology, and

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<sup>54</sup> For example, when Irenaeus describes the Valentinian tripartite anthropology and its origin in Paul's theology, he writes: "Paul, too, very clearly spoke of the earthly, the ensouled, and the spiritual when he said in one place: "As was the earthly, such also are the earthly" (1 Corinthians 15.48); and in another place: "But the ensouled man does not receive the things of the Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2.14); and in still another place: "But the spiritual man judges all things" (1 Corinthians 2.15). That the ensouled man does not receive the things of the Spirit they assert he said of Demiurge who, since he was ensouled, knew neither his Mother, who was spiritual, nor her offspring, nor the Aeons in the Fullness. Paul showed, furthermore, that Savior received the first fruits of those whom he was to save, when he said: "And if the first fruits are holy, so is the whole lump" (Romans 11.16). Now thy teach that the first fruits are the spiritual class whereas the lump is we, that is, the ensouled church, which lump he assumed and raised up with himself since he was the leaven." Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.8.3

<sup>55</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria introduces a particular issue with Mark 13.32 in *Oration against the Arians* 3.26 and 42–50. For a review of Athanasius' argument, see Paul S. Russel, "Ephraem and Athanasius on the Knowledge of Christ. Two anti-Arian Treatments of 'Mark' 13:32," *Gregorianum* (2004): 445–474 (462–466). Russel also calls another proto-orthodox theologian making a similar argument on the "correct" reading of Mark 13 to Athanasius with the hymns of Ephraem the Syrian.

thus iterates the baptismal story's potential for emphasizing the son's ontological difference from God the father.<sup>56</sup>

Notwithstanding the methodological problems found in relation to certain claims concerning heterodox beliefs (en masse) or a purported attraction to particular biblical texts, there is little support for a distinct, heretical reading of Mark. The evidence seems to be pointing instead in the opposite direction: the heterodox groups we have discussed did not differ much with respect to Irenaeus himself, nor to/from other patristic writers, in their view of Mark. The Gospel of Mark was not of particular interest or value to the heterodox groups we have discussed, but rather seems to have been somewhat overlooked. Mark might have been authoritative and one of the earliest textual sources left behind by Jesus' followers, enjoying high status as a symbol, but, theologically, the Gospel of Mark seems to have been neglected, by proto-orthodox and heterodox alike.

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<sup>56</sup> Περί δὲ τῆς ἡμέρας ἐκείνης ἢ τῆς ὥρας οὐδεὶς οἶδεν, οὐδὲ οἱ ἄγγελοι ἐν οὐρανῷ οὐδὲ ὁ υἱός, εἰ μὴ ὁ πατήρ: "But about that day or hour [of the eschaton], no one knows; neither the angels in heavens, nor the Son but only the Father" (NRSV). It is not difficult to imagine that a theology invested in the importance of locating differences concerning Jesus the human and the nature of the divine reality would develop an interest in passages such as Mark 1 and 13. This is precisely what the proto-orthodox proponents in this controversy argued happened with Arian exegesis of the Gospel of Mark. The problem, according to Athanasius for instance, was that Arians read Mark 13.32 in isolation from other texts underlining the unity of the Son and the Father, such as John 17.1. We therefore find a challenging method of interpreting scripture in the center of this theological conflict: "Scripture were themselves the source of the dispute and not fodder for proof-texting of predetermined theological position" (Kevin Madigan, "Christus Nesciens? Was Christ Ignorant of the Day of Judgment? Arian and Orthodox Interpretation of Mark 13.32 in the Ancient Latin West," *Harvard Theological Review* 96 (2003): 255–278 (255). In short, Arians were interested in the Gospel of Mark and its so-called "low Christology" because it strengthened their theological position. While Arians simply needed to point to Markan mentioning of Jesus' ignorance of details pertaining to the eschaton, Athanasius and other proto-orthodox theologians were forced to engage in a rather tortured exegesis of passages like Mark 13.32, in conflation with other canonical texts, in order to make the Gospel of Mark fall into line with their trinitarian position.