

ANTI-GOSPEL REVISITED

“The Gospel according to Mark can be read as an anti-gospel to the rise of the Flavian dynasty.” This statement about the second Gospel, also known as the “anti-gospel hypothesis”, leaves open whether it is a claim about the circumstances of the text’s production and thus its pragmatics (“it *should* be read that way”) or about possibilities for the text’s reception and thus its potential (“it *could* be read that way”). This essay argues for the second alternative and explores the anti-gospel hypothesis as a powerful reception category that is used to read Mark’s gospel narrative.

In addition to exegetical considerations, a side-step to social and cultural (memory) studies will offer further insight on the question. As an illustration, I will describe how Germany’s victory in the 1954 soccer World Cup was interpreted as the “miracle of Bern” and will argue that from the point of view of cultural studies and social memory theory the idea that Mark’s narrative was an anti-gospel – that this was already a socially accepted reception category – is implausible given how long such categories take to develop, and might not do justice to the reception categories used in the Gospel. The essay will close by considering the potential of the anti-gospel hypothesis and the question of why interpretative frames can be so influential.

1. INTRODUCING THE ANTI-GOSPEL HYPOTHESIS

In the last twenty years, Mark’s Gospel has increasingly been read in the context of the Roman Empire. This trend started with interpretation of individual passages like the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida (Mark 8,22-26),¹ and now involves the Gospel as a whole. One approach currently popular in the German-speaking world is the anti-gospel hypothesis. Tobias Nicklas, who has carefully evaluated the anti-gospel hypothesis in his

1. E.g. E. EVE, *Spit in Your Eye: The Blind Man of Bethsaida and the Blind Man of Alexandria*, in *NTS* 54 (2008) 1-17.

contribution to this volume, names Martin Ebner, Bernhard Heiningen and Karl Matthias Schmidt as its main supporters.²

The term “anti-gospel” goes back to Gerd Theissen³ and describes readings that understand Mark’s Gospel as a critical assessment of Roman imperial propaganda. Some view it specifically as a direct reaction to the “gospel” of the emperor Vespasian. This approach latches on to the first words of the text, especially the term εὐαγγέλιον in Mark 1,1, which is interpreted as a signal that the following text offers an alternative to Roman imperial propaganda. The Gospel is understood to be full of allusions to that propaganda, critiquing it and proposing a counter-identity for the Markan community based on values that differ from those that characterize the Flavian dynasty.⁴ Although the details of individual scholars’ readings vary, the basic argument is fairly consistent: Mark’s Gospel should be read as a direct reaction to and discussion of the rise of the Flavian dynasty.⁵ The Gospel can only be understood adequately against the backdrop of the rise of that *homo novus* Vespasian as Roman emperor and imperial propaganda geared to

2. T. NICKLAS, *Jesus und Vespasian* (essay in this volume). In n. 7, Nicklas mentions the most important contributions in the field, which I will not repeat here. The anti-gospel hypothesis has been worked out to the greatest extent by Martin Ebner. It has also now found its way into several introductory works on the New Testament: M. EBNER, *Das Markusevangelium*, in M. EBNER – S. SCHREIBER (eds.), *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, ²2013, 155-184; S. SCHREIBER, *Begleiter durch das Neue Testament*, Ostfildern, Patmos, ³2014, pp. 102-103. One early proponent of the anti-gospel hypothesis, Andreas Bedenbender, is rarely mentioned in the exegetical discourse, but claims to be one of the first to contribute in this area, with good reason. Cf. A. BEDENBENDER, *Unausgesprochen beim Namen genannt: Verdeckte Spuren des Jüdischen Krieges im Markusevangelium*, in *Texte & Kontexte* 140 (2013) 1-60, p. 10 n. 17 with reference to A. BEDENBENDER, *Römer, Christen und Dämonen: Beobachtungen zur Komposition des Markusevangeliums (1. Teil)*, in *Texte & Kontexte* 67 (1995) 3-50.

3. G. THEISSEN, *Lokalkolorit und Zeitgeschichte in den Evangelien* (NTOA 8), Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989 and ²1992; and G. THEISSEN, *Evangelien-schreibung und Gemeindeleitung: Pragmatische Motive bei der Abfassung des Markusevangeliums*, in B. KOLLMANN – W. REINBOLD – A. STEUDEL (eds.), *Antikes Judentum und Frühes Christentum* (FS H. Stegemann) (BZNW, 97), Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1999, 389-414.

4. Cf. EBNER, *Einleitung* (n. 2), p. 159, “Die Glaubenslehre vom Leidensweg Jesu hat verstanden, wer auf Rangstreben und Prestigesucht verzichtet und stattdessen Statusverzicht praktiziert”, or the final conclusion, p. 180, “Das MkEv ist also ein Versuch, am Lebensweg Jesu die Praxis einer Gegengesellschaft abzulesen und diesen Weg als dem Willen Gottes entsprechende und als Konkretion der Gottesherrschaft gekennzeichnete Alternative zum gesellschaftlichen Trend zu präsentieren, wie er unter den flavischen Aufsteigerkaisern virulent wird – und offensichtlich auch auf die christliche Gemeinde Anziehungskraft ausgeübt hat”.

5. Explicit in M. EBNER, *Evangelium contra Evangelium: Das Markusevangelium und der Aufstieg der Flavier*, in *Biblische Notizen* 116 (2003) 28-42, pp. 29-30.

legitimate his rule, such as stories of healing miracles he performed in Alexandria and the triumphal procession of Titus and Vespasian.⁶

2. A RECEPTION CATEGORY, NOT A STATEMENT ABOUT THE TEXT'S PRODUCTION: THE ANTI-GOSPEL HYPOTHESIS IN CURRENT EXEGETICAL DEBATE

The reception of this anti-gospel approach to the Gospel in biblical scholarship indicates that its insights are far from obvious: its merits are hotly debated. This may be partly due to the fact that it is often not clear whether the anti-gospel hypothesis is a claim about the *pragmatics* or the *potential* of the text. The approach is the focus of recent doctoral dissertations by Heinz Blatz⁷ and Markus Lau,⁸ as well as Gabriela Gelardini's Basel *Habilitationschrift*.⁹ The contributions of Blatz and Lau illustrate the two different sorts of claims, pragmatics / production vs. potential / reception.

Blatz conducts a historical-critical investigation of the semantics of power in Mark's miracle stories, and compares the Gospel with other ancient sources as a way of highlighting what he sees as Mark's critique of imperial power

6. R. VON BENDEMANN, *Sehen und Verstehen (Die zweiphasige Heilung eines namenlosen Blinden) – Mk 8,22-26*, in R. ZIMMERMANN (ed.), *Kompendium der frühchristlichen Wundererzählungen: Bd. 1: Die Wunder Jesu*, Gütersloh, Güterloher Verlagshaus, 2013, 341-349, p. 345: "Die vespasianische herrscherideologische Propaganda war ab dem Jahre 69 bestrebt, den *homo novus* Vespasian als *Kaiser* zu legitimieren. Hierfür wurden nicht allein heidnische Omnia, nach denen aus dem Osten ein großer König aufstehen werde, propagandistisch auf Vespasian übertragen, sondern vielmehr jüdisch-messianische Hoffnungen aufgegriffen und instrumentalisiert. Der Absicherung der Legitimität der unverhofft erworbenen Kaiserwürde sind auch die Heilungsbemühungen des Vespasian zuzuordnen, die Tacitus, Sueton und Dio Cassius für dessen Alexandriaaufenthalt berichten."

7. H. BLATZ, *Die Semantik der Macht: Eine zeit- und religionsgeschichtliche Studie zu den markinischen Wundererzählungen* (Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen, 59), Münster, Aschendorff, 2016.

8. M. LAU, *Der gekreuzigte Triumphator: Eine motivkritische Studie zum Markusevangelium* (NTOA, 114), Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019.

9. G. GELARDINI, *Christus Militans: Studien zur politisch-militärischen Semantik im Markusevangelium vor dem Hintergrund des ersten Jüdisch-Römischen Krieges* (SupplNT, 165), Leiden, Brill, 2016. Gelardini locates Mark in the context of the first Jewish-Roman war, and reads the Gospel as reacting to that disastrous war (p. 1). She regards such a reading as imperial-critical or "anti-imperialist" (p. 1). In her study, Gelardini investigates military connections and war terminology that she claims had not yet been covered by other studies. In her reading, Mark's Gospel illustrates the change from Herodian and Roman dominion to the Davidic-messianic dynasty of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, which is alluded to in the text (p. 25). Her main focus is on the possible course of events of this war and preceding battles. The crucial point is that the Gospel has to be read in the context of ancient political empire discourse (p. 25).

structures.¹⁰ Lau takes a slightly more reception-oriented approach and asks whether Mark's Gospel contains allusions to Roman triumphal processions that readers would have been able to identify, and whether the author was trying to narrate Jesus' life using terms with which his intended audience would have been familiar. He argues that coded allusions to Roman triumphal processions can indeed be found in the text.¹¹ While Blatz reads the Gospel as a direct reaction to the rise of Vespasian (i.e., as an *anti-gospel*), Lau thinks the story has been spiced up with hidden allusions in order to add an additional layer of meaning to the text. Blatz would claim that one can only properly understand the Gospel if one takes the imperial context into account, while Lau references that context as a reception scenario.¹²

While the differences between these approaches are clear to the trained eye of the biblical scholar, they might seem obscure to a lay reader who is not used to differentiating between *production-oriented* and *reception-oriented* approaches, and simply wants to understand the text. Contemporary readers, especially those whose personal faith and understanding of Jesus have been shaped by Mark's Gospel, may find it disturbing and reductionistic to be told that the Gospel should be understood as a warning about social climbing and that its Jesus is primarily an anti-type of the Roman emperor.¹³ For these readers and others, it is helpful to clarify that the anti-gospel

10. Cf. BLATZ, *Die Semantik der Macht* (n. 7), p. 218: "Gerade ein römisches Setting um den Aufstieg Vespasians zum Kaiser bietet eine Erklärung für die im Mk präsente Machtfrage."

11. Lau's study is currently undergoing revision for publication. I am grateful to my colleague for sharing the current status of his work for this article. It will be published as M. LAU, *Der gekreuzigte Triumphator: Eine motivkritische Studie zum Markusevangelium* (NTOA, 114), Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019.

12. In 4.1.2, Lau concludes, "Zu diesen dem MkEv vorauslaufenden Formen rechne ich auch den Triumphzug. Gleichwohl ist meine Lektüre des MkEv vor dem Hintergrund der Entstehungssituation des Textes nicht die einzig mögliche oder gar die einzig 'richtige' Art, einen biblischen Text zu lesen, aber es ist eine mögliche Lektüreperspektive, die es je nach Erkenntnisinteresse zu beachten gilt. Ich erhebe in keinem Fall den Anspruch, die einzig richtige Lesart für die von mir behandelten mk Texte zu präsentieren – wenngleich ich glaube, dass die hier vorgetragene Lesart einige mk Textdetails neu und im Vergleich zu anderen Deutungen überzeugender interpretieren kann – oder die Autorintention schlechthin zu erheben. Wohl aber möchte ich eine plausible, mögliche Lesart vortragen und meine Textfunktionszuschreibungen argumentativ begründen. Dabei gehe ich letztlich davon aus, dass der Autor des MkEv die Anspielungen auf das Ritual des Triumphzugs bewusst gesetzt hat, um eine inhaltliche Botschaft zu transportieren, der man sich interpretierend zumindest annähern kann. Das ist im Letzten nicht zwingend zu beweisen, weil der Text eben ein Eigenleben führt und Sinnlinien im Zusammenspiel mit den Lesenden produziert, wohl aber argumentativ zu plausibilisieren."

13. My students at the University of Passau find it disturbing and have expressed the critique mentioned above. I am particularly grateful to Judith Bauer for keeping this issue on our agenda and doing most of the pre-search for this essay.

hypothesis is not a feature of the text itself, but an interpretation that has been influenced by the context, questions, knowledge, and ideas of interpreters who argue this way, as well as by their religious, political and socio-cultural environments. The anti-gospel hypothesis says more about how Mark might be *received* than about the intentions of its producer.

Viewing the anti-gospel hypothesis as a reception scenario or interpretative frame does not render the approach less fascinating or less academic. It is still a masterpiece of historical-critical exegesis, but now with a different twist that does justice to the general state of the exegetical debate. Since the linguistic turn, interpreters of texts have sought to go beyond the question of what the author might have had in mind. The interpretative task has shifted from speculating about authorial intent to asking about texts' interpretative potential. We owe to Umberto Eco both the observation that texts are lazy machines for the production of meaning¹⁴ and the statement that it is hard to decide who is right: the author who never intended to make an allusion or the reader who has good reasons for finding one.¹⁵ This state of research and this climate within the academic community have paved the way for a new type of reading, guided by the question of how a particular reader, a particular audience or a particular interpretative community might have received a text.

Reader-oriented approaches that ask how texts might have been understood by historical readers have also emerged. Since few historical readers left reports,¹⁶ we can only guess how a text like Mark's Gospel might have been read in the earliest period after its composition. While this recognition can lead to frustration, it has also opened up a new field of research investigating how particular readers, audiences and interpretative communities might have received the text. As New Testament scholars, we are naturally curious about ancient recipients, and with regard to Mark's gospel we usually ask about possible reception in places like Rome or Syria around 70 CE, although one could also inquire about how the text might have been received at the end of the Jewish-Roman war and after the destruction of the Temple in places like Alexandria, Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus or Philippi.

14. Cf. U. ECO, *Lector in fabula*, Milano, Bompiani, 1979. For an English translation, see U. ECO, *The Role of the Reader*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1981, including essays from: *Opera aperta*, *Apocalittici e integrati*, *Forme del contenuto*, *Lector in Fabula*, *Il Superuomo di massa*.

15. U. ECO, *Ironia intertestuale e livelli di lettura*, in U. ECO, *Sulla letteratura*. Milano 2002, 227-252. German translation: *Intertextuelle Ironie und mehrdimensionale Lektüre*, in U. ECO, *Die Bücher und das Paradies*, Munich, Hanser, 2003, 213-237.

16. Their readings are often cited in studies focusing on reception history.

From my perspective, this is exactly what the anti-gospel hypothesis does: it sketches possible reception scenarios for the Gospel of Mark in a Roman context. Such readings involve two main steps. The first step is to (re-)construct the encyclopedia¹⁷ of the audience in question. The second step is to go through the text and see what meanings evolve by applying that encyclopedia.

The (re)construction of an audience's encyclopedia is an especially tricky task, because biblical scholars do not actually "have" an ancient encyclopedia, only a scholarly construction of what ancient people might have known and thought. This step also entails, of course, the anaesthetization of one's own encyclopedia, which is usually the hardest part, because biblical scholars in the twenty-first century have broader knowledge and more distance from the events than first-century followers of Christ in Rome. Hypotheses about what the target audience may have known are thus necessarily speculative. This is where exegetical debate usually kicks in. A common way to critique other scholars' readings of a text is to discuss the plausibility of the proposed encyclopedia.¹⁸ With regard to the anti-gospel hypothesis there are questions about the likelihood that a member of a Christian community in Rome in 71 CE would have been familiar with supposed miracles of Vespasian,¹⁹ the topography of the naval battle of Tarichaea²⁰ or a prediction of Vespasian's reign by Josephus, complete with messianic overtones and perhaps in the guise of the Phlegon or Hystaspes prophecy, whatever they might have looked like at that time.²¹ Since Josephus wrote considerably

17. Another concept we owe to Eco, cf. ECO, *Lector in fabula* (n. 14).

18. Nicklas' essay in this volume is a good example.

19. Cf. BLATZ, *Die Semantik der Macht* (n. 7), p. 218-219; see also EBNER, *Evangelium contra Evangelium* (n. 5), pp. 39-40.

20. Cf. BEDENBENDER, *Unausgesprochen beim Namen genannt* (n. 2), p. 17. See also: A. BEDENBENDER, *Ja und Nein: Das Matthäusevangelium als Gegenerzählung zur markinischen "Frohen Botschaft am Abgrund"*, in *Texte & Kontexte* 144 (2013) 11-13. K.-M. SCHMIDT, *Wege des Heils: Erzählstrukturen und Rezeptionskontexte des Markusevangeliums* (NTOA, 74), Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010, pp. 306-307, excludes influence along these lines: "Fraglos ist die Erzählung vom Seesturm kaum vor dem Hintergrund der Ereignisse bei Joppe oder Tarichea entstanden oder auch nur im Blick auf die Niederlagen der Juden zu Wasser in das Evangelium integriert worden, so wenig wie die Geschichte vom Gang über den See. Schon die Platzierung der Abfolge der Ereignisse entspricht nicht der Darstellung des Josephus, der die Szene bei Joppe nach dem Winterlager und vor der Ruhepause in Cäsarea Philippis ansiedelt. Wer jedoch den Text vor dem Hintergrund der Kriegereignisse las, wurde vermutlich von der Darstellung der Ereignisse besonders berührt."

21. Cf. EBNER, *Evangelium contra Evangelium* (n. 5), pp. 35-37, see also B. HEININGER, "Politische Theologie" im Markusevangelium: Der Aufstieg Vespasians zum Kaiser und der Abstieg Jesu ans Kreuz, in C. MAYER (Hg.), *Augustinus Ethik und Politik: Zwei Würzburger Augustinus-Studientage* (Cassiciacum, 39.4 = Res et signa. Augustinus-Studien, 4), Würzburg, Echter, 2009, 171-201, p. 193. The texts used as a basis for the argument, Josephus, *Bell.* 3,401f.;

after the events took place and had his own agenda when composing his text, one can hardly assume that the prophecy was originally phrased the way it appears in *Bellum* – not to mention the question of whether Mark and his audiences would have been familiar with Josephus.

This is not to say that the reading is uninteresting, however. In fact, since I am intrigued by the anti-gospel hypothesis, I find it sad that this sort of approach to Mark's Gospel tends to focus almost exclusively on Rome and Syria around 70 CE. I would very much like to see a conference or volume that collects different possible reception scenarios of Mark after the first Jewish-Roman war – not only in Rome and Syria, but also in the aforementioned Alexandria, Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus and Philippi. I am sure we would learn a lot from these readings, and that they would help counteract the current one-sided nature of the exegetical discussion,²² as well as preventing false impressions about the degree of certainty one can attach to the anti-gospel hypothesis. After all, while such readings reveal a lot about the interpretative potential of the text and about scholars' knowledge and creativity, they can never provide conclusive answers to questions about a text's production or the intentions behind it. To use Peter Lampe's phrase, these readings are a *reality construction of a second order*²³ that one places beside a historical source. From our current location in history we may find them plausible and persuasive, but that says more about us as readers than about real authors and original addressees.

Suetonius, *Vespasian* 5,6 and Cassius Dio, *Rom. Hist.*, 66,1,3f., as well as the underlying oracle (Phlegon: FGrH 257 F 36 III, Hystaspes: Lactantius, *Inst.* 7,15,11.18f.; 17,11; 18,5) are all later than the Gospel of Mark.

22. SCHMIDT, *Wege des Heils* (n. 20), p. 8, also points out this danger for the reception of his own study: "Es kann nicht nachdrücklich genug betont werden, dass die Untersuchung nur ausgewählte Perspektiven einnimmt und andere Blickwinkel weitestgehend ausblendet. Die oft hypothetisch in die Diskussion eingebrachten Details der Rezeptionskontexte unterliegen damit schon deswegen großen Vorbehalten, weil deren Wirkmächtigkeit im Rahmen dieser Untersuchung nicht im Vergleich mit anderen Rezeptionskontexten überprüft werden kann."

23. Cf. P. LAMPE, *Modellfall Auferstehung Jesu: Zu einer konstruktivistischen Theorie der Geschichtsschreibung*, in *EvTh* 69 (2009) 186-193, p. 188: "Bewusst sein muss er [sc. the historian] sich dabei, dass der große 'Text', der sich ihm erschließt, wieder nur ein Konstrukt ist, das er selbst erstellt – in der Hoffnung, das zu treffen, was die Damaligen innerhalb einer Sprachgemeinschaft als Wirklichkeit verstanden. Vorhanden ist der große 'Text', so wie ihn die Historikerin schreibt, in den Quellen nicht: Er stellt ein modernes Präparat mit vielen Schwächen dar, zum Beispiel bleibt er selektiv-fragmentarisch, ohne dass die Historikerin wissen könnte, wie viel die noch greifbaren Quellen verschweigen, wie groß die Löcher sind, die sie nicht zu füllen vermag, wie viel bunter und widersprüchlicher das damalige Wirklichkeitskonstrukt sich ausnahm, als heute erkennbar. Gleichwohl, naive Historiker würden ihr Tun als Rekonstruktion des damaligen Wirklichkeitskonstrukts charakterisieren. Weniger naive als ein Konstrukt des damaligen Wirklichkeitskonstrukts, als ein *Konstrukt zweiter Ordnung*" (emphasis original).

Readings of this type, however, can hardly ever be completely wrong. The focus of critique is thus usually not the reading itself, but its foundations or prerequisites. The focus of critique mostly concerns step 1, the (re-) construction of the encyclopedia, rather than step 2. The result is that the anti-gospel hypothesis cannot be falsified if taken as a reception frame. One can only discuss whether it provides a plausible reception scenario for a particular reconstructed historical situation. On closer examination, this is exactly what happens within the exegetical debate, and the criteria cited are old acquaintances from historical Jesus research: the criterion of historical plausibility and context plausibility.

The question remains, however, of whether this is all one can do. The tools of classical historical-critical research may not be able to dig deeper, but I deem it possible to take the criteria a step further by drawing on insights from cultural studies and social memory theory. A first step is to change the object of investigation: instead of considering what the author and/or target audience might have known, one can examine the reception frame itself. In the next section, a glance at the development of a more recent interpretative frame through the lens of cultural studies and social memory theory will illustrate this idea, which I will then apply to the anti-gospel hypothesis. As an example and test case, I have chosen the so-called “miracle of Bern” (*Wunder von Bern*).

3. “MIRACLE OF BERN” AS ILLUSTRATION OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF A RECEPTION CATEGORY

On 4 July 1954, West Germany won the soccer world championship in Bern, Switzerland. This was unexpected, since their opponent in the final was Hungary, the favorite to win, who had defeated the West Germans 8:3 in an earlier game. Eight minutes into the final match, in the pouring rain, the West Germans were behind 0:2, and there seemed no hope of recovery. Within ten minutes, however, they had scored two goals, and six minutes before the end, Helmut Rahn added a third, sealing their victory. Everyone was surprised: no one had considered the West Germans possible champions.

The 1954 World Cup was one of the first appearances of a West German national team at an international tournament, but not *the* first one. In 1950, the remains of the former German Reich – West Germany, East Germany and the Saarland – had not been allowed to take part in the tournament, just as they had not been permitted to take part in the 1948 Summer Olympics in London. Athletes from West Germany and the Saarland participated in

the 1952 Summer Olympics in Helsinki, however, where a West German amateur team took part in the Olympic soccer competition. They came in third. None of those players was on the 1954 World Cup team. I mention this because part of the frame or reception category that will be considered below is the idea that the 1954 World Cup was the first appearance of West Germans on the international stage after the Second World War – and that they left a positive impression on their first outing.²⁴

The unexpected win is widely believed to have changed the nation, and Germans today are said to remember the events of 4 July 1954 as the *Wunder von Bern* (“miracle of Bern”). The English entry in Wikipedia claims that

the unexpected win evoked a wave of euphoria throughout Germany, which was still suffering in the aftermath of World War II. This was also the first time since the Second World War that the German national anthem was played at a global sporting event. The 1954 victory is regarded as a turning point in post-war German history by German historians Arthur Heinrich and Joachim Fest.²⁵

It might be somewhat unusual to quote Wikipedia in an academic article, but since I am dealing with current reception categories, it actually makes a lot of sense. One intriguing effect of Wikipedia as a phenomenon is that it contributes to the creation of reception categories – that is, it helps to further the development of particular frames of reference within which events, texts, etc., are interpreted. Some of these, such as the “miracle of Bern”, might justifiably be called “myths”, but the same reception categories are furthered by academic publications. In the article mentioned in the Wikipedia entry, Arthur Heinrich, for instance, a sociologist and political scientist who writes about the history of soccer, comments about

the importance that the winning of the World Cup tournament in 1954 had for West Germany. Nine years after the defeat of the national socialist regime, this victory in soccer’s most important event heralded West Germany’s entrance into the international community of nations. The positive result in this forum contributed massively to the creation of a new West German collective identity. An essential ingredient of this identity was a positive orientation towards the newly established Federal Republic as a democratic structure,

24. When reviewing the historical data, it soon becomes clear that even in sports, there was no vacuum as is generally assumed. Publications on the “miracle of Bern” usually suggest that there was also a zero hour for sports (“Stunde Null”) – Bern. The myth feeds the assumption that the “miracle of Bern” came out of nowhere and contributed to the creation of a new nation.

25. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1954_FIFA_World_Cup_Final (accessed 9 November 2016).

which – in the wake of this victory in soccer – attained growing acceptance and legitimacy among the West German public.²⁶

The “miracle of Bern” is an interesting test case for the emergence of reception categories because one can trace its development. The interpretation of the 1954 World Cup as the “miracle of Bern,” and the idea that it led to a new German consciousness, are rarely questioned today, especially by younger generations. This is not how the event was perceived in 1954, however, but is largely a later creation.

In a short study, *Das “Wunder von Bern”: Rezeptionsgeschichte eines Mythos*,²⁷ Joachim Eder describes some of the principles behind this reception category, which he terms a “myth”. Eder’s study is especially interesting because he traces how the event was portrayed in several (West) German newspapers over a period of 50 years. The advantage of this type of source is that newspaper articles cannot be altered in hindsight and are thus snapshots that help unlock the communication patterns of a particular period.²⁸ Eder reaches a quite sobering conclusion regarding the idea that the World Cup victory “contributed massively to creation of a new West German collective identity”,²⁹ a notion that is often said to be captured in the motto *Wir sind wieder wer*. According to Eder, this stereotyped feeling that “We are back” is nothing more than a projection and wishful thinking on part of the people, which became one aspect of a myth whose various elements were only fully assembled after 1994: “Die Euphorie von 1954 wird gleichsam beschworen, reaktiviert und a posteriori in einen modernen Mythos übertragen.”³⁰

Eder’s other results are quite stunning, too, especially when read from the perspective of cultural studies. For many decades, what later became the

26. A. HEINRICH, *The 1954 Soccer World Cup and the Federal Republic of Germany’s Self-Discovery*, in *American Behavioral Scientist* 46 (2003) 1491-1505, p. 1491.

27. J.S. EDER, *Das “Wunder von Bern”: Rezeptionsgeschichte eines deutschen Mythos*, www.das-wunder-von-bern.de/Rezeptionsgeschichte.pdf (downloaded 23.07.2016). Eder is a post-doctoral research fellow at the University of Jena, in the field of contemporary history.

28. EDER, “Wunder von Bern” (n. 27), p. 5.

29. HEINRICH, *1954 Soccer World Cup* (n. 26), p. 1491. Later, Heinrich points out that “against the background of the economic recovery, winning the World Cup helped Germany play for more time in the matter of adapting to democracy” (p. 1501). Read against Eder, Blecking or Busche, Heinrich’s notion that “to be consolidated, the Federal Republic urgently needed some initial signs of success: The *economic miracle* (“Wirtschaftswunder”) was far and away the most important of these. Winning the World Cup crowned this economic breakthrough and supplied a unifying symbol – above and beyond any individual German’s budding postwar and consumer bliss – of the stretch of the road that had already been taken toward a new (and, to be sure, completely turned inside out) normality” (p. 1493), exhibits features of hindsight bias and coloring of the myth itself.

30. EDER, “Wunder von Bern” (n. 27), p. 22.

“miracle of Bern” was only the subject of private conversations and almost completely absent from public discussion – it only circulated in social memory. The first publications to employ the concept appeared as recently as the 1990s, forty years after the event. The phrase “miracle of Bern” itself originated directly after the tournament and can be traced to an interview with Fritz Walter, one of the players. Eder explains that the phrase reflects common speech habits at the time, when use of the word “miracle” was frequent. Pride about the team’s achievement, however, soon forbade its use in reporting.³¹ While the unexpected nature of the victory made it seem like a “miracle”, people at the time needed even more urgently to understand it as the work of heroes:

Vom Wunder von Bern zu sprechen, verbot schon bald das Selbstbewußtsein. Aber das, was die Männer von Bundestrainer Sepp Herberger bei der Fußballweltmeisterschaft 1954 in der Schweiz und zuletzt im Endspiel im Berner Wankdorf-Stadion zustande gebracht hatten, trug doch alle Züge einer Heldengeschichte, die nur durch das Zusammenwirken mythischer, das heißt durch den Mythos allen Erklärungsversuchen entzogener Kräfte geleistet werden konnte und so als Heldengeschichte für die kollektive Erinnerung zu vereinnahmen ist.³²

So, unsurprisingly, when directly asked whether they remember the “miracle of Bern” or the “heroes of Bern”, older Germans who were contemporaries of the event usually opt for the latter.

It is quite intriguing that although comments about a “miracle at Bern” had already been made in 1954, it took roughly forty years for the reception category to develop its full impact. For the reception category “miracle of Bern” to become a myth, several things had to come together. Important factors included time and a changed situation with different needs. The emergence of myths always requires special circumstances, like those that turned Rosa Parks into an icon of the US civil rights movement, but not Claudette Colvin. The same holds true for perceptions of the 1954 World Cup and the emergence of the “miracle of Bern”. One catalyst was surely German reunification in 1990, which coincided with Germany’s third win of the World Cup (following victories in 1954 and 1974). The coincidental soccer victory in 1990 may have helped Germans to come to terms with what had formerly been an “abstraktes, unsicheres Nationalgefühl”,³³ as Peter Kasza suggests. Eder assigns a similarly important role to the deaths

31. Cf. EDER, “Wunder von Bern” (n. 27), p. 8.

32. J. BUSCHE, *Der Mythos von 1954*, in *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 44 (1994) 24:13-15, p. 13.

33. P. KASZA, *1954 – Fußball spielt Geschichte*, Bonn, be.bra, 2004, p. 208.

of the “heroes” in the following years, especially Fritz Walter (d. 2002) and Helmut Rahn (d. 2003), followed by their glorification in the German media.³⁴ Other factors also led Germans to search for new constants in their sense of national identity – after reunification, they needed founding myths other than the “economic miracle” (*Wirtschaftswunder*) that applied only to West Germany, but not East Germany, which had just become an equal part of the reunited Federal Republic. The passage of time was also crucial: the interpretative frame “miracle of Bern” was kindled in 1990, but not yet fully established. Time would be fully ripe for it only about ten years later.

Presentation in a different *medium* also played an important role. At a time when a new social policy was needed, the “miracle of Bern” was celebrated in a highly emotional, but historically highly questionable movie³⁵, which was released about two months after Rahn died in 2003. This movie helped to create a new founding myth that seemed almost completely apolitical and was thus all the more persuasive. At times it has even been celebrated as one of the Republic’s hours of birth.³⁶ The movie “stellte die ahistorische Verknüpfung zwischen dem Fußballsieg, der Wirtschaftswunder und eben der angeblichen mentalen Gründung der Republik her, die weder die Zeitgenossen 1954 verspürt hatten noch die sozialhistorische Forschung nachweisen konnte”.³⁷

From the perspective of memory theory and cultural studies,³⁸ it is not unusual for events such as the 1954 World Cup to be portrayed as foundational moments for a nation, nor is it surprising that this particular interpretation only really began to be widespread decades after the event. It is also normal that this happened forty years later and was accompanied by a new narrative presentation in a new medium, in this case film in place of newspaper articles and interviews. After such a lapse of time – also known as a generational gap – it is to be expected that memories of past events will be reshaped according to new needs, and that members of a memory group will try to privilege one strand of interpretation against another, attempting to make their way of perceiving events the only right way to do so. In sum,

34. EDER, “*Wunder von Bern*” (n. 27), p. 21.

35. “*Das Wunder von Bern*” by Sönke Wortmann (2003).

36. “Eine der Geburtsstunden der Republik”, quoted in KASZA, 1954, 8f. German historian Joachim Fest writes, “July 4, 1954 is in certain aspects the founding day of the German Republic” (<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/SPORT/football/01/05/iraq.asia.six.games/>).

37. D. BLECKING, *Das “Wunder von Bern” 1954: Zur politischen Instrumentalisierung eines Mythos*, in *Historical Social Research* 40 (2015) 197-208, p. 203.

38. For an introduction to this area of research and suggestions for its application to Biblical studies, cf. S. HUEBENTHAL, *Das Markusevangelium als kollektives Gedächtnis* (FRLANT, 253), Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018, chapter 2.

it is normal for memories of past events to be reshaped according to the particular needs of succeeding generations, and for one interpretation of an event to outcompete others.³⁹

Eder concludes, “Die Rezeptionsgeschichte des ‘Wunders von Bern’ ist ein Lehrstück über die Funktionsweise populärer Erinnerungskultur”.⁴⁰ No miracle took place in Bern on 4 July 1954, only a soccer match. The “miracle of Bern” is an *interpretation* of the event. It is a reception category that now frames the event in popular consciousness: socially negotiated, socially accepted and eventually established as the dominant frame of reference for this event, which is now “remembered” far beyond the world of sports. This is a normal process, and the results tell us more about the generation involved in developing the reception category than about those who took part in the actual event. The key to understanding the “miracle of Bern”, which would achieve its full impact only after the turn of the millennium, lies more in the 1990s than the 1950s.

4. DEVELOPMENT OF RECEPTION CATEGORIES REQUIRES TIME

So how does the “miracle of Bern” shed light on the anti-gospel hypothesis? Like the “miracle of Bern”, the anti-gospel hypothesis is a reception category. A first insight that can be gleaned from the “miracle of Bern” is that the development of socially accepted interpretations or reception categories requires time.

What else does the anti-gospel hypothesis share with the “miracle of Bern”? Research from a cultural studies perspective has revealed that multiple components contributed to the creation and establishment of the latter reception category. First was the event itself, which was observed and discussed by those living at the time. The “hero” motif seems to have arisen fairly quickly, nurturing the needs of that generation. In the 1950s, Germans were focused on survival and they had to be active to make miracles happen. The events of Bern were initially discussed privately. Only over time, as the situation changed, did they gain public currency beyond sports magazines. When a new political situation emerged – no longer post-war West Germany, but now a reunited Germany, and after the deaths of the

39. For a more detailed discussion and application to Biblical studies, cf. S. HUEBENTHAL, *Social and Cultural Memory in Biblical Exegesis: The Quest for an Adequate Application*, in P. CARSTENS – T. HASSELBALCH – N.P. LEMCHE (eds.), *Cultural Memory in Biblical Exegesis* (Perspectives on Hebrew Scriptures and its Contexts, 17), Piscataway, Gorgias, 2012, 191-216.

40. EDER, “Wunder von Bern” (n. 27), p. 23.

protagonists – the story was retold in a different way, nurturing the needs of a new generation.

These crucial elements – time, a different situation with different needs, the absence of the protagonists and a change of medium – also apply to Mark's Gospel. This text similarly looks back on a crucial event – in this case a rather traumatic one that was nevertheless identity-forming – which is remembered in a new type of text that would become the instigator of a genre: a gospel. The event is the life and death of Jesus, the Christ event. Textualization in this new medium happened roughly a generation after the event, and the text clearly tries to grapple with the impact of what had happened for its current context. Is it plausible that Mark's Gospel already frames the Christ event as an anti-gospel to the rise of the Flavians? Could interpretation of the Christ event (which had occurred roughly a generation previously) and the rise of the Flavians (a recent development) already have led to socially accepted categories of interpretation that were stable enough to allow for a document like the Gospel to describe the former in the terms of the latter? Would it have made sense to tell the founding story of Christianity – an identity-forming story – against the background of those political developments? Was this really the most burning issue for Christians at the time?

A closer look at the frames used in the Gospel itself suggests that Mark was dealing with other issues. The first that comes to mind is the need to make sense of Jesus' life and death, for which Mark would use Jewish reception categories, namely Israel's Holy Scriptures. This does not rule out the possibility that he might also have borrowed from recent events, but such events do not yet seem to have developed into established reception categories. It is more likely that these emerging frames still needed social negotiation and were not yet stable.

If Mark's Gospel was conceived as an anti-gospel – and recalling how Fritz Walter introduced the idea of a "miracle" in the 1950s, although the frame did not immediately catch on – that interpretation did not win the day, since later readings of the Christ event do not pick up on it. Matthew, Luke and John show no trace of an anti-gospel interpretation of the Christ event, and I am not aware of any other Christian text that does before the advent of modern exegetical stories. From the perspective of cultural studies and social memory, this is an argument against rather than in favor of the anti-gospel hypothesis. Seen from this perspective, the rise of Vespasian, which was just in the process of happening, was simply too close to serve as an accepted reception category at the time when Mark's Gospel was put to page. This does not mean that the text could not have been received in this

manner, but it was too early for it to be a socially accepted category. In 70 CE, it was not yet clear what the new dynasty would mean and what impact it would have on emerging Christianity, just as the full impact of German reunification could only be guessed at in 1990. Only with time would the real potential and issues become evident and solutions begin to be sought. Likewise, changes brought about by the Flavian dynasty, including a social climber mentality, would have unfolded over a period of time and reactions to them would have required at least the same amount of time to develop. Thus a date of 70 CE, or even 73 or 75 CE, seems much too early for Mark to have arrived at a fully developed anti-gospel interpretation and to be able to combine it with traditional material into a coherent whole that could be fruitfully read either way.

In light of the time required for the development of the reception category “miracle of Bern” and the findings of cultural studies and social memory theory, the tight timeline necessary for the anti-gospel hypothesis thus warns against embracing that hypothesis too quickly.

5. RECEPTION CATEGORIES SAY A LOT ABOUT THE NEEDS OF THE INTERPRETERS

As already mentioned, the phrase “miracle of Bern” was briefly used in the 1950s before being replaced by the “heroes of Bern”, another reception category better suited to the needs of the time.⁴¹ Memories are not simply recalled, but more or less consciously constructed. This is especially true for collective or group memories: stories are told and retold and continually altered, and they eventually take on a socially accepted form in which they circulate within a given interpretative community and are passed on to others.⁴² The way important events and circumstances are remembered and recounted has less to do with what actually happened and more with what nurtures the needs of a particular interpretative community. The key issue is often how to make sense of a past that deeply affects the present.

Most stories – and this is probably particularly true for stories about historical events in a factual mode – are not really told to provide information about what actually happened, but to explain why things are the way they

41. Cf. EDER, “*Wunder von Bern*” (n. 27), pp. 8f. and BUSCHE, *Mythos* (n. 32), p. 13.

42. This is one of the key ideas of social/cultural memory theory. For an introduction to this area of research and initial suggestions for its application to biblical studies, cf. S. HUEBENTHAL, *Das Markusevangelium* (n. 38), chapter 2.

are (now). Quite often, stories say less about the past than about the present. The act of explaining what happened or what might have happened is always driven and biased by a desire to make sense of existing material, which most often consists of unconnected data that is not chronologically or causally arranged. Making sense of something, giving it a structure and putting it into certain categories is a creative act on part of the reader or recipient. This insight is not new, of course. Thomas Aquinas already knew that whatever is received is received according to the condition of the receiver.⁴³ The maxim *quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur* can also be observed when it comes to reception of past events: the past is received according to the needs of the present and by means of available categories, genres and patterns.

Applying this insight to Mark's Gospel, one is led to ask what genres and interpretative frames are evident in the text that might guide the reader to think about current issues. Scholars agree that Mark's gospel is the first narrative account of the Jesus story and the founding events of Christianity. There is also general agreement that Mark's account makes use of certain images, types or *topoi* to convey its message to hearers and readers.

This raises questions about probability: given other possible production scenarios, how likely is it that the author of Mark's Gospel wrote it as an anti-gospel, or that the earliest recipients would have understood it that way? The events of the Passion are framed⁴⁴ by Mark as exemplifying the fate of the innocent righteous person, for instance, using categories associated with the suffering servant of Isaiah.⁴⁵ In Mark's Gospel, Jesus is further portrayed as a teacher and healer, reception categories that had not necessarily been

43. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a, q. 75, a. 5; 3a, q. 5.

44. Framing and keying found their way into Biblical studies partly via the work of Barry Schwartz, e.g., B. SCHWARTZ, *Collective Memory and the Social Change: The Democratization of George Washington*, in *American Sociological Review* 56 (1991) 221-236; and B. SCHWARTZ, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000. Schwartz's work has been highlighted by Alan Kirk, Tom Thatcher, Werner Kelber and Chris Keith. Cf. W. KELBER, § 71 *Commemoration of Jesus' Death*, in W. KELBER, *Imprints, Voiceprints & Footprints of Memory: Collected Essays of Werner Kelber*, Atlanta, GA, Society of Biblical Literature, 2013, pp. 293-295; A. KIRK – T. THATCHER, *Jesus Tradition as Social Memory*, in A. KIRK – T. THATCHER (ed.), *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity* (Semeia Studies, 52), Atlanta, GA, Society of Biblical Literature, 2005, 24-42. C. KEITH – T. THATCHER, *The Scar of the Cross: The Violence Ratio and the Earliest Christian Memories of Jesus*, in T. THATCHER (ed.), *Jesus, the Voice, and the Text: Beyond the Oral and the Written Gospel*, Waco, TX, Baylor University Press, 2008, 197-217.

45. A good discussion of framing and keying in Mark's Passion account is W. KELBER, *Memory and Violence or: Genealogies of Remembering*, in W. KELBER, *Imprints, Voiceprints & Footprints of Memory: Collected Essays of Werner Kelber*, Atlanta, GA, Society of Biblical Literature, 2013, 333-366.

employed in all previous accounts. In Paul's letters, the earthly Jesus is never depicted as a healer or miracle worker. Christine Jacobi has recently argued that references to Jesus as a teacher are also quite sparse in Paul.⁴⁶ While one can debate about whether Paul received Jesus as a "teacher", the prevalent scholarly assumption that this understanding of Jesus was widespread in the middle of the first century is based less on the data than on the felt needs of historical Jesus research. This is another illustration of how the needs of the present shape interpretation of the past. Another recent example from the same camp is Bärbel Bosenius' observation that discipleship in Mark's Gospel does not necessarily entail an itinerant lifestyle or breaking with family and social contacts, but rather the contrary.⁴⁷ Here again, historical Jesus researchers have employed reception categories that have to do more with their own image of Jesus than with that of Mark.

Leaving detailed analysis for another venue, let's assume for the moment that Mark is the first text to portray Jesus in terms of the reception category "healer / miracle worker," and that he draws on images and categories associated with Moses, Elijah / Elisha and the book of Isaiah in this regard.⁴⁸ This type of portrayal of Jesus is found in every section of the Gospel and is immediately evident to any contemporary reader,⁴⁹ in contrast to the sort of non-Jewish frames of reference and references to particular first-century events suggested by proponents of the anti-gospel hypothesis, which only seem to be perceptible to a few scholars. In light of this, the fact that allusions to contemporary events involving non-Jews *can* be found in the text⁵⁰ hardly proves

46. The question of which images of Jesus might already have been received and used by Paul has been discussed with a certain ideological bias, since the main interest of a certain strand of historical Jesus studies has been to use Paul's letters to prove how ancient the Synoptic Jesus tradition is. Based on references to Jesus' words in Paul's letters, it has been suggested that the image of Jesus as a teacher was deep-seated in earliest Christianity. References to Jesus' words in, e.g., 1 Cor 9,14 are not framed in terms of "Jesus the teacher", however, but stand for themselves. Christine Jacobi concludes that the image of "Jesus the teacher" occurs for the first time in Mark's Gospel, not in Paul, against the assumptions of researchers who want to argue for traditional historical presuppositions about the earliest Jesus tradition. Cf. C. JACOBI, *Jesusüberlieferung bei Paulus? Analogien zwischen den echten Paulusbriefen und den synoptischen Evangelien* (BZNTW, 213), Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2015, pp. 388-396.

47. B. BOSENIUS, *Der literarische Raum des Markusevangeliums* (WMANT 140). Neunkirchen-Vluyt, Neunkirchener, 2014, 342.

48. For a brief overview cf. H. OMERZU, *Geschichte durch Geschichten: Zur Bedeutung jüdischer Traditionen für die Jesusdarstellung des Markusevangeliums*, in *Early Christianity 2* (2011) 77-99. See also HUEBENTHAL, *Das Markusevangelium* (n. 38), pp. 305-306 and 397-402 and VON BENDEMANN, *Sehen und Verstehen* (n. 6), p. 344.

49. HUEBENTHAL, *Das Markusevangelium* (n. 38), pp. 457-459. For detailed analysis, see chapter 4 of that study.

50. B. HEININGER, *Politische Theologie* (n. 21), p. 187: "Wer so sein Evangelium beginnt, weckt – zumal vor der Folie des Flavieraufstiegs und generell vor dem Hintergrund der

that it was expressly written as a response to them. Although it is fine to read Mark with a Gentile encyclopedia, we should not ignore a Jewish one.⁵¹ Reinhard von Bendemann is right when he warns about the danger of one-sided readings: “Die Erzählung weist eine doppelte Traditionstiefe auf. Sie erschließt sich in ihren Sinnpotentialen sowohl vor alttestamentlichen und frühjüdischen Hintergründen als auch in einem Zusammenhang zu nichtjüdischen hellenistischen Konzepten von Heilung.”⁵²

6. POTENTIAL AND INFLUENCE OF RECEPTION CATEGORIES

There are also other ways the Gospel can be read. The question is, which reading is most probable for the first century, either as a production or as a reception scenario? Many biblical scholars, including proponents of the anti-gospel hypothesis, frankly admit the speculative nature of their claims.⁵³ It seems to be a general weakness of the discipline, however, that producers and consumers of scholarly literature often neglect to ask about the *probability* of a certain scenario, deciding that it is convincing simply because it is *possible* and “feels” right. This notion is similar to one of Kahneman’s maxims about the “conjunction fallacy”: “They constructed a very complicated scenario and insisted on calling it highly probable. It is not – it is only a plausible story.”⁵⁴ Quite often, the challenge is to avoid getting carried away by an intriguing

römischen Kaiserideologie – Erwartungen: Was hat dieser ‘Sohn Gottes’, von dem Markus erzählen wird, zu bieten? Soweit es die Wundergeschichten betrifft, eine ganze Menge. Jesus befindet sich nicht nur auf Augenhöhe mit dem neuen römischen Kaiser, er überbietet ihn sogar quantitativ und qualitativ. Ähnlich wie Vespasian beginnt auch Jesus nach seiner ‘Regierungserklärung’ [Mark 1,14f.] und der Rekrutierung erster Truppen ... mit wunderbaren Heilungen.”

51. For a nuanced perspective, see W. KELBER, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: Fourteen Years Afterward*, in W. KELBER, *Imprints* (n. 44), pp. 177-178: “In the end, I venture the suggestion that the Gospel composition is unthinkable without the notion of cultural memory which serves ultimately not the preservation of remembrances per se but the preservation of the group, its social identity and self-image (J. Assmann 1992). Mark avails himself of a rich cultural memory for the purpose of securing the Christian identity of a postwar generation.”

52. VON BENDEMANN, *Sehen und Verstehen* (n. 6), p. 343. He is referring to Mark 8,22-26.

53. Cf. HEININGER, *Politische Theologie* (n. 21), p. 200: “Solche Überlegungen sind zugegebenermaßen ein Stück weit spekulativ, weil sie, wenn schon nicht die Abfassung, so doch zumindest die Lektüre des Markusevangeliums (oder wenigstens eines vormarkinischen Passionsberichts) im Rom der 70er Jahre voraussetzen.”

54. D. KAHNEMAN, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, London: Penguin 2012, p. 165. Briefly defined, the conjunction fallacy confuses probability with plausibility. See A. TVERSKY – D. KAHNEMAN, *Extension versus Intuitive Reasoning: The Conjunction Fallacy in Probability Judgment*, in *Psychological Review* 90 (1983) 293-315. A brief introduction to the problem can be found in KAHNEMAN, *Thinking*, pp. 156-165 (“Linda: Less is More”).

insight about a text, especially when it instantly “feels” right. It may still be unconvincing on other grounds. When considering potential readings of a text, it is crucial to consider *how probable it is* that particular producers or recipients would have had access to certain ideas.⁵⁵

The scholarly approaches discussed above make powerful and convincing cases for a particular reception scenario for certain texts, without always reflecting on its probability.⁵⁶ To borrow a phrase from Wayne Meeks, the conclusions may be persuasive, but they are far from certain.⁵⁷ This is not the place to discuss whether probability should be stressed as an important category in Biblical Studies. It is an important step simply to raise the issue of *plausibility vs. probability*. Actually determining probability is tricky, however, and it will thus never be possible to *prove* anything about the origins of Mark’s Gospel or the identity and motivations of the author.

Irrespective of how plausible and persuasive readings like the anti-gospel hypothesis may be and how much we might benefit from them, they do *not* explain what really happened. They cannot *prove* how Mark’s gospel really came about or who wrote it with what rationale. It is telling that publications about the anti-gospel hypothesis tend to say very little about that point. One of the roots of the anti-gospel hypothesis is a connection to *βίος* or *vita* literature, which is said to have been *en vogue* in the Empire and to have given rise to many texts of this genre. As Ebner points out, however, this finding is not unambiguous, since it was dangerous to commission, produce or even possess *vitae* that were not deemed politically correct in Flavian times.⁵⁸ The purpose of such a risky enterprise, Ebner adds, would

55. Cf. SCHMIDT, *Wege des Heils* (n. 20), p. 12: “Die Frage ist, wie plausibel es scheint, dass die Rezipienten des Evangeliums in ihrer Umwelt – sei es die unmittelbare Umwelt der konkreten Gemeinde, sei es die antike Gesellschaft – Kenntnis von dem jeweiligen Bezugstext hatten und ihn assoziierten.” Again, one could ask whether we are talking about plausibility or probability.

56. A good example of this approach from a different field of research is S. SWOBODA, *Mitleid wecken im flavischen Rom? Zur Plausibilisierung einer Intention des Josephus im Bellum Judaicum*, in *Early Christianity* 7 (2016) 155-185. In his article, Swoboda sets out to assess the plausibility of a particular intention sometimes attributed to Josephus’ work – pity or sympathy – and the question of whether it would likely have worked in this reception context given what we know about Flavian Rome.

57. W. MEEKS, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1983, p. 59, cit. S.J. FRIESEN, *The Wrong Erastus*, in S.J. FRIESEN – D.N. SCHOWALTER – J.C. WALTERS (eds.), *Corinth in Context: Comparative Studies on Religion and Society* (NovTSup, 134), Leiden, Brill, 2010, 231-256, p. 234.

58. M. EBNER, *Von gefährlichen Viten und biographisch orientierten Geschichtswerken. Vitenliteratur im Verhältnis zur Historiographie in hellenistisch-römischer und urchristlicher Literatur*, in T. SCHMELLER (ed.), *Historiographie und Biographie im Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt* (NTOA/StUNT, 69), Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2009, 34-61, p. 51.

have been to justify or even propagate one's own option.⁵⁹ This makes the question of who would have had interest in such a project and the means to be involved all the more intriguing.

I have found virtually nothing written about this particular point, which concerns literacy, social status and political connections, and the question of whether Christian groups in Rome would really have been interested in creating another occasion for trouble so soon after the Neronian persecution.⁶⁰ With good reason, I guess, because there is a general awareness of how speculative any explanation would be. We are back to the familiar question of historical plausibility. It is hardly surprising that no one ever assumes that Bishop *Linus* – who would have been in charge of the Roman church at the time according to the Patristic founding story or master narrative – had been involved in the process of the producing, receiving and handing down Mark's Gospel. It is obvious that Linus is a figure of memory from later times, "discovered" in order to serve the Christian community's need for continuity. Mentioning Linus in this context might seem a stretch, because with him we are encountering another reception category that was implemented much later and served the needs of its own generation, the late second century with its need for continuity: "The blessed apostles, then, having founded and built up the Church, committed into the hands of Linus the office of the episcopate. Of this Linus, Paul makes mention in the Epistles to Timothy."⁶¹

In this case the idea is not only far from certain, but not even persuasive. It requires too much speculation in general to come up with a convincing story about who might have had both interest in a project like producing an anti-gospel to the Flavian dynasty and the means to be involved.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

60. The question is usually addressed in the typical form known from introductory literature: author, addressees, date and location of textualization are dealt with in the classical way and the profile of "Mark" as an author remains as pale as ever. BLATZ, *Semantik der Macht* (n. 7), p. 332, goes quite far: "Das Markusevangelium als literarische Schrift besetzt und ändert die römische Herrschaftssprache und stellt eine Gegenideologie zur Kaiserideologie vor. Es gibt zwar keine Alternative zum römischen Reich – die Unterlegenheit und Unterdrückung sind nicht direkt veränderbar – und die markinische Gemeinde muss sich in ihrem Umfeld bewegen, aber sie erhält sich auf diese Weise mit einer veränderten Einstellung den Raum für ihre eigene Identität." The general reluctance to come up with scenarios is surprising only at first. On further reflection, the remarkable silence supports the idea that we are dealing with a reception category.

61. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 3,3,3.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while a particular reading may make sense in a particular context, that is an inadequate basis on which to argue for a particular construction of the text's origins. There is a difference between claiming that "we will never be able to understand Mark if we do not enter imaginatively into its first century world"⁶² and insisting that the text can only be adequately understood as a counter-gospel to Vespasian. The former indicates that a certain encyclopedia is necessary to do the text justice, while the latter makes a hypothetical production scenario and authorial intention conditions for proper interpretation.

In fact, many authors who contribute to this area state up front that they are not making statements about *production*,⁶³ and there is no reason to reject the various manifestations of the anti-gospel hypothesis as attempts to (re)construct possible *reception* scenarios for Mark. There is nothing wrong with investigating how Mark's Gospel could have been understood against the background of the rise of the Flavian dynasty, using (re)constructed encyclopedia, and with a view to different locations in the Roman Empire. Understood this way, the schemes of Ebner, Schmidt and Bedenbender do not actually contradict each other by positing different reception scenarios. A problem arises only if one particular reception scenario is taken to be *the* production scenario or the only way to understand the text adequately and is thus turned into an absolute – not by virtue of having been proven, but simply by fiat.⁶⁴ It is crucial to remind readers – especially lay readers – that this is not what biblical scholarship is about.

From a more remote perspective, the anti-gospel hypothesis is already a reception-oriented approach that investigates how readers in the aftermath of the first Jewish-Roman war might have read Mark's Gospel in particular locations. Within the context of "imperial-critical readings" or Empire

62. J. MARCUS, *Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AncB, 27/1), New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 37.

63. SCHMIDT, *Wege des Heils* (n. 20), p. 7: "Die Analyse nimmt zunächst nicht ausdrücklich die vom Evangelisten intendierten Leser, soweit sie aus dem Text zu konstruieren sind, in den Blick, sondern Rezipienten des Evangeliums, die in der zweiten Hälfte der 70er Jahre des ersten Jahrhunderts lebten. Es geht darum *einen* spezifischen Rezeptionskontext des Evangeliums vorzustellen, ohne die Analyse im Einzelfall an eine Überprüfung der vermuteten Autorintention rückzubinden."

64. As was the case in, e.g., the *quaestiones* answered by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, cf. *Quaestiones de evangelio secundum Matthaeum, On the Gospel according to Matthew* (June 19, 1911); *Quaestiones de evangelii secundum Marcum et secundum Lucam, On the Gospels according to Mark and Luke* (June 26, 1912) or *De quaestione synoptica, Concerning the synoptic question* (June 26, 1912).

Studies, it is also a *contextual reading* that reveals how a certain text could be received in a particular academic, social and cultural context. As a reception perspective, one cannot deem it right or wrong, only more or less adequate to the text and the encyclopedia chosen for the reading. As a reception perspective, a reading like the anti-gospel hypothesis also cannot constitute a claim about how the gospel actually came into existence or how it was meant to be understood by its real author(s). In order to determine the latter, one would need methodological criteria for moving from text to reality or – in this case – from a reception perspective to the historical circumstances of production.

In sum, I find the anti-gospel hypothesis a stimulating and entertaining intellectual exercise. Nevertheless, I am concerned that it is marketed as offering insights into factors occasioning the production of Mark, while it actually represents only one possible reception scenario. It has its place in answering the question of how Mark's Gospel might have been received in an early 70s urban Roman group, but it does not tell us why the text was written or with what intent.

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