

JESUS, King of Israel

*Toward a Final Quest
for the Historical Jesus*

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Chapter 4

*The Gospel of Mark
as a Rebuttal of Ur-John*

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The Gospel of Mark as a Rebuttal of Ur-John

I have argued thus far that a primitive Ur-John gospel, composed in Aramaic and written by or under the auspices of an influential archrival of Peter, was in circulation by the mid-first century, that the material in John 21 was appended to this Aramaic narrative at an early stage of its development, and that John 21 contains material that originated as the finale to the *Gospel of Mark*. Collectively this suggests that Mark may have been composed as a political response to Ur-John. The next obvious question would be whether there is evidence that the author of Mark was aware of Ur-John and was writing in response to it? If so, this would add substantial weight to the Ur-John thesis at large.

The reconstructed Ur-John text contains candid indications that its author had remembered Jesus as an anti-Roman Messianic rebel, and that both he and the movement at large had been condemned as seditious. These historical memories would have been politically disadvantageous, even dangerous, to the evolving Jesus movement. It appears that the author of Mark, an advocate of Petrine leadership, was either encouraged or commissioned to write a new gospel in response to Ur-John. As will be illustrated below, his evident objective was to (a) rebut the problematic representations in Ur-John, and (b) promote Peter as the sole authorized leader of the movement. As an advocate of Peter, the patristic tradition that Mark was interpreting and documenting the teachings of Peter is consistent with the apparent political context.

There is little doubt that Mark originally ended with the reunion story that now resides in John 21, establishing that Peter had been anointed by Jesus as the movement's sole shepherd going forward. When read side by side with Ur-John, this Markan conclusion would have been recognized as an aggressive rebuttal of the contentions in Ur-John that Peter was morally unfit for leadership. However, once one compares Mark to the Ur-John reconstruction and reads the two side by side, it becomes apparent that Mark's objective was not simply to refute Ur-John's attack on the integrity of Peter, but to issue a comprehensive rebuttal of Ur-John on a host of issues. Among the key

elements of the Jesus tradition upon which the *Gospel of Mark* and Ur-John disagree are the following:

Ur-John's Claims:	Mark's Response:
1. Was Jesus an associate of John the Baptist? Jesus and his initial disciples (Andrew, Peter, and another unidentified first disciple) met as apparent associates/disciples of JBap. (1.35-42) The Jesus group formed initially as a faction which split from JBap and began to compete against him for the same followers. (3.22-26)	1. Jesus was not an associate/disciple of JBap, but he had been baptized by him. Mark makes clear that Jesus did not call his first disciples until after JBap had been imprisoned (1.14). Jesus met his first disciples in Galilee; they never had any apparent association with JBap. Mark eliminates the evidence of a competition between Jesus and JBap that is visible in Ur-John.
2. Who were Jesus' initial adversaries? In Ur-John, Jesus' initial conflict was with Pharisees in Judea. He relocated to Galilee for a second time once the conflict with Pharisees was increasing (4.1-3). (Note: there is no temptation of Jesus by Satan in Ur-John, and Jesus never encounters demons or unclean spirits)	2. In Mark, Jesus' initial adversaries were Satan (1.13) and demonic spirits (1.23). Mark defines the essential dramatic conflict in the Jesus story as cosmic and spiritual in nature, not political.
3. Where did the Jesus movement begin? In Ur-John, Jesus began his activities in Judea and moved back and forth between Judea and Galilee. One of Jesus' first confrontational acts was the temple cleansing in Jerusalem (2.13-23)	3. According to Mark, Jesus began his mission in Galilee and was exclusively located in rural Galilee. He avoids not only Jerusalem, but Tiberias and Sephoris, the two economic and political power centers of Galilee. This is not the itinerary of one who intended to challenge ruling authorities. This portrayal of Jesus makes him appear to be unconcerned with politics or Roman authority.
4. Jesus actively promoted himself as Messiah.	4. Jesus actively suppressed his identity as Messiah (Messianic secret)

5. Jesus staged public miracles as “signs” to validate and promote his claim to messiahship.	5. Jesus refuses to do signs and directs his miraculous healings not to be publicized (8.11–12)
6. Jesus’ miracles incited popular unrest. After the mass feeding the people wanted to make him king (6.15, 11.47–48, 12.17–19)	6. Jesus’ miracles were done in private to avoid public spectacle. (5.43, 8.22–26) The mass feedings provoked no response, as if the people did not realize a miracle had occurred. He avoided public spectacle (9.30)
7. In Ur-John, Jesus’ followers candidly hail him by the politically inflammatory title <i>King of Israel</i> (1.49, 12.13).	7. In Mark, Jesus’ followers never hail him as a king; only his adversaries refer to him sarcastically as “king of the Jews.” The author reveals his awareness that Jesus had been known as <i>King of Israel</i> in 15.32, when the ostensibly ignorant chief priests taunt him as <i>King of Israel</i> while on the cross. The author attempts to make the alleged title look absurd.
8. The Beloved Disciple (apostle John) was uniquely favored by Jesus. The Twelve appear to be largely irrelevant, appearing only once in a negative context (6.66–71)	8. The Twelve are featured prominently in Mark. The author of Mark believes that apostle John and his brother had inflated views of themselves; the other ten had taken umbrage with them. (10.35–41)
9. Jesus said, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” (2.19)	9. Jesus did <i>not</i> say, “Destroy this temple and I will rebuild it in three days. (14.57–58)
10. A Roman cohort arrested Jesus.	10. An irate Jewish mob arrested Jesus. Roman involvement in the arrest of Jesus is eliminated.
11. Jesus’ disciples appear to have been subject to arrest. (18.8, 19.38, 20.19)	11. Jesus’ disciples were <i>not</i> subject to arrest, per the kiss of Judas that identifies Jesus as the only one to be seized and led away (14.44–46)

12. The apostle Peter struck the slave of the high priest with his sword.	12. An unknown bystander struck the slave of the high priest with his sword.
13. Jesus was interrogated over night by Annas concerning his teachings and his disciples; there was no trial before the Sanhedrin.	13. Jesus was tried in a late night trial by the Jewish Sanhedrin. There was no interrogation by Annas.
14. In Ur-John, Jesus is condemned for appearing to challenge the authority of Caesar (“we have no king but Caesar” 19.15)	14. In Mark, Jesus is condemned by the Sanhedrin for blasphemy, a crime of no concern to the Romans.
15. Ur-John leads the reader to suspect that the two crucified with Jesus may have been disciples who had not escaped. The implication is that the movement in its entirety had been condemned as seditious. This is in concert with the gospel’s hints that the disciples were subject to arrest.	15. In Mark, the author makes it clear that the two who died with Jesus were mentally deranged criminals unrelated to Jesus. There is no suggestion in Mark that the disciples were subject to arrest.
16. At the death of Jesus, a Roman soldier pierces him with a spear to ensure he was dead, but says nothing.	16. Upon Jesus’ death, a Roman soldier declares Jesus to have been the Son of God.
17. Joseph of Arimathea, an unknown secret disciple of Jesus , gave Jesus an honorable burial.	17. Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council (Sanhedrin) gave Jesus an honorable burial.

The above comparison of Ur-John’s claims with Mark’s apparent counterpoint responses suggests that the author Mark was engaged in a methodical depoliticization of Ur-John’s memory of Jesus. Ur-John paints a historically coherent sketch of Jesus as a self-promoting Messianic figure who stirred popular unrest, and who was arrested by Roman troops and condemned by Jewish priests/authorities for sedition. The accusers literally cry out, “we have no king but Caesar.” Not only is this rhetoric explicit, but there is little attempt in Ur-John to disguise the fact that the disciples were

subject to arrest, indicating that the movement itself was considered seditious. Reading Ur-John at face value as an independent composition, and free from the influence of Synoptic interpretations and claims about Jesus, the inference one would draw is that Jesus and his followers had been anticipating and advocating the restoration of an independent Kingdom of Israel that was presumably free of Roman domination. Jesus was envisioned as the pending king of this new sovereign nation. In light of this, Jesus had been arrested and executed for sedition, and the text carries hints that Jesus' associates had been subject to the same fate.

In response, the *Gospel of Mark* reads as a wholesale whitewashing of Ur-John, including a specific rejection of the many problematic references therein. Mark's Jesus focuses his entire mission in rural Galilee with no apparent intent or opportunity to confront the political power in Jerusalem. At the outset, his adversaries are Satan and demonic spirits, by which the author establishes that the essential dramatic conflict in the Jesus story is to be understood as cosmic and spiritual rather than political. Mark portrays a compassionate, misunderstood, Rome-friendly Jesus who never intended to stir popular unrest. Mark acknowledges that Jesus had indeed spoken of a *kingdom of God*, but that he had viewed it as a spiritual kingdom, a fellowship of believers that would peacefully coexist under Roman rule. According to Mark, Jesus' advocacy of this new spiritual *kingdom of God* was misunderstood due to his penchant for teaching in obscure parables that were intended to limit widespread understanding (4.10–12). Therefore, the author wants to assure his readers/hearers that they could be excused for having misinterpreted what Jesus had meant by the *kingdom of God*, for even his own disciples had not understood. But the very fact that Mark insists that Jesus' "kingdom" rhetoric had been misunderstood confirms that Jesus had spoken of a kingdom in some sense, and the most historically coherent guess would be that Jesus had envisioned the restoration of a sovereign Kingdom of Israel.

Mark alleges that Jesus actively suppressed proclamations of his Messiahship, that he did his healings and miracles in private, and that he did not intentionally incite popular unrest. In the first healing of the blind man in 8.22–26, Jesus leads him out of the village prior to healing him, then sends him home instructing him not to go through the village, apparently so that he does not draw public attention. In a similar vein, Jesus' raising of the daughter of Jairus in Mark is pointedly done in private with no spectators allowed, whereas the raising of Lazarus in Ur-John is a deliberate (and apparently pre-staged) public spectacle. When Jesus enters Tyre, Mark says he attempted to

keep his presence a secret (7.24). At one point as Jesus is passing through Galilee, Mark says “he would not have anyone know it.” (9.30). The author of Mark wishes to convey that Jesus intentionally avoided public provocation, a concept designed to assuage Roman concerns. In Ur-John’s mass feeding, the crowd responds with enthusiasm by wanting to seize Jesus and make him king without further delay. Conversely, in Mark’s two mass feedings there is no indication that the people even realized a miracle had occurred. Thus, there are recurring representations in Mark that, not only did Jesus *not* incite political unrest, he took active steps to avoid it.

Mark presents Jesus as one who actively befriended tax collectors. This point is made early and dramatically in 2.14–16 when he calls Levi from his tax office, and Levi follows him. *Many* tax collectors are said to have followed Jesus, and Jesus is represented as sharing table with tax collectors. Thus, Mark’s Jesus is portrayed as having been comfortable with the political system in power. In practical terms, it specifically conveys the notion that Jesus had not advocated tax resistance, for how much of a tax rebel could Jesus have been if he had practiced open commensality with tax collectors? Once Jesus enters Jerusalem, he is given the explicit opportunity to confirm his support for the payment of Roman taxes (12.14–17). With these affirmations of tax friendliness, Jesus is portrayed as accepting and even embracing the legitimacy of Roman rule.

There is no recollection in Ur-John that Jesus had befriended tax collectors or advocated the payment of Roman taxes. This is a remarkable omission. For the author of Ur-John reports explicitly that Jesus was condemned for challenging the authority of Caesar (19.12–15). He also claims that Pilate viewed Jesus as innocent (19.6). Thus, the question of Jesus’ guilt or innocence of sedition was at the heart of the matter. If the author had known or recalled that Jesus had engaged in friendly association with tax collectors or had advocated the payment of Roman taxes, it seems he would have mentioned this as evidence in favor of Jesus’ innocence, just as all three Synoptics do. The fact that he remains silent on this inflammatory issue suggests that the historical Jesus, as a Messianic rebel, probably did not associate with tax collectors and did not support Roman taxation. The *Gospel of Mark’s* explicit claims that he did read suspiciously as strenuous fabrications intended to sweep historical memories under the rug.

Moreover, Mark’s attempts to depoliticize the Ur-John traditions go to melodramatic extremes. Mark substitutes the interrogation by Annas with an impromptu midnight trial before the Sanhedrin which convicts Jesus of

blasphemy, a scenario which in historical terms is highly implausible. No one would have been certain of Jesus' arrest that particular night, and members of the Sanhedrin were surely not on standby to immediately convene an emergency trial to consider the offense of blasphemy, especially during the evening of the Passover meal (if one follows Mark's sequence of events). Mark's Sanhedrin trial is in practical terms historically inconceivable. Similarly, Mark's theatrical "kiss of betrayal" by Judas singles out Jesus as the *only one* to be seized and led away; this vignette attempts to establish in memorable fashion that the disciples were not subject to arrest.

Another improbable and melodramatic element in Mark is the notion that the two *lēstas* (robbers/thieves) who were crucified with Jesus reviled him while in the throes of their own crucifixions (15.32). Ur-John's treatment of the two crucified with Jesus is sympathetic to them while the Synoptics are not. Ur-John does not refer to them as criminals of any sort, and they are depicted as dying in intimate association with Jesus, "one on either side with Jesus between them" (Ur-John 19.18). The author draws further attention to their plight by noting that their legs needed to be broken to hasten their deaths. Ur-John readers would likely suspect that they had been disciples who had not escaped. Indeed, if the Romans had staged the scene in the manner described, they would have intended passersby to suppose that the two were disciples. This potential inference is eliminated by Mark with his allegation that they were not only criminals unrelated to Jesus, but they were (inexplicably) motivated to revile Jesus while suffering the horror of their own crucifixions. The fact that the author of Mark vilifies these two in such an extreme manner suggests that he was aware that they were either being remembered as disciples, or being interpreted as disciples by readers/hearers of Ur-John. This would have carried ominous implications that Jesus had not been condemned for blasphemy, but rather that the movement itself had been condemned as seditious. Mark's depiction of these two as mentally deranged seems excessive, but since it makes it difficult to imagine that they might have been disciples, one must suspect that this was his objective.

At the very end of the *Gospel of Mark* there is the gospel's one glaring reference to Jesus as *King of Israel*:

15.29 And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads, and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, 30 save yourself, and come down from the cross!" 31 So also the chief priests mocked him to one another with the scribes, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. 32 Let the Christ, **the King of Israel**, come

down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.

This stunning reference to Jesus as *King of Israel* in 15.32 comes out of the blue with no antecedent anywhere prior to this in the gospel. It stands out as a red flag, indicating that the author of Mark was indeed aware that his audience remembered that Jesus had been regarded by his followers as King of Israel, per Ur-John, and he recognized that this memory must be suppressed for political reasons. So he puts this phrase on the lips of ostensibly confused and deluded adversaries in an attempt to make the memory of Jesus as a pending King of Israel to appear to be a ludicrous misunderstanding. This is consistent with Mark's methodical refutation of a host of politically problematic elements in Ur-John.

As a final correction, Mark does not care for Ur-John's notion that Jesus was buried by a "secret" disciple who was fearful of the authorities, one who was apparently duplicitous in his representations of himself to Pilate (19.38). Mark transforms Joseph of Arimathea into a respected member of the council, a member of the establishment in good standing (15.43). That the author was motivated to alter even small details such as this illustrates the degree to which he was committed to whitewashing the Jesus tradition.

Mark's Moral Reinterpretation of Jesus

Once one begins to consider the *Gospel of Mark* as a comprehensive political rebuttal of Ur-John it becomes apparent that the author was not only committed to a depoliticization of the Ur-John Jesus, but also to casting Jesus in a more favorable moral light. Mark introduces ethical admonitions to forgive (11.25), to love one's neighbor (12.30–33), to serve rather than be served (10.43–45), to avoid divorce (10.2–12), to avoid ostentatious displays of privilege and power (12.38–40), and to relinquish material possessions and give to the poor (10.21–23). Moral teachings and aphorisms of this kind do not exist in Ur-John, and collectively they represent the Markan Jesus as a moral guide and teacher. Yet at the same time Mark is trying to transform the character of Jesus, depicting him as kinder, gentler, more focused on others, and more worthy of respect and sympathy than the brash, self-centered character in Ur-John. One of the most dramatic examples of the author of Mark reinterpreting the moral character of the Ur-John Jesus is found in their respective accounts of the *Anointing at Bethany*:

The Anointing at Bethany

John 12.1–8

1 Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. 2 There they made him a supper; Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at table with him. 3 Mary took a pound of costly ointment of **pure nard** and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment. 4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was to betray him), said, 5 "Why was this ointment not sold for **three hundred denarii and given to the poor?**" 6 This he said, not that he cared for the poor but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it. 7 **Jesus said, "Let her alone,** let her keep it for the day of my burial. 8 **The poor you always have with you,** but you do not always have me."

Mark 14.3–9

3 And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of **pure nard**, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. 4 But there were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment thus wasted? 5 For this ointment might have been sold for more than **three hundred denarii and given to the poor.**" And they reproached her. 6 But **Jesus said, "Let her alone;** why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. 7 **For you always have the poor with you,** and whenever you will, you can do good to them; but you will not always have me. 8 She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burying. 9 And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

Several points are worth noting in these parallel accounts. First, the literary format in John is simple narrative storytelling; there are no signs of interpolation for the purpose of inserting new interpretive or corrective commentary. Furthermore, in John 12.1–8 the term *oun* occurs four times in these eight verses (vv. 1, 2, 3, 7). Thus, John 12.1–8 reflects typical characteristics of a passage that has been preserved intact from Ur-John. In this account, the author's petty side reference to Judas being a thief in 12.6 is remarkable for its irrelevance—it could be deleted with no impact on the story, and in fact the author of Mark does delete it. The author of Ur-John is apparently aware that Judas was the custodian of the money box, evidently serving as a treasurer of sorts in the Jesus group.¹ The derisive comment in 12.6 suggests that the author harbored enough personal animosity toward Judas that he would interrupt the story to accuse him of being a thief as well as Jesus' betrayer. Of course, that the author actually knew Judas personally

¹ Another reference to Judas and the money box is found in John 13.29, where it appears that Judas was responsible for the dispersal of funds. This verse is in John 13.21–30, a literary unit which, like 12.1–8, is identified under the Ur-John reconstruction procedure as part of the preserved Ur-John layer.

is rarely considered by scholars since there is no academic awareness that the author of this text could have been an early eyewitness apostle. However, under the Ur-John theory, an apostle who was a leading rival of Peter appears to have been the author of this primitive edition of John, and seen in this light, 12.6 reads as a genuine expression of personal disgust. The verse adds weight to the interpretation of this text as a preserved primitive tradition, for it is unlikely that a late first century author composing this text for the first time would have thought to insert such a petty and irrelevant side comment as a distraction to the primary thrust of the passage. However, it is worth noting that though the author of Mark removes Judas from his version of the Anointing pericope itself, he follows it immediately in the next two verses with a comment on Judas and his financial corruption: *Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. And when they heard it they were glad, and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him.* (Mark 14.10–11).

These Anointing pericopes in Mark and John contain some common grammar and similar phrasing. In particular, that the fragrant oil was of “pure nard” (*nardou pistikēs*), and that it was worth 300 denarii, are details found only in John and Mark; the parallel Anointing pericopes in Matthew and Luke do not contain these details. These incidental details in common as well as several instances of similar phrasing indicate direct literary dependence between John and Mark in this material. Under conventional theory, the *Gospel of John* is assumed to postdate the *Gospel of Mark*. So if there is literary dependence between John and Mark, scholars routinely assume that the direction of dependence must necessarily be that of John upon Mark. Mark Goodacre interprets the Anointings from this perspective:

There are those who have suggested Johannine priority in different forms, but there are indications here that John is secondary. John appears to have crafted this account on the basis of the Markan/Matthean narrative. The story, the structure, and the wording are substantially similar. The only major fresh elements in John are the naming of the woman as Mary, contextually determined by his resetting of the account as a postlude to the Lazarus story, and the naming of the one who complains as Judas. This element itself may be derived from Mark 14.10–11 which comes straight after the anointing and links Judas with an unhealthy interest in money. But there is one element in John that is not to be found in Mark or Matthew, Mary’s wiping of Jesus’ feet with her hair. This detail appears to come from Luke 7.38 where it forms part of Luke’s story of the anointing (Lk 7.36–50).

The anointing in each of the Synoptic accounts makes sense. In Mark and Matthew, Jesus' head is anointed with perfume. No hair is mentioned; no feet are mentioned. In Luke, the woman wets Jesus' feet with her tears, an act of repentance, and she wipes them with her loose 'sinner's' hair before she anoints them with perfume. But John's reminiscence of the Lucan detail about the wiping of Jesus' feet creates an anomaly. First, there is no reason for Mary, in John, to be wearing her hair like Luke's 'sinner', which is the point of the Lucan story. Second, because there are no tears in John, Mary's wiping of Jesus' feet with her hair means that the perfume ends up on her hair and not on Jesus. Jesus is the one who is supposed to be being anointed. The most plausible explanation here is that John has drawn a favourite Lucan detail into a narrative in which it no longer makes sense.²

Goodacre has developed this interpretation of the Anointing pericopes based on a presupposition that John postdates Mark and Luke. His analysis certainly makes sense *if* the direction of dependence is that of John upon Mark. However, if Mark is using a more primitive Ur-John, then we might as easily say that Mark eliminates the woman's name Mary because he has eliminated the entire Lazarus episode. He edits out Ur-John's petty comment that Judas was a thief because it is an unnecessary distraction and not germane to the primary thrust of the Anointing story. But then Mark follows this pericope with a comment regarding Judas' betrayal and relates it to Judas being motivated by money, a context in which Judas' interest in money makes more sense. It is also the case that in Luke's account the woman is a repentant sinner who weeps and wipes Jesus' feet with her hair, but this is easily interpreted as a Lukan embellishment of the story as he found it in Ur-John, as Luke also eliminates the Lazarus episode and thus the woman's identity as Mary. It is an overreach to infer that the lack of tears and the perfume/hair wiping sequence in John implies that the woman gets anointed rather than Jesus. And there is no inference in John's account that Mary was wearing her hair in the manner of a sinner. Goodacre is inferring this from the Lukan context, but there is no reason to interpret it that way from a reading of John alone.

Under the Ur-John thesis, literary dependence between the accounts in John and Mark is also assumed, but the direction of dependence is reversed—it is the author of Mark who has drawn details and similar phrasing from Ur-John as he rewrites the story to improve the moral character of Jesus.

² Goodacre, Mark, *Parallel Traditions or Parallel Gospels? John's Gospel as a Re-Imaging of Mark*, published in *John's Transformation of Mark* (edited by Becker, Bond, and Williams), T&T Clark, 2021, 83–84.

For in John's version, Jesus is disturbingly self-absorbed. He accepts Mary's cleaning of his feet with her hair as appropriate behavior, a sign of prostrate homage that he is rightfully due. He speaks dismissively of the poor, and he does not bother to acknowledge Mary's self-debasing act as worthy of comment. Objectively speaking, Ur-John's account is not an attractive performance by Jesus. Accordingly, the author of Mark eliminates the degrading act by having the woman anoint Jesus' head rather than his feet, and the use of her hair has been deleted from the account. Jesus receives her gracious act with praise, "she has done a beautiful thing to me." Jesus says she is to be honored forever for this act of kindness. Jesus also adds a clarification that, though the poor are always with us, "whenever you will, you can do good to them," thus mitigating the harsh tone of this saying as it appears in John 12.8.

There is, therefore, little doubt that the author of Mark is rewriting this problematic Ur-John text with the intent to portray Jesus as more compassionate, outwardly focused, morally grounded, and more worthy of respect as a spiritual and moral authority. Any casual reader unaware of the conventional dating of these gospels would find it difficult to imagine that the author of John could have read the beautiful version of the Anointing in Mark, and elected to transform it into John's version that so diminishes the moral integrity of Jesus. At face value, Mark's account of the *Anointing at Bethany* simply looks quite like a morally improved and corrected version of John's, which is indeed what it is. But the Ur-John thesis is required to explain how Mark's version could have been dependent upon John 12.1–8.

A Return to Mark's Ending and John 21

Mark's comprehensive rebuttal of Ur-John places the question of Mark's missing ending and John 21 into a greater context, for these two authors have adopted a contentious posture toward one another. Once the basic narrative in John 21 is recognized as Mark's original reunion story beyond 16.8, the corollary implication is that it was the author of Mark (not the redactor of John 21) who had first seized upon Ur-John's triple-denial allegations and transformed them into the literary device by which Peter is anointed as the sole heir to leadership. Little imagination is required to infer that this would have been interpreted as an aggressive and even contemptuous response to the BD/author's claim to leadership authority in Ur-John. But it would also have brought the antagonistic posturing of these two gospels into sharp relief. With the appearance of the *Gospel of Mark*, the movement would

suddenly have been confronted with two countervailing accounts of Jesus, both carrying apostolic authority, revealing problematic evidence of internal factional conflict within the movement. They faced the prospect of publishing this conflict to the world.

By the year 65, James, the brother of Jesus, and Peter were both dead. Paul was also presumably dead, although he would not have been a significant figure in the Jerusalem-based movement. It is *conceivable* that the BD had died as well since scholars commonly allege that his recent death is alluded to 21.23. However, there is a strong patristic tradition that John died at an advanced age around the turn of the century. Jerome indicates that John died during the reign of Trajan (98–117 CE):

But Domitian having been put to death and his acts, on account of his excessive cruelty, having been annulled by the senate, he [John] returned to Ephesus under Pertinax and continuing there until the time of the Emperor Trajan, founded and built churches throughout all Asia, and, worn out by old age, died in the sixty-eighth year after our Lord's passion and was buried near the same city.³

If Jesus died in either 30 or 33 CE, Jerome's belief that John died 68 years after the death of Jesus suggests that John would have died in either 98 or 101, perhaps in his late 80s depending upon how old he was at the time of Jesus' death. Irenaeus also indicates that John lived until the time of Trajan:

the Church in Ephesus, founded by Paul, and having John remaining among them permanently until the times of Trajan, is a true witness of the tradition of the apostles.⁴

Thus, it would be wise to approach the exegesis of this language in 21.21–23 with caution. The academy's typical interpretation is that it reflects the BD's unexpected death and the "Johannine community's" alleged consequent dismay. Yet this is based on the mistaken assumption that John 21 appeared circa 100 CE or later. For when this text is read at face value, there is no indication that the BD has died. To the contrary, it appears to suggest that there is puzzlement that the BD has not died. The most literal inference from Jesus' statement, "*If it is my will that he remain until I return*" is that

³ Jerome, *De Viris Illustribus*, ch. ix

⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.3.4

he has not died for some reason. The following verse 23a, "*The saying spread among the brothers that this disciple was not to die*" appears to suggest that the BD's continuing survival was being interpreted by his followers as a confirmation that he had been uniquely designated by Jesus as the ultimate apostolic authority, a theme consistent with the promotion of the BD in John 1–20. The redactor wishes to suppress this interpretation with the correction that, though the BD has outlived James and Peter, his eventual death will be irrelevant and of no consequence. This is the plainest reading of 23b, "*Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?'*" The dismissive tone is ostensibly directed at Peter, but in context it would apply to anyone who may have been reading too much into the BD's continuing survival.

Note that the redactor then refers to the BD in the present tense as if he is still living, "*This **is** the disciple who **is bearing witness** to these things, and we know that his testimony is true, but...*" At face value the text reads as if the BD is still alive as John 21 is being appended to Ur-John. This would of course have been the case if the BD was the apostle John, the text was being appended to Ur-John in the mid-60s, and John did not die until the reign of Trajan.

Yet the affirmation of the BD's testimony being true rings hollow. In context it is apparent that this redactor does not believe that the BD's "testimony is true" either in regard to Peter or his own claim of "uniquely beloved" status. So his comment "*we know that his testimony is true*" is at least somewhat disingenuous. Since he has used sarcasm as a device in 20.20 one may suspect that in saying "*we know that his testimony is true*" he is inviting his fellow pro-Petrine believers to interpret this as sarcasm as well. Following this is the editor's cool dismissal of Ur-John as just one of a world full of books that could be written. Accordingly, given the evidence of political conflict that is reflected in Ur-John and John 21, the unit 21.20–25 in its entirety may be read coherently as the redactor's somewhat derisive dismissal of the BD as a leading authority in the movement.

There will surely be resistance among scholars to the interpretation of 21.20–25 in this manner. Those who view the scriptures as divinely inspired will have difficulty reading them as materials produced out of menial human conflict. Even secular scholars who view the NT gospels as religious or philosophical fictive fabrications may not be accustomed to interpreting them as products of genuine historical dispute between real persons. So I offer this

interpretation of 21.20–25 as a viable alternative for those who may wish to consider it.



In the mid-60s, a second generation of leadership was assuming control of the Jesus movement just when tensions between Rome and the Jews were reaching a crescendo. The author of Mark would surely have presented his newly composed gospel to the movement's leadership. It appears that someone recognized that the publication of two opposing gospels revealing factional discord within the movement would have been counter-productive. For evidently, a decision was made to truncate Mark at 16.8 and transfer the conclusion in edited form to Ur-John. Someone had recognized that this would resolve several issues. The transfer would rehabilitate Ur-John, nullifying its anti-Petrine orientation and making it appear in the end to be a pro-Petrine work. Mark's aggressive adaptation of Ur-John's three denials as the literary device by which Peter is declared the movement's new shepherd would have been seen as an obvious refutation of Ur-John's attack upon Peter, so the transfer of Mark's ending to Ur-John would eliminate the most glaring point of political conflict between Ur-John and Mark. Suppressing Mark's ending at 16.8 would also eliminate tangible evidence that the Ur-John appendix had been replicated from Mark. Meanwhile, Mark's significant literary achievement and political contribution affirming Peter's supremacy would be retained in the movement's written traditions; the pro-Roman *Gospel of Mark*, even in truncated form, would continue to be circulated and recognized as a record of Peter's teachings, as patristic tradition attests.

It is probable that the transfer of Mark's finale to Ur-John occurred concurrently with the decision to reproduce and distribute Mark, for it seems unlikely that Mark would have been circulated for any length of time without the affirmation of Peter's leadership and authority having been preserved in the movement's documents somewhere. Matthew and Luke both appear to have used copies of Mark ending at 16.8, so the loss of Mark's ending occurred early in the gospel's existence. But more telling is the fact that John 21 contains the array of grammatical features (frequent use of *oun*, asyndeton, historical present verb forms) noted previously that are in literary harmony with the Ur-John text. Collectively these data suggest that the John 21

narrative was appended to Ur-John prior to its translation from Aramaic to Greek. And indeed, if Mark was produced in the mid-60s at a time when Ur-John was circulating in Aramaic, John 21 would need to have been rendered in Aramaic for it to have been recognized as an authentic appendix to Ur-John.

Who was the redactor of John 21?

Several things can be known or suspected of the redactor who added John 21. He appears to be an advocate of Petrine leadership, for he claims that Jesus had designated Peter as the sole shepherd of the movement, and in 21.11 it is Peter, not the Beloved Disciple, who hauls the catch of 153 fish symbolizing the church to shore. In the end, Peter is to suffer a martyr's death to the glory of God (21.18-19), while the BD's death will be of no concern or consequence (21.23). So it is fair to presume that the redactor is a pro-Petrine editor who is politically aligned with the author of Mark. In addition, he was in a position to exercise editorial authority over the *Gospel of Mark* soon after it had appeared. And he had the authority and desire to copy over key details from Mark's original conclusion into John 21 that reveal that the story had been composed in some other context as a first post-resurrection appearance (21.4,12b). The redactor is evidently aware that the claims in 4 (that the disciples did not recognize Jesus on the shore), and 12b (that they dared not ask, "Who are you?") would cause readers to suspect that this story was originally composed as a first reunion encounter, for he knows that he needs to "clarify" in 21.14 that this was indeed the disciples' third encounter.

However, at the end of the appendix in 21.20–25, we find what appears to be the editor's caustic dismissal of the BD. This writer is editing with a negative frame of mind that becomes quite apparent at the end. Once one suspects that the redactor may be editing with a simmering resentment causes 21.14 to read in a different light—one must consider (as difficult as it may be to imagine at first) that the "third appearance" claim may also have been intended as thinly-veiled sarcasm. For this redactor knows that this is a first encounter story being unnaturally appended to Ur-John; he is required to represent it as a third appearance, but he does little to mitigate the confusion. One might argue that the disciples' inability to recognize Jesus in 21.4 could have been simply because he was too far away. But 21.12b is a serious and apparently deliberate discontinuity; the redactor could easily have omitted the unnecessary side comment that the disciples dared not ask who he was.

Omitting this would have reduced the awkwardness of the narrative. But the redactor does not do so—he lets it stand for some reason. Thus, this redactor appears committed to reproducing as much as possible of the narrative detail in the source he is drawing from, while showing little concern for making it appear coherent as a continuation of the narrative in John 20.

Seen in this light, the opening verses 21.1–2 become all the more suspicious for their clumsiness. For as noted in Chapter One, if this story had originated in Mark beyond 16.8, there is no doubt that the grieving disciples deciding to return to their homes would have been Peter, Andrew, James, and John. The parallel in the *Gospel of Peter* that cites the despondent Peter and Andrew returning to their nets in Galilee is consistent with this. Yet “Peter, Andrew, James and John” constitutes a distinctive Markan signature; it would have been impossible to transfer these four names to Ur-John. The redactor would have been required to construct an alternative scenario. He evidently did so in a heavy-handed manner by mining Ur-John for uniquely Johannine references, and thus came up with Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael, ostensibly from the town of Cana, and the sea of Tiberias. Yet as a final touch he appears to add “those of Zebedee” to the group, which he is surely aware (if this is not an interpolated reference) would have made no sense at all in the *Gospel of John*. The end result is that in John 21.1–2, an improbable crew of uniquely Johannine disciples elect to go fishing at the “sea of Tiberias” for no apparent reason after having just seen the risen Lord twice in Jerusalem.

Now, to be sure, this redactor would have been faced with an impossible task—to transfer the story of a first post-resurrection reunion from the *Gospel of Mark* where it makes literary sense to the end of Ur-John where it does not. Nevertheless, the stringing together of so many Johannine names appears unnecessary and strenuously contrived. The editor has replaced an original Markan signature with an elaborately fabricated Johannine signature. This may be taken as further evidence that the text originated in Mark. The end result is that the opening premise in John 21 is, by any practical measure, a nonsensical continuation of John 20, and the redactor surely knows this. Accordingly, we may reasonably suspect that he was intentionally creating an overtly absurd scenario, which contributes further to the impression that he was editing with little regard for the integrity of the final product. In short, he was editing with the *express objective* to make the appendix appear out of place. If this was not the editor’s objective, it is difficult to avoid the

alternative inference that he must have been remarkably careless or inept as an editor. In my view, all of this was quite intentional.

Meanwhile, the editor who truncated Mark at 16.8 had the authority and evident desire to leave the end of Mark dangling on the improbable term *gar*, with the women fleeing in fear and leaving the story unresolved. In so doing, he intentionally created an ending that would certainly cause readers to wonder what had happened to the original conclusion. So both Mark 16.8 and John 21 present jarring irregularities that would cause readers to inquire about the endings. Given that there were likely only two extant narrative gospels at the time, one with a strange ending on *gar* and the other with an incoherent extra ending, one must suspect that the redactor(s) *wanted* readers to recognize that the original conclusion of Mark had been transferred to Ur-John. This would explain why Mark's original ending was preserved to such a surprising degree in John 21.

The truncation of Mark at 16.8 and the appending of Ur-John with ch. 21 were related literary events—the text was being taken from Mark for the express purpose of appending it to Ur-John, for it is unlikely that the ending of Mark had been independently suppressed with the intent of destroying it, yet through some serendipitous sequence of events it was salvaged and attached to Ur-John. It is also highly unlikely that Mark originally ended at 16.8 without the reunion predicted in 14.28, only to have John 21 materialize as a manipulated version of what one would expect to have followed Mark 16.8. Scholars who wish to maintain that Mark originally ended by design at 16.8 would need to consider that the editor of John 21 must have been, for some unknown reason, composing a narrative that would function with precision as an ideal conclusion to the *Gospel of Mark*, yet intending to append it to John. This scenario is difficult to envision. The simpler and more coherent explanation is that the ending of Mark was being edited for transfer to Ur-John for political reasons, and that this transfer was being managed by a single redactor or perhaps two editors working in concert.

Who could have been in a position of authority to manipulate these two gospels in such an aggressive manner, right at the time of Mark's release? This of course is the stuff of pure speculation, but may we not reasonably suspect that this pro-Petrine editor with such a commanding respect for the *Gospel of Mark* may have been the *author of Mark* himself? For one can easily imagine a scenario in which he had completed his magnificent literary triumph with its brilliant original climax, and was quite justly satisfied with his work. But after reviewing it with key leadership figures in the movement,

a collective assessment had been made that Mark's confrontational response to Ur-John was not in the movement's best interest. Someone evidently realized that if Mark's conclusion was transferred to Ur-John, it would mask the internal political hostilities and present a more unified front to the world. With such a decision made, would it not have been natural for the movement's leadership to engage the author of Mark to edit his own gospel? The author himself would have been acutely aware of the need to insert 16.7 as a substitute closing bracket of Section 6, and he was surely creative enough to have visualized this solution to the problem. And he would have wanted to replicate as much of his ending in John 21 as he could possibly justify. In the end, he performed the edits to both the ending of Mark at 16.8 and the text of John 21 in such a way that it remained obvious to his immediate audience that the inspired climax of his gospel had been transferred to Ur-John. Furthermore, if the author of Mark had been directed to edit the texts in this manner, he would likely have approached the task with some degree of frustration and resentment, knowing that his formidable literary achievement was being severely compromised. The hostility that he appears to direct toward the BD in 21.20–25 would have been understandable under the circumstances. The notion that this may have been the author of Mark himself performing the edits is speculative of course, but if this was not the author of Mark, it was a close associate with the same abiding respect for the *Gospel of Mark*.

Conclusion

The recovery of the primitive Ur-John text embedded in canonical John brings into focus several intriguing insights related to the origin of Christianity. Ur-John appears to contain early historical remembrances of Jesus by an apostle and rival of Peter who had known and traveled with him. This was likely the apostle John, as will be discussed in the next chapter. These apparent memories of Jesus in Ur-John include the notion that Jesus had split from and competed with John the Baptist, that he had aggressively promoted himself as Messiah, that he had been hailed by his followers as a pending King of Israel, and that he had been condemned explicitly for challenging the authority of Caesar. The author also recalls that the disciples had been subject to arrest. Collectively these memories constitute a primitive sketch of Jesus as an anti-Roman Messianic rebel of some type. Since there is no surviving indication that the Jesus movement was militarized and

violent, one must consider the possibility that Jesus believed that a popular Jewish uprising would be honored and abetted by God. With the assistance of heavenly intervention, Jesus may have believed that the foreign oppressors would be expelled from the holy land and a sovereign Kingdom of Israel would be restored. If this is what Jesus had envisioned, it is difficult to imagine that he did not know or gain inspiration from *Psalms of Solomon 17 and 18*, which are a script for precisely this type of Messianic rebellion (for the texts of these Psalms, see Appendix II). In particular, they predict the coming of a Messiah without an army, whose rebellion (with the assistance of heavenly intervention) would culminate in the restoration of a sovereign Israel and an expulsion of the foreign overlords. If Jesus had been motivated by such a vision, it provides a credible historical context for his crucifixion by the Romans as an anti-Roman rebel, yet without any surviving memory of his movement having been violent.

The existence of Ur-John as a primitive narrative composed by an author in conflict with Peter also provides a plausible historical context for the transfer of the conclusion of the *Gospel of Mark* to a Johannine narrative that, through subsequent recensions, eventually became the *Gospel of John*. Yet it also suggests what the essential ideological conflict between Peter and the BD/author of Ur-John might have been. For if the BD's perspective on Jesus is preserved in Ur-John, and Peter's preaching is documented in Mark, then both apostles were aware of the need to mask the explicit anti-Roman sentiments of Jesus if the movement was to survive in any form. Both were aware of the need to absolve Pilate for the crucifixion, and to make it appear as if Jesus' adversaries were Jewish priests and Pharisees. Both contain debates over Sabbath law, suggesting that Jesus was engaged in religious (non-political) conflicts. However, in Ur-John, other than Jesus proclaiming his Messiahship and performing signs to validate his claim, he is largely portrayed as a Messiah without a message. There are no parables, no moral aphorisms, no *kingdom of God* rhetoric, no apocalyptic speeches, no references to Jesus as *Son of man*. In Ur-John, Jesus is silent on issues that are prominent in the Synoptics. If Jesus was indeed leading a popular rebellion, it would not be surprising to discover that the BD/author of Ur-John had genuine historical memories of anti-Roman rhetoric that would have been dangerous and counterproductive to include in his gospel. And if he was writing prior to the time the movement had developed and attributed a non-political message as a substitute to fill the void, this would explain the silence. Nevertheless, for whatever reason, in Ur-John we see compelling indications

of Jesus as an anti-Roman Messianic rebel without a coherent message of substance.

Meanwhile, the *Gospel of Mark* takes the depoliticization of Jesus to a far greater extreme. In Mark, Jesus actively suppresses his identity as Messiah, he does healings in private, he takes step to avoid stirring the masses. He conducts his healing/teaching mission exclusively in rural Galilee to avoid political confrontation with Jerusalem. His teachings on the *kingdom of God* are allegedly “misunderstood” by everyone including his own disciples. In Mark, Jesus’ tendency to preach in obscure parables is advanced as the reason for everyone’s confusion as to what Jesus had meant by the kingdom. In Mark, Jesus actively befriends tax collectors and advises payment of taxes to Caesar. He is condemned for blasphemy, not sedition. And per the melodramatic kiss of Judas, we understand that the disciples were not subject to arrest. This thorough whitewashing of Jesus in Mark reads as a comprehensive rebuttal and deconstruction of an extant memory that Jesus had indeed been an anti-Roman Messianic rebel.

In short, when compared to the Ur-John sketch of Jesus, the Markan Jesus appears to be a largely fictitious character fabricated for the express purpose of appealing to Rome. One might be on firmer ground to assume that the *Gospel of Mark* is not merely nonhistorical; rather, it is quintessential anti-history, in many respects a politically neutralized polar opposite of the authentic Jesus. And Mark’s whitewashed image of Jesus is one that the historical Jesus himself, as a passionate anti-Roman rebel, would likely have found offensive.

It is on this contentious point that a likely historical conflict between Peter and the BD/author of Ur-John comes into view. If Ur-John reflects historical eyewitness memories, and Mark preserves the teachings of Peter, then these two gospels reflect a constitutional dispute between the Petrine and Johannine factions of the movement over the degree to which the legacy of Jesus should be distorted or even falsified in deference to Rome. The author of Ur-John knew that it was prudent to remain silent on what he remembers of the politically inflammatory rhetoric of Jesus, but to fabricate stories such as that of Jesus befriending tax collectors or supporting Roman taxation; or to claim that nobody had understood Jesus’ kingdom rhetoric, or that he had been condemned for blasphemy—these were all seen by the author of Ur-John as a bridge too far—overtly dishonest falsifications of the memory of Jesus. Bowing to Roman interests to this extreme degree was seen by him as cowardly, a betrayal of all that Jesus had stood for, a betrayal of the vision

for which Jesus had given his life. Under these circumstances, it is little wonder that the author of Ur-John went to extraordinary lengths to portray the apostle Peter as a liar, a coward, and a second betrayer of Jesus.