

## Re-Marking the Place of Mark in Christian Origins

A Review of:

**Mack, Burton L. *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988.**

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Burton Mack's *A Myth of Innocence* presents a novel approach to the study of early Christianity. Scholars have always imagined that the foundational beginnings of Christianity could be traced back to the historical man named Jesus.<sup>1</sup> The rise of Christianity has been variously attributed to Jesus' charisma or personality, to some surprising activity he did or words that he spoke, or to something remarkable about his death.<sup>2</sup> Although a consensus as to what the unique originary events must have looked like has never been reached, scholars continue to assume its existence is the only thing that can account for the beginnings of Christianity and its myths of divine events.<sup>3</sup> As a historian, Mack finds the insistence upon a singular origin to be strange.<sup>4</sup> New Testament scholarship over the past two centuries has focused on two related topics, the historical Jesus and the earliest Christology, by attempting to work backwards in

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<sup>1</sup> Burton Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), xi.

<sup>2</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, xii.

<sup>4</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 3.

time through the gospel mythologies.<sup>5</sup> Mack, however, proposes that since the gospels are mythical stories, the foundations of Christianity should be located with the composition of the gospel stories.<sup>6</sup> The Markan depiction of Jesus is the result of two generations of imagination and social experiences, as well as the need to develop a common understanding of Jesus.<sup>7</sup> It is the socio-historical circumstances which are of interest to Mack, who focuses on legendary accretions and the reasons for re-imagining the story of Jesus as a novel origin.<sup>8</sup> His main source of evidence and information is textual, because of the ability of texts to reflect social experience and because in many cases texts are the best, if not only, sources which relate the ideologies of early Christianity.<sup>9</sup> Mack uses the information in this literature to draw suppositions about the social context in which the text was composed.

Mack begins his book by briefly examining Judaism during the middle of the first century. He argues that as a result of being ruled by divine law, Jews preferred to see authority in the figure of a priest rather than a king and as such messianism was not as important a concept to the Jews as it became in Christianity.<sup>10</sup> But, he cautions that the few popularly recognized messiahs at this time were anti-Roman, not anti-temple or anti-Jewish, and most were leaders of

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<sup>5</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 5-6.

<sup>6</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, xii.

<sup>7</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 8-9, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 35-36.

political resistance movements.<sup>11</sup> They were not from Galilee which was relatively stable during this time.<sup>12</sup> It is also unlikely that Jesus and the Pharisees came into frequent conflict because the latter were centered around Jerusalem before the Jewish War and did not spend much time in Galilee.<sup>13</sup>

Mack then briefly discusses the historical Jesus. Jesus' social critique was not directed at specific institutions and did not attack either the Roman political situation or the Jewish religious one.<sup>14</sup> Jesus was also not a hermeneutical scholar or intellectual, but represented a common person's view on human experience.<sup>15</sup> Jesus' teachings have many more parallels with Cynic themes and methods than with eschatological prophets, and he probably preferred to teach to small audiences.<sup>16</sup>

Next, Mack discusses early Jesus movements. House gatherings centered around meals were important for these groups, as evidenced by their prevalence in miracle traditions, pronouncement stories, the Didache (a Jewish-Christian manual), and the conversation between the pillars of Jerusalem and Paul.<sup>17</sup> During these events people would discuss ideas, share poetry, say prayers, read scriptures, and ask questions, all of which would naturally lead to the institutionalization of practices and the beginnings of a new religious

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<sup>11</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 52.

<sup>12</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 52.

<sup>13</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 42-44.

<sup>14</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 64.

<sup>15</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 64.

<sup>16</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 67-69.

<sup>17</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 80.

movement.<sup>18</sup> Mack mentions five different types of Jesus movements. The first is the Galilean itinerant composers of Q, who preached about the kingdom of God and whose Cynic-like teachings eventually became apocalyptic.<sup>19</sup> Second are the Jerusalem "pillars" who appeared to be Pharisaic-like Jewish reformers.<sup>20</sup> Third is the hasidic group in Galilee, centered on Jesus' family, who had conflicts with the Galilean itinerants.<sup>21</sup> Fourth is the Israel congregations who emphasized and collected miracle stories.<sup>22</sup> Fifth is the synagogue reformers who were responsible for the pronouncement stories and who frequently came into conflict with the Pharisees in the synagogues.<sup>23</sup> Although these early Jesus movements tried to remain within the synagogue system they were ousted sometime during the fifties or sixties.<sup>24</sup>

The Christ cults were comprised of Hellenistic followers of Jesus who divinized him and developed a mythology about his resurrection.<sup>25</sup> Many of these groups saw Jesus as a cultic patron deity and they met in ritualized table fellowships to recall Jesus' death.<sup>26</sup> Paul was a member of one of the Christ cults, and Mack uses Paul's writings for insights into their beliefs.<sup>27</sup> The groups were made of a mix of Jews and Gentiles, and were based on a Greek-type of

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<sup>18</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 83.

<sup>19</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 84-87.

<sup>20</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 88-90.

<sup>21</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 90-91.

<sup>22</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 91-93.

<sup>23</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 94-96.

<sup>24</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 128.

<sup>25</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 100.

<sup>26</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 100, 111.

<sup>27</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 98-99.

mythology that included Judaic ideals.<sup>28</sup> Mack argues that the Christ cults chose to leave the synagogues early in their history.<sup>29</sup> These groups interpreted Jesus' death in terms of Hellenistic traditions of martyrdom that involved either obedience and a noble death or a refusal to betray a cause resulting in a post-death vindication of both the martyr and the cause.<sup>30</sup>

Mack's discussion moves to an examination of some pre-Markan sources: the parables, the pronouncement stories and the miracle stories concerning Jesus. He critiques John Dominic Crossan's theory that parables present the audience with an inversion between what is normally assumed and what is presented in the story, thereby challenging the listener to see the world in a different manner.<sup>31</sup> Mack argues that whether or not Jesus spoke in parables, the examples in the gospel traditions should be taken as later arguments in defense of the new Christian world.<sup>32</sup> Mack then examines the collection of parables in Mark 4, which he concludes may contain some pre-Markan or even some authentic sayings.<sup>33</sup> Mack also talks about the use of parables in Greco-Roman rhetorical arguments.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, he argues that the social setting prior to the composition of the Gospel of Mark, particularly the destruction of the temple and the failure of the Jesus movements to affect any reform in the synagogues, led to

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<sup>28</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 101.

<sup>29</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 128.

<sup>30</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 105-6.

<sup>31</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 142-45.

<sup>32</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 148-50.

<sup>33</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 152.

<sup>34</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 157-59.

Mark's apocalyptic viewpoint, which was retroactively attributed to Jesus in the gospel.<sup>35</sup>

In the pronouncement stories, a typical genre of Greco-Roman literature, a challenge to Jesus' authority and wisdom actually proves his superiority.<sup>36</sup> Most of these stories are recognized by scholars to represent chreia or rhetorical anecdotes, oftentimes based on Cynic models and themes.<sup>37</sup> Many of them are late creations, and some may have been composed by Mark.<sup>38</sup> About two-thirds of the chreia deal with issues of conflict between the Jews and Jesus.<sup>39</sup> Mack argues that these stories were composed and attributed to the group's founder as a result of a history of conflict between the synagogues and the Jesus movements.<sup>40</sup>

The miracle stories are some of the most dramatic stories in the gospels, and they are often referenced as part of the assumption of a remarkable origin for Christianity.<sup>41</sup> A number of theories for their inclusion have been presented, including the association of Jesus with popular Greco-Roman miracle men, the desire to show a manifestation of Jesus' divine power, the equating of Jesus with an exorcist, and the associations of Jesus with transformative and liberating abilities.<sup>42</sup> Mark appears to have had two related chains of miracle stories at his disposal when writing his gospel, reminiscent of the proposed Signs Source used

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<sup>35</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 166-67.

<sup>36</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 175-76, 178.

<sup>37</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 179-84.

<sup>38</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 193.

<sup>39</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 195.

<sup>40</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 195.

<sup>41</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 208.

<sup>42</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 210-14.

by John.<sup>43</sup> The first and last stories in each chain are concerned with a water crossing and a mass feeding, reminiscent of the story of Exodus and thus associating Jesus and Moses, and the middle three miracles allude to the Hebrew figures of Elijah and Elisha.<sup>44</sup> Many of the Markan miracles dealt with issues of cleansing and healing.<sup>45</sup> At other times they are used in relation to the theme of discipleship, often portraying Jesus' followers as questioners and dense observers.<sup>46</sup> Mark altered the order of the second chain, placing the story of the blind man (Mark 8:22-26) last to emphasize how Jesus' miracles allowed people to "see" correctly.<sup>47</sup> Mark also often combines miracle stories with chreia pronouncement stories, both of which emphasize Jesus' authority, to blend the images of the miracle man and the teacher.<sup>48</sup>

Mack proceeds to discuss the passion narrative and the misconception that it is one of the earliest Christian stories.<sup>49</sup> He points to scribal additions to the story associating Jesus with the Righteous One, a Judaic image of an innocent sufferer<sup>50</sup>. These additions, he argues, were added to counteract criticisms that Jesus could not have been the messiah because he was executed as a guilty criminal.<sup>51</sup> Other scholars have noted that the main themes in Mark peak during

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<sup>43</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 216.

<sup>44</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 217.

<sup>45</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 238-42.

<sup>46</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 231.

<sup>47</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 232.

<sup>48</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 235.

<sup>49</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 250, 254-55.

<sup>50</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 255-58.

<sup>51</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 255-58.

the passion account, making it difficult to argue for a pre-Markan tradition, since the passion narrative meshes so well with Mark's own designs.<sup>52</sup> Ultimately, Mack feels that Mark took his basic outline for the passion story from the story of the Righteous One and combined this with the mythologies and characterizations from the Christ cults and Jesus movements to create his own gospel.<sup>53</sup>

Mack argues that the Gospel of Mark was most likely written in Syria during the seventies.<sup>54</sup> He supports this by claiming that the events of the Jewish War had to have been observable to Mark, yet the gospel writer's community must not have been directly involved.<sup>55</sup> During this time there were many popular stories about messiahs in circulation as well as claims of strange portents.<sup>56</sup> It is not likely that this was in Galilee, since Mark is unfamiliar with its geography, nor was it in Antioch, since that was a major center for the Christ cults.<sup>57</sup> Mark's concerns center around his community's independence from the synagogues, and in response to this and to other movements calling upon Jesus as their founder, Mark created a foundational story to influence the future existence of the Jesus movements.<sup>58</sup> He made the synagogues' rejection of his group reflective of the rejection of Jesus, and then cited the destruction of the temple as divine

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<sup>52</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 263.

<sup>53</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 268.

<sup>54</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 315.

<sup>55</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 315.

<sup>56</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 315.

<sup>57</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 316.

<sup>58</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 318-19.

vindication.<sup>59</sup> Mark consciously merged various traditions from the Jesus movements and Christ cults in order to create his narrative.<sup>60</sup>

Mack concludes by arguing that the Markan tradition continues to influence our society. He sees a distorted reflection of the innocent redeemer theme in American international affairs.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the notion of an innocent and pure power that uses its power to intervene and make peace can be seen in such pop culture entities as Superman, the Lone Ranger, and Star Trek.<sup>62</sup> The Markan narrative has also led to various anti-Semitic activities, whether consciously influenced by Christianity or not.<sup>63</sup> All in all, Mack advocates that we should recognize these myths of innocence for the dangerous notions that they are.<sup>64</sup>

Over all, Mack's book is extremely thought provoking, especially with regards to many assumptions about early Christianity and the composition of the Gospel of Mark. The sections on the parables, pronouncement stories, and miracle stories were especially helpful, as most other scholarship skims over the composition of Mark, citing oral traditions and a lack of potential sources as problems for reconstructing the gospel's sources. I was especially pleased by the section on the Markan creation of the story of Judas' betrayal (see especially 299, 304-5) as I have been intrigued for some time by the developments of this story.

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<sup>59</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 355.

<sup>60</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 303.

<sup>61</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 371-73.

<sup>62</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 374.

<sup>63</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 375.

<sup>64</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 376.

One problem that I had with Mack's presentation of his arguments was his use of evidence. Most of Mack's evidence for his arguments was based on either textual reconstructions or other scholars' arguments concerning the topic in question. His arguments based on social and historical assumptions would have been stronger if he had consistently used outside confirmation like archaeological research or non-Christian writings (which he did do occasionally but not enough). J. Andrew Overman raises similar concerns over some of Mack's arguments, noting that they are certainly possible but that more supporting evidence is needed.<sup>65</sup> Adela Collins feels that many of Mack's arguments rely on "imaginative speculation," especially in relation to the conflict between Jews and Christians and the assumption that a different social situation is reflected in each different type of text.<sup>66</sup>

I also found some of Mack's arguments to be weak because I was not fully convinced by some of his underlying assumptions. For example, Mack positions Paul within the Hellenistic Christ cults, not the more Judaic Jesus movements, even though Paul converted from a strong Jewish faith and continued to discuss Jewish ideas throughout his ministry. Mack deals with this by arguing that Paul is not representative of all the Christ cults,<sup>67</sup> but still this is an issue that raises some doubts. Mack also attributes the early Christian animosity towards the temple and

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<sup>65</sup> J. Andrew Overman, "Review of *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins*, by Burton Mack," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 44 (1990), 193.

<sup>66</sup> Adela Collins, "Review of *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins*, by Burton Mack," *JBL* 108 (1989), 728.

<sup>67</sup> Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 98-99.

the Jews as a result of the Jesus movements' conflicts with the synagogues. While this is plausible, Mack did not mention the equally plausible idea that the Christians were trying to separate themselves from the Jews so as not to be included in the Romans' wrath during and after the Jewish War. As with other scholars, I had reservations concerning Mack's somewhat arbitrary decisions concerning early and late Q material.<sup>68</sup> Werner Kelber questions whether Mack's "slim and contestable" choices for the early sections of Q are strong enough to have a weighty thesis based on them.<sup>69</sup> Overman also raises doubts regarding Mack's proposal that Jesus was an itinerant Cynic preacher, arguing that Jesus' movements appear to have been localized around Capernaum and lower Galilee.<sup>70</sup> Mack is also too quick to dismiss much of the apocalypticism in the gospels as a Markan creation.<sup>71</sup> Although some critics support a Markan beginning for the eschatological issues, many other scholars have criticized this dismissal.<sup>72</sup> Overman, for example, points out that apocalyptic documents from the first century have been found around Palestine and it appears that Paul is dealing with eschatological issues in First Thessalonians, so these issues may have developed in Christianity before Mark's time.<sup>73</sup> Some critics have also questioned whether Mack sees too much of a difference in the social situations between areas like

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<sup>68</sup> See for example Overman, "Review," 193.

<sup>69</sup> Werner Kelber, "Review of *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins*, by Burton Mack," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52.1 (1990), 162.

<sup>70</sup> Overman, "Review," 194.

<sup>71</sup> See for example Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 328.

<sup>72</sup> Collins, "Review," 727.

<sup>73</sup> Overman, "Review," 194.

Galilee and Syria.<sup>74</sup> Mack is also repeatedly criticized for blaming the gospels for the atrocities committed on their ideas when the blame should fall on the human beings committing the crimes.<sup>75</sup>

In conclusion, Burton Mack's *A Myth of Innocence* was a thought-provoking book. In this scholar's attempt at a new approach to the issues concerning the composition of the Gospel of Mark I found myself thinking about the social context of early Christianity, and the development of legends in the gospel stories. While I did not necessarily agree with all of Mack's conclusions, I was convinced to re-examine a number of my own assumptions concerning the story of Jesus, especially as it is presented in the Gospel of Mark.

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<sup>74</sup> Overman, "Review," 194.

<sup>75</sup> Kelber, "Review," 163; Overman, "Review," 195.

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