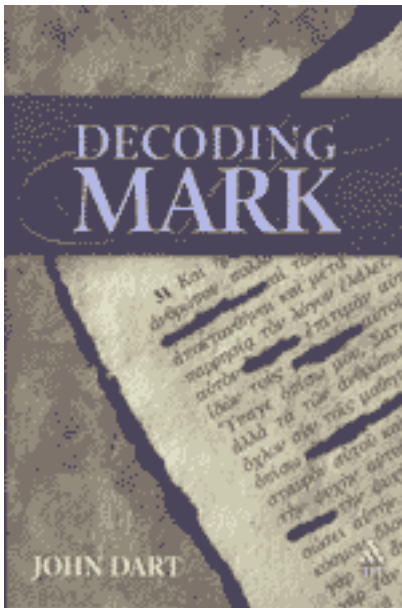


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Dart, John

Decoding Mark

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John Dart's *Decoding Mark* reminds me of a saying I once heard while attending the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature to the effect that "any scholar worth his salt could find a chiasm in a biblical text, no matter how improbable." *Decoding Mark* certainly reinforces this saying, especially the latter half, as Dart claims to have found a series of interconnected chiasms in the Gospel of Mark that occupy the entire book, from the prologue at 1:1–14 stretching to the epilogue at 15:34–16:8. The significance of this sensational find for Dart is primarily threefold: it reveals (1) that the episode reported in the fragment from the *Secret Gospel of Mark* discovered by the late Morton Smith was genuine and was part of the original version of the Gospel of Mark, (2) that the original text of Mark can be reconstructed with accuracy, (3) and that the author of the Gospel was a literary genius who wrote a complex and sophisticated work.

Decoding Mark starts off quite well as Dart relates the interesting story of the discovery of a fragment from the *Secret Gospel of Mark* by Morton Smith at the Mar Saba Monastery in 1958 and its controversial reception in scholarship. What makes the first two chapters so interesting is that Dart had covered the discovery firsthand when he worked as a journalist for the *Los Angeles Times* and had been in direct contact with Morton Smith since the late 1970s. Dart's storytelling abilities combined with his

journalistic flare in these opening chapters makes for some interesting reading. Unfortunately, once one moves beyond the two introductory chapters and into Dart's convoluted and sensational arguments, the quality of the book greatly diminishes.

In chapter 3, "The "Big Omission" in Luke," Dart begins building his argument by examining why Luke, who used Mark as a source for his Gospel, does not contain Mark 6:47–8:26 when he contains Markan material from both before and after this section. Dart argues that the gaping omission in Luke was due to the fact that Luke used a version of Mark that did not contain this material. Dart then goes on to postulate that these missing chapters (6:47–8:26) were not even part of the original version of the Gospel but were later added by a redactor. As part of this claim Dart suggests that these missing Markan chapters are found in the Gospel of Matthew because its author used a different and later edition of Mark than Luke had used.

In chapter 4, "Better Than Elijah, Greater Than Elisha," Dart relies primarily on the scholarship of Wolfgang Roth, who argued that Jesus in the Gospel of Mark is best understood when one considers the Israelite prophets Elijah and Elisha. Roth argued that Elijah is portrayed in the book of Kings as performing eight miracles, while his predecessor Elisha, who received a "double portion" (2 Kgs 2:9) of his spirit, is portrayed as performing sixteen miracles. In the Gospel of Mark Roth attributes twenty-four miracles to Jesus and argues that Jesus was being purposely portrayed as a figure greater than both Elijah and Elisha. Although Dart employs Roth's study to prop up his argument that Mark 6:47–8:26 was not originally part of Mark's Gospel, he departs from it in a few ways. Dart argues that Mark 6:47–8:26 was added because a redactor wanted to add more miracles to the Gospel to make Jesus look greater than the original version of Mark intended. When this section is omitted from Mark, Jesus performs roughly the same number of miracles as Elisha, and the similarities between Jesus and Elisha are much stronger. For Dart, a nice parallel in Mark exists between Jesus and Elisha and John the Baptist and Elijah. Dart argues that this evidence helps to buttress his claims that 6:47–8:26 was not in the original version of Mark.

Chapter 5, "Bracketing and Bashing," asserts that the original version of Mark contained six and possibly seven bracketed stories that were used to write off Jesus' blood relations and defame Jesus' best-known followers. The upshot of the use of this bracketing for Dart is that it directs negative attention toward Jesus' family and named disciples and highlights the key disciple in the original version of the Gospel: the unnamed young man who appears in *Secret Mark* and in the empty tomb at Mark 16:5. Chapter 6, "Deciphering the Code," contains the central thesis of the book, that the original version of Mark contained a web of chiasms that stretched throughout the entire Gospel. Not only does Dart identify the prologue (1:1–14) and the conclusion of the Gospel (15:34–16:8)

as chiasms, but he identifies five major chiastic blocks that form the inner layers of the Gospel: 1:14–4:12; 4:13–6:46; 8:27–10:52; 11:1–14:9; 14:10–15:33. In chapter 7, “Bringing back the Lost Disciple,” Dart reiterates his chiastic findings and focuses in on the third chiasm at 8:27–10:52, where he inserts the fragment from the *Secret Gospel of Mark*. Dart attempts to show how well this fragment fits into this chiasm and argues that as a result it is original. In this chapter he also argues that Luke (23:39–44) contains some original Markan material that had been omitted from Mark.

In chapter 8, “The Fabulous Word Mosaic of Mark,” Dart stresses that his chiastic findings reveal that the author of Mark wrote an intricate and complex Gospel whose literary merits have been grossly underestimated in scholarship. In chapter 9, “Overlooked Heroes,” Dart argues that his chiastic patterns suggest that Mark was very critical of Jesus’ family and the leading disciples and that they needed to be discredited in order for the figures who play a small role in the Gospel to be recognized. Thus, the unnamed young man who figures prominently in the episode from *Secret Mark* plays a key role in the Gospel of Mark and one that has been historically undervalued. Chapter 10, “Unashamed Naked Return to Oneness,” Dart argues for a deeper view of baptism in early Christianity based on the fragment from *Secret Mark*. Dart suggests that the early Christian initiation ritual of baptism attempted to “restore the initiate into an Edenlike bisexual being, neither male nor female” (107). Dart further argues based on some creative exegesis from the *Gospel of Thomas* that early Christian baptism occurred at the end of a seven-day period of initiation. In the last three chapters of the book (chs. 11–13) Dart goes over his previous conclusions and tries to restate and reinforce his central theses.

On the positive side, *Decoding Mark* has a few strengths. Following the lead of Helmut Koester, Dart raises the possibility that many different versions of the Gospel of Mark could have existed in the early stages of its composition. Although Dart does not convincingly prove that this was the case, this is certainly an interesting possibility that potentially has many consequences for the Two Document Hypothesis. Another strength of *Decoding Mark* is that it is creative, offers novel exegesis of certain Markan passages, and pays attention to underlying themes in the Gospel. For example, Dart connects the young man in the empty tomb at Mark 16:5 with the unnamed young man from *Secret Mark*. Likewise, Dart’s emphasis that Mark is often especially critical of Jesus’ family and named disciples is worthy of further analysis. Another up-side to this book is that it stresses that the Gospel of Mark is a complex literary document whose literary sophistication has been traditionally undervalued in scholarship. While I disagree with the way in which Dart argues that it is complex document, I do agree with him that Mark’s literary merits deserve more acknowledgement.

Despite the few strengths of the book, it has many weakness and deficiencies that render its conclusions extremely dubious. Problems with the work range from minor errors such as the one on page 2 that reads that Clement of Alexandria lived in the first-century (in actuality, he lived at the end of the second and beginning of the third century) to more fundamental problems with Dart's eclectic ad hoc approaches and conclusions.

First and foremost, Dart's chiastic argument for Mark is too grand and unconvincing. One look at the appendices of the book (158–98), where he lays out his various chiasms, immediately reveals how tenuous they are. Rarely are they built upon solid links but rather upon a few catchwords here and there that Dart has found and manipulated into a chiasm. Dart's chiastic divisions are based more on convenience than they are on substance. The contents of Mark's Gospel are diverse, and accordingly Jesus' deeds, teachings, and miracles are interspersed throughout the Gospel in such a way that many possible configurations could be made by connecting or juxtaposing any one section of the Gospel with any other. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that one might be able to find many possible configurations by connecting or juxtaposing any one section of the Gospel with many others. Furthermore, in order to make some of these chiasms workable, Dart is forced to edit Mark as he sees fit, sometimes arbitrarily. He cuts out 6:47–8:26 because this is not found in Luke and he supposes that Luke did this solely because this section was not in the version of Mark he used, even though there are persuasive reasons why Luke might have purposely chosen to omit this material from Mark. Likewise, in order to make his chiasm that stretches from Mark 14:10–15:33 look somewhat convincing, Dart takes Luke 23:39–44 and argues that this was a part of the original version of Mark, even though it is not even in Mark. Dart can marshal no evidence for this addition except that it conveniently fits in his chiasm.

On page 79 Dart claims that the reason he has found all these chiasms in Mark that connect to make one "macro-chiasm" and that no other scholars have found this is because (1) most scholars are busy doing administrative duties and have not had much time to spend examining "unconventional avenues of research" and (2) scholars and researchers are content to spend their time doing safer research that will not endanger tenure. While I mildly agree with Dart's second point, I disagree with him completely that the reason no one else has found the "macro-chiasm" in Mark is because scholars are too busy with administrative duties and other responsibilities to spend time doing "unconventional" research on the Gospel. Rather, I would suggest that no one else has found the "macro-chiasm" in Mark because when Mark is subjected to rigorous scholarly investigation this theory falls apart.

Another major problem with Dart's work is that it appears that he does not correctly understand the relationship between the *Secret Gospel* and the Gospel of Mark. Dart

argues that the episodes from the *Secret Gospel of Mark* were in the original version of Mark. However, this is not what Clement of Alexandria, who preserves the fragments of the *Secret Gospel* reports. When Clement writes to Theodore he says that two versions of Mark existed: a “public Mark” for a general readership and a “secret Mark” for a narrow circle of initiates. He also explicitly says that the public Mark was written first and that Mark revised this Gospel after he went from Rome to Alexandria to make the secret Gospel. Clement clearly infers that the public Mark was written first and that the episode from the secret Gospel was not in this edition. However, Dart argues that the episode from *Secret Mark* was in the original edition of Mark and hence contradicts what Clement reports.

Dart also does not do a very good job of explaining why Luke, who apparently had the original version of Mark, which contained the episode from *Secret Mark*, chose to completely omit this story from his Gospel. Dart’s reasons for Luke’s omission on pages 121–22 are not altogether very convincing for removing such an important episode if it were in fact in the original version of Mark that Luke used. Contra Dart, it is more likely that Luke did not include this episode in his Gospel because it was not in the version of Mark he was using.

There are other substantial problems with the book, but space prohibits me from addressing them all. In the final analysis, I have very mixed views of *Decoding Mark*. On the one hand, it is a creative book that raises a few interesting issues about the Gospel of Mark, but on the other hand the central chiasmic thesis of the book is so tenuous and the methods of arriving at it are so ad hoc that it casts a shadow of doubt over almost every conclusion reached in the work. Dart has neither convincingly established that the Gospel of Mark contained a web of chiasms, that the episode contained in the *Secret Gospel of Mark* was a part of the original version of Mark, nor that he has reconstructed the original text of Mark. While Dart does his best to be convincing, his conclusions remain quite dubious and improbable.