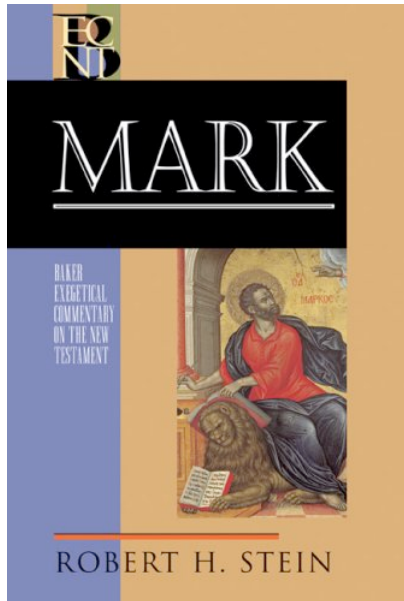


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Stein, Robert H.

Mark

Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

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The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament series seeks to provide “commentaries that blend scholarly depth with readability, exegetical detail with sensitivity to the whole, and attention to critical problems with theological awareness” (xi). A major purpose for the series is to serve the needs of those “involved in the preaching and exposition of the Scriptures” (xi). Robert H. Stein is particularly well qualified for writing a commentary on the Gospel of Mark for such a series. For years he has devoted himself to scholarly research on Mark’s Gospel and also to pastoral training through his work at Bethel Seminary and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. The result is a commentary distinguished both by its scholarship and by its practical usefulness for pastors.

The introduction to the commentary argues for traditional viewpoints concerning the setting for Mark’s Gospel. The author was John Mark, who based his Gospel at least in part on the eyewitness testimony of the apostle Peter (1–9). The original audience consisted primarily of Gentile Christians in Rome (9–12), and the date for the writing of Mark was in the late 60s, shortly after the death of Peter (12–15). Stein explains why he believes such traditional conclusions are important—and why they are not important—for the interpretation of Mark’s Gospel (7–8). They are not important for determining the

meaning of Mark's Gospel. What the author intended by his words determines the meaning, and this is true whether or not the author's name was John Mark. Traditional conclusions on the setting for Mark become important for understanding the significance or value of Mark's Gospel. On the one hand, a critical approach that denies the historicity of most of what is recorded in Mark's Gospel practically requires a rejection of authorship by John Mark in dependence on Peter's testimony. Instead, an anonymous author must have believed the largely fictional accounts created by an anonymous community and incorporated them into his Gospel. On the other hand, an approach that values the truthfulness of Mark's Gospel finds further support in traditional conclusions concerning authorship and setting. Yet the truthfulness of Mark's Gospel does not require these traditional viewpoints. "Markan authorship in association with the eyewitness testimony of Peter would be nice but is not necessary" (8).

The commentary section itself walks through the text basically phrase by phrase, noting interpretive problems along the way that call for further explanation. Stein's answers to such questions of interpretation are consistently thoughtful and supported by evidence. At the same time, the commentary never becomes tedious or lost in details. Stein ends his discussion of each passage in Mark with a summary section that highlights what Mark emphasized in the passage, especially what he emphasized about Jesus. These summary sections should be particularly helpful for those "involved in the preaching and exposition of the Scriptures" (xi).

Stein's methodological approach to Mark's Gospel is primarily "a cautious use of redaction criticism" (18). What exactly is involved in a cautious use of redaction criticism must be pieced together by looking at Stein's actual practice, since he does not state his cautions directly. From my observations, I would point out three examples of caution. First, Stein recognizes that it is impossible to sort out tradition and redaction completely (695). He contents himself with identifying what is most clearly traditional and what is most obviously from Mark's hand. Traditional material reveals itself especially in words or phrases that are unique within Mark (e.g., 356), in important events or people introduced without explanation, since these assume a prior knowledge among Mark's audience (e.g., 39), and in parallels that also appear to be traditional in Matthew, Luke, or John (e.g., 205, 310). Redactional material is identifiable primarily through characteristic themes and vocabulary, especially as found within summaries, insertions, and seams (e.g., 112, 160), through explanatory *gar* clauses, although generally in narrative material as opposed to sayings material (e.g., 78, 461), and through recurring patterns, such as dual expressions and sandwich arrangements (e.g., 95, 510). Second, for Stein, a cautious use of redaction criticism refrains from employing the method as a way of denying the historicity of Mark's account. So, for example, the summary statement in 1:32–34 is the work of Mark, but that does not necessitate treating the miraculous healings in the summary statement

as nonhistorical (92; cf. 289–90, 309–10, 364). Third, Stein refuses to use redaction criticism to speculate about the historical circumstances within the church of Mark's day (e.g., 276–77). Stein avoids a mirror-reading approach that quickly moves from Mark's account concerning Jesus and his circumstances to those of Mark's audience (e.g., 296, 404).

Stein is more negative toward recent methodological developments in the study of Mark such as narrative criticism and reader-response criticism (18–19). However, it is unclear why a cautious use of such newer methods is not just as appropriate as a cautious use of redaction criticism, especially since Stein at times seems to draw on insights from these methods. Stein recognizes the need for a holistic approach to Mark's text (18), one that focuses on what the author sought to communicate to his audience through the final form of the text (248–49), a point frequently made by narrative critics. Stein notes that Mark begins his Gospel with a positive portrait of the disciples, reinforcing the likely positive view of the disciples among Mark's readers. The subsequent negative aspects of Mark's portrayal of the disciples will not so overturn the initial positive portrait that Mark's readers will come to regard the disciples as heretics and reprobates (27, 30). This is a reader-oriented argument. Stein also takes the position of Mark's readers into consideration when arguing against the presence of less than obvious Old Testament allusions in Mark (e.g., 269, 325, 719–20). For Stein, it is difficult to imagine how Mark's audience would have been able to reflect on and therefore recognize such allusions and at the same time to concentrate on the rest of the narrative as it continued to be read to them. Once again, this is a reader-oriented argument.

Still, Stein's general reliance on redaction criticism has implications. At times, one loses the sense that Mark's Gospel is a narrative, a story that may have shifts and turns in the plot or in the portrayal of people. Stein's interpretations are perhaps a bit too uniform. One example involves his outline for Mark. After the prologue (1:1–13), Stein divides Mark's Gospel into six parts. The first two parts (1:14–3:6; 3:7–6:6a) have the exact same title "Who is this Jesus?" (35). Major sections of Mark's Gospel seem to be identified by structural patterns alone rather than by any significant development in the story (67). The third part receives a new title "Mission and Misunderstanding" (6:6b–8:21), which draws attention to the efforts and failures of the disciples. However, Stein hastens to point out that the section is not primarily about the disciples but about answering the question "Who then is this?" (4:41; see 288). For Stein, this section, like every section in Mark, is about Jesus, the Son of God (288; cf. 737). Therefore, the outline communicates well that Mark's Gospel throughout is first and foremost about Jesus, but it leaves little reason for making any divisions in the text.

Another implication is that interpretations concerning individual passages can potentially lose sight of the broader narrative. In my mind, Stein's overall approach to the eschatological discourse in Mark 13 serves as an example. Stein takes the disciples' question in 13:4 concerning the sign of the temple's destruction as a valid question to which Jesus gives a direct answer (595–96, 617). Therefore, Jesus' answer in chapter 13 deals almost entirely with the events leading up to the destruction of the temple, which for Stein include the completion of gospel proclamation in all the nations (13:10; see 600), the appearance of the abomination of desolation (13:14; see 604), and the greatest of all tribulations, one that no one would survive unless God shortened the days (13:19–20; see 605–7). The only exceptions are a brief and rather abrupt interruption concerning the parousia in 13:24–27 and the final call for watchfulness in 13:32–37. The end result is that almost the entirety of chapter 13 concerns the destruction of the temple (584, 591, 621). For Stein, there is “no hint at all in Mark” that the disciples' question is in any way out of place or that Jesus is seeking to turn their attention to a different or more important subject (595). Yet by this point in the narrative what is needed is some hint that the disciples have indeed asked an intelligent question and that Jesus is ready to give a straightforward answer to his disciples about their concerns and preoccupations. Stein's approach seems to isolate chapter 13 from the increasingly negative portrayal of the disciples in the broader narrative.

Overall, however, my evaluation of Stein's work is positive. His commentary shows a sense of balance and a depth of thought. The balance seems to grow out of Stein's recognition that Mark glories in both the mighty acts of Jesus and his sacrificial death. As Stein points out, Mark “does not minimize one for the sake of the other” (404). The depth of thought must be a reflection of years of studying and teaching the Gospel of Mark. The careful exegesis in this commentary serves as evidence that Stein has thought long and often about the meaning of Mark.