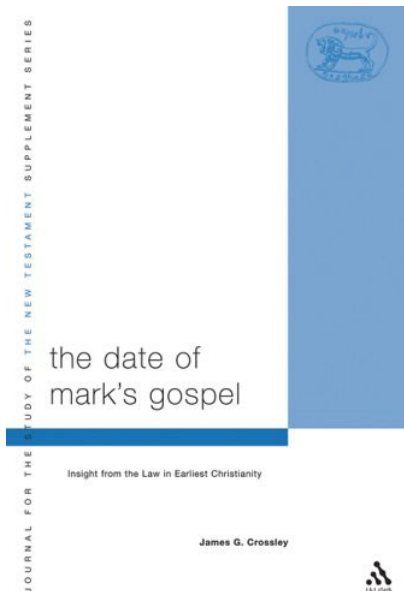


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Crossley, James G.

The Date of Mark's Gospel: Insight from the Law in Earliest Christianity

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The author tells us that this book is a slightly revised version of his Ph.D. thesis, supervised by Maurice Casey at the University of Nottingham. There are several matters worth mentioning at the outset. The subtitle provides the key to the distinctive contribution of this book. The attempt to establish the likelihood of a very early date for Mark draws on historically conservative scholarship, but the case is carefully argued. What drives the early dating hypothesis is a thesis developed on the basis of the work of W. C. Allen and Maurice Casey. It is argued that Mark represents the Jesus tradition prior to the rapid expansion of the Gentile mission in the 40s (3, 80, 206).

The book is well planned and well written. The short introduction outlines the strategy followed in the following chapters of the book. Because the cases for dating Mark around the time of the Jewish War or at an earlier date make use of external and internal evidence, the plan of the book proceeds by first dealing with the external evidence (ch. 1). The subsequent chapters, apart from chapter 5, concentrate on the internal evidence. In the second chapter the internal evidence used to establish a date around the time of the Jewish War is examined. The aim of the first two chapters is to show that this evidence concerning the date of Mark is inconclusive.

Treatment of the external evidence is clear and interesting. Crossley first outlines the evidence asserting that Mark wrote down the preaching of Peter after his death, before setting out the evidence that asserts Peter's presence in Rome during the reign of Claudius, where Mark wrote down Peter's preaching during his lifetime. Clement of Alexandria, to whom Crossley appeals (9–10), makes Mark the third Gospel after Matthew and Luke, written while Peter was alive. Crossley notes that both Eusebius (*Chronicles*) and Jerome (*Vir. ill.* 1) place Peter in Rome in the reign of Claudius. Without earlier evidence, this is hardly persuasive. At the same time, he recognizes that a critical review of the Papias tradition casts doubt on the ascription of the Gospel to Mark, and the appeal to the Petrine tradition seeks to overcome the criticism that Mark lacked orderliness and accuracy. In the Papias tradition, Mark's accuracy is defended and the lack of order explained. Crossley recognizes that the reliability of the Markan traditions is questionable. He appeals to the common occurrence of anonymous and pseudonymous works at Qumran and the Judaism of the time and concludes that Mark may well have been anonymous originally so that the Markan ascription with the Petrine link was a response to the criticism of the Gospel's lack of accuracy and order. Thus the external evidence leads Crossley to the conclusion that an early or later date of Mark remains possible.

Chapter 2 takes account of Mark 13, in which many scholars find evidence for dating Mark around the time of the Jewish War. Crossley seeks to show that other earlier situations also fit the historical evidence of Mark 13; in particular, a situation in the reign of Caligula is identified. His conclusion is that the situation reflected in Mark 13 allows for dating Mark "sometime between the mid to late thirties and c. 70" (43).

Chapter 3 examines the implications of modern Gospel criticism for dating Mark. Crossley recognizes the strengthening of the consensus dating Mark around the time of the Jewish War but argues that this is based on a number of arguments that are too speculative to be convincing. He signals a newish approach based on the work of W. C. Allen and Maurice Casey and the portrayal of Jesus' attitude to the Torah in the Synoptic Gospels. He recognizes that not all scholars agree that the Synoptics portray Jesus as a Torah-observant Jew and foreshadows an examination of this matter in the rest of the book (ch. 4). Given that the argument concerns the date of Mark in the early 40s, this involves some difference in Mark's portrayal compared with Matthew and Luke. It also presupposes an understanding of the changing place of Torah in early Christianity (ch. 5).

Crucial to the argument of this book is conclusion that the Jesus of Mark breaks no biblical law. Indeed, Crossley goes further: "if Mark really does show no signs of the biblical Torah being challenged then a date for Mark sometime before the fifties could reasonably be suggested" (125). The reason for this is that the challenge to Torah is found

in Paul's letters in the mid-50s. Thus Crossley not only claims that the Jesus of Mark is Torah observant, but he argues that Mark knows no challenge to Torah observance from any quarter. Certainly Matthew, of all the Gospels, portrays Jesus as Torah observant, but that Gospel portrays Jesus as aware of such a challenge (5:19). According to Crossley, this implies that Mark was probably written between the mid-30s and mid-40s (208), and Matthew some time later.

The case depends on the acceptance of the argument that Mark portrays Jesus as Torah observant. Crossley goes about the task of proving this in two stages (chs. 6–7). In chapter 6 he argues that Jesus was Sabbath observant and did not contradict the biblical law of divorce. There are complexities with both arguments, but greater problems emerge with the argument of chapter 7 on the issue of purity. Recognizing this, Crossley argues that chapters 4 and 6 “argued that Mark always portrays Jesus observing biblical law and so the same can be expected of Mk 7.1–23” (192). I doubt that the general case is as secure as Crossley would like. Even if it were, that does not exclude a different outcome on this purity issue. Crossley has overlooked a significant detail that makes the case in Mark 7 quite different from others.

Crossley rightly argues that the issue under discussion in 7:1–23 is the necessity of hand washing before eating. This is clearly the issue dealt with in the tradition used by Mark. Matthew so edits Mark to retain this focus. But Crossley is unjustified in arguing that Matt 15:20b *correctly* interprets Mark 7:19b at a time when food purity laws were in question (184, 193). His assertion that Mark 7:19b demonstrates that Mark was written before the food purity laws were questioned is unjustified. Here he uses a conclusion concerning the early date of Mark to establish the case for the early date of Mark. Rather, it seems, Mark has used a traditional story in which Jesus was challenged about hand washing and responded with a proverbial saying. But the proverbial saying has implications in relation to the food laws as well as hand washing. It is Mark, not Jesus, who draws the conclusion about this saying making all foods clean. Certainly it is wrong to read 7:19b “as Jesus declaring literally all foods clean” (192). Here Crossley misses the point. It is not possible to say whether Jesus envisaged these implications, but Mark has, and it is this that undermines his case on the date of Mark. Subsequently Matthew, for whom the food laws are still in force, refocuses his conclusion on the tradition of hand washing before eating. I believe it is true that the Jesus of Matthew abrogates no biblical law. But, according to Mark's interpretation (7:19b), Jesus does. This evaluation concerns Mark whether or not Jesus was scrupulously observant on purity issues.

Ingenious as Crossley's arguments are, I fail to be convinced that the Jesus of Mark was painstakingly Torah observant and am convinced (along with other recent scholars mentioned at 191–92 n. 20) that Mark concludes that the implications of Jesus' proverb

in 7:15 lead to the conclusion that no food eaten can make a person unclean (7:19b). Any attempt to restrict all foods to those permitted by the law destroys the contrast between what does not defile and what does. Consequently, I am unpersuaded that a case has been made for the writing of Mark by the mi-40s. Certainly Crossley has reminded us, as J. A. T. Robinson did before him, upon what flimsy evidence our views of the authorship and dating of the Gospels are based. But flimsy evidence is flimsy for all comers. It seems to me that the straws in the wind continue to point more in the direction of a date around 70 C.E. than elsewhere.