

Jacob P. B. Mortensen (ed.)

# Genres of Mark

Reading Mark's Gospel from Micro  
and Macro Perspectives



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Jacob P.B. Mortensen and Mikael Brorson

## The Gospel of Mark in the Context of Ancient Greco-Roman Education – A Search for Comparable Genres

Since the pioneering work on the *chreia* by Burton Mack and Vernon Robbins in the 1980's, New Testament scholars have been hesitant to apply the literary theories of the *Progymnasmata* – especially the remaining progymnastic exercises – to New Testament texts. The general idea among scholars has been that the early Christian writers were poorly educated (if they were educated at all) and did not intentionally make use of educational aids. However, during the last decade more interest has been shown in these second-level school exercises (*Progymnasmata*), of which four complete ancient versions have been handed down to us.<sup>1</sup> This process of increased awareness of the *Progymnasmata* reached a peak with the publication by Mikeal C. Parsons and Michael W. Martin of *Ancient Rhetoric and the New Testament: The Influence of Elementary Greek Composition* (2018). In their book, Parsons & Martin present seven (out of twelve) progymnastic exercises, explain the theory, provide ancient literary examples, and point out helpful New Testament parallels. Their collection of useful and comparable material is commendable, even though it is not comprehensible. Thanks to their presentation, it is now possible for a wider audience to learn, for instance, the theoretical background of how to make a comparison (*synkrisis*) and where to find examples of such comparisons in ancient literature.

Another and more established discussion about literary forms is the discussion of macro-genres. During large parts of the 20th century, much Markan scholarship focused on the genre debate in an attempt to determine the genre to which Mark belonged. Various scholars have argued that Mark was a gospel,<sup>2</sup> an eschatological historical monograph,<sup>3</sup> a biography,<sup>4</sup> an aretalogy,<sup>5</sup> a historiog-

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1 Cf. the translation of all four *Progymnasmata* by George A. Kennedy (trans.), *Progymnasmata. Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

2 Francis Watson, *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

3 Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); *The Beginning of the Gospel: Probing of Mark in Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).



raphy,<sup>6</sup> a novel,<sup>7</sup> a Homeric epic,<sup>8</sup> or a tragedy.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, there are problems and advantages with all eight genre designations. For instance, the “gospel” was not defined as a literary genre until the second century CE, so it could not have been used by the author to conceive his text. The same objection can be raised against designating Mark as an eschatological historical monograph. Ancient biographies focus on the birth, ancestry and education of the protagonist, but these features are absent from Mark, unless serious interpretational work is done. Regarding historiography, the novel and tragedy, it is clear that the style and themes of Mark do not conform to other historiographical works, novels or tragedies. Mark’s focus is proclamatory and cannot be categorised as historical information, a love story or a tragedy like the works of Sophocles and Euripides.

It is within the context of the scholarly trajectories outlined above that the conference on “The Gospel of Mark and Genre: Micro and Macro”, with the support of the Research Foundation (Aarhus University) and the H.P. Hjerl Hansen Mindefondet, was held. The purpose of the conference was to discuss, primarily, the educational level of the author of Mark and the possible presence of progymnastic forms or exercises in the Gospel. Additionally, the purpose was to discuss the relation and integration of micro-forms into the macro-genre debate. The meeting was made up of twelve paper sessions, each of which fea-

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- 4 Charles H. Talbert, *What is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977); Richard Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Helen K. Bond, *The First Biography of Jesus: Genre and Meaning in Mark’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020); David E. Aune, “The Gospels as Hellenistic Biography”, *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 20, no. 4 (1987): 1–10; *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, LEC 8 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987). Cf. also Bond’s article in this volume.
  - 5 Howard C. Kee, “Aretology and Gospel”, *JBL* 92, no. 3 (1973): 402–422; Lawrence A. Wills, *The Quest of a Historical Gospel: Mark, John, and the Origins of the Gospel Genre* (London: Routledge, 1997); cf. Andrew J. Kelley, “Miracles, Jesus and Identity: A History of Research regarding Jesus and Miracles with Special Attention to the Gospel of Mark”, *Currents in Biblical Research* 13, no. 1 (2014): 82–106.
  - 6 Eve-Marie Becker, *Das Markus-Evangelium im Rahmen antiker Historiographie*, WUNT 194 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006); Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007). Cf. Eve-Marie Becker’s article in this volume.
  - 7 Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel. Mark’s World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); Michael E. Vines, *The Problem of Markan Genre: The Gospel of Mark and the Jewish Novel*, SBL – Academia Biblica 3 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2002). Cf. Sylvie Honigman’s article in this volume, which argues against this perception.
  - 8 Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2000).
  - 9 Adam Z. Wright, *Of Conflict and Concealment: The Gospel of Mark as Tragedy* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2020); Stephen H. Smith, “A Divine Tragedy: Some Observations on the Dramatic Structure of Mark’s Gospel”, *Novum Testamentum* 37, fasc. 3 (1995): 209–231; Amelinde Berube, “Tragedy in the Gospel of Mark” (thesis, McGill University, 2003).

tured a thirty-five-minute presentation by the author and a thirty-minute moderated discussion.<sup>10</sup> In addition to these sessions, an article by Professor Helen Bond (Edinburgh) has been included in the volume. Professor Bond was unable to attend the conference and speak on the Gospel of Mark as a biography. Professor Bond's contribution makes the discussion of the macro-genre approach more complete because her opinion is one of the most widely held views on the genre of Mark.

The scholars who gathered at Sandbjerg Estate in Southern Jutland, each an expert in various facets of the overall theme, shared a common goal: they would refrain from attributing some sort of normative or common notion of literary forms or genres within and beyond the ancient Greco-Roman educational and literary curriculum. Rather, the intention was to move towards a greater overall understanding of the subject, by allowing the diversity of views to stand and speak for themselves. None of the participants wanted to presume the uniqueness of the Markan text, neither in its entirety nor in its minor passages. Instead, they sought to situate Mark's Gospel within a proper and plausible historical setting, making neither an ontological claim about the absolutely alien nature of this text, nor a historical claim of radical incomparability with contemporary literary forms and genres (both micro and macro).<sup>11</sup> The intention was to situate Mark's Gospel within its proper socio-historical and literary context and compare it with the literary forms (micro and macro) and educational textbooks which were available at the time it was written.

In this way, the importance of educational exercises and the perception of these exercises as literary forms or genres drove the investigations. Additionally, this was what made it possible to overcome the "form-critical flaw," as we might call it. The importance of genres was already familiar to form critics in the early part of the twentieth century. Martin Dibelius and the majority of all subsequent scholars identified various literary units and generic forms in the Gospel texts and sought analogies to these particular "Gospel forms" in other ancient literature. This methodology has something to say for itself, but it also contains a serious flaw: if too much focus is placed on the "Gospel form," similar literary expressions and genres in contemporary literature tend to be overlooked. Hence, the starting point of the investigation should be reversed. First, the basic literary genre, form or exercise should be identified in an ancient, literary and theoretical

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10 Professor Eve-Marie Becker (Münster) was unable to deliver her paper at the venue because of illness. She revised her presentation, and it is incorporated into the volume in its German form.

11 For these distinctions, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 39.

context, and then the *expression* of this genre, form or exercise should be investigated in other ancient prose material to evaluate the extent to which it conforms to the generic guidelines and literary conventions. On the basis of such investigations, similarities and differences should be explored. This approach provides a broader basis for comparison and a specific ancient and literary-theoretical starting point and perception of the conventions and guidelines of a genre, form or exercise. In this way, the “form critical flaw” is overcome.

During the conference, it became clear that there should be a focus on the specific nature of the relationship between Theon’s *Progymnasmata* and Mark’s Gospel. Was this relationship genealogical, analogical or something else? Did we want to state Mark’s direct dependence on Theon (or a similar set of progymnastic exercises), or were we applying Theon as a heuristic tool to open (parts of) the Markan text? Obviously aware of the difference, it became clear that maps are not territory, so all the participants struggled to work with the literary guidelines in relation to actual instantiations of literature. Hence, these discussions were taken up several times during the conference, but no consensus was reached. However, there was a general agreement that the Gospel of Mark should be regarded as a genuine product of the ancient system of Greco-Roman literary education – an ancient piece of Hellenistic literature with a strong Jewish flavour. Its literary forms and narrative building blocks (micro and macro) were not considered to be later inventions attributed to a unique and untranslatable core. Rather, all the participants attempted to approach the text at its instantiary level as it was perceived within the socio-historical and literary forms available to an author at the time of its inception. This is why the *Progymnasmata* was chosen as a lens to focus the interpretations. Hence, a consensus approach might be said to consider the relationship between Theon’s *Progymnasmata* and Mark’s Gospel as functional and constructive. Mark related to the progymnastic exercises by way of an interactive literary capacity, and he was able to go in the same direction as other contemporary and previous authors.

As a methodological point of departure, none of the participants wanted to claim that Mark and the progymnastic exercises were identical or even similar. Of course, all the participants wanted to compare Mark with the progymnastic exercises to some degree. However, it became apparent that there was considerable interest in focusing on where and how the Markan passages *differed* from the text-book examples and contemporary literary forms. Everyone wanted to discuss the ways in which Mark appropriated the educational forms and put them to use for his own purposes, with a view to identifying the incongruities and variations. In this sense, the approach to the Markan text and the progymnastic exercises was inspired more by the idea of family resemblances than by a formal set of criteria defining a checklist. The approach was more functional and pro-

totypical than genealogical, and seemed to be a better way of capturing the fluidity and variety of the literary forms. As one literary scholar has put it: “Members of one family share a variety of similar features: eyes, gait, hair color, temperament. But – and this is the crucial point – there need be no one set of features shared by all family members.”<sup>12</sup> In order to capture the features that produce a descriptively productive category with enough richness and depth to make a comparison and categorise the literary passages within the same literary form or micro-genre, there was a need for more than a mere checklist. What some might deem a comparison (*synkrisis*) or a speech-in-character (*prosôpopoia*) may not be deemed a comparison or speech-in-character by others, even if they share several correlating features from a checklist. Put differently, the way one author elaborates on a chreia or fable may be different from the way another author does, even if they both engage in the literary practice of elaboration. Hence, the model of family resemblance seemed apt for capturing the idea of comparing one literary form, genre or exercise with a wide variety of literary examples and deciding whether to include or exclude the passage in the group.

In addition to the above, there was a shared perception that Mark did not conceive his message in some original or pristine form untouched by the rules of the world. On the contrary, Mark was perceived as a thoroughly Hellenised Jew who conceived and formulated his message in precisely the literary categories that were available to him as an author in a specific place and time. He did not have to borrow some literary categories or a perceptual system from a foreign culture, and nor did a foreign culture intrude upon his message with a view to adapting it to his context. Rather, the way in which Mark conceived his message, organised and ordered it according to structural principles and perceptual categories, was based entirely on the literary categories that were available to him as the result of his education. The most likely theoretical background for him to apply was the literary forms or micro-genres of the *Progymnasmata*.

The papers offered at Sandbjerg Estate and revised for the present volume highlight the importance of the concept of genres for understanding the wider conceptual context of individual authors and the social and cultural importance of the ancient Greco-Roman education. They also vividly demonstrate the necessity of collaboration and interdisciplinary dialogue in attempting to grasp such a foundational and multi-faceted topic as micro- and macro-genres. In the present volume, the articles have been structured according to their affiliation to the micro- or macro-genre approach, and a subdivision has been added relating to theology and ethnicity. This strategy is not meant to insinuate that the author

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12 Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 28.

of Mark's Gospel and the other ancient authors thought in terms of these concepts in their theory, ideology or practice. Parallels and/or differences cannot be assumed but, instead, must be evaluated on an individual basis in each case. Nevertheless, in order to present the articles in a systematic fashion, they have been divided according to such rules.

The first six articles of the anthology are comprised of contributions that investigate different micro-genres of Mark's Gospel. In the first article, Tobias Hägerland does this by treating Mark 2:1–3:6 in relation to the *chreia* exercises (*χρεία*) from Theon's *Progymnasmata*. Hägerland demonstrates the impact of Theon's *chreia* exercises on the genre of Hellenistic biography by comparing the exercises to Lucian's *Life of Demonax* and other contemporary literature. He then asks whether Mark 2:1–3:6 seems to draw on *chreia* exercises as well, and concludes that this seems very likely, if one is willing to assume that Mark had received a progymnastic education. In this way, Hägerland also stresses the meaning of how we view the socio-literary context of Mark's Gospel.

Justin Strong's point of departure in the second article of the volume is the antique fable genre (*μύθος*), and especially Theon's writing on *μύθος* in the *Progymnasmata*. By way of introduction, Strong defines the fable genre and provides examples of ancient fables in order to render it probable that the Greek word *παραβολή* in the NT is an umbrella category which often covers or includes fables. Strong then uses the *παραβολαί* of The Sower (Mark 4:3–9) and The Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1–12) as prime examples of fables in Mark's Gospel, as well as attempting to demonstrate the usefulness of the fable genre in categorising the short comparisons in the Gospel of Mark (often referred to as similes). He thus concludes that it is unequivocal that Mark was familiar with the fable as a genre.

The Greco-Roman notion of *διήγημα* ("short story") is put to use by Joel Kuhlin as the central micro-perspective for his analysis of Mark's Gospel. Firstly, Kuhlin relates *διήγημα* to *διήγησις* ("narrative"), in line with the historian Polybius as well as Theon and other late antiquity rhetors. Kuhlin then applies the terms to Mark's depiction of Jesus' death (Mark 15:16–32) and finds that Mark 15:16–32 is best described as an example of the principle of suturing or weaving (*συμπλέκειν*) narration into narration: Mark tries to combine two short stories (*διηγήματα*: Mark 15:16–20a and 15:20b–27) and a *χρεία* (Mark 15:29–32) into one single narrative totality. From a rhetorical perspective, however, Kuhlin concludes that Mark's attempt to weave episodes together fails because of a lack of clarity and credibility as well as a lack of brevity – however, the story still "works." This failed attempt is contrasted to Chariton of Aphrodisias' *Callirhoe* as a prime example of suturing episodes.

The rhetorical category of *ἔκφρασις* ("description") is used to read and analyse the story of the women at the tomb (Mark 16) in Maria Sturesson's article. First,

Sturesson defines *ἔκφρασις* using the *Progymnasmata* of Theon as well as Nicolaus the Sophist and Aphthonius, and here she discusses the meaning of terms such as vividness and clarity with regard to *ἔκφρασις*, thereby distinguishing it from plain narration. She also underlines that turning listeners into spectators is a key way of identifying *ἔκφρασις*. Making use of literary critics such as Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette, Sturesson then shows that the category might entail what Barthes denotes “the reality effect”, and finally she points to two hints of *ἔκφρασις* in Mark 16 and compares them to parallels in the Gospels of Matthew and John. The Gospel thus invites the reader to perform a visual reading, according to Sturesson.

Sigurvin Jónsson focuses on the speeches in Mark’s Gospel and reads them in the light of the notion of “speech-in-character,” more specifically the notions of *προσωποποιία* and *ἡθοποιία*, which can be found both in the writings of Dionysius of Halicarnassus and in Theon’s *Progymnasmata*. These notions are applied to Herod Antipas’ (Mark 6:16, 22–3) and Pilate’s direct speeches (Mark 15). Furthermore, both speeches are compared to their parallels in the Gospels of Matthew and John. By doing this, Jónsson shows that the category of speech-in-character is relevant to the speeches of Herod Antipas and Pilate, indicating that Mark is a rhetorically well-educated writer.

The passage in Mark’s Gospel on Jairus and the Hemorrhaging Woman (Mark 5:21–43) has typically been recognised as a Markan intercalation. However, it has never been situated and read in an ancient framework in relation to the concept of comparison. In his article, Jacob Mortensen attempts to do exactly this by using Theon’s (as well as Hermogenes’ and Libanius’) concept of *σύγκρισις* (comparison). Mortensen exemplifies this in an ancient context with Sallust’s *Bellum Catilinae*, the *Letter of Aristeeas*, and an example from Plutarch. Mortensen then applies the concept of *σύγκρισις* to Mark 5:21–43 and shows that the focus of the passage is faith and how it responds to Jesus, notwithstanding people’s differences.

Following this thorough investigation from a micro-perspective, the next four articles apply macro-perspectives to Mark’s Gospel. The last article also approaches Mark’s text from a macro-perspective, although this is done from a theological and ethnic perspective.

First, Eve-Marie Becker reads Mark’s Gospel, as well as the other early gospels, as drafts of Hellenistic-Roman and early Jewish historiography by regarding Mark as a historiographer. She thus studies Mark as the author, the individual and active creator and composer of this concrete piece of antique historiographical literature. After presenting a historical overview of the genesis and development of the authorship category in Mark’s Gospel, Becker shows the potential of viewing the Gospel as historiography. Finally, she illustrates how the

research on the *Progymnasmata* can benefit from this historiographical consideration of the author of Mark's Gospel.

In the next article applying a macro-perspective, Helen Bond argues that Mark's Gospel should be understood as an ancient biography (*bios*), alongside those specifically dealing with ancient philosophers. These works acted not only as memorials to great lives, but perhaps more importantly set out their subjects' ways of life as models to be imitated. A person's death, too, was of great importance: since philosophers offered people practical advice on how to live a good life, it was only to be expected that they lived up to this advice when they died themselves. After considering Mark's use of *χρείαι* and *σύγκρισις*, Bond argues that the Markan Jesus does indeed die in conformity with his teaching, a counter-cultural inversion of honour/shame that turns traditional notions of the good death upside down. This insight has important ramifications earlier on in the *bios*, as can be seen from an examination of both Jesus' earlier characterisation and that of secondary characters (most of whom, she argues, exist as foils to Jesus).

Sylvie Honigman, in her article, points to a new approach to the discussion of the macro-genre of Mark's Gospel. She proposes that the Gospel should be understood as being derived from the narrative tradition of Demotic tales and as having been influenced by the subgenres of Demotic stories of magicians as well as Hellenistic royal biographies. She surveys the narrative structure of Mark's Gospel and finds that it is composed of a framework narrative about Jesus' life which contains a variety of episodes characteristic of Demotic tales. According to Honigman, this places Mark's Gospel in the socio-cultural context of the south-eastern part of the Mediterranean, presumably the Southern Levant.

Matthew Larsen asks how the first readers of Mark's Gospel must have understood its genre and makes the argument that it must have been conceived as *ὑπομνήματα* ("notes"). By way of introduction, he distinguishes between different types of *ὑπομνήματα*. He then goes on to show that the linguistic, grammatical and geographical curiosities and mistakes in Mark's Gospel are characteristic of *ὑπομνήματα*, as well as pointing out that the rhetorical and literary qualities of the Gospel do not in any way preclude it from being understood as *ὑπομνήματα*. Larsen thus concludes that Mark's Gospel is best understood as a para-literary *ὑπομνήμα* turned into a pre-literary *ὑπομνήμα*, i. e. as textual notes turned into a draft on a literary text about the story of Jesus.

Last, but not least, John Van Maaren surveys the theological macro-perspective of Mark's Gospel. Many historical-critical readings of New Testament texts have begun to understand them within the context of ancient Judaism. In his article, Van Maaren attempts to do the same with Mark's Gospel. First, he surveys current scholarship on Mark's Gospel and the tendency to understand it primarily within a gentile context. He then focuses on the meaning of the "Paul

within Judaism” paradigm, which may serve as an analogy for understanding Mark’s Gospel in a Jewish social setting. By surveying key pericopes of Mark’s Gospel (e.g. Mark 5:25–34; 7:1–23) and scholarship on Mark, Van Maaren attempts to demonstrate that Mark’s Gospel can indeed be read within the context of first-century Judaism.





Tobias Hägerland

## Reminiscences True, Noble and Beneficial: Mark 2:1–3:6 in the Light of Theon's Chreia Exercises

### 1. Introduction

Researchers have long since noted that Mark 2:1–3:6 forms a coherent sequence of units centred on controversies over the authority of Jesus. Scholarly discussion of this sequence has largely focused on the question whether the evangelist received at least its core as a unified whole from his tradition, or created the collection himself. This question need not detain us here.<sup>1</sup> Rather, the purpose of the present contribution is to advance the understanding of the composition from a synchronic perspective with the help of the chreia exercises in Theon's *Progymnasmata*.

The most extensive study of the compositional structure of Mark 2:1–3:6 remains Joanna Dewey's brilliant 1980 monograph *Markan Public Debate*, preceded by her 1973 article in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*.<sup>2</sup> As Dewey herself has remarked, these studies were published before the breakthrough of research into the oral dimensions of the New Testament and thus conceived of Mark's structure in terms of literary techniques, but she later resituated her results

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1 See, in favour of a pre-Markan source, Martin Albertz, *Die synoptischen Streitgespräche: Ein Beitrag zur Formengeschichte des Urchristentums* (Berlin: Trowitzsch, 1921), 5–16; Heinz-Wolfgang Kuhn, *Ältere Sammlungen im Markusevangelium*, SUNT 8 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971), 53–98; Ingrid Maisch, *Die Heilung des Gelähmten*, SBS 52 (Stuttgart: KBW, 1971), 112–17; James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 10–36; Tobias Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins: An Aspect of His Prophetic Mission*, SNTSMS 150 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 241–45; cf., against the pre-Markan source hypothesis, Joanna Dewey, *Markan Public Debate: Literary Technique, Concentric Structure and Theology in Mark 2:1 to 3:6*, SBLDS 48 (Chico: Scholars, 1980), 184–85; Jarmo Kiilunen, *Die Vollmacht im Widerstreit: Untersuchungen zum Werdegang von Mk 2,1–3,6*, AASFDHL 40 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedakatemia, 1985).

2 Joanna Dewey, "The Literary Structure of the Controversy Stories in Mark 2:1–3:6," *JBL* 92 (1973): 394–401; Dewey, *Markan Public Debate*.

within the framework of orality studies.<sup>3</sup> Conspicuously absent from her subsequent work, however, is the in-depth engagement with any form of ancient rhetoric. Dewey does acknowledge Vernon Robbins's identification of "rhetorical culture" as a culture that "features comprehensive interaction between spoken and written statement,"<sup>4</sup> and she agrees that all New Testament texts belong to this type of culture. At the same time, she argues that the texts "may be located along a continuum from more literal to more oral," and she places the Gospel of Mark (as well as the Gospel of John) "at the oral end of the continuum"—where we cannot even be certain as to whether the composers were literate or not.<sup>5</sup> This is certainly going too far. As the composer of a biography or biography-like narrative, Mark the evangelist must have attained some level of literacy.<sup>6</sup> This, in its turn, suggests that he had been trained in at least some basic progymnasmata—since there was no way around these proto-rhetorical exercises for anyone learning how to write and compose in antiquity—and that progymnastic rhetoric is a proper framework for interpreting Mark 2:1–3:6.

I set out to reconsider this Markan sequence in the light of Theon's chreia exercises and the use of chreiai in roughly contemporary literature. This will be done in three steps. First, I will consider what existent research on Mark's Gospel has concluded about its use of chreiai in a stricter and a broader sense and of chreia elaborations. Secondly, I will discuss the form of the chreia exercises suggested by Theon and their impact on Hellenistic biography as represented in particular by Lucian's *Life of Demonax*. Thirdly, I will turn to Mark 2:1–3:6, which I think can be appropriately labelled a sequence of "reminiscences," *apomnemonemata* or "expanded chreiai"—and which is at the same time an important building-block in Mark's composition of his *Life of Jesus*. Is there anything near evidence that this sequence has been influenced by Theon's exercises?

3 Joanna Dewey, *The Oral Ethos of the Early Church: Speaking, Writing, and the Gospel of Mark*, Biblical Performance Criticism Series 8 (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013), xii–xiii; cf. 53–62.

4 Vernon K. Robbins, "Oral, Rhetorical, and Literary Cultures: A Response," *Semeia* 65 (1994): 75–91 (80). See also Vernon K. Robbins, "Progymnastic Rhetorical Composition and Pre-Gospel Traditions: A New Approach," in *The Synoptic Gospels: Source Criticism and the New Literary Criticism*, ed. C. Focant, BETL 110 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1993), 111–47 (116–18).

5 Dewey, *Oral Ethos*, 34–35.

6 On the (quasi-)biographical genre of Mark, see Tomas Hägg, *The Art of Biography in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 148–56, 161–65; Richard Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 3rd ed. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2018), 1.16–31; 185–212, 273–75, 281–84; Helen K. Bond, *The First Biography of Jesus: Genre and Meaning in Mark's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020).

## 2. Chreiai and Reminiscences in Mark and Theon

The chreia (χρηία) is probably the most studied progymnastic form in research on Mark's Gospel. Among the early form critics, Martin Dibelius noted the resemblance of what he preferred to call the "paradigm" to the chreia, and Rudolf Bultmann's definition of the "apophthegma" in essence corresponds to the chreia as described in the *Progymnasmata*.<sup>7</sup> Since the 1980s, more in-depth studies of the chreia form in ancient rhetorical education as well as in Mark and in the other Synoptic Gospels have been undertaken.<sup>8</sup> New Testament scholars have become increasingly aware that none of the evangelists could possibly have achieved the literary competence required for the task of composing a Gospel apart from being trained in chreia manipulation and other basic progymnasmata, and few if any would question the relevance of progymnastic chreia discussions for understanding how the Gospel authors handled their material.<sup>9</sup> A by no means exhaustive scan of relevant publications shows that well over forty chreiai or chreia-like units have been identified within the Gospel of Mark, although it comes as no surprise that researchers employ different criteria for delimiting units and for identifying chreiai.<sup>10</sup> In part, the differences in definition go back to the progymnastic handbooks.

7 Martin Dibelius, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1933), 149–64; Rudolf Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1931), 8–9.

8 See especially Ronald F. Hock and Edward O'Neil, *The Chreia in Ancient Rhetoric: Volume I. The Progymnasmata*, SBLTT 27 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1986); Ronald F. Hock and Edward N. O'Neil, *The Chreia and Ancient Rhetoric: Classroom Exercises*, SBLWGRW 2 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002); James R. Butts, "The Chreia in the Synoptic Gospels," *BTB* 16 (1986): 132–38; Burton L. Mack and Vernon K. Robbins, *Patterns of Persuasion in the Gospels* (Sonoma: Polebridge, 1989); Marion C. Moeser, *The Anecdote in Mark, the Classical World and the Rabbis*, JSNTS 227 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002); Alex Damm, *Ancient Rhetoric and the Synoptic Problem: Clarifying Markan Priority*, BETL 252 (Leuven: Peeters, 2013); Mikeal C. Parsons and Michael Wade Martin, *Ancient Rhetoric and the New Testament: The Influence of Elementary Greek Composition* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2018), 17–44.

9 Thomas F. Magill, "Markan Controversy Dialogues and the Chreia Tradition. An Investigation of the Rhetorical Dimensions of Selected Markan Pericopes (2.15–17, 18–22, 23–28, [sic] 3.22–30; 7.1–23; 11.27–33) in Light of their Redaction, Form, and Transmission Histories" (PhD diss., Glasgow University, 1996), implausibly questions Mark's familiarity with the chreia (329). There is far more to be said for Magill's contention that "at the very bedrock of the post-Easter tradition there were small stories that were crafted as chreiai" (323).

10 See Vernon K. Robbins, "Pronouncement Stories and Jesus' Blessing of the Children: A Rhetorical Approach," *Semeia* 29 (1983): 43–74; Butts, "The Chreia," 134–37; Wolfgang Weiss, "Eine neue Lehre in Vollmacht": *Die Streit- und Schulgespräche des Markus-Evangeliums*, BZNW 52 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), 121–22; Mack and Robbins, *Patterns of Persuasion*, 92–100, 123–29, 143–60, 171–77; Rod Parrott, "Conflict and Rhetoric in Mark 2:23–28," *Semeia* 64 (1993): 117–37; Gregory Salyer, "Rhetoric, Purity, and Play: Aspects of Mark 7:1–23," *Semeia* 64 (1993): 139–69; Magill, "Markan Controversy Dialogues", 130–320; Jerome H. Neyrey,

Theon's description of the *chreia* as "a brief saying or action making a point, attributed to some specified person or something corresponding to a person" (*Prog.* 201.16–18) is loose enough to accommodate not only for all the examples of *chreiai* in his own *Progymnasmata* and for those given by (probably) later authorities such as Hermogenes and Aphthonius, but also for the various explicit or implicit criteria employed by modern investigators searching for *chreiai* in Mark's Gospel.<sup>11</sup> The clearest feature that distinguishes between the *chreia* and other progymnastic forms is that the *chreia* is always attributed to a specific person, although Theon's formulation ("something corresponding to a person") seems to allow for some liberty here as well. The various ways of "making a point"—through words, through actions, or through both—in combination with different circumstances that prompt the *chreia* and different forms of expression form the basis for Theon's sophisticated classification of *chreiai* into types and subtypes (*Prog.* 202.18–210.3). This variation allows us to look beyond the "pronouncement stories" when we identify Markan units as *chreiai*. Most strikingly, the requirement that the *chreia* should be "brief" or "concise" is open to wide-ranging interpretation. According to the strictest definition, which corresponds well to practically all examples of isolated *chreiai* given by the *Progymnasmata*, a *chreia* consists of a "single syntactic system," that is, one main clause which may be qualified through participial clauses.<sup>12</sup> Theon, however, expects the teacher to train his students how to "expand" and "compress" a *chreia*, which indicates that the extreme conciseness exhibited by the school examples is not a necessary characteristic of all units identified as *chreiai*. For the sake of analytic clarity, it may be helpful to make a distinction between the "chreia proper," in the sense of unexpanded *chreiai* of the textbook type, and the

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"Questions, *Chreiai*, and Challenges to Honor: The Interface of Rhetoric and Culture in Mark's Gospel," *CBQ* 60 (1998): 657–81; Moeser, *The Anecdote in Mark*, 204–38; Klaus Berger, *Formen und Gattungen im Neuen Testament* (Tübingen: Francke, 2005), 140–52; Samuel Byrskog, "The Early Church as a Narrative Fellowship: An Exploratory Study of the Performance of the *Chreia*," *TTK* 78 (2007): 207–26; Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins*, 230–41; Marius Johannes Nel, "The Relationship Between the Markan ἀφίμυ-*chreia* and the Historical Jesus," *Scriptura* 115 (2016): 1–17; Damm, *Ancient Rhetoric and the Synoptic Problem*, 173–225; Parsons and Martin, *Ancient Rhetoric and the New Testament*, 27–32.

11 References to Theon follow Christian Walz, *Rhetores Graeci: Ex codicibus Florentinis Mediolanensibus Monacensibus Neapolitanis Parisiensibus Romanis Venetis Taurinensibus et Vindobonensibus*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1832), 145–257. For quotations in English, I use the translation by George A. Kennedy, *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric*, SBLWGRW 10 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003). Most scholars seem to remain unconvinced by the attempt to relocate Theon's *Progymnasmata* to the fifth century CE by Malcolm Heath, "Theon and the History of the *Progymnasmata*," *GRBS* 43 (2002/2003): 129–60; see Justin King, *Speech-in-Character, Diatribe, and Romans 3:1–9: Who's Speaking When and Why It Matters*, BIS 163 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 38–39 n. 3.

12 Michel Patillon, ed., *Aelius Théon: Progymnasmata: Texte établi et traduit* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1997), lviii–lix.

“reminiscence” or “apomnemoneuma” (ἀπομνημόνευμα) which seems to be more or less equivalent to an expanded chreia.<sup>13</sup> On this scheme, most of the units that scholars have identified as chreiai in Mark can be more aptly described as “reminiscences” (ἀπομνημονεύματα).

Another confusing feature of chreia discussions in the *Progymnasmata* is that the term “chreia” is used both for the progymnastic form and for the exercises in which it is handled. Hermogenes and all later *Progymnasmata* associate the chreia so closely with the exercise of elaboration that this exercise has almost become identical with term. It is not uncommon for scholars who analyse chreiai in the Gospels to identify at least parts of the pattern of elaboration that Hermogenes and Aphthonius describe, which consists of the following “headings”: (1) praise, (2) paraphrase, (3) cause, (4) contrast, (5) comparison, (6) example, (7) judgment or testimony of the ancient, and (8) exhortation or brief epilogue. Thus, Rod Parrott finds in Mark 2:23–28 headings (2), (3), (4), (6) and (7), albeit in an order different from the standard;<sup>14</sup> Gregory Salyer analyses 7:6–13 as a chreia elaboration including headings (1), (2), (6) and (7);<sup>15</sup> Marion Moeser argues that 8:34–38 contains headings (2), (3), (4), (5), (6) and (7), that 9:38–40 contains headings (1), (2) and (3), and that 10:41–45 contains headings (2), (3) and (4);<sup>16</sup> and Burton Mack views 14:3–9 as an elaboration involving headings (2), (3), (4), (5), (6) and (7).<sup>17</sup> There is nothing at all implausible about these analyses, especially when one remembers that the exercise of elaboration has affinities with the *expolitio* exercise in *Ad Herennium* and therefore builds on earlier educational practices.<sup>18</sup> It is, however, important not to overlook that there were evidently alternative ways of handling chreiai. Theon’s recommendations concerning how to use the chreia in education do not involve the elaboration scheme as found in later *Progymnasmata*. Rather, Theon includes eight different chreia exercises: (1) restatement and (2) inflection, (3) comment and (4) contradiction, (5) expansion and (6) compression, and (7) refutation and (8) confirmation. Although the purposes of the third, fourth, seventh and eighth exercises do overlap with that of the exercise of elaboration, there are significant differences. Above all, whereas the later *Progymnasmata* provide students with model elaborations and obviously expect them to follow the scheme rather slavishly, The-

13 See Hågerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins*, 32–33. The distinction can, of course, be made in different meaningful ways. Butts, “The Chreia,” 133–37, categorizes chreiai in the Synoptic Gospels into three groups of varying conciseness, the third of which he identifies as “expanded chreiai.” Berger, *Formen und Gattungen*, 144, similarly employs the category “erweiterte Chrie” (expanded chreia).

14 Parrott, “Conflict and Rhetoric,” 126.

15 Salyer, “Rhetoric, Purity, and Play,” 143–44.

16 Moeser, *The Anecdote in Mark*, 213, 216, 235.

17 Mack and Robbins, *Patterns of Persuasion*, 93.

18 Hock and O’Neil, *The Chreia and Ancient Rhetoric*, 87–89.

on's is a manual for the teacher and rather seems to function as a toolbox from which the instructor may freely choose elements of the exercises and adapt them to his students as seems fit. The imprecision of the following advice is characteristic:

One should refute from these topics, and one should provide arguments against each part of the chreia, beginning with the first, using whatever topics are possible. But do not forget that it is not possible to argue from all topics in all chreias ... The more accomplished students can appropriately get their starting points ... from what we are going to describe in regard to theses. (*Prog.* 216.1–5, 8–10)

Attempts have been made to synthesize the exercise of confirmation mentioned by Theon with the exercise of elaboration described by Hermogenes and Aphthonius into a system of “first-” and “second-level elaboration.”<sup>19</sup> This has been rightly criticised as a gratuitous process of harmonization resulting in a picture that does not correspond to any of the sources.<sup>20</sup> It is probably more accurate to view the *Progymnasmata* of Theon and Hermogenes respectively not only as two works that structure their exercises differently, but as two fundamentally different textual genres: the one being an inspirational set of practices to be used as a teaching resource, the other a prescriptive set of rules to be obeyed by the student. We can expect both to have something to offer in relation to our analysis of chreiai and reminiscences in the Gospel of Mark, but each in its own way, and we should resist the temptation to combine them.

### 3. Theon's Chreia Exercises and the Composition of Biographies

Let us now take a closer look at the eight chreia exercises suggested by Theon, and the various ways in which they may have influenced the handling of chreiai by the composers of ancient biographies. When it comes to the latter topic, it is important to bear in mind that the *Sitz im Leben* of *Progymnasmata* is the school, and that these manuals and textbooks theorize and systematize the exercises in a manner that does not necessarily reflect the more integrated use of progymnastic forms by mature authors, such as composers of biographies.<sup>21</sup> An obvious aspect of the adaptation of chreiai to the biographical genre is that the name of the main character does not have to be spelled out at the beginning of each chreia, since it can easily be inferred from the context. Sometimes chreiai are linked together by

19 Vernon K. Robbins, “Introduction: Using Rhetorical Discussions of the Chreia to Interpret Pronouncement Stories,” *Semeia* 64 (1993): vii–xvii.

20 Magill, “Markan Controversy Dialogues,” 74–76.

21 See Robert J. Penella, “The *Progymnasmata* in Imperial Greek Education,” *Classical World* 105 (2011): 77–90 (85–89).

the use of adverbial phrases, although they normally retain their characteristic shape as isolated units.<sup>22</sup> To understand the relationship between the chreia exercises and the Gospel of Mark, it is necessary to consider how other ancient biographers put their progymnastic skills into practical use. Lucian's second-century *Life of Demonax*, containing a sequence of more than fifty chreiai or reminiscences, is commonly recognised as a fairly close literary parallel to Mark's Gospel.<sup>23</sup> It will be used as the primary point of comparison in the following.

Theon's two introductory exercises—restatement and inflection—are very basic. Restatement (*ἀπαγγελία*) is even claimed by Theon to be “self-evident; for we try to express the assigned chreia, as best we can, with the same words ... or with others in the clearest way” (*Prog.* 210.7–9). That such reformulation in the interest of “clarity” might at times render the original chreia almost impossible to recognise can be seen from the classic example of Theon's chreia about the Laconian and his spear, which seems to undergo quite an evolution each time Plutarch “restates” it:<sup>24</sup>

A Laconian, when someone asked him where the Lacedaimonians set the limits of their land, showed his spear. (Theon, *Prog.* 206.6–8)

Being asked once how far the boundaries of Laconia extended, he (Agesilaus) said, with a flourish of his spear: “As far as this can reach.” (Plutarch, *Mor.* 210E 28)

Being asked how much land the Spartans controlled, he (Archedamus, son of Agesilaus) said, “As much as they can reach with the spear.” (Plutarch, *Mor.* 218F 2)

Only the perceived point of the chreia remains constant. The action as described in Theon's version is combined or replaced with a saying in Plutarch's versions. Even the attribution of the chreia varies throughout the three versions. No doubt this process of “clarifying” restatement also lies behind many of the chreiai for which we do not have access to alternative versions, such as those included in the *Life of Demonax*.

Inflection (*κλίσις*) is a more diverse, if indeed mechanical, exercise. The student should practice how to change the person in the chreia throughout the three

22 Catherine Hezser, “Die Verwendung der hellenistischen Gattung Chrie im frühen Christentum und Judentum,” *JSJ* 27 (1996): 372–439 (392–93).

23 See, on the chreiai in *Dem.* 12–62, Hubert Cancik, “Bios und Logos: Formengeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu Lukians *Dem. Demonax*,” in *Markus-Philologie: Historische, literarische und stilistische Untersuchungen zum zweiten Evangelium*, ed. H. Cancik, WUNT 33 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1984), 115–30; Moeser, *The Anecdote in Mark*, 89–105; Mark Beck, “Lucian's *Life of Demonax*: The Socratic Paradigm, Individuality, and Personality,” in *Writing Biography in Greece and Rome: Narrative Technique and Fictionalization*, ed. K. De Temmerman and K. Demoen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 80–96.

24 Mack and Robbins, *Patterns of Persuasion*, 15. See also Vernon K. Robbins, *Sea Voyages and Beyond: Emerging Strategies in Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation*, Emory Studies in Early Christianity 14 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018), 239–41.



numbers—singular, dual, and plural—resulting in such absurd formulations as “The twin rhetors Isocrates said the twin students with natural ability are children of gods” (*Prog.* 210.19–21). The purpose of this type of inflection is obviously the training of grammatical proficiency, and it is difficult to see that it would be of any practical use for someone composing a biography. Another type of inflection may have been more useful. Theon suggests that the student should learn how to change the chreia into each of the five grammatical cases—the nominative, genitive, dative, accusative and vocative—a skill that can be easily acquired by learning certain set phrases. Thus, the default (nominative) chreia “Isocrates the orator said (Ἰσοκράτης ὁ ῥήτωρ ... ἔλεγεν) that the student with natural ability was a child of gods” is put into the genitive by adding the phrase “the saying has become memorable”: “The saying of Isocrates [the orator] (Ἰσοκράτους τοῦ ῥήτορος ... τὸ ῥηθέν), remarking that those students with natural ability are children of gods, has become memorable (μνήμης ἔτυχε)” (*Prog.* 211.9–11). Similar grammatical inflection can be observed occasionally in biographies. Almost all of the chreiai or reminiscences in the *Life of Demonax* retain the default nominative form. In one instance, however, where Lucian explicitly claims to have heard Demonax utter the saying, he employs the genitive:

I once heard him say (Ἦκουσα δὲ αὐτοῦ ποτε ... λέγοντος) to . . . , the lawyer, that in all likelihood the laws were of no use, whether framed for the bad or the good; for the latter had no need of laws, and the former were not improved by them. (*Dem.* 59)<sup>25</sup>

Moeser claims that none of the anecdotes in the *Life of Demonax* “illustrate” the exercise of inflection, or indeed any of the chreia exercises apart from expansion and compression.<sup>26</sup> The validity of this claim obviously depends on what we mean by “illustrate”—at least we can observe one case in which Lucian did make use of the ability to inflect a chreia that was an intended learning outcome of Theon’s curriculum.

Let us save discussion of Theon’s third and fourth exercises for a moment, and move on to the fifth and sixth, that is, expanding (ἐπεκτείνειν) and compressing (συστέλλειν) the chreia. Theon defines expansion as the exercise performed by students who “lengthen the questions and answers in it, and the action or suffering, if any,” and provides as his example the expansion of the childless Epaminondas’ metaphorical saying about his two military victories as his “daughters” into a more elaborate story (*Prog.* 213.11–214.4). With regard to compression, Theon merely states that it is the opposite of expansion (213.13–14). There are indeed some anecdotes in the *Life of Demonax* that conform more

25 Text and translation of *Demonax* are from A. M. Harmon, *Lucian: Volume I*, LCL 14 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913).

26 Moeser, *The Anecdote in Mark*, 97.

closely to the shape of expanded chreiai or reminiscences. They are not confined to the “single syntactic system” of the chreiai proper, but contain two or more main clauses. Two examples may suffice:

Another time the same man went to him and asked (ἠρώτα) what philosophical school he favoured most. Demonax replied: “Why, who told you that I was a philosopher?” As he left, he broke into a very hearty laugh (ἐγέλασεν); and when Favorinus asked him what he was laughing at, he replied (ἔφη): “It seemed to me ridiculous that you should think a philosopher can be told by his beard when you yourself have none.” (*Dem.* 14)

His remark to the proconsul was at once clever and cutting. This man was (ῥῖν) one of the sort that use pitch to remove hair from their legs and their whole bodies. When a Cynic mounted a stone and charged him with this, accusing him of effeminacy, he was angry, had the fellow hauled down and was on the point of (ἐμελλεν) confining him in the stocks or even sentencing him to exile. But Demonax, who was passing by, begged (παρητεῖτο) him to pardon the man for making bold to speak his mind in the traditional Cynic way. The proconsul said: “Well, I will let him off for you this time, but if he ever dares to do such a thing again, what shall be done to him?” “Have him depilated!” said Demonax. (*Dem.* 50)

Moeser’s suggestions that some of these reminiscences may have resulted from Lucian’s expansions of chreiai proper, and that extremely brief chreiai such as *Dem.* 46 may be the result of compression, are by no means implausible.<sup>27</sup> We cannot know this for certain, however, since none of the chreiai attributed to Demonax in other sources is found in Lucian’s work, or vice versa.<sup>28</sup> Again, Plutarch offers more information. A comparison between different versions of the same chreiai or reminiscences in his work confirms that biographers did expand and compress chreiai along the lines suggested by Theon.<sup>29</sup>

Just as expansion and compression are each other’s opposites, so Theon’s third and fourth exercises—comment (ἐπιφωνεῖν) and contradiction (ἀντιλέγειν)—mirror one another. To “comment” on a chreia, according to Theon, means to provide at least one out of four types of arguments to corroborate the chreia, namely, (1) from the true (ἐκ τοῦ ἀληθοῦς), (2) from the noble (ἐκ τοῦ καλοῦ), (3) from the beneficial (ἐκ τοῦ συμφέροντος), or (4) from the witness of the famous (ἐκ τῆς τῶν εὐδοκίμων μαρτυρίας). To contradict a chreia is to provide similar arguments against it (*Prog.* 212.12–213.11). Surprisingly few scholars seem to have taken an interest in understanding how these two exercises differ essentially from Theon’s seventh and eighth exercises, if there is at all any essential difference between them. In his seventh exercise, Theon suggests that the student should

27 Moeser, *The Anecdote in Mark*, 97–98.

28 Denis M. Searby, “Non-Lucian Sources for Demonax with a New Collection of ‘Fragments’”, *SymbOsl* 83 (2008): 120–47.

29 See Mark Beck, “Plutarch’s Use of Anecdotes in the *Lives*” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 1998), 119–82.