The Origins of Mark is a revision of Dwight Peterson’s doctoral dissertation written under the direction of D. Moody Smith of Duke Divinity School. The task of the work is straightforward and simple: It offers a incisive critique of the commonly held notion that a distinctive “community” can be reconstructed from the Markan Gospel and that apart from such reconstruction this Gospel cannot be adequately understood. In the judgment of this reviewer, Peterson has landed a significant blow against this way of thinking. The Origins of Mark functions in some ways like a wrecking ball that clears away old, failing structures, so that newer, better-founded ones may be built. In short, Peterson’s book is successful.

Peterson suggests that the “lack of agreement among Gospel community constructors is related more to the futility of the entire enterprise than to a need for further study. This is the thesis of this book” (p. 4). Or, this book “contends that the inferring and reconstruction of Markan communities from the text of the Gospel in order to provide a sure footing for its interpretation is a highly problematic practice indeed” (p. 5). Then follows a survey of the history of scholar attempts to reconstruct the Markan community (pp. 5-19). The balance of the book is given over to three chapters that critically evaluate the methods of scholars whose work is representative of three kinds of approaches to discovering the community from which the Markan Gospel originated.

First, Peterson considers a redaction-critical account of the origins of Mark, as seen particularly in the work of Werner Kelber, particularly his The Kingdom in Mark (1974). Peterson’s criticisms of Kelber’s approach are on target and devastating. Kelber’s speculations about the new “place and time” hermeneutic of the Markan evangelist and his
community are highly subjective and constitute little more than allegory—even a form of ventriloquism, as one critic put it, in which we are asked to believe that Markan friends and foes speak through the characters of the narrative.

One might object to Peterson’s selection of Kelber’s work by pointing out that his subjective approach is hardly a typical example of redaction criticism. Be that as it may, Peterson’s critique of Kelber is justified, and his work has been chosen probably because it presents an extreme case that helpfully exposes the egregious flaws inherent in this approach. On the other hand, the strengths and weaknesses of redaction criticism should not be judged on the merits of Kelber’s. The principal problem for redaction criticism of Mark is that we are not in possession of the evangelist’s sources. His editorial hand can be detected here and there, but for the most part we do not know where his sources end and his contributions begin. In principle, an accurate detection and explanation of Markan redaction should shed meaningful light on at least some aspects of the Markan Sitz im Leben, if not of the community of which the evangelist was part, at least of his own situation. Redaction criticism has much to offer, but those who employ must be cognizant of its limits, especially when dealing with Mark.

Howard Clark Kee’s attempt to provide a sociological account of the origins of Mark is considered next. Peterson focuses primarily on Kee’s Community of the New Age (1977) and Christian Origins in Sociological Perspective (1980). Kee approaches Mark as an “enigma,” whose secret needs to be unraveled. Kee believes that we cannot discern the evangelist’s purpose for writing unless—following Emanuel Hirsch—we reconstruct his community. Mark’s “let the reader understand” (13:14) is accordingly understood as the key to the perspective of the book as a whole, not an injunction to understand the immediate context. Jesus’ pronouncement of forgiveness in 2:5 reveals the community’s tradition of offering forgiveness in Jesus’ name. Jesus’ pronouncement regarding the Sabbath in 2:27-28 reflects the community’s flexible approach to the law. Kee infers from Mark 7 that the community had no knowledge of what food was clean and what was not and therefore made no attempt to observe kashrut. From other passages Kee infers the economic status of the Markan community.

Peterson rightly argues that all of these passages are open to very different interpretations and, worse, Kee’s interpretation is particularly susceptible to circular reasoning: the community construct guides the interpretation, which in turn justifies the construct. Peterson rounds out his critique of Kee’s approach by calling into question assumptions about the genre of Mark and the usefulness of comparing it to apocalypses and their inferred “communities.”

Finally, Peterson evaluates the approach of Ched Myers, whose principal work is Binding the Strong Man (1988) and who attempts to provide a political account of the origins of Mark. Myers writes from the perspective of a radical Christian who has learned
from Marxism and liberation theology. He has little concern for Mark’s first-century; rather, his concern is to show how Mark speaks to contemporary society, which should be understood more in political and economic terms that in theological terms. Peterson finds many of the same problems with Myers’s work: circularity, lack of evidence, and the assumption that the community construct has great probative power. But worse still, Myers’s reading of Mark in reality has little to do with Mark; it has more to do with Myers’s social and political location. Peterson comments that the Markan community of Myers’s construct “looks suspiciously like the communities with which he himself has been associated in the 1970’s and 1980” (p. 140).

Some will no doubt wonder why Peterson did not take on Willi Marxsen or some other interpreter of Mark. Peterson’s task is not exhaustive, but selective and heuristic. He has been fair and his examples have been illustrative and convincing. With justification, he concludes that at “the very least, the present state of affairs should make it impossible simply to assume that reconstructed communities behind Gospels are hermeneutically necessary to read Gospels rightly” (p. 202).