



**The Gospel of Mark
An Introduction
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Mark is the first written and shortest of the Gospels. There isn't a birth narrative, nor is there a recollection of the risen Jesus appearing to his disciples or friends. But if you're familiar with other Gospels, Mark may seem a little sparse. Moreover, there's a definite emphasis in Mark on suffering, frailty, and mystery. Yet, Mark's book is master. I highly recommend reading it in a single sitting to get a sense of the narrative flow!

Authorship

The book itself is anonymous, but by the start of the 2nd century, Christians were writing "according to Mark" on manuscripts.

The Church's tradition associates the book with Peter's interpreter, Mark, but we're not sure this is true. Why? Two reasons:

- It offers a less flattering view of Peter than the other gospels (which you wouldn't expect from someone who worked so closely with Peter); and
- It contains fewer stories about Peter or things Peter would've seen than the other gospels.

In any event, it's likely the author was associated with Peter and might have been in Rome. It appears to have been written to Gentiles and contains several Latin phrases and sayings.

When and Why Written

We estimate that it was written in 66-70 CE, about the time of the Jewish uprising against Rome. Why?

As [Jesus] came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

Mark 13:1-2

¹ I am grateful to Dr. Jaime Clark-Soles for her introduction to Mark's Gospel during my course of study with her at Perkins School of Theology. No doubt, her introduction serves as a framework for this one.

So, we see Jesus predicting the destruction of the Temple. That actually took place (at the hands of Rome) in the year 70.

Mark's Gospel seems to have been writing to provide comfort, courage, and counsel to Christians suffering violent persecution.

Jesus said: "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. And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

Mark 13:9-13

We know that there were terrible persecutions in Rome under Nero in the mid-60s.

Additionally, we suspect that Mark sensed a need to provide Christians with a written account of the life of Jesus as the generation of eyewitnesses (including the original apostles) was passing away.

Distinctive Characteristics of Mark

1. *The Kingdom of God*

Mark's thesis statement can be found in 1:15. After Jesus is baptized, he goes to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God and saying,

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Mark 1:15

The whole rest of the Gospel of Mark is about how this is true, so let's break this down a bit:

Fulfilled – eschatology (eschatos = everything is aimed toward a telos (goal) and history is unfolding in a meaningful way, need to know where we are in the unfolding of God's plan of salvation history).

Near – What happens when the K of G is near is that people are healed and things are aligned with God's will.

Repent and believe in the good news: you have to do something. Act in certain way.

In Mark's Gospel, references to the "Kingdom of God" are largely about routing Satan, the strong man. We see this foreshadowed in Jesus' healings, miracles, and exorcisms.

Jesus spoke to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man's house [i.e., Satan's house] and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

Mark 3:23b-27

As we work our way through Mark, we will see Jesus will enter Satan's house, bind Satan up and plunder him – because Satan has robbed God of what belongs to God and Jesus is taking it back.

When we read about Jesus' miracles – in Greek "acts of power" (*dynamis*), keep in mind that Mark doesn't tell us these things just to show us that Jesus can do miracles. These stories aren't about making him come off as important. Mark's point is that the miracles are tied to showing God's work in the world – to showing that the Kingdom of God has come near. Remember, in the 1st century, illness was either God's teaching or demon possession. Jesus acting to release people from demons shows God's work in the world.

2. Discipleship

I love the disciples in Mark. They're so easy to relate to.

- They don't understand
- They are afraid
- They are amazed (which isn't necessarily a good thing in Mark)
- Unlike Jesus' opponents, the disciples (apart from Judas) do not destroy Jesus to save their lives. They are not *against* Jesus; yet they fail at being *for* him.

On the surface, the disciples would be called the "insiders." But Mark doesn't show them in best light.

Who does look good in Mark?

- Women!
 - Stick with Jesus at the end when the men have fled. This is especially unusual in the 1st century – to hold up women as models of high virtues of faith, loyalty, etc.
 - The first ones to the tomb after Jesus' death.

It is probably historically true that the women were first at the tomb. **Lectio difficilior** is a principle of text criticism that holds that the most difficult reading is probably the most accurate reading (because there's a tendency to gloss or fix

troublesome things and make them easier which we don't do with easy stuff). Plus, all 4 evangelists include this detail – supports historical accuracy.

- Children
- Gentiles
- Demons (understand and fear Jesus)
- Centurion confesses Jesus is Son of God on cross!

The book opens with 1:1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The Centurion is the first person to confess what Mark wants us to confess. That this is a Roman centurion at the crucifixion is hugely ironic!

3. *Marcan Sandwiches (Intercalation)*

Mark wraps stories around other stories to invite the reader to look more closely at the stories, to compare and contrast them. So, the story of Jesus cursing the fig tree helps us to understand his purging the Temple (like the fig tree, the temple no longer bears fruit – produce what God intended), so it is doomed like the tree.

The whole Gospel is one big sandwich: the beginning of the Good news of Jesus, Son of God; surely this man was God's son.

4. *The Messianic Secret*

The whole Gospel is imbued with a sense of mystery and secrecy. Jesus asks people to “tell nothing to no one.” We see the first instance of this right from the start in Chapter 1 when Jesus heals a leper, then sends him away, saying:

“See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

Mark 1:44-45

The way it reads in the original text is literally: “Say nothing to no one.” However, the more Jesus says “don't tell,” the more they tell (1:45 and 7:36). This will continue until the last chapter when it's finally time for some folks to tell ... and there, when they're supposed to tell, is the only time they will actually “say nothing to no one.”

Moreover, Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God in mysterious ways that maybe insiders understand, but not everyone. And we see that even the “insider” disciples don't often get it.

This is known as the “messianic secret.” We believe that Mark used this theme as a way of making a theological claim: that no aspect of Jesus' story can be understood apart from the

cross. Jesus says “don’t tell”, because his works of power and his transfiguration need to be understood in context, and the proper context doesn’t come until the end of the story when he dies on the cross. Before that point, people are impressed with his authoritative teaching and awed by his miracles, but they don’t fully understand until he’s crucified.

So, when Peter confesses Jesus as messiah in the middle at the transfiguration, Jesus tells him not to mention it because Peter does not yet understand the nature of Jesus’ role as messiah – he’s still thinking of an earthly savior.

5. *The Ending(s)*

The original ending of Mark is abrupt. The women go to the tomb, Jesus is not there, a messenger tells them Jesus has been raised and then ...

They went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Mark 16:8

The ending leaves lots of questions: if they said nothing to anyone, how did the disciples learn? Did anyone ever see the risen Jesus? What about the Ascension?

Christians added endings – two of them.

An additional thought from Fr. Michael:

The titles “Son of God”, “Savior”, and “Lord” were, in the Roman Empire, titles claimed by the Emperor. So, to proclaim “Jesus is Lord” or “Jesus is Savior” or “Jesus is the Son of God” was – in addition to making a theological claim about Jesus – making a claim about the Emperor. If Jesus is Lord, then the Emperor is not.

These are counter-cultural titles being used by Christians. They are revolutionary.

To say “Jesus, the Son of God” was crucified (killed in the manner reserved mostly for enemies of the Empire) in a back-water town at the edge of the Roman Empire was scandalous.

For *Lectio Divina* (Divine Reading)

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He

was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Mark 1:9-15

Have one person read the passage aloud. As you hear the passage read, listen for a word that strikes you. Take turns sharing that word, allowing time for each person to share and all to reflect silently on the shared words.

Have another person read the passage aloud a second time. This time, listen for a phrase that strikes you. Share your phrases, allowing time for all to share and all to reflect silently on the shared phrases.

Have another person read the passage aloud a third time. This time, listen for how God might be calling you to respond to the passage. Share, if you're willing, allowing time for all to share and silently reflect on the shared calls.