John Dart, for years a religion writer for the Los Angeles Times and currently news editor for the Christian Century, weds his journalistic experience covering biblical research with careful attention to word and thematic plays to offer a provocative reconstruction of an original Mark that included a story from Secret Mark discovered by Morton Smith in an unknown fragment of Clement of Alexandria recovered from the Mar Saba monastery in the Judean wilderness. The key for reconstructing original Mark from the canonical Mark, fragments of Luke, and the Mar Saba fragment is an elaborate and multifaceted chiasmus woven throughout the reconstructed work.

Writing in a breezy, conversational style and displaying a journalist’s flair for story telling, Dart recounts the controversial reception of Smith’s discovery of a story a young man, whom Jesus raises from the dead and then initiates in a secret rite. Then, following Helmut Koester’s suggestion that Secret Mark may be evidence for Mark’s unstable beginnings, Dart proposes (along with Koester) that the omission in Luke of the material from Mark 6:47–8:26 reflects Luke’s use of a version of Mark different from canonical Mark, a version that was lacking the material from 6:45–8:26 (25). Stylistic differences in this Markan material suggest that the block was added by a subsequent editor. Turning next to the thesis of Wolfgang Roth, Dart posits that 6:47–8:26 with its six miracles was
added to original Mark by a later editor to boost Jesus’ number of miracles higher than Elisha (32).

Dart constructs the rest of his case on literary devices he finds in the text. First Dart turns to the Gospel’s practice of bracketing one story around another to convey a stinging irony. None of the six classic examples occur in 6:47–8:26, suggesting such brackets were a technique of original Mark. *Secret Mark’s* story of the young man whom Jesus raised would form a seventh bracket with the episode in Mark 10:35–45 of James and John seeking high status with Jesus in glory (41–42). Dart is opening his argument to include the story uncovered by Smith in original Mark.

The second and more significant literary device employed by original Mark is chiasmus (Dart prefers “chiasm”). Dart recovers a formal structure to original Mark containing five major chiastic spans framed by a prologue and a conclusion (54). Mark 6:47–8:26 is not part of this pattern. The third chiastic span becomes symmetrically balanced when the episode from *Secret Mark* is added. (60). A missing link for the fifth chiastic span is recovered from Luke 23:39–43: the story of a convicted robber, a minor character joining a tax collector, a blind beggar, and a centurion in recognizing the divinity of Jesus in original Mark. Dart’s reconstruction of original Mark is complete, “all authenticated by chiasms” (67, emphasis added). As further confirmation Dart decodes the “macro-chiasm” of original Mark. “The Gospel as a whole is one large chiasm” (80). Each half is also a chiasm. And after recovering overlooked heroes, baptismal themes in an unashamed return to oneness, and the motives of Mark’s editor and Luke’s preferences, Dart becomes convinced that original Mark is so multileveled and multidirectional that its chiastic structures weave it into a circle—a work to be read again and again. Dart provides extensive appendices to detail his chiastic arguments.

Dart freely recognizes that his approach is unconventional (79). He even cites Morton Smith’s caution that scholars who find chiastic patterns in ancient texts tend to meet heavy resistance from peers (133). But Dart’s journalistic urge to publish a “great story” that “was getting better all the time” does not rescue his project from “adjectives such as ‘conjectural’ and ‘unconvincing’ ” (79).

Chiasmus is identified by inverted parallelism of catchwords, words of similar roots, themes, and grammatical forms. If chiasmus is said to provide internal organization of ancient writings that lack paragraphs and punctuation (50), then any modern analysis of chiastic structures must be done on the ancient text itself, not an English translation. Dart does identify in boldface words with identical Greek roots, but his presentation of words with similar or opposite meanings and other corresponding elements is done in English.
only. Greek word order does not seem to enter the discussion. Verse counts are even more problematic (129).

Dart’s assertion that original Mark is a multileveled and multidirectional chiasm assumes that macro-chiasmus was a literary device available to writers such as Mark and that ancient readers (and hearers!) could identify such techniques. Micro-chiasmus is observable in ancient texts, but chiasmus is not discussed in ancient rhetorical texts until the dawn of the Byzantine era in the fourth century. Dart’s complicated reconstruction of an original Mark “authenticated” by a macro-chiasmus must seriously engage the assertions of Porter and Reed that chiasmus was “probably unknown and unrecognized by the ancients . . . and was certainly not . . . a category that could be applied to entire literary works” (S. E. Porter and J. T. Reed, “Philippians as a Macro-Chiasm and Its Exegetical Significance,” New Testament Studies 44 [1998]: 219). It seems precarious to argue for additions and subtractions from a given text to create a chiasmus and then claim the chiasmus proves the validity of such modifications.

For Dart, the Gospel of Thomas, Q, and his decoding of an original Mark contain the oldest materials for uncovering the beginnings of the Jesus movement in which a seven-day initiation and baptism brought the initiate to the “pre-fall whole human, neither simply male nor simply female” (114). Chiasmus and the story from Secret Mark become the keys; Morton Smith “deserves posthumous praise for his discovery of a missing piece of the oldest New Testament gospel” (153). Decoding Mark may sell well, as it is targeted to popular audiences and was fortuitously published at a time when many are fascinated with codes, secrets, and alternative tales of the origins of Christianity. But personal constructs by definition are hardly canonical. Both methodologically and theologically, Dart may be imaginative, but he does not convince.