

Gathered Around Absence: A First-Century Approach to the Text Known as “Mark”

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1. Introduction

Beginning a paper on text and authority in the first two centuries of the common era with a quotation from Irenaeus, the man born in Asia Minor around 150 CE who became the bishop of Lyons, might not feel like much of a surprise. After all, Irenaeus has, it seems, always been the go-to primary source grounding conversation about scholarly constructs like “orthodoxy,” “heresy,” and “gnosticism.” When it comes to questions of “canon,” Irenaeus’ 180 – 190 CE work *Against Heresies* is quoted as our earliest evidence for four “gospels” as having some kind of recognized authority; Irenaeus, to use the words of Raymond E. Brown, established that “God wanted four separate Gospels for the church” (1997, 14). Irenaeus writes,

Now Matthew published a written gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were proclaiming the gospel in Rome and founding the assembly. After their deaths, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, also handed down Peter’s preaching to us in written form. And also Luke, the follower of Paul, put the gospel preached by Paul down in a book. Then John, the disciple of the Lord, the one who reclined on the Lord’s breast, he also published the gospel, while living in Ephesus of Asia (3.1.1, adapted from Larsen 2018, 93).

Irenaeus’ naming of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, in that particular order, seems to offer proof of a move towards canon at the end of the second century CE, or at least a move towards a stable, bounded collection of texts specified or classified as “gospels”. Previous historical-critical scholarship certainly identifies this naming element of Irenaeus’ statement as the “take home” point. “The Gospels are finally named!”

scholars proclaim.¹ Finally, as if we had been waiting for this moment all along. In this assertion is proof of what we already know. Irenaeus' insistence elsewhere in *Against Heresies* that there are, and can only be, four gospels, offers further corroboration for this canonical focus, evidence for a move to stability, and an identification of authority in this stability, by the end of the second century CE.

This interpretative approach to Irenaeus' naming of four gospels reads history backwards, starting with later understandings of authors, books, publication, and canon.² Irenaeus' assertion has echoed loudly throughout history likely because it confirms later ways of knowing and approaching these writings: we know four gospels, authored, in a particular order, and it is nice that Irenaeus knows these four authored, ordered, gospels too. He seems to confirm our own way of knowing these texts.

While Irenaeus tends to receive most scholarly attention, his defense of four named gospels is at odds with the ways in which his contemporaries "know" these writings, and should be viewed alongside these other approaches to Jesus-group texts. As Matthew D.C. Larsen notes in *Gospels Before the Book*, "While [Irenaeus'] approach may seem intuitive to modern readers, his comments stand in stark contrast to prior

¹ "The Gospels are Finally Named!" is actually the title of a blog post by Bart Ehrman, on his eponymous blog, The Bart Ehrman Blog. Accessed February 29, 2020. <https://ehrmanblog.org/the-gospels-are-finally-named-irenaeus-of-lyons/>.

² This reading backwards speaks to of the invention of fictional languages. At a 2017 talk at Princeton University, "The Art of Language Invention," David Joshua Peterson, the linguist who invented the languages for the HBO television series *Game of Thrones*, stated that in order to make an invented language "real" – to make it adhere to the largely rule-based but sometimes unexpected structures of actual spoken language, he had to create a language in several iterations, going back in time. For example, to create a language called Valyrian properly, he had to invent the ways in which Valyrian would have been spoken hundreds of years before the Valyrian required for the series, in order to authentically "evolve" the language. In order to find the word you "want" in the current language, you need to invent versions of it backwards, essentially. It seems to me like studies of book and canon need to consider this inventive work. If we want to speak a "real" language, we need to invent it backwards, to invent the language *as it was spoken* long before you need it to be. So, if we want to talk about "canon", and if we want to talk about the writings of the Jesus people, specifically this thing called a or the "gospel," we need to see how that language would have been spoken several incarnations in the past – which may not sound like or seem to have much to do with "canon" at all.

discourses of gospel textualization and authorship” (2). There is no reason why Irenaeus should speak louder than others.

As examples, Theophilus of Antioch, writing at about the same time as Irenaeus (180 – 85 CE), refers in *To Autolycus* not to books, authors or publication, but instead uses terminology like “holy word,” and “the voice of the gospel”(3.13). In the third century, Origen records tradition from Celsus, likely dating to the middle of the second century, in which Celsus, not a member of a Jesus group, derides Jesus group members who appear to “alter and remodel the gospel from its initial written form – three times, four times, many times” (*Against Celsus* 2.27; translation from Larsen 2018, 151).

References to “the gospel” very generally appear in the earlier writings of 2 Clement (8.5) and the Didache (8.2): “And do not pray as the hypocrites [do]; pray instead this way, as the Lord directed in his gospel: “Our father in heaven, May your name be acclaimed as holy, may your kingdom come, May your will come to pass on earth as it does in heaven...” reads the Didache (van de Sandt, Huub and David Flusser 2002).

Writing in the middle to late second century CE, Justin Martyr, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, quotes a range of textual traditions at once, and refers to the memorials or memoirs of the apostles as a form of authoritative tradition:

And Moses predicted that he would arise like a star from the seed of Abraham when he said: *A star shall rise out of Jacob and a leader from Israel*. And another passage reads, *Behold the Man; the Dawn is his name*. Therefore when a star arose in the heavens at the time of his Nativity, as the memoirs of his apostles attest, the Magi from Arabia knew the fact from this sign, and came to worship him (106.4; translation adapted from Falls).

These various mentions of gospels, general “gospel,” memorials or memoirs, and textual reworkings, mentions that can be considered as contemporaneous with Irenaeus, all put a reliance on Irenaeus for “finally” naming the gospels into question. “Gospel” in text form, from this evidence alone, seems to have been much more diverse, at the end of the second century, than has been previously allowed.

Even setting Irenaeus' contemporaries aside, Irenaeus himself offers compelling evidence for "messy" tradition, evidence that has yet to be considered within wider scholarship. Larsen's reading of *Against Heresies* 3.1.1 brings new life to this most famous quotation, steering interpretation in an entirely new direction. While Irenaeus does insist on four gospels, with four named authors – Matthew, Mark, Luke, John – and even on times and places of textual creation, he does not treat these textual objects alike, as presented in the table below:

	<i>Matthew</i>	<i>Mark</i>	<i>Luke</i>	<i>John</i>
Form	written gospel	"writtenly" (<i>eggraphōs</i>)	gospel book	the gospel
Circulation	published	"handed down to us"	-	published

Only Luke is called a "book" by Irenaeus. Matthew and John receive mentions of "publishing," or bringing a text into public domain; Irenaeus uses *ekpherō* for Matthew, referencing a sense of carrying out or bringing forth, and *ekdidōmi* for John, referencing a sense of surrender or "giving up" something. Because they are "published," Larsen suggests that Matthew and John must also be "books."

Matthew, Luke and John are also all placed in the context of "gospel": written gospel, gospel, the gospel. Luke, however, is not "published," and Irenaeus makes no mention of how the book might be accessed or accessible. Mark was "handed down," but no mention is made of the form in which this handing down occurred. Irenaeus grants Mark only an adverb, *eggraphōs*, which Larsen translates as "writtenly": "Mark... also handed down Peter's preaching to us *writtenly*." Larsen's suggestion is that Mark "is not a piece of literature; it is certainly not a book. Rather, it is a speech that happens to have become a textual object" (2018, 95). Larsen's reading of Mark as accidental text is not compelling; how does an oral tradition "happen to become" textualized, inadvertently? His reading of Irenaeus, however, is extremely useful, pointing to, as

Larsen puts it, “competing gospel textuality discourses within Irenaeus’s framework for thinking about gospel, textuality, and authority” (2018, 96). While Irenaeus has been celebrated as the earliest identifier of four discrete gospel traditions, a closer examination of his statement reveals that these traditions were taken in inconsistent forms. The gospels were different kinds of textual objects, even for Irenaeus.

Mark did not matter – in any sense of that word, “matter,” – in the first and second centuries as a *book* at all. The writing we now call “the Gospel according to Mark” did not exist as such in the first two centuries. A textual or textualized object that became Mark *did* matter, again in both senses of the word “matter”, in this period, however: mattered as a material object, and as a source of authority. Following Larsen, I agree that “rereading texts without the framework of authors and books – without using “book” as a metaphor for organizing questions and information – creates new and innovative understandings of texts and the communities that produced and reproduced them” (2018, 4; see also Mroczek 2016). Approaching what we now call “the Gospel according to Mark” as a textual object, not a book, opens a door to radically new questions about text, textuality and textual production that can enable interpretation much more grounded in the socio-cultural contexts and realities of writing and reading in the first two centuries CE. Imagine how different commentaries on biblical texts might be, if their introductions no longer – *can* no longer – begin with heretofore “basic” questions such as, “Who wrote this gospel?” “Where was it written?” “For whom?”

Contrary to Larsen, I argue that the-textual-object-we-now-call-Mark³ is an intentional textual production. Larsen is willing to push significant scholarly boundaries, upsetting basic assumptions about writing and the early Jesus movement;

³ “The-textual-object-we-now-call-Mark” sounds a bit too much like “the-artist-formerly-known-as-Prince,” just facing the opposite direction. I understand that my references to “Mark” might seem cumbersome, and might not make for the tidiest writing. It is difficult to come up with a regular means of referring to this “textual object” without falling into the traps of ideas like “book” and “authorship.” I use different methods of referring to “Mark” throughout this paper, and sometimes, for convenience, will just say “Mark.”

in the first two centuries, were Jesus-group participants “people of the book”? Larsen suggests not. Surprisingly, Larsen is not willing to test other scholarly assumptions, particularly about “Mark”. This early textual tradition, the earliest textualized gospel tradition to which we have access, has always been considered the underdog of gospel studies: written poorly, unliterary, communicated in a strange “immediate” style, full of redundancy... so the scholarly story has gone. Traditionally, Mark has not been considered as really “written” at all, instead reflecting oral tradition. As both a textual and material artifact, Mark has primarily been read for or in terms of its orality, representative of an oral/textual tension, or an historical transition from oral to textual storytelling (for example, see Achtemeier 1990, Dewey 1995, Kelber 1983; *contra* these positions, see Keith 2015).

Larsen holds on to these approaches to Mark, arguing that this textual object is a collection of notes meant to encourage remembrance of spoken tradition, accidentally made textual, and accidentally brought forth into a public sphere: “a speech that happens to have become a textual object” (2018, 95). Can speech unintentionally, accidentally become text? Why not test these assumptions about Mark, in particular? Why not treat this textual object we now know as “the Gospel according to Mark” as intentional text? Mark is not a “book”; the non-book status of this textual object is clear. As non- or not-book, Mark does offer possibilities for interpretation that are more purposeful than scholarship suggests.

2. “Mark” as Not-Book

Larsen’s overall argument in *Gospels Before the Book* is that the textual object we now call Mark was initially a collection of unpolished notes, lacking author, publication, textual finality, and even real textual intention. He places Mark in the category of Greek *hypomnēmata* (Latin, *commentarii*), a category of text representing “more fluid, less authored, and less ‘bookish’ texts – things put down in writing not so much to become

literature as to be memoranda. They are more practical than formal” (Larsen 2018, 11).

Larsen references Lucian’s discussion of *hypomnēmata* as a series of notes in *How to Write History* as parallel to Mark:

When [the historian, or the one who wants to write a history] has collected all or most of the facts let him first make them into a series of notes (*hypomnēmata*), a body of material as yet with no beauty or continuity. Then, after arranging them into order, let him give it beauty and enhance it with the charms of expression, figure and rhythm (Lucian, *How to Write History* 48, trans. Kilburn).

The application of Lucian’s use of *hypomnēmata* to Mark assumes, it seems, that the writing we now call Mark, in its earliest form or forms, was provisional, a skeleton text, lacking style and even substance.

Plato also uses the term *hypomnēmata* to refer to a provisional kind of text, meant primarily as memory aids. In *The Statesman*, for instance, the Stranger, speaking to Young Socrates, places *hypomnēmata* in the context of a physician or gymnastic trainer’s notes: if the physician is going away for a while and thinks that his patients might not remember his instructions in his absence, he writes them down in brief form, to help his patients remember. The notes are subject to change, though, as the physician might learn something new, or determines a better course of action for a patient (Plato, *Pol.* 295b-c; see also *Phaedr.* 276d). These notes “assume a close relational proximity between the writer and the reader, one in which things can be left presumed that might appear too ambiguous to an anonymous reader but nevertheless jog the memory of the intended reader” (Larsen 2018, 20). Read in this sense of *hypomnēmata*, certain elements of Mark might make better sense: the strange explanation for the parables in Mark 4:10-12, for example, where Jesus states that he tells parables so that people will *not* understand his teaching (Larsen does not reference this ambiguity in Mark).

The reading of Mark as a *hypomnēma* is incredibly useful, but not quite in the ways in which Larsen suggests. Larsen translates *hypomnēma* as memorandum, arguing

that this earliest known textualization of Jesus tradition later known as Mark is a loose, unpolished collection of notes, meant to stimulate more fleshed-out memories on the part of a reader, reading group or user already familiar with the context. Larsen asserts,

The producer(s) of the textual tradition we now call the Gospel according to Mark seems (seem) to have collected sets of notes to be meditated upon, to be reread, to be rewritten, to be used, to be taught and preached. When approached as an unfinished collection of notes, the Gospel according to Mark becomes precisely the kind of text with which one expects to cooperate in the production of meaning. Meaning lies not within but beyond the text (147).

The reading of Mark as an unfinished note collection does place this textual object in much more authentic first- and second-century cultures of text, considering textual production and reception as precisely socio-culturally located constructions.⁴ Mark-as-notes also makes sense of some of the supposed “gaps” in the text: the lack of a birth narrative, the strange ending (or absence thereof). In these particular ways, Larsen’s reading offers a helpful corrective to much (perhaps the majority) of gospel scholarship.

Larsen’s insistence that “meaning lies not within but beyond the text,” however, continues to buy in to the longstanding scholarly idea that Mark is a “lesser” writing than gospels like Matthew and Luke, inferior in its language and lack of completion, missing literary spark. Finding patterns, literary motifs, plot development... those elements are part of reading processes, according to Larsen, not writing processes. The textual object of “Mark” is not meaningful in and of itself. Larsen declares, “What modern scholars and readers do with the Gospel according to Mark is analogous to what ‘Matthew,’ ‘Luke,’ and the continuators of the Gospel according to Mark did with it: fill in gaps, rework the text, clarify ambiguities, resolve tensions, or enjoy them” (Larsen 148). This activity, Larsen argues, is necessary, since Mark is so roughly

⁴ Here I find William A. Johnson’s word on elite reading practices in the Roman world instructive. Johnson writes, “I prefer to look at reading as not an act, not even a process, but as a highly complex sociocultural system that involves a great many considerations beyond the decoding by the reader of the words of a text. Critical is the observation that reading is not simply the cognitive process by the individual of the “technology” of writing, but rather *the negotiated construction of meaning within a particular sociocultural context*” (Johnson 2000, 603). The same principles apply to writing, I would say.

sketched. Mark's notes require readers with insider knowledge to make sense of them. As memory aids only, the notes do not offer a complete picture, but are just meant to aid insider readers with the retrieval of additional, more meaningful details.

Hypomnēma can indeed mean note collection, explanatory notes, memorandum or written reminder, and the evidence Larsen cites in *Gospels Before the Book* certainly follow these usages. If "Mark" existed as a group of rough notes requiring insider arrangement and interpretation, and these notes were then "filled in" by later readers and users, it is strange, perhaps, that Irenaeus still refers to a "Mark" at the end of the second century as "writtenly," to use Larsen's translation, but not as "written gospel" nor as "book." Would not the notes have fallen out of circulation, as "better" versions were textualized? Or again, could this textual object have served its own purpose?

3. Mark as Memorial

Consideration of the most common usage of *hypomnēma* helps to make better sense of this textual object we now know as the gospel of Mark. This word is used most often with the sense of "memorial", or means of remembrance, taken literally: a tomb. A tomb dating from first- or second-century CE Aphrodisias (Caria, Asia Minor) offers one representative example of this usage amongst hundreds (a simple search for *hypomnēma* in the *Inscriptiones graecae* corpus, for example, yields 415 results for *hypomnēma* in 398 texts):

To good fortune. Memorial/tomb (*hypomnēma*) of the family and of the beast-fights of Marcus Antonius Apellas Severinus, high priest, son of Marcus Antonius Hypsikles, high priest (IAph 12.1211; Harland 2015 a).

The epitaph does not exist apart from its material context, the tomb itself:



(Harland 2015 a)

Similarly, an undated inscription from a tomb in Kyzikos (Mysia and the Troad, Asia Minor), reads:

Memorial/tomb (*hypomnēma*)... (*two and a half lines missing*) ... Now if anyone dares to put another body in it ... or to scratch out the inscription or to alter it..., that person will pay 2500 denarii to the sacred sanhedrin of ... porters who are from ... the measuring house and the same amount ... to the city ... and that person will be subject to the law regarding tomb violation. (IMT 1584; Harland 2015 b)

As one final representative example, a monument dating to the second-century BCE in the area of Koloe (Lydia, Asia Minor), refers to a *hypomnēma* for a particular person, the priestess Stratonike, in the context of the ritual activities of a larger voluntary association:

It was resolved by the association of hero-devotees who gather together for Harpalos (senior), Athenodoros (senior), Menodote and Zostas: Since it was announced that the priestess Stratonike, daughter of Athenodoros and mother of both Harpalos (junior) and Athenodoros (junior), has left us, who was beautiful and good and behaved in an honor-loving manner

towards both the association and each member individually during the gathering of the association. She conducted her entire life in an honorable manner, always seeking to maintain her propriety and love of humanity in a manner worthy of her ancestors and she was god-fearing.

Then it is just and appropriate, since she is irreproachable, for her to be honored by the associates in the following manner: that a day may be observed for her whenever the rest of the sacrifices are performed, just as is also done for her ancestors (i.e. those heroes listed at the opening); that she also be crowned with a gold crown worth ten gold coins; that a painted portrait be set up in the heroes' shrine; and, that a slab of white stone be set up with the decree inscribed on it, in order that she herself might possess an eternal memorial (*hypomnēma*) of her benevolence toward everyone. Furthermore, men are to be sent who, meeting with Harpalos and Athenodoros (i.e. her sons), will explain the honors which have been decreed and will comfort her sons appropriately to endure her deification (*apothēōsis*) which has taken place, of one who was affectionate towards her children and was blameless by all people during her life-time. (ILydiaHM 96; Harland 2016).

Philip Harland places this *hypomnēma* in the context of another monument found close by naming additional members of the family – Harland suggests that this association originally formed around a single family – and 65 other active association members (ILydiaHM 97; Harland 2016).

These monuments, these *hypomnēmata*, were the culturally accepted and expected means for interaction with the dead. Memorialization in a material, visual format was essential to both the dead and the living, as true “happiness” or honour – immortality, essentially – rested upon how well one was remembered and actively celebrated by the living, after one's death.

But: what happens when these usual means of memorialization are not available? What happens if there is no body for a tomb – only empty space? The textual tradition we now call Mark highlights this absence: at the (non-)end of the text, the body of Jesus is gone, and Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome run from the empty tomb in terror, saying nothing to anyone. Absent body, absent followers, absent speech.

If we think of the meanings of words as the rungs of a descending ladder, our first steps, the top rungs, for *hypomnēma* are “memorial” and “means of remembrance,” taken materially as tomb or monument. If we continue to descend the ladder, we find

additional, related but alternate, readings: “notes” and “written reminder.” When considering the textual object later known as the Gospel according to Mark, we do not have to descend as far down the ladder as Larsen suggests. We can stay on the top rung. The primary importance and authority of this textual object derived from its function as a *hypomnēma*, a material memorial to the missing Messiah. The rendering of Jesus stories as text established a means of memorialization for a group or groups responding to a situation of absence. In the first two centuries, textualized stories about Jesus were meaningful as experiential opportunity for memorialization, as a mechanism for expected and effective remembrance.

Also absent in this configuration of first- and second-century Jesus-people “text” is “book,” in literal or metaphorical form (and “author,” and “publication,” etc.). “Textual object” works, but is very abstract. “Extended epitaph” is much more appropriate for what we find in the writing now called Mark, or simply, “memorial.”

Approached as memorial, the writing we now call Mark suddenly bears striking resemblance to the monument created to honour the priestess Stratonike and, in honouring the priestess, unifying the association of hero-devotees in continuing remembrance through ritual. Stratonike has “left” the association: she has died. While living, she was god-fearing and good, recognized each individual member of the association as worthy of attention, always focused on her “love of humanity.” She is irreproachable. But, she also appears to be absent; her children have to “endure her deification (*apotheosis*),” according to the monument. As *apotheosis* refers to a bodily “taking up” into the realm of the gods or divinity, Stratonike’s body can be read as gone.

The monument is established in order to ensure that members of the association will have and adhere to particular guidelines for Stratonike’s memorialization, or for remembering Stratonike appropriately. The monument, the self-referencing “slab of white stone” inscribed with the decree, exists “in order that [Stratonike] herself might

possess an eternal memorial of her benevolence toward everyone,” and to facilitate the activities of the “men” who are “to be sent”, “who, meeting with Harpalos and Athenodoros, will explain the honors which have been decreed and will comfort her sons appropriately to endure her deification...” (Harland 2016). The memorial to the priestess-now-hero/god Stratonike remembers her in a way that enables the continuing functionality of her association, despite her physical absence and the “normal” centering of a tomb/memorial around the physical, present body of the deceased.

That textual object now called Mark, while not inscribed on a slab of white stone (that we know of!), can be read like Stratonike’s monument, a necessary memorialization for an absent body allowing for the continuing functionality of an association. Parallel to Larsen’s argument for Mark as collection of notes, the memorial is incomplete, and will require others to “comfort” group members “appropriately” to endure an absent body – to fill in the details. In many ways, Larsen’s argument still applies. Larsen notes, for example, that *hypomnēmata* “are skeletons that need the breath of human memory to bring them to life. They are a concession to the absence of a source of knowledge, designed to protect against memory loss” (2018, 11). Jesus as a source of knowledge is definitely absent, in this case. Deviating from Larsen, I argue that *hypomnēma* refers not to a collection of notes, but to a literal memorial, separate from a slab of stone, but still material, an actual object, aligned with the function of text and stone monument-complex for Stratonike’s hero association, designed to protect not just memory, but the functionality of a group or groups.

Read as a textual tomb for an absent body, this textual object now called Mark is a mechanism for structured remembrance: for witness. Stratonike’s absence could be a disaster for her family, should association members not remember correctly and adhere to the decree of her monument. “Men” must be “sent” to explain Stratonike’s significance in fleshy detail, especially given her physical absence. Likewise, Jesus’ absence could be a disaster for early Jesus groups, if not interpreted appropriately. The

missing body of Jesus – “He is not here,” says the young man at the tomb in the verses commonly referenced as Mark 16.6 – needs to be remembered, both to properly honour the deceased, and to enable Jesus-followers to endure the potential disaster of his absence.

4. Mark as Disaster Response

In the context of the first and second centuries, this textual object is a cultural monument designed to interpret and appropriately respond to the potential disaster of the absent body of Jesus. The memorial allows for the creation of a reading culture both structured by the absent body, and held responsible for that body, or for the continuing importance of that absent body to social life. Borrowing from Johnson, a “reading culture” structures the particular socio-cultural reality of a particular reading community, the people who gather around the text. Johnson argues that a reading culture grounds a community’s activity, structuring what the group gets together to do, and also validates that community’s self-identity as those “able to derive special meaning from this exclusive text” (Johnson 2010, 202). Text, when understood as part of the complex of a reading culture, works to establish and maintain the boundaries of group identity, structuring the physical activities of a reading community and the dispositions of that community in outlining both an approach to and an understanding of what qualifies as knowledge or knowing. A reading culture validates not only what is known or what is important to know, and important to do, but also *how* things are known, and how things are done.

Building on Johnson’s work, Chris Keith has argued that the reading culture centred on the text we now call Mark valued not just the content of text, but the physical text itself. Specifically, the gospel as a cultural artifact enabled and constructed identity in the early Jesus movement due to its material, physical form as well as to its content. He writes, “Mark’s textualization of the oral Jesus tradition gave birth to a distinctive and

powerful reception-history of the gospel tradition wherein manuscripts nurtured, shaped, and maintained various (often competing) Christian identities in ever-new expressions" (Keith 2015, 38). Mark matters as thing, as material object.

Keith refers to Mark as "manuscript," implying an object more bounded, perhaps, than Larsen's imagined collection of notes. What exact form the textual object we now call the gospel of Mark took in the first two centuries is impossible to say. What is most important is that this textual object was actual *object*. I am arguing that the interpretation of this textual object as *hypomnēma*, translated more literally as memorial, makes the best sense of the evidence we now have available to us in contemporary versions of Mark, and within the complex of first- and second-century memorialization practice.

As Stratonike's association must endure her absent body, it is clear from the text of "Mark," at least in the versions in which we now read "Mark", that the absence of Jesus after his death has the potential to be a disaster. This disaster is evident not only in Mark's open ending ("he is not here," 16.6), but across the text. The present time of the text is one in which the bridegroom has been taken away (2.20), followers in Judea are fleeing without even grabbing their clothes (13.14-18), the shepherd is struck and the sheep are scattered (14.27), and disciples, confronted with a missing body, feel abject terror (16.8). There is no validating presence of the risen Jesus in this textual object, even though traditions about resurrection appearances seem to be known in the text (14.28; 16.7).⁵

Both content and composition in this text make Jesus' absence palpable. The shifting between verb tenses in "Mark" is not necessarily evidence of poor writing style or a lower level of literacy, but can also be interpreted as an intentional move to blur the

⁵ I am indebted to Daniel Smith, Huron University College, Western University for these references. Dan responded to a very early version of this work, and his comments have been invaluable in my rethinking of the project. Thank you, Dan! I am so grateful for your feedback.

world of the reading culture with the context of the disaster. The “ending” of the gospel illustrates this shifting in time; translated literally, the beginning of what is now chapter 16 would read:

And the Sabbath having passed, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome *brought* spices so that, having come [to the tomb], they might anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, they *come* to the tomb, the sun having arisen. And they *were saying* among themselves, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?” And having looked up, they *see* that the stone has been rolled away – it was extremely large. (16.1 – 4).

These verb tenses, normally “corrected” in translation, can be read as intentional. While difficult, perhaps, for modern readers, as a strategy for memorialization, the time shifts make it impossible for the reading or using community to interpret the events apart from that community’s own world, in the present. Events are no longer “past,” done, concluded.⁶ They are ongoing, present.

The elision of past and present in this textual object demands the participation of the reading or using community. As Stratonike’s memorial is designed to ensure the ongoing, structured activity of the hero association, “Mark” requires active response, involvement. It requires *witness*, understood in sociological (rather than theological) terms. Sociologically, witnessing, specifically the witness to a traumatic event, requires an agent who bears witness to a traumatic event, a textual witness that encodes the experience of the agent, and an audience/responder to that textual witness who, in reading, becomes somehow involved. Sociologist John Durham Peters identifies four “attitudes of witnessing”:

To be there, present at the event in space and time is the paradigm case. To be present in time but removed in space is the condition of liveness, simultaneity across space. To be present in space but removed in time is the condition of historical representation: here is the possibility of a simultaneity across time, a witness that laps the ages. To be absent in both space and time but still

⁶ I take inspiration here from Umberto Eco’s 1990 “Portrait of the Elder as a Young Pliny,” though I cannot profess to follow all of Eco’s complex linguistic manoeuvring. As Dan Smith noted in his response to the earlier paper, it would have been nice, perhaps, if the text as we have it ended with a present-tense verb, rather than the aorist: “and going out, they flee from the tomb, trembling and ecstasy taking them; and they are saying nothing to no one, for they are afraid.” But, as Dan said, “maybe that would be too much.”

have access to an event via its traces is the condition of recording: the profane zone in which the attitude of witnessing is hardest to sustain (Durham Peters 2001, 720).

Durham Peter's emphasis on "attitude" involves the implication of the witness in the event, a requirement to act. The liveness of witnessing ties it to responsibility.

What of "Mark," absent in both space and time from the events of Jesus' life and death, and the traumatic event itself being absence? The shifting verb tenses certainly speak to a sense of liveness or simultaneity. The apocalyptic discourse in what is now Mark 13 speaks to this simultaneity: "let the reader understand" (13.14) directly addresses a reader or reading community, for example, as does the command to watch: "Watch therefore – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cock crow, or in the morning – lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch" (13.35-37). The implication of this section of the text is that the absence of Jesus is about to end for this reading community, so they must demonstrate their ability to respond appropriately, and to have acted appropriately up to that point.

For a community gathered around an absent body, a community potentially experiencing its own pain and trauma, the use of a textual object as a monument or memorial to the missing Jesus enables a reading or using community "to find collective purpose when the victims' own individual purpose has been violated or destroyed, to use a definition of "disaster monuments" from Kirk Savage (2006, 111). The victim of pain or trauma is able to regain some sense of agency, or at the very least of meaning, through the material expression of trauma in a monument. Stratonike's association could keep meeting because of and through her monument, the complex of stone and text that marked an absent, but continually significant, body. Perhaps, as a *hypomnēma*, "Mark" was at some point a slab of white stone. The physicality of a textual object – *contra* oral tradition – also facilitated the witness-response of a group or groups enduring the absent body of Jesus.

5. Conclusion

The configuration of first- and second-century “gospel”, specifically the “gospel” we now know as “Mark,” as memorial and as witness makes better sense of “gospel” interlocutors beyond Irenaeus. Irenaeus has received scholarly pride of place in discussions about authors, books, and canon because his approach feels so similar to, and thus validates, our own. When Irenaeus is placed in his context, amongst others writing about gospel, gospels and other textualized forms of Jesus stories, the significance of his gospel-naming and “book”-naming weakens. Justin Martyr used memorials or memoirs of the apostles to refer to textualized Jesus tradition: “...since we find it written in the memoirs⁷ of the apostles that he is the Son of God, and since we call him by that same title, we have understood that this is really he...” (*Dialogue with Trypho* 100.4; see also 101.3). In the third century, Origen references Jesus-group writings as *en grammasin hypomnēmata*, written memorials of Jesus, left of necessity for the continued activity of Jesus-followers (*Against Celsus* 2.13).

Other users or responders to Jesus-group textual tradition speak to the importance of the importance of witness in the development of text. The preface to the text we now know as Luke, for example, reads,

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed (Luke 1.1-4).

⁷ The Greek here is *en tois apomnēmeumasin* – *apomnēmoneuma* being a slightly different word from *hypomnēma*, the word referred to most often in this paper. It should be noted that as late as the fifth century, the *Acts of Timothy* describes how Jesus-group members approached John of Ephesus with loose notes that they could not organize, which John then arranges into Matthew, Mark and Luke, writing another gospel to fill in the gaps (*Acts of Timothy* 8-10; mentioned in Larsen 2018, 151).

This textual object begins with a statement about loosely constructed, malleable, changing traditions of writing and reading within the Jesus groups of the first two centuries. “Narrative” or “narration” could refer to many different textual forms or objects, and indeed, appear to do so, as “many” continually seek to related “the things which have been accomplished among us.” As in “Mark”, “Luke” presents these events in a present context, linking them to the importance of continued witness, “witness” again understood in sociological terms.

The writings of Jesus groups in the first two centuries must be separated from the social constructs of book, author, publication, and even from textuality, as we might understand that term in contemporary contexts. Placing the textual object we now call Mark, specifically, in a first-century context of memorialization enables an interpretation valuing this textual object as such, as both *text* and *object*. This textual object stands in for the absent body of Jesus, in a way analogous to Stratonike’s second-century BCE monument. As an extended epitaph in text, rather than a complex of text-and-stone (text must be embodied in something material), the textual object “Mark” memorializes Jesus, both enabling his remembrance and structuring the ongoing activity of Jesus groups through a reading culture of witness.

6. Works Cited

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