

An Introduction to Mark's Gospel

The Gospel of Mark is the written manifestation of a “Christ-ian” Jewish community’s long oral tradition. The gospel tells the story of Jesus’ ministry, first in Galilee and the north country, then traveling south in the Jordan River valley, and finally in Jerusalem where he was crucified.

The word “gospel” is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *god-spell* and it means “good tidings”. In Greek, the language of the Christian gospels, the word gospel is written *evangelion* and it translates “good news”. An evangelist, then, is one who brings “good news”. And so, the gospels are about “good news” as understood by the early followers of *The Way*, which is how the Jesus movement was originally characterized.

Many gospels about the life, teaching, and ministry of Jesus were written and four— Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John—were included in the New Testament canon as it evolved during the first three centuries of Christianity.

Most of the other so-called “gnostic” gospels were long lost until the remarkable discovery in 1945 at Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt of over fifty ancient texts stored in earthen jars. Among these additional early Christian scriptures were the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, and the Gospel of Mary.

History generally agrees that Jesus was crucified between 30 and 33 C.E. after the Jewish Temple elite turned him over to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. But there are no written records from the time. In fact, the earliest Christian writings are not gospels but letters of Paul. 1st Thesalonians, his earliest extant letter, is said to have been composed in about 50 C.E. which would have been seventeen years after Jesus’ death. Paul, however, makes no reference to any gospels in his correspondence.

Although scholars do not know for certain, there is compelling evidence that Mark was among the earliest gospels recorded, if not the first. Some contend it was written as early as 40 C.E. Others argue for a date after Nero’s persecution of Christians in Rome in 64 C.E. Most, however, suggest Mark was probably written after the disastrous Jewish uprising in 66 C.E. and perhaps near the time of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 C.E.

A brief note about this historical setting for Mark’s community in the wake of the Roman-Judean War may be helpful.

Discipleship in the Kingdom of God (that is, in a world where God rules and not Emperors) is the key component to Mark’s Gospel. The people for

whom the gospel was written were being called to discipleship in the midst of a violent struggle and conflict with Rome. Roman legions had crushed the Jewish people and their culture and traditions were in disarray. The prospect of persecution or death would have engendered real fear among the faithful. Yet, in the miracles of Jesus told in Mark's Gospel, God triumphs over disorder, thus assuring that followers of Jesus too would be vindicated from their troubles if they remained unyielding in their discipleship, that is, following *The Way*.

The actual author of the Gospel according to Mark is unknown. Until the second century the author was simply anonymous. Then a tenuous link was made to "my son Mark" who is mentioned in the 1st Letter to Peter (*1 Peter 5.13*). In this tradition Mark could have been written in Rome by an associate of Peter and where Peter was martyred.

Other scholars, however, associate Mark with the person of "John Mark" who is mentioned by the evangelist Luke in the Acts of the Apostles (*Acts 12.12, 25; 15.37-39*). In this case the suggestion is that Mark's Gospel was written perhaps in Syria. In any event, tradition has assigned the authorship to a person named Mark whose original text was a folksy, prose style of Greek.

The gospel stories of Jesus are neither journalism nor history. Their authors' chief aim was theological. Each gospel was written for a particular religious community of nascent "Christ-ian" Jews. In other words, the purpose of the gospels was to set down the "correct" understanding of the Jesus story for local believers, Jewish doubters in the synagogue, and potential new worshipers. The actual facts about Jesus in the four gospels are rich in diversity and theology, thereby challenging readers to study and appreciate the various interpretations and contradictions expressed from gospel to gospel.

Three of the gospels—Mark, Matthew, and Luke—share many common aspects and so they are often referred to as the synoptic gospels. Accepting that Mark was the earliest, the authors of both Matthew and Luke used Mark as the basis of their works. In addition, these two scribes had another shared independent source, now designated Q. Each also had unique material that was included in their respective gospels. Matthew was written after 70 C.E. but before the end of the 1st century, perhaps around 80 C.E. Luke was probably penned after Matthew and also before the end of the century. Most scholars agree that none of the synoptic gossellers knew Jesus.

The Gospel according to John was the last of the canonical gospels to be written, sometime between 90 and 110 C.E. John's rendition of the Jesus story explains who Jesus was, his origin, and divine nature. As with the

other gospels, the true author is unknown although tradition says it was John the apostle of Jesus.

The three synoptic Gospels express a “lower Christology” than John. In them, Jesus was chosen or anointed by God and was called, among other appellations My Son, the Beloved, Son of God, Son of Man, and King of Israel, but he was never actually equated with the Godhead, i.e. as God. (See *below*.)

The Fourth Gospel—John—has a very “high Christology,” that is, Jesus is specifically named as the incarnation of God: “And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (*John 1.14*).

The author’s purpose in the Gospel according to Mark, however, is to tell his community that Jesus is the Son of God. Indeed, the text opens with the bold statement, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (*Mark 1.1*). Likewise, the same message is proclaimed by a Roman centurion near the conclusion of the gospel: “Truly this man was God’s son!” (*Mark 15.39*). In between, the construction of the gospel is masterful.

The author of Mark tells a chronology of the last months of Jesus’ life and ministry beginning with his meeting John the Baptizer in the waters of the Jordan River when Jesus is adopted as God’s son: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (*Mark 1.11*). Then, after confronting Satan in the wilderness, Jesus spends much of a year wandering throughout Galilee, crossing and re-crossing the Sea of Galilee, and even trekking north to Tyre, Sidon, and Caesarea Philippi.

With Jesus always are an intrepid band of disciples, including twelve men Jesus chooses to be apostles: “He went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed the twelve, whom he also named apostles...” (*Mark 3.13-14*).

However, many other disciples are integral to the story, too. Among these unnamed disciples who traveled with Jesus are a significant number of women as we learn at the end of Mark’s story: “There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem” (*Mark 15.40-41*).

The first half of Mark’s Gospel is concerned with Jesus’ activity in and around Galilee. He heals many who are ill (ex: *Mark 1.30-34; 5.22-34*), is recognized by demoniacs (ex: *Mark 1.23-26; 5.1-20*), performs miracles (ex: *Mark 6.47-52; 7.30-44*), teaches and tells parables (ex: *Mark 4.1-9; 7.1-16*),

and leads his band of disciples from Capernaum to Magdala to Sidon to Bethsaida to Caesarea Philippi. These anecdotes and scenes serve to establish who Jesus is through what he does.

In the gospel, there is also an ill kept secret, known to scholars as the Messianic Secret. Often, after a healing, Jesus says, “See that you don’t tell anyone anything...” (*Mark 1.44*) or Mark himself comments, “And he gave them strict orders that no one should learn about this...” (*Mark 5.43*). The twelve and other characters ‘in the story’ are constantly confused about Jesus’ identity for they don’t know what happens in Jerusalem. For the community of Mark (and for us), however, the outcome is already evident and the listener or reader knows of Jesus, the Christ, and of the empty tomb.

Then, at the exact center of Mark’s Gospel Jesus asks, “But who do you say that I am?” to which Peter replies, “You are the Christ” (*Mark 8.29*). Jesus then warns the disciples not to tell anyone about him. Some argue that this is the climax of the gospel. The question, it would seem, is asked by Mark to his community as much as it is by Jesus to his disciples.

Afterwards, Jesus predicts the passion (three times), “Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (*Mark 8.31*). These predictions introduce Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem which is the focus of the second half of the gospel.

As Jesus walks south with the twelve and a loyal band of followers, anticipation grows about what will happen once Jesus reaches the city. Then, Jesus enters Jerusalem in triumph amid cheers of “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” (*Mark 11.9*). All seems to be well.

As mentioned above, discipleship—following Jesus—is central to Mark and it is reemphasized in Jerusalem. One example is Jesus’ answer to a scribe’s question about the greatest commandment. Jesus says, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (*Mark 12.30-31*). This, Mark insists, is what members of his community are called to do as well, even and especially during difficult times.

The Jesus of Mark also speaks eloquently about what it means to be caught up in difficult times: “As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them” (*Mark 13.9*).

The joy and celebration of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem is short-lived and within a day there is trouble. Jesus disrupts Temple commerce and upsets the Jewish establishment, thereby giving them cause to plot his arrest and turn him over to the Romans.

In the end, of course, Jesus suffers on the cross and dies. Although the community of Mark learns that they may suffer as well, there is always hope. On the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and two other women find Jesus' tomb empty. But the gospel ends suddenly: "...and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (*Mark 16.8*). Mark's message: what may seem like failure now will ultimately turn into vindication for the disciples of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Of all the gospels, Mark presents Jesus in his most human form—albeit an extraordinary human being. While in Mark Jesus becomes the adopted Son of God through his baptism, there is no association with Jesus as God incarnate as in John's Gospel. Rather, Jesus is seen as a wise teacher, gifted healer, and spirit-filled person who is capable of awesome and miraculous feats. He is also a radical movement leader who threatens the religious status quo and the Temple elite and, by extension, causes the Roman governor concern because of his potential for civil disorder. Mockingly, Pilate crucifies Jesus beneath a sign that reads, "Hail, King of the Jews". In other words, this is what happens to those who think themselves king in the place of Caesar. And yet, Jesus was certainly seen by Mark's community as the Messiah, the Anointed.

The Messiah, *Christ* in Greek, was expected by the Hebrew people to be a great king in the tradition of King David. As such, the Messiah would deliver God's "chosen" from oppression and recover the fortunes of the historic Israel. We know, however, that Jesus did not challenge and defeat Rome militarily or politically and thus to most Jews of the day, he was a sad disappointment who could hardly qualify as the Messiah.

Surely for those listening to Mark's Gospel, there would have been no question but that God anointed Jesus as the Christ to deliver them from oppression and injustice. The faithful felt Jesus had opened their hearts and minds to a relationship with each other and the one Hebrew God symbolized through a new covenant in bread and wine—Jesus' body and blood. God, through the teaching and example of Jesus, became immediately available to all people, especially through the Eucharist. Jesus, the Christ, offered the promise of hope to people who were hungry for God's compassion, justice, forgiveness, and a priori love. Jesus offered the kingdom of God.

In Christ, the faithful were no longer required to make sacrifices and keep untenable purity laws in order to have God's favor and blessing. God was immanent in Christ, the post-Easter Jesus, to use Marcus Borg's term. Jesus transcended religious expectations as well as the political and social circumstances of the day. He changed the focus of Hebrew worship away from the Temple and made the divine accessible to all, a truly radical proposition.

One might easily imagine Mark's Gospel being spoken aloud on a Sunday morning at the Eucharistic feast. Those gathered would have been a group of people who believed Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. They would have met at somebody's house or, if in Rome, maybe in the catacombs to remember their Lord, what he taught, and how he brought them a sense of peace.

The author of Mark makes the story of Jesus come alive with excitement and anticipation. There is an urgency to the writing: "And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him" (*Mark 5.2*).

The craftsmanship and genius of the gospeller Mark is evident in the way he knit together various oral traditions and stories about Jesus into a single, comprehensive narrative. Mark wrote with style and energy. He recounts clever parables—the story of the sower for example (*Mark 4*)—that Jesus must have told many times in many places. He combines emblematic episodes such as the anecdote about curing the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years with the story about bringing Jairus' daughter back to life (*Mark 5.22-43*). The technique enriches the Gospel and gives it body.

Mark is careful to explain in detail to his community what happened to John the Baptizer. This suggests that John and his ministry were an important precursor to that of Jesus.

Speaking of John, a clarifying comment about Herodias is necessary (*Mark 6.14-29*). In Mark's Gospel the name of the girl who dances in front of Herod and requests the head of John the Baptizer on a platter is sometimes translated "Herodias" (*NRSV*) or "the daughter of Herodias." As we know, Herod's wife is also named Herodias. It is unclear and confusing whether the girl is Herodias' daughter or stepdaughter and just what her name actually is. According to the historian Josephus, the girl is called Salome (see *Josephus Ant.X.VIII.5.4*) and some readers may expect this name to be used here.

The phrase "Son of Man" is used fourteen times in Mark's Gospel. What "Son of Man" means exactly is difficult to say. It can also be found in Isaiah 51.12 and 56.2 and Daniel 7.13 and 8.17. In Aramaic, the language spoken

by Jesus, a common meaning is “I”, as in the first person singular. Some scholars suggest that “Son of Man” expresses modesty. Still others (including 20th century theologian Rudolf Bultmann) contend that it is an apocalyptic term.

One final point of clarification about disciples, apostles, and the Twelve. Disciples are all people who followed Jesus. From the disciples Jesus chose twelve men “to be with him” (*Mark 3.14*). Mark says that Jesus named the twelve “apostles”. In addition to the original twelve apostles, others became apostles after Jesus’ death. Among these were Paul and James, the brother of Jesus.

By way of conclusion, the earliest version of Mark’s Gospel abruptly ends with the words “They were afraid” (*Mark 16.8*). There are two later additions to this ending which attempt to match Mark’s closing with those in Matthew and Luke, including resurrection appearances. I chose to stay with the original abrupt ending, in part because it is so dramatic.

Did the events of Jesus ministry play out in the exact form and order Mark records? Probably not. Did Jesus travel the highways and byways of Galilee then go up to Jerusalem, die on a cross, and become known as the Christ? Absolutely!