

THE MEMOIRS OF ST. PETER: A NEW TRANSLATION OF THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK

(MICHAEL PAKALUK)

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New translations of the Bible, targeted at a broad audience and done by individuals, rather than committees, seem to be a growth industry. This book, a translation of the Gospel of Saint Mark, joins, among others, Sarah Ruden's excellent recent work, *The Face of Water*, which offers both commentary on translation and translation itself, and David Bentley Hart's 2018 translation of the entire New Testament. The author, Michael Pakaluk, has done an outstanding job of writing a translation that is not daunting, yet is very enlightening, and this is a book well worth reading.

Pakaluk's goal is to restore the "you are there" feel of the text, mostly simply by using the verb tenses and cadences of Mark's original Greek. This is a much better way to update the feel of older translations than the "contemporary" translations offered in the 1970s and 1980s, which, in the tiresome way of the time, tried to make Christianity "hip" and "relevant," and probably "groovy" too, a worthless project then as now, since as this translation shows, Christianity is always relevant. Not to mention that the miserable end of that project is what we see today, that those churches most hip are most empty, or filled with mini-golf courses instead of worshipers, as in the case last month of Rochester Cathedral.

The evangelist Mark switches tenses constantly, but most translations consistently use the past tense in English, rather than switching. Pakaluk says, and it seems right, that keeping Mark's tense changes and treating the Gospel as, in essence, a spoken narrative leads to enhanced understanding. Someone speaking from memory, Pakaluk correctly points out, often switches tenses, especially as he places himself back into the narrative as if he were still there. This explains Mark's use of the historical present—using the present tense to refer to an event in the past, which creates an effect of immediacy. Pakaluk retains this usage, and the result feels both different and more right than the translations we are used to.

The translation is backed up with short, but powerful, explanatory notes, which cover background explanations of history and culture; interpretations related to phrasing; ties to other passages of Scripture;

and pointers to Saint Peter's authorship. The result is a compelling and valuable read. That said, I think *The Memoirs of St. Peter* should be a starting point, or part of a larger reading program, not an end, even for reading only Mark. A basic truth for Christians, of all stripes, is that it is valuable to read the Bible in part or in whole, and in particular the Gospels. But reading must be accompanied by understanding, and few of us are capable of full understanding without help. Thus, interpretation is necessary, both to enhance understanding and to not fall into error.

Pakaluk does not claim to provide a complete set of interpretations, merely some explanations that are relevant and which fit with his thesis, that Mark's Gospel is a record of Peter's own words. He discusses each chapter briefly, then comments on some, but not all, of the verses, grouped by event. So to get extra detail, I coupled this book with a read of the Navarre Bible's *Gospel of Mark*, which is the Revised Standard Edition copiously footnoted from a Roman Catholic perspective. Pakaluk cites and uses various other commentaries, especially the Venerable Bede's (he wrote one on Mark and one on Luke) and that by Theophylact, an Orthodox archbishop of the eleventh century. You can go very far in this direction; my point is that rounding out any commentary with some other commentaries gives a fuller picture.

All these commentaries, including Pakaluk's, have little in common with modern pseudo-commentaries, such as those offered by the infamous and mis-named Jesus Seminar. Those are a dime a dozen, or were a few years ago. One main dividing line among commentaries is between those who actually have Christian faith and those who do not, but a second fracture line is focus. That is, if the focus is Jesus Christ and the meaning of his ministry, analysis and commentary will necessarily be different than if the focus is on man, especially modern man, the idol of his age. It is that latter that we were offered for a long time. Fortunately, those pseudo-commentaries by pretend Christians seem to have declined in popularity, because they are no longer needed to provide cover, as we become a post-Christian society, and as many supposedly Christian leaders, from Jen Hatmaker to Pope Francis, feel free to simply ignore the Bible and tradition in preference for Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, and feel no need to conceal their own self-exaltation with sophisticated and heretical "commentary."

To me, raised religious (Roman Catholic) and attending a (Dutch Reformed) elementary school where significant memorization of Bible passages was practiced, all of Mark, and for that matter all the Gospels, and Acts, are very familiar. I tend to assume that's true for everyone, but of course it's not, anymore, though it certainly used to be, even fifty or sixty years ago, true for nearly everyone. This included non-Christians, since the stories of the Bible were, and are, woven throughout all high Western culture, and were referred to continuously in conversation, popular media, and political speeches, such that even a pure atheist would know all the significant stories of the Gospels. This is true for core episodes, such as the Resurrection, or the Transfiguration, or the death of John the Baptist, but also true for individual phrases, often used as aphorisms, and usually quoted from the King James Version (the cadences of which often influenced earlier politicians, most notably Lincoln). As a result, much is lost, and increasingly lost, both in the richness of modern discourse, and in the ability to understand crucial speeches and writings of the past. Too bad.

As the title of this book indicates, there is a long tradition that Mark's Gospel was dictated by, or relied upon direct discussions with, Peter. Pakaluk wholly endorses this tradition, and quite a few of his notes comment on portions of the text that support the tradition. So-called modern textual interpretation often rejects the idea that Mark or Peter had much if anything to do with this Gospel, but Pakaluk does not spend time countering such claims, or nattering on about "Q," though he does briefly discuss the relationship among the synoptic Gospels. Mark's Gospel was the earliest Gospel, it appears, and we know enough about their dates of death that certainly it is plausible that Peter cooperated with Mark in its writing. Moreover, it is recorded that Mark was with Peter in Rome around A.D. 60. Pakaluk believes, and makes a strong case, that the origin of the Gospel of Mark was as an exercise of pastoral care by Saint Peter, showing how he thought the life of Jesus was best presented for the formation of Christian souls, for the collective of which he was responsible, having been appointed to that role by Christ himself.

Subtle phrasings used by Mark suggest an eyewitness; when Pakaluk points them out, it seems obvious, even though we've read the same text many times before. In general, these are the types of details that an eyewitness would notice and comment on, but an after-the-fact

chronicler, even a sympathetic one, would pass over or, more likely, be unaware of. Mark, of course, was not a follower of Jesus during Jesus's lifetime, except maybe at the very end, so he wasn't an eyewitness. The tradition from very early was that Peter was the eyewitness for Mark. In fact, Justin Martyr, in A.D. 150, specifically referred to the Gospel of Mark as "the memoirs of Peter"; Pakaluk's title is not even original. This does not mean that Peter sat down with Mark to write together, as in the painting on the cover of this book—in fact, given suggestions by Irenaeus that the Gospel of Mark was completed after Peter's death, perhaps Peter wrote notes, or worked on a rough draft with Mark. It doesn't really matter; the point is, Pakaluk says, that the Gospel of Mark represents the life of Jesus as experienced, first-hand in almost every particular, by Peter.

Evidence for Peter's authorship includes that only Mark cites actual words in Aramaic used by Jesus in healings; that Peter is often not referred to by name in Mark's stories when other Gospels do refer to him by name in the same stories, especially when using his name would draw attention away from Jesus, except when the reference shows Peter in a bad light, when Peter is more often named; and that more detail is added in episodes, such as Peter's denial of Jesus, where only Peter was present. Aside from facts derived from Peter's eyewitness, Mark also records, as is common in the Gospels, passages that a later chronicler would likely have sanitized, tidied, or interpolated explanatory information to make the Gospels seem more complete or coherent. Instead, they remain in what seems like their original, orally transmitted, "you are there" state. In addition to sometimes presenting the disciples, especially Peter, in a negative light, and the emphasis on the Crucifixion itself, regarded as disgraceful at the time, there are other untidy elements. For example, in Mark 5, the story of the Gadarene Swine, when Jesus casts out a demon, or demons, and they enter pigs, the demon does not immediately leave the possessed man upon Jesus's initial command, and then the demon, after identifying himself as "Legion," "begs and begs [Jesus] not to send them out of that district." What does that mean? We are not sure, as Pakaluk says, but Mark, in Pakaluk's interpretation, faithfully simply repeats what Peter, who was there, told him.

Mark, it is traditionally held, inserted his own life obliquely into his Gospel. Of the Gospels, only Mark has the story, in the Garden

of Gethsemane, of the young man who fled naked when stripped of his cloak during the violent arrest of Jesus. As Pakaluk discusses, this young man is presumed to have been Mark himself, and his inclusion of the story a type of wry signature, since it would be a strange side-note otherwise with no evident reason for inclusion. Mark is also believed to be the “John Mark” mentioned in, among other places, Acts 12:12, the son of a rich widow, and there is a tradition that she owned the Garden of Gethsemane. That would explain Mark’s presence in the Garden, given that he was not a follower of Jesus at the time, or perhaps had only recently come to be one. None of this has theological impact, but it is an interesting personalization of the Gospel stories, showing how these were all real people with real lives, complex and interwoven.

I’m not qualified to parse any of this chapter by chapter, and you’re best off reading it yourself. Still, two items, one general and one specific, stood out to me. First, Pakaluk points out that, beginning from the first chapter, Mark makes Jesus the message—not what Jesus had to say. That is, Jesus was not primarily some teacher of a new set of morals, as facile moderns often would have it, but the Son of God, come to defeat Satan and to bring life to mankind. The moral precepts flow from his being God; they are not, in the manner of some Eastern swami, the main point. Shot throughout Mark is the related concept that Jesus spoke with authority, and people reacted to him as to someone with authority. Thus, for example, when Jesus threw the money-changers out of the Temple, as Pakaluk notes, “There were temple guards who could be summoned to deal with violent people. It is unlikely that the money-changers suffered from a bad conscience.” In order to command, Jesus must have been seen as possessing authority—the authority of the Son of Man. As a general frame for understanding the Gospels, this seems critically important to me.

Second, and more specifically, Pakaluk points out that eschatology is a particular pastoral concern of Peter’s, appearing also in First Peter. As with each of the Gospels, Christ talks about the end of the world, a topic that I, with my apocalyptic bent, am always interested in hearing about. Mark 13 focuses on two final things: the coming destruction of Jerusalem, and the end of Time itself. In Pakaluk’s translation (quite similar to the RSV), in Mark 13:24–25, after talking of false Christs who will arise toward the end of Time, the real Christ tells four of the

disciples (the usual trio of Peter, James, and John, plus Andrew), “But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened. The moon will not give its light. The stars will be falling from the heavens. The powers which are in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds, with much power and glory.” Pakaluk notes that while the Church Fathers interpreted the “shaken powers” as angels, as science has advanced, the alternate interpretation of some change in the physical laws of the universe, unknown to the Fathers, seems plausible. (The Navarre commentary suggests something similar, but less specific.) As with the Big Bang and Genesis, it is interesting to me that modern science never contradicts the substance of the Bible, as often assumed by those today in the grips of primitive scientism, and that as our knowledge increases, and gaps in our knowledge also appear (such as what started the Big Bang), the interplay of Christianity and science makes Christianity appear more, rather than less, plausible. And, of course, there are the strange lacunae of areas such as quantum mechanics, where it appears that conscious observation is necessary for certain aspects of reality to snap into non-probabilistic existence, suggesting that man is, perhaps, after all, the focus of the Universe, and it made by God for us. Maybe, therefore, when something dramatic happens to the known basic physical laws of the universe, we will know that the End Times are upon us. You and I probably won’t be here to witness it, but who knows? In the meantime, waiting for such drama, we can enrich ourselves by reading this book—so go ahead, buy a copy.