

2011

# Book Review: A Comparative Handbook to the Gospel of Mark

Joel F. Williams  
*Cedarville University*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/biblical\\_and\\_ministry\\_studies\\_publications](http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/biblical_and_ministry_studies_publications)

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Williams, Joel F., "Book Review: A Comparative Handbook to the Gospel of Mark" (2011). *Biblical and Theological Studies Faculty Publications*. 72.

[http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/biblical\\_and\\_ministry\\_studies\\_publications/72](http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/biblical_and_ministry_studies_publications/72)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Cedarville, a service of the Centennial Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in Biblical and Theological Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@cedarville.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@cedarville.edu).

*A Comparative Handbook to the Gospel of Mark: Comparisons with Pseudepigrapha, the Qumran Scrolls, and Rabbinic Literature.* Edited by Bruce Chilton, Darrell Bock, Daniel Gurtner, Jacob Neusner, Lawrence H. Schiffman, and Daniel Oden. The New Testament Gospels in Their Judaic Contexts 1. Leiden: Brill, 2010, xii + 596 pp., \$247.00.

This helpful reference work situates the Gospel of Mark within the context of Jewish literature by providing for each passage in Mark a series of comparative quotations from a variety of sources: the pseudepigrapha, the writings of Philo and Josephus, texts related to Qumran, and Rabbinic literature including the Targumim. The handbook works through Mark's Gospel passage by passage, beginning each section with a fresh translation of Mark's text (with Codex Vaticanus serving as the underlying Greek text), followed by extended quotations from Jewish literature (often with quotations from Qumran literature predominating), followed by brief comments on the place of Mark's Gospel within a Jewish context. The purpose for these comments is somewhat limited; the intention is not to analyze or provide a commentary on Mark's Gospel but to suggest possible comparisons between Mark and various Judaic environments. Often included in the comments are Aramaic retroversions of Jesus' sayings, translating the Greek text of Mark's Gospel back to an underlying Aramaic saying, all for the sake of better comparing Jesus' words with the Jewish context. The volume as a whole begins with an introduction to Jewish literature (pp. 1–60) and ends with a series of appendices (pp. 529–72), covering "Rabbinic Rules of Interpretation," "(The) Son of (the) Man, and Jesus," "Rabbi as a Title of Jesus," and "Synagogues."

The preface sorts out four different types of possible analogies between the Gospels and Judaic literature: simple, topical, interpretive, and close (pp. viii–xii). A simple analogy points to a similar pattern of thought. So, for example, the idea that a fresh experience of God brings with it new requirements of response appears both in the Gospels (e.g. Matt 13:17) and the Targumim (e.g. Tg. Isa. 48:6a). The similar use of a word or phrase produces a topical analogy. As an example, Jesus was not alone in teaching about the kingdom of God (e.g. the Targumim use the form "the kingdom of the Lord"; see p. ix for a list of references). An interpretive analogy does not point to a parallel that involves exact wording, but rather it presupposes a comparable understanding of the same biblical text. Other Second Temple Jewish texts present the nation and land of Israel as God's vineyard based on the metaphor of Isa 5:1–7, and they do so in ways that are comparable to Jesus' use of the metaphor in his parable of the vineyard in Mark 12:1–12. A close analogy shows a similarity in both wording and thought. Jesus' teaching on Gehenna (e.g. Mark 9:48) is closely similar to statements found in pseudepigraphic texts (e.g. 1 Enoch 27:2; 54:1–6; Syb. Or. 2:283–312) and in Rabbinic literature (e.g. Tg. Isa. 66:24b; m. Eduy. 2.10). The editors kept all four types of analogies in mind as they chose comparative quotations from Jewish literature, but no attempt was made to assign quotations to a particular category of analogy. The comments included on each passage in Mark's Gospel are therefore somewhat limited. They are "deliberately minimal" (p. xii). The comments suggest possible interpretations based on comparisons between Mark's Gospel and quotations from Jewish literature. However, there is no attempt to provide a full commentary on Mark based on these quotations. Instead, this handbook treats the reader as a commentator, providing comparative material to serve the reader in the task of commentary writing on Mark's Gospel or in the task of interpretation more generally.

The limited nature of the comments has the potential to create some lack of clarity. At times not enough explanation is offered to evaluate the statements made in the comments. For example, on a number of occasions throughout the handbook, references are made to possible sources for the traditions in Mark's Gospel. The story of Jesus'

baptism comes from Peter and his circle (p. 76). It was also Peter and his companions who crafted the account of Jesus' death and resurrection (p. 476). The description of the exorcism at the synagogue in Capernaum emanates from Mary Magdalene and her circle (p. 89). Stories related to purity and ritual, such as those appearing in the second chapter of Mark, find their source in Barnabas and his circle (pp. 101, 114, 131). The probable source for Jesus' teaching concerning his parables in Mark 4:10–12 is James, the brother of Jesus, and the circle around him in Jerusalem (p. 166). However, insufficient evidence is offered to evaluate such claims, and little guidance is given to make sense of why these comments serve to clarify the relationship between Mark's Gospel and comparative Jewish literature. In other words, the comments included for each passage in Mark's Gospel are more suggestive than comprehensive in nature.

Another limitation is the lack of any obvious system for cross-references. Particular selections from Jewish literature may be relevant to more than one passage in Mark's Gospel. Yet quotations normally appear in conjunction with just one passage (or maybe two) in Mark. For example, the Aramaic Apocalypse found at Qumran is significant for understanding early Jewish messianic beliefs and the use of "Son of God" as a title. Therefore the reference in Aramaic Apocalypse ii 1 to a person called the Son of God and the Son of the Most High is important for a number of passages in Mark's Gospel. Yet this quotation from the Aramaic Apocalypse only appears in the handbook in connection with Jesus' silencing of the unclean spirits in Mark 3:7–12 when they call him the Son of God. Another example involves the quotation from Florilegium 1–2i 21:10–13, which looks ahead to God's fulfillment of his promises to the offspring of David who will arise to save Israel. This quotation serves to illustrate Bartimaeus's cry to Jesus as the Son of David (Mark 10:46–52) and the cry of the crowd at Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem concerning the coming kingdom of David (11:1–10) but not Jesus' question about the Son of David in Mark 12:35–37. The opposite occurs with regard to the reference to the Branch of David in the War Rule 7:2–5 and the reference to the Son of David in the Ps. Sol. 17:21–43. These appear in conjunction with Mark 12:35–37 but not 10:46–52 or 11:1–10. As a result, users of the handbook must be careful to check the sections for multiple passages in Mark's Gospel when studying any topic that appears in several places in Mark.

Overall, the handbook is an achievement, and certain limitations should not detract from its success. The editors provide hundreds of pages of extensive quotations drawn from Jewish literature that have the potential to shed light on every passage in Mark's Gospel. The comments for each section begin the comparative work and point to possible avenues for further study. As such, the handbook serves as an important resource for commentators and other interpreters of Mark's Gospel.

Joel F. Williams  
Cedarville University, Cedarville, OH

*Mark's Jesus: Characterization as Narrative Christology.* By Elizabeth Struthers Malbon. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009, xiv + 286 pp., \$39.95.

To narrative critics in general and to those who study characterization in Mark's Gospel more specifically, Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, longtime Professor in the Department of Religion and Culture at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, is a well-recognized leader in the field. *Mark's Jesus* is the culmination of Malbon's research into Mark's characterization that dates back to the 1980s (see her collected