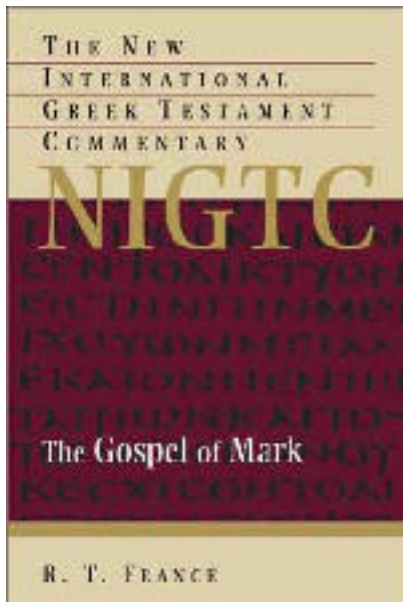


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France, R. T.

The Gospel of Mark

New International Greek Testament Commentary

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As the rash of commentaries on the Gospel of Mark continues unabated, one may search for a work that can offer a “definitive” word. That work comes from R. T. France, a prolific writer on the Gospels who has perhaps written his magnum opus on the second Gospel. This commentary, part of the New International Greek Testament Commentary series, is not a “commentary on commentaries,” nor is it concerned with theories about the prehistory of the Gospel’s composition. Rather, it is concerned with the text of Mark itself. France treats Mark as a narrative whole and is guided by the historical awareness brought on by the “Third Quest” of the historical Jesus. The commentary is based upon UBS⁴ and NA²⁷ and assumes a working knowledge of Greek. Prior to the introduction there are a list of abbreviations and a bibliography of works cited in the commentary. Following the commentary, there are an index of modern authors, a helpful index of Greek words and phrases, and a listing of biblical and other ancient sources.

The introduction deals with issues such as genre, structure, and origin. France classifies Mark as a biography, though its distinctive character is traced to its subject matter. Mark is also distinctive because the Gospel bears the mark of “preaching” and was not written to be read but to be heard. Showing his inclination toward recent literary methods in New Testament studies, France sees Mark as “A Drama in Three Acts.” Following the heading of 1:1 and the prologue of 1:2–13, act 1 centers in Galilee (1:14–8:21). Act 2 finds Jesus

on the way to Jerusalem (8:22–10:52) and act 3 in Jerusalem (11:1–16:8). The two major discourses of Mark 4 and 13 are opportunities to allow the reader a pause in the rapid narrative to think through what has occurred up to those points. France explains that there is “no symmetry” to the structure, only a “narrative flow” to carry the reader toward the climax (13). As far as origin is concerned, France defends the traditional understanding of the apostle Peter as the source of the second Gospel.

Toward the end of the introduction France also deals with Mark’s purpose and briefly with origin. No one specific purpose should be expected in a work such as this. According to France, Mark’s message does revolve around Christology and discipleship; however, there are other prominent themes, such as the kingdom of God, the secrecy motif, eschatology, and the locations of Galilee and Jerusalem (Galilee is a positive location and Jerusalem a negative one). While no view of authorship, date, or location is necessary to interpret Mark, France advocates a Markan authorship (with Petrine influence) and a Roman provenance. He dates Mark not later than the early 60s of the first century.

If one picks up this commentary in order to ponder the Synoptic Problem, there will be great disappointment. France spends little more than four pages discussing how Mark relates to Matthew and Luke. The author sees weaknesses in the two major theories of Gospel composition and holds to a third position, advocated by J. A. T. Robinson and E. P. Sanders, in which the process of Gospel formation was “more complex and fluid than a matter of simple literary dependence of one writer on another” (43). France, however, does hold to Markan priority; Matthew and Luke depended upon Mark due to Peter’s influence. In advocating Mark’s priority, France would not necessarily conclude that the second Gospel always represented an earlier tradition. In essence, France does not believe a solution to the Synoptic Problem is possible or necessary to understand Mark.

In the commentary proper France follows the structure laid out in the introduction. Each major section is introduced by an essay. The subsections begin with textual notes, followed by a brief introduction and the exegesis of verses. More often than not, the verses are dealt with individually. The textual notes discuss variants found in UBS⁴ plus a few others of significance. If one who appreciates text criticism may quibble, more textual notes would have been preferred, although admittedly it is difficult to determine where to draw the line. France drew his primarily from the UBS apparatus.

It is impossible to deal with France’s position on all critical issues found in Mark. Brief comments, however, will be made on a few. France considers “son of [the] God” as original to 1:1. The prominence of the term in the Gospel at key points makes its

presence likely. France denies that Mark 13 is an “apocalypse” in the strict sense of the term, although the chapter bears some its characteristics. For France, 13: 1–31 refer to the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. He interprets 13:24–27 as apocalyptic language relating the political change that will occur following the predicted destruction—the temple is out, and the Son of Man is in (501)—while 13:32–37 deal with the parousia. In his introductory essay on the interpretation of this chapter, France often is in dialogue with N. T. Wright (*Jesus and the Victory of God*), who removes the parousia from Mark 13. Many readers may take issue with France’s metaphorical interpretation of much of 13:24-27, which he argues is taken directly from the language of Old Testament prophecy.

France deals with the ending of Mark in detail. While he is certainly one who appreciates literary criticism, France parts company with many current scholars who advocate that 16:8 is an appropriate ending to a work that deals so heavily in paradox. France argues, correctly, in this reviewer’s view, that 16:8 would be an unacceptable ending to a story that began on “an overt note of faith in Jesus as Messiah and the Son of God” (672). France refuses to speculate on what actually happened to Mark’s original ending. That does not stop him, however, from speculating on what the original ending must have contained if it were written. France guesses that Mark’s ending perhaps looked like that of Matthew: an account of resurrection appearances and a Galilean rendezvous with his disciples. France deals with the textual evidence for the ending of Mark in a final, appended note. His goal is not to argue that the authentic text of Mark ends at 16:8 but to set out the data that has led to the consensus that it does so.

For those who can handle Greek, this commentary will become the “definitive” word on Mark for years to come. It is the best commentary based on the Greek text available today. Every scholar and church leader should have it on his or her shelf. For church leaders there are few expository insights; thus it should be coupled with a commentary such as the recent work by Witherington.