

Identifying how the Gospel was heard and understood

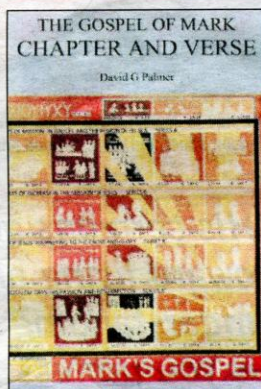
MARK has just become the "lead" Gospel in the Lectionary for the next 12 months. How should we hear and read it now? Should we be influenced by how people in the first century heard it? The answer to that is probably "Yes", although to what extent we should be controlled by it is debatable. At the very least it is helpful to know when current readings of the Gospel chime with those of the original audiences and the intentions of the author (if those can be clearly discerned) and when they are dissonant.

Relaunch

In **The Gospel of Mark: Chapter and Verse** (Ceriden Press, £24.95 from www.davidpalmer.co.uk/books) the Rev Dr David Palmer believes that he can clearly identify the original ways in which this Gospel was heard and understood. He argues that in AD 33 Christianity was launched into the world after the death and resurrection of Jesus, but that Mark's Gospel was created around AD 70 to relaunch Christianity at the time the Romans were ending the Jewish Wars, capturing Jerusalem and destroying the Temple to such an extent that it has never been rebuilt. "God was establishing his rule in AD 70 through his judgment on Jerusalem and his provision in Christ Jesus to see 'new things' happen.

Book review

by Kenneth Howcroft



We could call this the prophetic function of Mark's Gospel. The replacement of the Old Covenant with the New, which the Old foresaw as coming, is evidence. The events of AD 70 are evidence ..."

David has arrived at these conclusions because he has discerned a plan underlying the Gospel. He is a supernumerary presbyter who has always had a passion for the New Testament and a detailed knowledge of it, an inquiring mind, an ability to communicate through artwork and statistical tables as well as words, and a preparedness to challenge other scholars and "consensus" views when he believes he is in the right and his arguments are not being addressed. Importantly, as he

himself says, his first training was as an architect and so he expects any creative enterprise to work from a detailed plan.

This book therefore revises and develops his thinking in "The Markan Matrix", which was itself a version of his doctoral thesis. He sees Mark's Gospel as structured with a Prologue (which he identifies as 1. 2-20) and an Epilogue (which, against much current thinking, he identifies as 16. 9-16, 19-20a). Between them he sees four series of seven formal or symbolic "Days", making 28 in total. He describes them as "Jesus' First Days of Mission, confined to Galilee and the Region of its Sea" (1. 21-5. 43); "Days of Increase in the Mission of Jesus" (6. 1 - 8. 26); "The Days of Jesus Journeying to Jerusalem" (8. 27-10. 52); and "Jesus' Jerusalem Days: his Passion and Resurrection" (11. 1-16. 8). He then sees the fourth series as echoing or responding to the first, and the third to the second.

Developed

Within all that, he discerns a repeated pattern of writing in which an idea is introduced (A); the idea is developed (B); and the idea is developed further (B1). All of this is set out in sections of the full Greek text that are clearly differentiated and labelled, followed by the same arrangement of his own lit-

eral translation of the section concerned.

It is certainly the case that things in one place in Mark's Gospel often echo or correspond with those in an earlier one, which can sometimes make you see more in them both if you re-read them in the light of each other. Yet these might be typical ways in which a predominantly oral text or story engages its hearers and is remembered.

David recognises that Roman pronouncements or propaganda (for example about the Emperors being "Sons of God"), the conventions of Greek drama, the stylistic tricks of poems and sagas like the Iliad and the Odyssey, and the patterns identified in ancient treatises on rhetoric may be in the background of both Mark's mind and the minds of the Gospel's hearers and readers. That, though, is not the same as saying that every bit of the text has been conformed to a deliberate plan. Sometimes, for example, at 3.7, it requires a lot of pleading to identify the beginning of a new "Day".

That said, this is a book from which I have profited much and to which I shall return many times. Many of the readings of particular texts have made me stop and think. It is not just technical, but prompts fascinating general insights.

The Rev Kenneth Howcroft is a former President of the Conference.