

Mark at Perga

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Information about the archaeology of Perga was recently summarized by Mark Fairchild.¹ This plus Acts 13, which recounts Mark's failure at Perga, suggests that passages added to Mark's Gospel to adapt it for non-Jews were after all unsuccessful.

Excavations at Perga and vicinity include material up to at least the 3rd century. No synagogue has been found in Perga.² The earliest evidence for Jews in Perga is a 3c (?) synagogue dedication inscription at Aphrodisias, 160 miles NW of Perga, which mentions Samuel, an Elder from Perga (ΣΑΜΟΥΗΛ ΠΡΕΣΒΕΥΤΗΣ ΠΕΡΓΕΟΥΣ).³ That he was an Elder implies a Jewish community; that he helped fund the Aphrodisias synagogue suggests that the Perga Jews were too few to build their own synagogue. If such was the case with the Jews of 3rd century Perga, the Jews of 1st century Perga are unlikely to have been more numerous. There may have been none at all.

Ac 13:13. Now Paul and his company set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia, and John [Mark] departed from them and returned to Jerusalem.

[14] But they, passing through from Perga, came to Antioch of Pisidia, and they went into the Synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down.

It would then seem that Mark quit when he first encountered a non-Jewish audience. Now, there are signs in Mark of attempts to adapt that Gospel to make it intelligible to those without knowledge of the Scriptures⁴ or of Jewish customs. Among these is:

Mk 7:1. And there are gathered together unto him the Pharisees and certain of the scribes, who had come from Jerusalem, [2] and had seen that some of his disciples ate their bread with defiled, that is, unwashen, hands.

[3] For the Pharisees and all Jews, except they wash their hands diligently, eat not, holding the tradition of the elders, [4] and when come from the market, except they bathe, they eat not; and many other things there are, which they have received: washing of cups and pots and brazen vessels).

[5] And the Pharisees and scribes ask him, Why walk not thy disciples according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with defiled hands?

¹Fairchild **Perga**.

²Fairchild 55. This is the key fact.

³Fairchild 55-57. Samuel is the only 3c Jew who can be firmly connected with Perga.

⁴The dying cry of Jesus in Mk 15:34 is a defeat – *unless* the reader completes the allusion to Psalm 22, which turns it into a transcendent victory. For those unable to complete the allusion, Mark's story is unrelievedly pessimistic; see in detail below.

Not only is 7:3-4 parenthetical (the story resumes smoothly at 7:5), but it assumes a *different audience* than the Scripturally aware one Mark otherwise addresses. These details suggest an interpolation. Mk 7:3-4 occurs in all manuscripts, and is thus not a scribal corruption; it is better assigned to the text's formation period. It would seem to be Mark's attempt to adjust his text to the needs of a new audience.

Another passage (7:19b) may be ascribed to the same impulse: to simplify issues for Gentiles unfamiliar with Jewish references. The context is complex, and contains a shift of subject implying a later addition. Jesus is discussing Pharisee traditions:

Mk 7:13 . . . making void the word of God by your tradition which ye have delivered, and many such like things ye do.

[14] And he called to him the multitude again, and said unto them, Hear me all of you, and understand: [15] There is nothing from without the man, that going into him can defile him; but the things which proceed out of the man are those that defile the man.⁵ [17] And when he was entered into the house from the multitude, his disciples asked of him the parable. [18] And he saith unto them, Are ye so without understanding also? Perceive ye not, that whatsoever from without goeth into the man, cannot defile him, [19] because it goeth not into his heart, but into his belly, and goeth out into the draught?

[19b] [This he said], making all meats clean.

[20] And he said, That which proceedeth out of the man, that defileth the man. [21] For from within, out of the heart of men, evil thoughts proceed, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, [22] Covetings, wickednesses, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, railing, pride, foolishness; [23] all these evil things proceed from within, and defile the man.

The subject of 7:1-13 is Pharisee purity rules, including food preparation;⁶ 7:14-23 rejects food rules and identifies sin as the real defilement.⁷ This second step has its own introduction, and should be seen as a later phase in the argument, not composed at the same time as the segment ending at 7:13. To that second step, implicitly voiding the Pharisee food prohibitions, 7:19b offers a clear and explicit statement. It would appear to be a final clarifying addition, like 7:3-4, and intended for the same audience.

This argument depends on the factuality of Acts 13:13. Luke, the presumed author, also claims knowledge of Mark's mother's house in Jerusalem where the Christians gathered, none of which seems suspect. Luke is a creative author, and needs to be watched. It was undoubtedly to Luke's advantage to tell a negative story about Mark, whose Gospel Luke aimed to replace, but the story itself may be true. I here accept it. But this raises a further question, namely, Mark's reason for doing what Acts says he did at Perga. Acts simply says that "he departed from them and returned to Jerusalem," and that Paul later "thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work" (Ac 15:38).

⁵Mk 7:16, here omitted, is considered by critical scholars to be a scribal addition

⁶The lack of continuity between 7:1-13 (washing) and 7:14-20 (permissible food) is manifest; Johnson 133 calls the latter "much more radical."

⁷For the list of sins, which has an outside source, see Brooks **Two** 40.

Motive. Why did Mark quit at Perga? Perhaps because *he preached his Gospel*, and his Gospel was not fully intelligible to Gentiles. For one thing, Mark's Passion narrative is suffused throughout by a sort of background music of Scripture allusions. Consider only the echoes and evocations of Psalm 22:⁸

Mark 15 Text	Psalm 22 Evocations
[22] And they bring him unto the place Golgotha, which is, being interpreted, the Place of a Skull.	[16b] They pierced my hands and my feet.
[23] And they offered him wine mingled with myrrh, but he received it not. [24] And they crucify him, and part his garments among them, casting lots upon them, what each should take. [25] And it was the third hour when they crucified him.	[18] They part my garments among them, and on my vesture do they cast lots.
. . . [29] And they that passed by railed on him, wagging their heads and saying, Ha! thou that destroyest the temple and buildest it in three days,	[7] All they that see me laugh me to scorn, they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying,
[30] save thyself and come down from the cross. [31] In like manner also the chief priests mocking him among themselves with the scribes, said, He saved others; himself he cannot save. [32] Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down from the cross, that we may see and believe.	[8a] Commit thyself unto Jehovah, let him deliver him;
. . . [33] And when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.	[8b] Let him rescue him, seeing he delighteth in him.
[34] And at the ninth hour, Jesus cried with a loud voice, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? Which is, being interpreted, My God my God, why hast thou forsaken me?	[1] My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

So far Mark's bleak Crucifixion scene. But his readers, knowing the rest of Psalm 22 by heart, will have realized that it ends, not in despair, but in triumph:

[23] Ye that fear Jehovah, praise him,
All the seed of Jacob, glorify him,
And stand in awe of him, all ye the
seed of Israel
[24] For he hath not despised nor
abhorred the affliction of the afflicted;
Neither hath he hid his face from him,
But when he cried unto him, he heard.

⁸For a detailed account of Psalm 22 here and in related texts, see O'Brien Use 147-154.

Those unable to complete the righthand column will go away with an unrelievedly bleak account of Jesus' end. And knowing nothing of the Temple and its meaning, what will they make of Mark's symbolic representation of Jesus' vindication . . .

[37] And Jesus uttered a loud cry
and gave up the ghost. [38] And the
veil of the Temple was rent in twain,
from the top to the bottom.

. . . against the Temple authorities, who had been Jesus' enemies from the beginning? Answer: Nothing. The Scriptural music is lost, and the final symbol is inscrutable.

Mark's Gospel is a collaboration between author and audience; it works only for an audience which can smoothly supply the other half of the story as Mark tells it. Those of Perga, unfamiliar with Jewish life and Scripture, would have been baffled.

Conclusion. There is dirt archaeology. And there is text archaeology, whose business here is to note interpolations and detect allusions. What does all that work of noting and detecting tell us? In this case, it tells us that Mark's Gospel was designed for reading⁹ by Jews or by Gentiles familiar with Jewish Scripture and customs. Despite Mk 7:3-4, 7:19b, and other last-minute patches (such as translations of Aramaic words) to make it work for a non-Jewish audience, Mark, preaching it at Perga, evidently failed to get it across. The patches were just not enough.

From Perga, Mark returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13), and to his mother's house, where his Gospel was once again in Jewish context.¹⁰ If we credit local tradition,¹¹ Mark and his Gospel later found a home among the Jewish Christians of Alexandria. These at least would have had no trouble with Mark's Scriptural echoes.

Appendix: Last-Minute Additions to Mark

It would be wrong to conclude without noticing other plausible last-minute additions to Mark. Those here given supply information on Jewish ritual matters or translate terms from the Aramaic language. Their number implies a serious effort by Mark to deprovincialize his Gospel for wider use. That Mark's subtle use of Scripture allusions could not be ameliorated by this method does not impugn his good sense in employing the method where he could.

⁹Note Mk 13:14, "let him *that readeth* understand." Oral delivery is not excluded, but it would appear that Mark's own attempt to deliver the whole thing orally was not a success.

¹⁰The maid's name was Rhoda (Ac 12:13); see further Rothschild **Prosopography** 295f.

¹¹Which seems to be on the whole sound, apart from an assimilation to the myth of Mark as Peter's interpreter at Rome, and a probably standard martyrdom story; see the short summary in Atiya **History** 25-28, and the longer appreciation in Oden **African**. Mark's association with Alexandria is the background for his appearance as one of twelve in the Assumption of the Virgin (4c), "And Mark, who was still alive, came from Alexandria with the rest, as has been said, from their several countries," and "And Mark also answered and said, As I was finishing the service of the third hour in the city of Alexandria, while I prayed, the Holy Ghost caught me up and brought me to you" (Elliott 702, 703). Nor is the Assumption an African text.

These groups of passages may plausibly be assigned to the final layer of Mark:

Explanations of Jewish customs and beliefs or adaptation to non-Jews:

- 2:27. In effect abolishes Sabbath rules
- 7:3-4. Explains Jewish washing of hands and food-preparation vessels
- 7:19b. A universalizing statement, that all foods are permissible
- 12:18b. Identifies the Sadducees as not believing in resurrection
- 14:12b. Defines the First Day of Unleavened Bread as the time when the Passover lambs are sacrificed

Translations of Aramaic phrases or Semitic words:

- 3:17. Boanerges = “sons of Thunder” [epithet of the Zebedees]
- 5:42. Talitha cumi = “little girl, rise” [word of healing]
- 7:11. Corban = “dedicated [to God]”
- 7:34. Ephphatha = “be opened” [word of healing]
- 14:36. Abba, “father”
- 15:22. Golgotha = “the place of a skull”
- 15:34. Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani = “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” [last words of the crucified Jesus]

Many of the Aramaisms in Mark occur at moments of great tension: words of healing, Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane, and his last utterance on the cross. That is presumably why they were put there in the first place; they are part of the drama which Mark has designed into his work. Mark later tried to preserve the drama by rendering these terms transparent for his new audience.

Not translated are the terms Rabbi (9:5, 11:21, and 14:45) and Rabboni (10:51). From the context it is evident that these are terms of respect used in addressing Jesus, and Mark probably thought them self-evident, even for non-Jewish hearers.¹²

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¹²Not content to rely on context, the Gospel of John deals with its first occurrence of the term thus: “Rabbi, which is to say, being interpreted, Teacher” (1:38), though leaving it untranslated on later occurrences (3:2, 3:26, 4:31, 6:25, 9:2, 11:8).