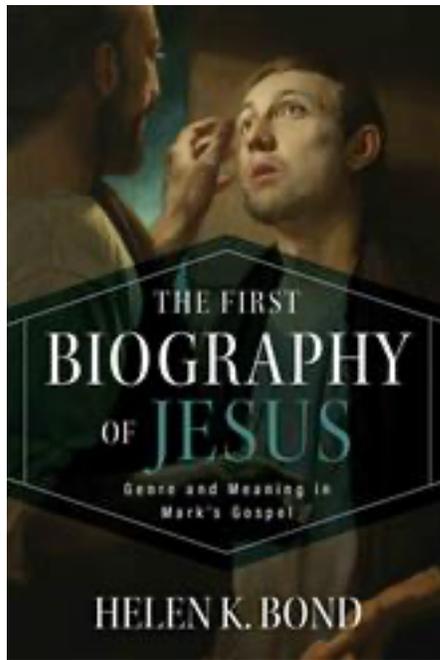


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Helen K. Bond

The First Biography of Jesus: Genre and Meaning in Mark's Gospel

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The past few decades have seen a growing scholarly consensus that the four canonical gospels are a kind of ancient biography. Helen Bond argues that this genre identification has been relegated to a “footnote” (4) in gospel studies, and “the fact that we are dealing with *bioi* should be the starting point for all gospel discussion” (5). The end point is to read Mark as a thoroughgoing life of Jesus. This is not just to produce a narrative reading of the text, for, Bond argues, such readings “have tended to impose too much coherence on the text” (153). Instead, the only coherent element is Jesus, the subject of the *bios*, on whom the spotlight shines throughout the gospel, to provide an exemplar for would-be disciples in a Roman world. For Bond, the perennially thorny topics of Christology and discipleship are thus joined in Mark’s portrayal of Jesus.

In the introduction Bond articulates her aims and approach. She wishes to demonstrate interpretive implications of the assumption that Mark’s Gospel is a *bios*. To accomplish this, she takes a literary and historical approach. Bond views Mark’s *bios* as a “very specific *reception* of the Jesus tradition” (5; see also 253), that is, as an innovative expansion of the gospel proclamation to include not only Jesus’s death and resurrection but also his life and teaching. She proposes that an educated church leader named Mark created a formal

literary work by taking previously unconnected traditional material and reworking it into a biographical structure in light of contemporaneous literary conventions. Mark writes to early 70 CE Christ-followers, Bond proposes, to convey their founding figure's way of life and death, so that they might have a pattern for living in their Roman context.

Bond lays out the rest of the book in six chapters. In chapter 1 she provides a brief survey of the history of the recognition of Mark as *bios*, with a view to establishing the literary conventions with which she reads it. Chapter 2 delineates her working method, which is to compare and contrast Mark to relevant features of Greek and Latin biography, particularly Greek lives of philosophers. Bond's investigative expertise is on full display in this chapter and the next as she lays the groundwork for her subsequent analysis of Mark. She names two key features of *bioi*: "first, a concern to commemorate a great life, and second, a moralistic desire to learn from it" (45). Then she contextualizes these features within a Greco-Roman education system based on the idea of imitation/*mimēsis*. In particular, she unpacks how *bioi* portray their subjects through the presentation of character and the telling of a noble death.

Chapter 3 presents a profile of Mark as a biographer. Bond offers a plausible scenario in which a Jewish writer with limited education, like Mark, might have been exposed to elements of Greek literature that "trickled down" organically from more educated, elite circles. This scenario is foundational for Bond's proposal that Mark used Greco-Roman literary forms and rhetoric. First, she proposes that "almost everything in Mark can be broadly identified as one of these forms [*chreiai*/anecdotes, *gnomai*/ maxims, *mythoi*/ fables, *diegemeta*/ short narratives], or a combination of a couple of them" (100). Second, Bond uses the rhetorical technique *synkrisis* (comparison) to explain Mark's juxtaposition of scenes and characters (intercalation). Bond argues that Mark widened the appeal of his subject by choosing a literary form extremely popular in Roman circles (although uncommon in Jewish ones) through which to convey Israel's scripture and tradition. The *bios* genre thus enabled Mark to present an authorized portrait of his Jewish subject as among the great and admirable men of Roman society, and this portrait may have provided a model for Christian believers, as they heard the gospel together in reading communities, to work out their identity in a Roman context.

The second half of the book exemplifies how reading Mark as a life of Jesus impacts its interpretation. In chapter 4, Bond focuses on Mark's subject, Jesus, as she takes her readers on a whistle-stop tour through the whole narrative. Remarkably, Bond bypasses 1:1–8 to make her first stop at 1:9–11. For Bond, the baptism is the beginning of Mark's *bios* because it establishes Jesus as God's Son and thereby his "family" and his position as "an honorable, even elite male" (142). Through implicit moral discourse that shows more than it tells, Mark develops this depiction of Jesus throughout the narrative. Jesus exemplifies certain

Greco-Roman values through his compassion, self-control, authoritative speech, and dominance in public debates. Bond attributes the Markan Jesus's self-designation as Son of Man and the so-called secrecy motif to Jesus's avoidance of celebrity, a mark of the admirable Greco-Roman man due to a "culture of moderation and restraint" (147). But then Jesus upends other Greco-Roman values through his humility, self-denial, service, and, ultimately, death. Bond concludes that Jesus is finally admirable because his death is consistent with the teaching of his life, so that he is "not only the content of Christian proclamation but also the model of Christian discipleship" (166).

Chapter 5 looks at the function of other characters. Bond explains characterization through *synkrisis*, or juxtaposition of actors. Moreover, the *bios* genre presses Bond to view Mark as an episodic narrative composed of a "patchwork of small anecdotes," unified only by its subject, Jesus. The gospel's patchwork nature helps Bond explain the seemingly inconsistent portrait of the disciples. They are neither failures nor exemplars; instead, they function expediently in service of Jesus's characterization. Minor characters function similarly as fleeting exempla, exhibiting traits either to avoid or embrace. Whereas secondary characters each exhibit a specific trait, Jesus exemplifies them all (that is, the positive ones). Accordingly, "once supporting actors have served their purpose within an individual story they can be forgotten" (170). Mark's Jesus thus stands as the *only* model of Christian discipleship.

In chapter 6 Bond develops her argument that Mark presents Jesus's death as both redemptive and exemplary. To unpack the redemptive aspect, Bond recalls earlier places in which Jesus explained his death according to Israel's scriptures, that is, Mark 10:45 (septuagintal use of *lytron*) and 14:24 (Exod 24:8; Jer 31:31–34). Bond focuses on the exemplary aspect of Jesus's death, however, since this is foundational to a *bios*. To do so, she shows how Mark painstakingly paints a portrait antithetical to a "good death" as Jesus is passively overpowered, abandoned, and mocked. Ultimately, "Jesus' cry of desolation [LXX Ps 21] signifies a bad death" (230). Jesus's bad death, however, is transposed to a noble key because of its consistency with the teaching, actions, and values of his unconventional life. Finally, Bond argues that Mark draws from Greco-Roman stories about disappearing corpses upon which he layers a Jewish idea of resurrection to communicate Jesus's vindication. Bond concludes with a chapter in which she summarizes and reflects on her interpretation.

Throughout the book Bond offers methodological and interpretive insights more numerous than I can discuss in a brief review. Still, four significant contributions stand out. First, her focus on Jesus's character throughout the narrative is a reminder that the whole is important, not just the end. In fact, Bond builds a compelling case that Mark works backward from the proclamation of Jesus's passion to expand it with material about his life and teaching, ultimately to build a fuller portrait of the "gospel." Second, Bond insists—

against recent trends in biblical scholarship—that Mark’s textualization of the Jesus tradition is a crucial factor in the development of ancient Christian book culture and in the formation of early Christian identity. Third, Bond’s analysis suggests that Mark’s textual engagement with Roman culture is much more subtle and pervasive than is commonly perceived. Scholars have tended to focus on explicit linguistic data in discrete pericopes to determine the extent to which Mark presents an implicit challenge to imperial Rome (e.g., *euangelion* in 1:1; *hiou theou* in 1:1, 9; *legiōn* in 5:9, 15). Instead, Bond’s analysis suggests that Mark engages with Roman culture by means of his genre choice, implemented through characterization and rhetoric. Finally, Bond produces a remarkable and unprecedented reading of Mark’s Gospel as a thoroughgoing life of Jesus. This consistent reading uncovers a number of details as one progresses through the text that would otherwise remain unseen; however, it obscures many others. So, while Bond’s life of Jesus is consistent, it is unbalanced. In this regard, the book is open to critique, and I raise three issues below.

First, Bond describes Mark as a sort of hybrid text, that is, a popular Greco-Roman literary form that conveys content from the Jewish literary tradition. Yet she never fully explains how these literary cultures and their symbolic worlds intersect in Mark’s writing. For example, Bond rarely discusses Mark’s use of Israel’s scripture and tradition. She notably bypasses Mark 1:1–8, which places the good news about Jesus at the height of Israel’s history and the prophetic promise of God’s coming. Moreover, Bond barely addresses Mark’s apocalyptic eschatology—a topic absent from *bioi*—mentioning only that “Mark does have apocalyptic touches” (158). Further, while it is possible broadly to identify “almost everything in Mark” with some sort of Greco-Roman literary form or rhetoric, one may wonder whether these *account for* “almost everything in Mark.” A more balanced reading would have addressed how Mark employs a *bios* to convey his Jewish content and how the Jewish literary tradition and symbolic world inform the *bios*, possibly modify it, and shape early Christian identity.

Second, and related to the previous point, Bond does not sufficiently address Mark’s epistemology. She suggests that the function of the disciples’ misunderstanding is to “highlight the difficulty of Jesus’ teaching” and its “quality as divine revelation” (204). But this explanation overlooks the imperception and hard-heartedness that builds throughout the narrative, rooted in Mark’s use of Isa 6:9–10 in Mark 4:10–11. In short, how does Mark think people are supposed to imitate Jesus if they are unable to do so?

Third, that the chief function of secondary characters is to highlight Jesus’s portrait appears to be a hermeneutical move forced by genre choice. Particularly striking is Bond’s interpretation of the woman who anoints Jesus (Mark 14:3–9). Bond concludes that the woman “becomes a living embodiment of self-denying service (8:34, 35–37).” In Bond’s view, this one trait of followership is enough to make the woman an exemplum but not a

disciple, which seems like splitting hairs. Moreover, Bond overlooks Jesus's own statement that the woman's actions will be told in remembrance of *her* wherever the good news is proclaimed (14:9). While Bond is surely correct that Jesus is the exemplary character, Mark's characterization seems more complex than she allows.

In conclusion, Bond's study is meticulously researched, beautifully written, and provocatively argued. If her goal is to draw out the meaning of reading Mark as a life of Jesus, then she delivers. Bond proposes more fully than anyone before now Mark's purpose in choosing this genre, which is to present Jesus as an appealing exemplar for Christians in a Roman world. Yet her reading does not sufficiently account for the elements in the narrative through which an author with a Jewish heritage would communicate meaning and by which an audience familiar with that heritage would construct it. This is because the question, "By what values do I live?" is not just a matter of asking "Whom do I imitate?" but of asking "How do I relate to God and God's people?" and "Where is history going?" The strength of Bond's reading ends up being its very weakness, for it illustrates the insufficiency of the *bios* genre alone to explain Mark's Gospel in all its parts.