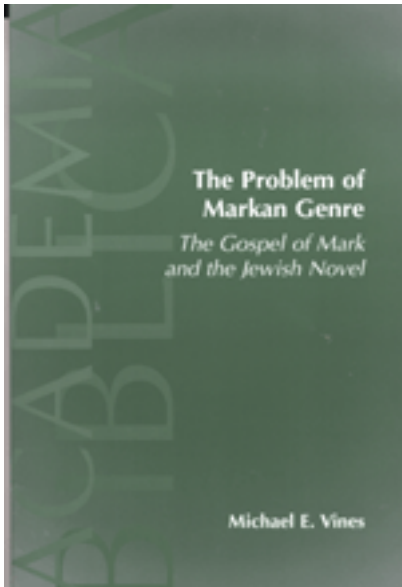


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The Problem of Markan Genre: The Gospel of Mark and the Jewish Novel

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This study takes its place among persistent attempts to identify the genre of the Gospel of Mark, as well as persistent attempts to discover how such generic information might abet our understanding. If this were Gospel similar to examples of Greek and Latin biographies, so what? If it were like examples of Jewish apocalyptic literature, how would that enlighten us? The author reviews various ways in which these questions have been approached previously by, among others, Aune, Burridge, Collins, Peterson, Talbert, Tolbert, and Votaw. In doing so, the chase after Mark's genre is on in this book—and on in a gripping way.

To follow his course, the author draws a sharp distinction between genre analyses that center on inner form versus those that center on outer form, or those that focus on accidental versus essential characteristics. Success in literary theory such as this—before the participant is aware of it, genre theory quickly becomes quite philosophically complicated—depends on critical dexterity, clever arguments to the best explanation, plausible methods of comparison, and avoidance of articulating the trivial as if it were significant. We are fortunate that the author provides a good account of himself on all fronts. His conclusion about the genre of Gospel of Mark is that it is the kind of narrative in which God's intervention in earthly activities is at the center of action. "God alone saves, and God's salvific plan is not subject to human manipulation or interference" (155). This is not merely a theological opinion about Mark's presentation but a statement

about Mark's genre, and it is important to note the difference. The Gospel of Mark is a member of a set of narrative works that depict God and human affairs in this particular way. The set of such works as this includes what the author identifies as "Jewish novels," especially Esther, Susanna, and Dan 1–6.

To reach this conclusion, the author in chapter 1 reviews and dispatches previous attempts to show that the Gospel of Mark belongs to that set of narratives construed as biography: Greek and Latin lives penned, roughly, within two centuries of the composition of Mark. Through this review, the problem of genre is shown to result directly from the challenge of settling on a proper method for the classification of literary items. Something other than "like compositional features" must be sought in order correctly to group discrete narratives into genres. Otherwise, genre analysis becomes dismally formalistic. To avoid this, the author labors to establish that it is a critical mistake to confuse form with genre.

This insight is worked through in chapters 2 and 3, which provide an eighty-eight-page primer to Bakhtin's genre theory and that theory's application to Hellenistic biographies, romances, and Menippean satires (Petronius, Apuleius, Lucian, some Seneca, and the *Life of Aesop*). The turn to Bakhtin is lengthy and unexpected, at least as far as one would expect from the title of the book. It is also, at least to this reader, complex and wordy (though not languid), taking a student of Mark on a fast-paced tour through Bakhtin's patois about discourse, speech genre, and literary genre. However brisk the tour might be, the author does focus this material. He concludes his review by showing the importance of the idea of "chronotope" to Bakhtin and, therefore, to his own attempt to address the problem of the Markan genre. A chronotope, it turns out, is construed to be the most essential feature that enables assignment of literature to generic sets. The author articulates numerous supports for this conclusion from Bakhtin's writings; a reader will need to work through them in order to grasp the book's ambitious theoretical point of view. This is not a course easily digested in one reading.

The chronotope of a narrative is that which fixes it in a certain time and place. Various combinations of past, present, or future times and local or foreign spaces can create very different meanings, moods, intimations, and (especially) discourses. Most to the point, chronotopes are the features by which literary works may be classified into genres. The grouping of literary items into sets is, in the author's view, best done when the items are analyzed for their "axiological potential of a particular form-shaping ideology" (67). Critical identification of such a feature makes for better comparisons.

Chronotopes may be indicative of cultural trends, such as the trend of increased polyglossia during the Hellenistic period—that is, a period of new empires and new

social mix, when ancient traditions were reworked into a variety of new literary forms. The author suggests that Greek and Latin biographies from this period have chronotopes of abstract time and exterior public space. In them, existence is an outward and essentially social orientation, not a private life (87–88). The chronotope of ancient romances is different, being temporally abstract and spatially alien. Characters are placed in such an abstract-alien world “to test their piety and romantic devotion” and to show how well-born Greeks might live in the midst of “a strange and often dangerous world” (108). The chronotope of Menippean satires differs still, as it creates “fantastic temporal and spacial possibilities” in which authors can “bring epic traditions into direct contact with the present” (119). Since the Gospel of Mark was also written in the midst of the same trends of Hellenization, it too can be analyzed for generic chronotopes from this the period. Comparison of it to the chronotopes of biographies, romances, and Menippean satires will not, however, demonstrate a significant influence of one upon the other but instead may help us to “gain some insight” into Mark’s own chronotope (120). Even so, comparison to these three genres does not produce the most satisfying critical results when analyzing Mark.

For the author, what works best with Mark’s chronotope is comparison to the Jewish novels. It might come as a surprise to a reader that the content so specifically highlighted by the book’s subtitle is really addressed only here, toward the end, in about sixteen pages. The Jewish novels depict a world that is considered open to divine intervention, although such intervention hardly ever actually appears in the story lines. Instead, representatives or emissaries of God do the work. They are characters typically beset by weakness or marginal social status, depending on God and risking their lives in such dependence as they act. Unlike apocalypticism, the Jewish novels are more realistic. Their chronotope is therefore “realistic-apocalyptic: the anticipation of divine deliverance and the actualization of divine sovereignty within a realistic time and space” (153).

Like the Jewish novels, aspects of Mark’s story have the sense of eschatological fulfillment: Mark 1:2–3, with conflation of prophetic texts about God’s coming; 13:26, about seeing the Son of Man coming on the clouds; and 14:62, about someday catching sight of the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power. However, Jesus is depicted as genuinely disenfranchised in Mark; he is in conflict with many other enfranchised powers, always apparently on the verge of fulfilling nothing too much or too obvious. The chronotope of Mark is in “real, historical time,” which is different from the Jewish novels that are set in “pseudo-historical time.” Mark also differs from the Jewish novels in that, unlike the protagonists in them, Jesus in Mark is pictured neither as pious nor ritually observant. Even so, Mark and the Jewish novels still share the same basic chronotope, and by the author’s lights that puts them into the same genre.

Much of this goes by quickly in the book. Unfortunately, the author provides no lengthy, detailed analysis of any particular Markan text. His generalizations about many various verses in Mark can all be subject to serious reexamination, making his conclusion about Mark's genre, at least by the book's end, essentially tentative. However, that is not an inauspicious conclusion, since what this book really accomplishes is to provide the challenge to move away from the ennui of formalistic comparisons and to embrace comparisons that are more dynamic. Whether Mark's chronotope will remain as the author describes it, after further and more extensive analysis of specifics in Mark, is an open question.

The book has a citation and modern author index. In the latter, many entries point to items found only in the bibliography, not to references to the authors in the text or notes. For example, Glen Bowersock is in the index but not discussed in the book. It would have been worthwhile had the author interacted with Bowersock's proposal that the Gospel genre in fact influenced the development of the Greek romance genre.