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

Dr. Erin K. Vearncombe  
University of Toronto

Ballot Items

The writing we now call the gospel of Mark did not exist as such in the first two centuries of the common era. A written object that became Mark did matter in this period, however, as a material object, and as a source of authority for and within Jesus groups. This object was an intentional textual production, but not a “book.”

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.

The writing we now know as the gospel of Mark should be read as a hypomnēma, a socio-cultural memorial or means for remembrance of the dead very common in the first two centuries. This memorialization allows for the continuing functionality of a Jesus group or association.

The writing now known as Mark enabled a Jesus group gathered around an absent body, a group potentially experiencing its own pain and trauma, to establish a reading culture of witness-response.