

## ***A World without Mark***

Mark Goodacre, Duke University

### *Erasure History as an Everyday Reality*

There is one important respect in which writing counterfactual history about antiquity differs from writing counterfactual history about the modern world.<sup>1</sup> Where the modern historian is often spoiled by the sheer volume of source material, and the task is to sift through massive amounts of data, the ancient historian has to cope with huge gaps in the data set, daily reflecting on the lack of good source material. For us, erasure history is not an imagined state of affairs. It is our everyday reality.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The already seminal study of counterfactual history is Niall Ferguson (ed.), *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (New York: Basic Books, 1999). See especially Ferguson, "Introduction. Virtual History: Towards a 'chaotic' theory of the past" (1-90). The sole focus on modern history in the book precludes any reflection on how the ancient historian's task differs. For initial explorations in virtual history and Biblical studies, see J. Cheryl Exum, *Virtual History and the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), also available as *Biblical Interpretation* 8/1-2 (2000). Although they are not called "erasure history", several of the essays are relevant to the topic. See especially Diana Edelman, "What if we had no accounts of Sennacherib's third campaign or the palace reliefs depicting his capture of Lachish?", *BibInterp.* 8 (2000): 88-103, though her conclusion is that "In spite of the important information contained in the various accounts of Sennacherib's third campaign and the reliefs of his conquest of Lachish that were on the palace wall at Nineveh, their absence would have little effect upon the recreation of events in the reign of Hezekiah by historians of Judah" (102).

<sup>2</sup> The same point could be extended, of course, to other periods like the dark ages, which derives its name in part from the paucity of the surviving data.

Luke famously speaks of “many” (πολλοί) who had already written narratives of the Jesus story (Luke 1.1) but at best we have access to only two of them. Paul refers to a prior letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 5.9), the loss of which has made what is really 2 Corinthians into 1 Corinthians, 3 Corinthians into 2 Corinthians, and so on. The reason we are stuck with mirror reading the epistles is that the Corinthians’ letters to Paul (1 Cor. 7.1) do not survive. The Gospel of Hebrews can only be reconstructed from patristic citations, Papias’s work from quotations in Eusebius, Celsus from the refutation in Origen. Other works have vanished so completely that we are left guessing their contents, the Gospel of Matthias, the Gospel of Eve and the Gospel of Thaddeus to name just a few.

The difficulty with this everyday reality is that lost works are also forgotten works. Their lack of survival makes us behave as if they never existed. Our imaginations are limited and it is not easy to factor such uncertainty into our models, to know how to allow for such large scale ignorance. In the case of the lost letter of the Corinthians, Paul is only one half a conversation (or even less than half if Cephas, Apollos and others were involved too) and to interpret 1 Corinthians as if it were a homily would be to misunderstand it. And this is a more straightforward case of absent works than

most. With respect to those lost gospels whose existence is attested by the church fathers, it is difficult to know in their absence just what role they played and whether knowledge of them could change the way we view Christian origins.

This kind of thought experiment has a real life analogy in the behaviour of those scholars who take what meagre sources we possess and erase even those from the scholars' canon. For many, there is a lack of attractiveness in this kind of scholarship with its spoil-sport tendency to take scholarly advances and subject them to erasure. An obvious example of the phenomenon is scepticism about Q. Austin Farrer's suggestion, over half a century ago, that we could dispense with Q by drawing a direct line from Matthew to Luke,<sup>3</sup> leads to a literal erasure not just of two of the lines (from Q to Matthew and Q to Luke) but to one of the very entities in the classic diagram of the Two-Source Theory.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of the merits or otherwise of the

---

<sup>3</sup> Austin Farrer, "On Dispensing with Q," in D. E. Nineham (ed.), *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955), 55-88.

<sup>4</sup> Contrast the Griesbach (Two-Gospel) Hypothesis which involves restructuring the entire diagram, moving Mark from source to conflater. Although the Griesbach Hypothesis also dispenses with Q, this is, in a sense, a corollary of its more fundamental prior decision that Mark was written not first but third. For the most recent full statement of the hypothesis, see Peabody, McNicol and Cope, *One Gospel from Two*.

case,<sup>5</sup> such scholarship has a value of its own in that it provides an invitation to imagine a world in which the work in question did not exist and so to engage critically with the historical and theological consequences of such a position.<sup>6</sup> This is real life erasure history, for its proponents the proper erasing of a historical error, for its opponents a potentially useful thought experiment in alternate history.

As someone who is used to imagining a world without Q, to be asked to imagine a world without Mark is simultaneously frightening and exciting. Already, the loss of Q deprives the scholar of a favourite, highly valued early source. How on earth could we hope to reconstruct the history of early Christianity if we were to lose Mark too? The stimulation to the historical imagination and the lessons to be learned about the study of Christian origins could make the experiment a useful one. I propose to imagine the erasure of Mark under three different headings. First, I would like to erase Mark from the surviving manuscript record, imagining that Mark was indeed

---

<sup>5</sup> For exposition of the Farrer theory, see Michael Goulder, *Luke: A New Paradigm* (JSNTSup, 20; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989) and Mark Goodacre, *The Case Against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002). For critique, see especially C. M. Tuckett, "The Existence of Q" in Ronald A. Piper (ed.), *The Gospel behind the Gospels: Current Studies on Q* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 19-48 and John S. Kloppenborg, "On Dispensing with Q?: Goodacre on the Relation of Luke to Matthew," *NTS* 49 (2003): 210-236.

<sup>6</sup> For a sketch of some of the issues, see my "A World Without Q" in Mark Goodacre and Nicholas Perrin (eds.), *Questioning Q* (London: SPCK, 2004), 174-9.

written and that it was a source for Matthew and Luke, but that no witness to it survived antiquity. Second, I would like to try a variant on the first scenario. Mark is erased from history only to resurface in a handful of manuscript fragments in the 1890s and 1900s, and a more complete textual witness in 1945. Finally, and most drastically, we will imagine that the boy who would have grown up to be the author of Mark's Gospel did not survive childhood and that his Gospel never existed.

### *Erasing Mark from the Manuscript Record*

The phenomenon of works that were well known in antiquity but which have not survived into the present stimulates our imagination to erase Mark from the manuscript record and to consider how different scholarship on Christian origins might have been. How might the absence of Mark have changed the course of historical Jesus scholarship? What difference would it have made to the study of Synoptic relationships and the development of redaction-criticism?

It is one of the more perverse elements in historical Jesus scholarship that multiple attestation is generally held to be a strong criterion of authenticity. There is little reflection on the possibility that unusual, primitive, strange materials are likely to be

the very things that are at best weakly attested, at worst lost. One of the benefits of imagining a world without Mark is that it brings into focus the fact that high quality, primitive materials might easily have been lost, reminding us of another problem seldom acknowledged – the sheer number of missing pieces and the limits they impose on the historian.

The point is easy to illustrate. Mark's story of the healing of the blind man of Bethsaida (Mark 8.22-6) does not make it into either Matthew or Luke,<sup>7</sup> and it is easy to see why. Not only does there appear to be some limit on Jesus' healing ability – a two-stage healing according to which the man at first sees people walking around like trees – but also it is a healing involves Jesus spitting on the man's eyes. This kind of healing with a physical agent is absent from Matthew and Luke. Similarly, one of the few other examples of Special Marcan material in the Synoptic tradition is the Deaf Mute (Mark 7.31-7), which once again involves healing with saliva (7.33), and Jesus putting his fingers in the man's ears. The presence of stories like this in Mark, alongside their absence in Matthew and Luke, is generally held to support the theory

---

<sup>7</sup> It is possible that Matt. 8.27-31 (two blind men) reflects consciousness of the miracle Matthew has omitted in its Marcan sequence, but the links between the two pericopae are sparse. Mark 8.22-26 is at the end of Luke's Great Omission (Mark 6.45–8.26). Given the uncongenial nature of the pericope to Luke, it is unnecessary to imagine that this pericope was lacking in Luke's copy of Mark.

of Marcan Priority – it is more likely that these are the kinds of pericope omitted by both Matthew and Luke than that they are the kinds of pericope that Mark is keen to add to his sources. In the context of a world without Mark, these apparently primitive healing stories are absent and we are left with the more dignified world of Matthew’s and Luke’s Jesus whose healings are a little less earthy and a little more reverential.

It is a phenomenon that draws attention to how serious it would be to lose Mark’s Gospel. Where historical Jesus criteria like multiple attestation incline us to expect materials with the best claims to authenticity to be found in several sources, and so to have survived the decades of being told and retold, the reality is that some of the more primitive materials are at best singly attested and are likely to have quickly passed out of the collective memory.<sup>8</sup> Telling our students that ninety percent of Mark has survived into Matthew and Luke lulls us into a false sense of security, since that ten percent contains so much that has a good historical pedigree.

---

<sup>8</sup> I am aware, of course, that attestation of a feature in triple tradition does not constitute multiple independent attestation. My point is from analogy, that if Matthew and Luke omit some of the more primitive elements in Mark, it is legitimate to imagine the same principle obtaining more broadly in the tradition, including in the pre-Markan tradition.

The difficulty lies in the fact that so much of what is unique to Mark is what is most interesting to the New Testament scholar, and it is not simply a matter of whole pericopae like the Blind Man of Bethsaida and the Deaf Mute but of nuances and details that have determined our outlook on Mark. Could redaction criticism have been as influential as it has become without Mark's Gospel? It is not simply that the absence of Mark makes it so much more tricky to see what is going on in both Matthew and Luke but also that Mark lends itself so well to redaction-critical scrutiny, with its repeated emphases, its distinctive themes, its key structural moments.

It is doubtful that William Wrede's *Messianic Secret*<sup>9</sup> could have worked if he had had only Matthew and Luke.<sup>10</sup> It would not be easy to construct a theory of the Messianic Secret on the basis of some loose shards in Matthew and Luke.<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to

---

<sup>9</sup> William Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien: Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901); translated into English as *The Messianic Secret* (Cambridge: J. Clark, 1971).

<sup>10</sup> See *ibid.*, 151-80, for Wrede's discussion of the Messianic Secret in Matthew and Luke.

<sup>11</sup> This is the weakness of the explanation of the Messianic Secret Allan J. McNicol, "Appendix 1: The Messianic Secret in Mark" in David Barrett Peabody, Allan J. McNicol and Lamar Cope, *One Gospel from Two: Mark's Use of Matthew and Luke* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), 348-53; it is a tall order to build

imagine a parallel universe in which Wrede's book was focused on the Messianic Secret in Matthew.

Nor, of course, is the depiction of the disciples anything like as hostile in Matthew and Luke as it is in Mark. In a world without Mark, the disciples take their rightful place as the fragile but ultimately faithful followers of Jesus who go on to become the church's apostles. We would lose one of the most curious phenomena in early Christianity, Mark's negative portrait of the disciples,<sup>12</sup> and with it would go some of the best evidence for the continuation of power-struggles in the immediately post-Pauline period.

There would be a major loss too for feminist hermeneutics. Elisabeth Schüssler

---

a convincing theory of Mark extracting the shards from Matthew and Luke and working them into so thoroughgoing a redactional feature.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. John Kloppenborg, "The Theological Stakes in the Synoptic Problem", in F. van Segbroek, C.M. Tuckett, G. Van Belle, and J. Verheyden (eds.), *Evangelica: Essays to Honor Frans Neirynck* (BETL; Leuven: Peeters, 1992), 93-120, which helpfully sets up the implications of the Griesbach's Mark's redaction of Matthew and Luke (97-108) in ways that (by extension) demonstrate what would be lost in a world without Mark.

Fiorenza would still have been able to label her seminal work *In Memory of Her*<sup>13</sup> (now on the basis of Matt. 26.13), but would Matthew have provided so rich a resource for reimagining Christian origins as Mark? The phenomenon that makes Mark so inviting for feminist hermeneutics is the difference the narrative generates between first and second readings. On the first reading, those who are called and follow and who are sent out on mission are men (1.16-20, 2.13-17, etc.), with women only appearing in peripheral roles (e.g. 1.30-1) but at the end of the Gospel, the reader discovers that in fact there were women present all along and that these women understand the gospel in a way that the men who have been our constant company have not (15.40-1). Now, on second reading, the mental image has to be adjusted, and the initial, androcentric reading is replaced by one that instead imagines the women present throughout.

### *Dethroning the New Testament Scholar*

The prioritizing of Mark's Gospel is a jewel in the crown of Biblical scholarship. In historical Jesus study, in reconstructing early Christian history, in appreciating its literary genius, Mark is preeminent in the scholar's canon. It sits alongside source-

---

<sup>13</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

criticism of the Pentateuch, the literary stratification of Isaiah and questioning the authenticity of several Pauline epistles as a celebrated achievement of post-Enlightenment scholarship on the Bible. To imagine a world without Mark is to imagine a world in which one of the key advances has not been made, in which the academic guild is closer to church, and Matthew's Gospel retains a position of authority for the scholar as well as for the minister.

The difficulty for many scholars of early Christianity is that they never knew or cannot remember what it was like to live in that world. They are so used to celebrating the dark, enigmatic brilliance of Mark's Passion and Resurrection account, so rich in dramatic irony and so jarring in its sudden ending, that they barely pause to consider just how disappointing it has been to the vast majority of Christians throughout history. The scribes who added the shorter ending, the longer ending and the Freer Logion were at the beginning of a long trajectory that stretches from antiquity to the present, and which witnesses to a profound dissatisfaction with the way that Mark ends, and so to Mark's Gospel as a whole. It is a dissatisfaction that arises in part from familiarity with the appearance stories<sup>14</sup> in successor Gospels like

---

<sup>14</sup> For a helpful discussion of the contrast between the appearance traditions and the traditions of Jesus' absence from the tomb ("He is not here!"), see Daniel A. Smith, *Revisiting the Empty Tomb: The Early History of Easter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

Matthew, Luke, John and Peter, but it is phenomenon that may go back to the first hearers of Mark, many of whom will have been familiar with the kind appearance tradition retold by Paul in 1 Cor. 15, and which Mark itself – somewhat bizarrely – appears to anticipate (14.28, 16.7) but subsequently fails to narrate.<sup>15</sup>

The current dominance of the view that Mark 16.8 was the author's intended ending, and that it is an especially profound and appropriate conclusion to the Gospel, makes it easy to forget just how recent it is that theories of a lost ending were consensus. When R. H. Lightfoot argued in 1950 that it was, after all, conceivable that Mark intended the book to end there, he was swimming firmly against the tide, at least of English-speaking scholarship,<sup>16</sup> and he had to work hard to make his case.<sup>17</sup> But in a

---

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Clayton Croy, *The Mutilation of Mark's Gospel* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 33-44. Whatever one thinks of Croy's solution (that the original ending of Mark was lost), his study is a useful reminder of how jarring the ending has appeared to many throughout its history of reception. Austin Farrer expresses the point with his customary elegance, "If we are uneasy with the ending, it is an aesthetic unease, a sense that the ending lacks 'poetic inevitability' . . . St Mark has built up in our mind strong poetic expectations: we feel them to be disappointed by his conclusion, and we cannot believe that such a writer could have written so ill", *Glass of Vision* (Westminster: Dacre, 1948), 138.

<sup>16</sup> See already J. Wellhausen, *Das Evangelium Marci: übersetzt und erklärt* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1903), 146, "Mit 16.8 endet das Evangelium Marci . . . Es fehlt nichts; es wäre schade, wenn noch etwas hinterher käme."

world without Mark, there is no sudden ending, there are no attempts to supply longer or shorter endings and there are no theories about lost endings. Mark itself is lost and the scholar's attention is focused on Matthew and Luke, for whom the story of the empty tomb sits alongside stories of Jesus' appearance to his disciples, as if the two always belonged together.<sup>18</sup> It is a world in which the resurrection narratives are less diverse, less puzzling. No longer are Matthew, Luke, John and Peter reconciling an empty tomb narrative like that found in Mark with appearance traditions like those found in 1 Cor. 15. Now, the two lie side by side as if they belonged that way, as if it was the only and inevitable way to tell the story.

This raises a more troubling question, at least for our own sanity and sense of self-

---

<sup>17</sup> R. H. Lightfoot, *The Gospel Message of St Mark* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1950), 80-97. Austin Farrer was among the few who saw the strength of the case for Mark's ending at 16.8, *The Glass of Vision*, 140, "The mere rustling of the hem of his risen glory, the voice of the boy in the white robe, turns them to headlong flight: 'and they said not a word to anyone, for they were afraid'. Do we stop there or do we go on? I think we stop."

<sup>18</sup> It is sometimes claimed that Matthew's and Luke's agreement stops with the empty tomb at Mark 16.8 (e.g. Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2009), xxx), but this underestimates the agreement between Matthew's and Luke's commissions to the disciples, Matt. 28.19 // Luke 24.47; cf. my *Case Against Q*, 58-9. It also overestimates the extent of agreement between Mark 16.1-8 and Luke 24.1-11, where the longest sequence of words in verbatim agreement is three (οὐκ ἔστιν ὧδε in Mark 16.6 // Luke 24.6 and ἀπὸ τοῦ μνημείου in Mark 16.8 // Luke 24.9).

worth. What if Christian history, the church, the theologians are right and the contemporary scholars of Christian antiquity are wrong? What if our aesthetic preference for Mark's literary enigma is simply a product of our own, warped sense of self-importance, a celebration of an imagined skill in teasing out patterns that are illusory, mere pictures in the clouds? The language and culture of contemporary scholarship, the shared textbooks, the popular websites, the participation in the same conferences, generates a scholarly currency, reinforcing presuppositions and keeping our thinking firmly inside established tracks.

### *Erasing Mark until 1945*

If I may be permitted a little licence on the idea of erasure history, it is intriguing to reflect on the idea that Mark was lost for many hundreds of years but only re-emerged in the sands of Egypt in the modern era. What if fragments of Mark, then an unknown Gospel, had been unearthed by Grenfell and Hunt in the 1890s and 1900s, and a full Coptic witness had been found in a jar in 1945? Would we have been able to tell that Mark was the long-lost common primary narrative source for Matthew and Luke? Or would our innate canonical bias, further entrenched by years of intra-canonical source-criticism, simply blind us from seeing what we think we can now

see? Perhaps the very strangeness of Mark's Gospel would appear all the more stark given our unfamiliarity with the work. After centuries of seeing Matthew and Luke as normative, the manic pace of Mark, and its clumsy, colloquial expressions, might be enough to cause many a scholar to marginalize the text. Perhaps we would puzzle over the man running away naked in Mark 14.51-2, or be impressed by the colourful details added to its miracle stories (e.g. Mark 6.39), but with the canonical Matthew and Luke so firmly entrenched in our consciousness, it is easy to imagine that Mark would become about as significant as Papyrus Egerton 2 – curious, intriguing, mysterious, but ultimately doing little to change our perspectives on Christian origins.

The late discovery of Mark would of course have consequences for perspectives on the Synoptic Problem. Perhaps the brightest and best would ultimately be able to see that here was the long lost source of much of the material common to Matthew and Luke, but our instincts might be to think of it as a hitherto unknown creative harmony. In the absence of Mark, the Q hypothesis could not have been formulated, at least not in its classic form,<sup>19</sup> and the relation of Luke to Matthew would no doubt

---

<sup>19</sup> As it is formulated by B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* (London: Macmillan, 1924), Q becomes necessary because of Luke's allegedly unfathomable re-ordering of the non-Markan material in Matthew. However, in a world without

be one of direct borrowing. Long used to thinking of pericopae like the Temptation story (Matt. 4.1-11 // Luke 4.1-13) as originating with Matthew and being revised by Luke, the two-verse Temptation in the newly discovered Mark (1.12-13), would appear like a simple summary conflation, and it would attract little attention. The Death of John the Baptist (Matt. 14.3-12 // Mark 6.17-29), on the other hand, would appear like a creative Marcan embellishment, in line with similarly expansive versions of the Gerasene Demoniac (Matt. 8.28-34 // Mark 5.1-20 // Luke 8.26-39) and the Epileptic (Matt. 17.14-21 // Mark 9.14-29 // Luke 9.37-42). Living in the world of the newly discovered Mark is a little like living in the world of the Griesbachian Mark, with priority given to Matthew and with Mark marginalized.

A similar scenario may already obtain in our field in another way. John Dominic Crossan's proposal that the Gospel of Peter witnesses to a primitive Passion Gospel, which he labels "the Cross Gospel" and which was a source for the Synoptics and John, invokes a non-canonical (Crossan "extracanonical") Gospel to shed light on Gospel origins.<sup>20</sup> Without prejudice to the plausibility of Crossan's case, his complaint

---

Mark, in which Streeter wrote *The Three Gospels*, the distinction between triple tradition and double tradition would collapse, and a relationship of direct dependence between Matthew and Luke would be the obvious outcome.

<sup>20</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Cross That Spoke: The Origins of the Passion Narrative* (San

that his proposal has been unfairly treated because it involves an extant non-canonical gospel is telling. His questions, in the context of our erasure history, are to the point:

This, then, is my challenge: On what principles might *any* future extracanonical text be judged as canonically independent by those who have thus far refused that position to all past ones? Put another way: how could your position ever be falsified?<sup>21</sup>

Up until the late nineteenth century, scholars had been living in a world without the Gospel of Peter for a very long time. Even now, we have only a portion of what was clearly a far longer work. Would the discovery of Mark, after hundreds of years in the ground, meet a similar fate to Crossan's Cross Gospel?<sup>22</sup>

---

Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

<sup>21</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), Chapter 8, this quotation 119.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Charles Quarles's dismissal of Crossan's Cross Gospel, which repeatedly uses the term "canonical" as if that is a key datum itself, "Thus, if the GP [Gospel of Peter] is the single source for the canonical narratives of the Passion and resurrection, the canonical Gospels are unreliable revisions of an unreliable tradition." C. L. Quarles, "The Gospel of Peter: Does it contain a Precanonical Resurrection Narrative" in R. Edwards (ed.), *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright in Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 106-20 (119). Similarly, the very title of Raymond Brown's response to Crossan also invokes canon as a relevant descriptor, Raymond E. Brown, "The Gospel of Peter and Canonical Gospel Priority", *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987): 321-43.

### *Erasing Mark from History*

I have focused so far on the counterfactual ideas that Mark's Gospel did not survive or that it was only recently rediscovered. Under these scenarios, it was written, it was influential for a generation or so, it influenced Matthew and Luke, and it provided the stimulus for them to write their Gospels and to base them on Mark's, revising, expanding, supplementing and substituting. But there is a more fundamental act of erasure that would have had far more drastic historical consequences, the idea that Mark's Gospel had never been written. Let us imagine that the young boy who grew up to become the anonymous author of Mark's Gospel in the early 70s, had instead contracted tuberculosis in the early 30s. He died, never having heard of Jesus or Christianity, and Mark's Gospel was never written. Without Mark, would there have been a Matthew? Could there have been a Matthew? As we know it, Matthew's Gospel is so strongly dependent on Mark, in order, in shared wording, in theological overview, that in the absence of Mark, our Matthew could not have existed. Likewise Luke. For all Luke's talk about the "many" who had engaged in the enterprise, there is little doubt among most contemporary New Testament scholars that it was Mark's Gospel that had the strongest influence on Luke. Without Mark, would there have been a Luke? Could there have been a Luke? Not, at least, the Luke that we have. One of the reasons that the Proto-Luke hypothesis was in the end unsuccessful was that it simply did not pay adequate attention to the enormous influence that Mark's

Gospel appeared to have on the author of Luke.

In the absence of Mark, the development of early Christianity would surely have taken a different path. If Mark was the catalyst for the composition of Matthew, then without it, his Gospel may never have existed. If Luke's Gospel was dependent also on Matthew, the basis for Luke doubly disappears – no Mark, no Matthew, no Luke. And if no Luke, then no Acts. What place is there in the history of Christianity for a sequel to a non-existent first volume? Would Theophilus have been sufficiently intrigued by the development of the Jesus movement to have commissioned a volume about the followers of the Christ, and not the Christ himself?<sup>23</sup>

The difficulty, of course, with counterfactual history like this is that the speculation itself depends on prior assumptions about Gospel relationships. If Luke was independent of Matthew, as Two-Source theorists maintain, a world without Mark is not the end of the world. Q rises to greater prominence. Perhaps Q provides the catalyst for the composition of Matthew and Luke, both of which will now look very different. Would there have been anything like the emphasis on the Passion that now

---

<sup>23</sup> For reflection on a world without Theophilus, see Loveday Alexander, "What if Luke had never met Theophilus?", *BibInterp* 8 (2000): 161-70.

pervades their Gospels? In the absence of Mark, Matthew and Luke would presumably have more closely resembled Q. And on the assumption that Q did not contain a Passion narrative, their Gospels would have looked very different, some narrative sequence, especially in the early chapters, and a high proportion of sayings material throughout. The orientation of Matthew and Luke would no longer be towards the Passion. While present (e.g. Q 14.27), the cross would diminish in narrative prominence. The orientation would all be towards the beginning of the story – John the Baptist’s preaching, the temptation and Jesus’ sermon, with no narrative resolution focusing on death and resurrection.

This kind of world without Mark resembles one of the trajectories in early Christianity championed by Helmut Koester and James Robinson.<sup>24</sup> It is a world in which Jesus’ salvific death and resurrection radically diminishes in importance, a world more welcoming to the sayings-based salvation of the Gospel of Thomas.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester, *Trajectories Through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990), 86, “The *Gospel of Thomas* and Q challenge the assumption that the early church was unanimous in making Jesus’ death and resurrection the fulcrum of Christian faith. Both documents presuppose that Jesus’ significance lay in his words, and in his words alone.” This is a poor characterisation of Q, for which the deeds of Jesus are so important that their

Perhaps Thomas would have become more mainstream both in its self-conception and in its reception. The Gospel of Thomas as we know it stresses the secrecy of the sayings that the one with knowledge can interpret (Incipit, 1, 13). It is a perspective that may be in part polemical, with Thomas's authoritative yet secret viewpoint at variance with the public norms represented by the characters of Matthew and Peter (13). With Mark out of the picture, that public perception of Christian norms might have been different, Thomas's Jesus might have seemed less unusual, and there might have been even more copies made, its survival guaranteed through its regular reading in church.

Does a world without Mark therefore lead to a Christianity without the cross? Is the survival of this author and his work the key moment in making Christianity what it eventually became, in ensuring the centrality of atonement? The question can only be resolved by considering the role played by Paul and the Pauline epistles, and this involves an assessment of the degree of influence exercised by Paul's stress on the cross. It is such a major emphasis in Paul's letters that it is easy to see it as distinctive

---

rejection can lead to damnation (see especially Q 10.13-15), but it is an effective summary of the theology of the Gospel of Thomas. A world without Mark does not make Q more like Thomas, but it does pave the way for making Thomas somewhat less anomalous than it was for the proto-orthodox who made the cross and resurrection central.

Pauline focus, and to attribute its success to the apostle, yet it is clear from passages like 1 Cor. 15.3-4 that Christ's salvific death was already regarded as foundational to those who were in the movement before Paul, and the contrasting reflections on Jesus' death in works like Hebrews and Revelation only make the crucifixion appear still more important. Was this, therefore, so fundamental to so many that it would have been as pervasive even without the contribution from Mark and those he influenced? It is difficult to resist the notion that the proclamation of Jesus' death and resurrection would have survived the non-survival of Mark. Perhaps, then, it would have been traditions about Jesus' life that suffered in the absence of Mark, and not the focus on his death.

### *Conclusion*

Erasing Mark from history, whether in toto or only for a season, provides the kind of academic adventure that justifies the experiment. For most New Testament scholars, Mark's Gospel is the equivalent of science fiction's "fixed point in time".<sup>26</sup> Without it, many of our models would collapse. A world without the Pastoral Epistles, or

---

<sup>26</sup> The concept of "fixed points in time" is a staple of the revived series of *Doctor Who* (BBC TV, 2005-present). These are points that are so important to the continuation of the space-time continuum that compromising them can lead to complete collapse in the natural progression of human affairs on earth. For similar reflections on how analogies from science fiction and film can help in counterfactual history, see Ferguson, "Introduction", 2-4.

without 2 Peter, or without the Shepherd of Hermas, would be nothing like as drastic. Since at least Wrede, Mark has represented a decisive moment in the story of Christian origins. Whether or not one agrees with Hans Conzelmann that the secrecy theory is the hermeneutical presupposition of the gospel genre,<sup>27</sup> the composition and dissemination of Mark's Gospel represents the point at which the gospel of a crucified Christ is embedded as the climax in a narrative of Jesus' life. It is the crucial bridge between early confessions of the crucified Christ (e.g. 1 Cor. 15.3) and traditions about Jesus' life, a bridge that makes possible the dominant trajectory in early Christianity, giving us not only Matthew, Luke and John but ultimately also Nicea and Chalcedon. If New Testament scholars are right about the priority of Mark, it turns out that a great deal more hangs on it than the simple solution of a complex literary problem.

---

<sup>27</sup> Hans Conzelmann, "Present and Future in the Synoptic Tradition", *Journal for Theology and the Church* 5 (1968): 26-44 (43).