

INTRODUCING MARK

Introducing Mark

The gospel of Mark is very much shorter than either Matthew or Luke, and if one takes a quick glance through the three so-called Synoptic Gospels, Matthew and Luke seem to contain just about everything that is in Mark, plus a lot of extra material, especially sayings of Jesus. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that throughout most of the Church's life, Mark has been the least quoted and least used of the gospels. With more careful attention to the differences between the gospels, however, this situation is changing.

The gospel according to Mark has its own special and very attractive qualities. The fact that Mark has relatively few words of Jesus, necessarily focuses attention on action, and an action that moves quickly (the word 'immediately' occurs forty times). Mark's gospel is not poetically crafted, but it has its own dramatic power. Furthermore, his presentation of Jesus' feelings has a particular attraction to today's readers.

Clement of Alexandria held that Mark depended upon Matthew (see Eusebius *History of the Church* 6.14). Augustine considered Mark a precis of the longer gospels (*De consensu evangelistarum* 1.2.4), and such was his authority that this assumption stood till the last century. Today, however, something approaching a general consensus has been achieved that there is a literary dependency of Matthew and Luke upon Mark, which is judged by most scholars to be the earliest of the gospels. Nevertheless, there are still scholars who consider that Mark borrowed from Matthew. The matter remains unresolved.

The Gospel itself contains no indication of its author. However, there is no reason to doubt the following statement from Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor early in the second century:

When Mark became Peter's interpreter, he wrote down accurately, though not in order, all that he remembered of what the Lord had said and done ... for he had not heard or followed the Lord. Peter, as I heard, used to adapt his teaching to the needs of the time, without making any sort of arrangement of the Lord's oracles. Consequently, Mark made no mistake in thus writing down certain things as he remembered them. For he was careful not to omit or falsify anything of what he had heard.

– Eusebius *History of the Church* 3.39.15¹

We do not possess any of the original manuscripts of the New Testament. Our earliest copy of Mark's gospel is a papyrus manuscript dating from the third century, preserved thanks to the dry heat of the Egyptian desert. The first and last pages did not survive the ravages of time, and some other small sections have been lost, but most of the gospel can be read there.

The whole gospel can be found intact in two books from the fourth century, one kept in the Vatican library, and the other discovered only last century in a monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai. These and all other ancient manuscripts, whether written in Greek or in the various other languages into which the gospel was translated, attribute the gospel to Mark. Careful comparison of these ancient manuscripts also gives us confidence that the text we have is indeed the text as it came from Mark's hand.

¹See also Irenaeus *Against the Heresies* 3.1.2 and Eusebius *History of the Church* 5.8.

According to Irenaeus, writing about 180AD, Mark is the John Mark mentioned in the Acts. The first time he is mentioned is during the persecution of the Christians under king Herod Agrippa I, probably in 44AD. We read in the Acts:

Peter [after his deliverance from prison] went straight to the house of Mary the mother of John Mark.

– Acts 12:12

The Hebrew name John followed by the Greek (Roman) name Mark suggests that he was a Greek-speaking Jew. This fits also with information we have from the letter to the Colossians (4:10), that he was a cousin of Barnabas, one of the leaders of the Greek-speaking community in Jerusalem (Acts 9:27, 11:21).

We next hear of him moving from Jerusalem to Antioch with Barnabas and Saul (Acts 12:25), and setting out with them on what is known as Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13:4-5,13). This did not work out well, and when Paul was setting out on a longer mission he refused to take Mark with him (Acts 15:36-40). Mark went instead with his cousin Barnabas to Cyprus, which was Barnabas's homeland (Acts 4:36).

Mark must have met up with Paul again, for Paul mentions him with affection in two letters written probably during his Ephesian imprisonment about 54AD.

Mark, the cousin of Barnabas sends his greetings - you were sent some instructions about him; if he comes to you, give him a warm welcome ... Greetings from my dear friend Luke, the doctor.

– Colossians 4:10,14. See also Philemon verses 23-24

Paul speaks of him again in his final letter. The mention of Mark and Luke together in these letters is of some interest when we consider the literary relationship between their two gospels.

Only Luke is with me. Get Mark to come and bring him with you. I find him a useful helper in my work.

– 2 Timothy 4:11

Finally Mark is mentioned in the First Letter of Peter, written probably from Rome about 64AD.

My son Mark sends you greetings.

– 1 Peter 5:13

A Latin prologue to the gospel from the second half of the second century, and called the Anti-Marcionite prologue because it was written against a certain Marcion, states that the gospel was written after Peter's death and in Italy. This takes us back to the statement from Papias. We can imagine Mark learning much of his theology from Paul, but drawing on Peter's memories to fill in the picture of Jesus. As we read the gospel, we will do well to read it through the eyes and heart of Peter.

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Mark's gospel, as we shall see, is very conscious of conflict. Having lost his two mentors, Peter and Paul, in Nero's persecution in the middle sixties, Mark completed his gospel during the catastrophe of the Jewish-Roman war which broke out in 66AD. Many Christians must have been wondering about the reality of the salvation brought by Jesus. Mark realised that Christians must expect to suffer as Jesus suffered, and that they should not let apparent failure in this life distract them from living as Jesus lived. God was faithful to Jesus and would be faithful to them. Their hope in Jesus would not be in vain, for Jesus was the promised Messiah. According to one commentator:

Mark's task was to present Messiahship in the terms drastically reinterpreted by Jesus, and to present resurrection as that which came only at the end of persecution and terror.

– C.S.Mann, *Mark Anchor Bible* NY: Doubleday 1986, page 83

If Mark's was the first of the gospels, then his was a superb achievement. He drew on thirty years of oral tradition and had in Peter the best of mentors. Nevertheless, it fell to him to take the various sayings of Jesus and the disconnected memories, and to create out of them a mosaic of faith in which the real values and attitudes of Jesus of Nazareth are presented convincingly and attractively. His was the task of assembling the material and arranging it in such a way as to present its inner meaning by conveying something of the wonder of the person who had captured the imagination and inspired the lives of so many.

In portraying as he does the last two or three years of Jesus' life, Mark aimed to demonstrate that Jesus had died as he had lived, and that the message of Jesus' love, given so unforgettably on the cross, could inspire Jesus' disciples to continue to live as Jesus had lived.

A final note. It is providential that we have four gospels, each with its own insights and perspective. This should help us to avoid going to the gospels expecting to find one fixed answer to our questions about Jesus' life and preaching. One definite answer might have simplified matters, and might, perhaps, have appeared to satisfy our curiosity, but the variety of insights that we have in the different gospels helps us see Jesus from different angles, and also to observe how different disciples responded to him.

By contemplating Jesus of Nazareth and by listening to him, we can become more sensitive to the presence and inspiration of the risen Christ, speaking to us now through Mark's inspired words. May we learn to be faithful disciples of Jesus in our obedience to God, and in carrying out the commission given us to 'go into the whole world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation'(16:15), building communities of faith that will reveal the true God in today's world.

The structure of Mark's gospel

Prologue: Introducing Jesus (Mark 1:1-13)

1. The Gospel of Jesus (1:1)
2. John the Baptist heralds the one who is to fulfil the Messianic hopes of Israel (1:2-8)
3. Jesus is declared Son of God at his baptism (1:9-11)
4. Jesus is our brother, tested, like us, in the desert (1:12-13)

BOOK ONE:

THE GOSPEL OF JESUS THE MESSIAH (1:14 - 8:30)

Part One: God's healing and liberating word (1:14 - 3:6)

1. Summary of the good news (1:14-15)
2. Jesus invites others to join him in his mission (1:16-20)
3. The healing effect of Jesus' teaching (1:21-28)
4. Healing for ministry (1:29-31)
5. Healing in obedience to God's will (1:32-39)
6. Jesus shares the condition of those he heals (1:40-45)
7. God's word liberates from sin (2:1-12)
8. God's word reaches those not accepted in the synagogue (2:13-17)
9. God's word liberates from slavish conformity to ritual (2:18-22)
10. God's word liberates from narrow interpretations of the Law (2:23-28)
11. The leaders reject Jesus and conspire to destroy him (3:1-6)

Part Two: God's powerful word (3:7 - 6:6a)

A: God's word is for everyone (3:7-19a)

1. Opposition cannot prevent the spread of the good news (3:7-12)
2. A 'renewed Israel': a community of disciples open to all (3:13-19a)

B: The power of God's word illustrated in parables (3:19b - 4:34)

1. God's word conquers evil (3:19b-30)
2. Intimacy with Jesus is experienced by doing God's will (3:31-35)
3. God's word produces an amazing harvest (4:1-9)
4. Understanding comes through listening to Jesus (4:10-13)
5. An allegorical application of the parable of the seed (4:14-20)
6. Four proverbs (4:21-25)
7. It is not we who produce the harvest (4:26-29)
8. The hidden power of grace (4:30-32)
9. Understanding the parables (4:33-34)

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C: Nothing can withstand God's powerful word (4:34 - 6:6a)

1. The chaos around us cannot keep us from God's word (4:35-41)
2. The chaos within us cannot keep us from God's word (5:1-20)
3. Not even death can keep us from God's word (5:21-43)
4. The only barrier to receiving God's word is disbelief (6:1-6a)

Part Three: Only by a miracle of grace can we receive the word (6:6b - 8:30)

A: The word of God continues to spread in spite of growing rejection (6:6b-31)

1. The twelve commence their missionary activity (6:6b-13)
2. The death of John the Baptist (6:14-29)
3. The twelve return from their mission (6:30-31)

B: Only by a miracle of grace can we 'hear' God's word (6:32 - 7:37)

1. 'You give them something to eat' (6:32-44)
2. The disciples fail to grasp the message of the loaves (6:45-53)
3. The crowd fail to understand Jesus (6:54-56)
4. The religious leaders fail to understand Jesus (7:1-23)
5. A stranger, a Gentile woman, believes (7:24-30)
6. Hearing comes through a miracle of grace (7:31-37)

C: Only by a miracle of grace can we 'see' God's word (8:1-26)

1. A re-look at the miracle of the loaves (8:1-10)
2. The Pharisees are obstinate in their refusal to 'see' Jesus (8:11-13)
3. The disciples still fail to 'see' (8:14-21)
4. Seeing comes through a miracle of grace (8:22-26)

D: Jesus is acknowledged as the Messiah (8:27-30)

Caesarea Philippi - the turning point in Jesus' ministry

BOOK TWO

THE GOSPEL OF JESUS THE SON OF GOD (8:31 - 15:39)

Part Four: The Son of Man came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (8:31 - 10:52)

A: Jesus introduces the theme of suffering: the role it is to play in his life and in the lives of his disciples.

1. The Son of Man must suffer, die, and rise again (1) (8:31-32a)
2. Peter fails to understand (8:32b-33)
3. A disciple will find life by following Jesus (8:34 - 9:1)
4. God's response to Jesus: the promised glory is revealed (9:2-8)
5. Why is the Son of Man to suffer? (9:9-13)
6. Only God can overcome evil: the necessity of prayer (9:14-29)

B: A disciple must be a servant of the LORD (9:30 - 10:31)

1. The Son of Man is to suffer, die, and rise again (2) (9:30-31)
2. The disciples fail to understand (9:32)
3. Disciples must be faithful to their sacred commission (9:33-37)
4. Deeds done in Jesus' name (9:38-41)
5. Jesus condemns scandal (9:42-50)
6. An example: breaking the marriage covenant (10:1-12)
7. 'Little ones who believe in me' (10:13-16)
8. Disciples must rely on God not on themselves (10:17-27)
9. The gift of eternal life (10:28-31)

C: Disciples must offer their lives for others (10:32-52)

1. The Son of Man must suffer, die, and rise again (3) (10:32-34)
2. The twelve fail to understand (10:35-41)
3. Disciples must be ready to give their lives like Jesus (10:42-45)
4. Only through a miracle of grace can a disciple follow Jesus (10:46-52)

Part Five: God's judgment (11:1 - 13:37)

A: God's judgment of religion (11:1 - 12:44)

1. Jesus enters Jerusalem and the temple (11:1-11)
2. God's judgment of the fig tree and the temple: the essence of true religion (11:12-25)
3. Where does religious authority lie? (11:27-33)
4. The mission of the beloved son (12:1-12)
5. Jesus exposes the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Herodians (12:13-17)
6. Jesus exposes the errors of the Sadducees (12:18-27)
7. The central place of love (12:28-34)
8. Do the scribes really know the nature of the Messiah? (12:35-37)
9. Jesus' judgment of the scribes (12:38-40)
10. The nature of true discipleship (12:41-44)

B: God's judgment of human history (13:1-37)

1. Jesus foresees the destruction of Jerusalem (13:1-4)
2. Deception, war and persecution (13:5-13)
3. The Jewish-Roman war: an example of the suffering Christians are to expect
(13:14-20)
4. A further warning against being deceived by false Messianic claims (13:21-23)
5. God's final judgment (13:24-27)
6. God's final judgment is imminent: the timing of the final consummation of history
is known only to God (13:28-32)
7. All must face God's judgment (13:33-37)

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Part Six: The passion narrative (14:1 - 15:39)

A: Jesus offers himself (14:1-52)

1. The final conspiracy to arrest Jesus (14:1-2)
2. Jesus is anointed (14:3-9)
3. Judas arranges to betray Jesus (14:10-11)
4. Preparations for the Passover meal (14:12-16)
5. Jesus speaks of his betrayer (14:17-21)
6. The supper (14:22-25)
7. Jesus' disciples will all desert him (14:26-31)
8. Jesus faces his bitter struggle alone (14:32-42)
9. Jesus' arrest (14:43-52)

B: Jesus' trial, passion and death (14:53 - 15:39)

1. Jesus' testimony before the Jewish authorities (14:53-64)
2. Jews abuse and mock Jesus (14:65)
3. Peter denies that he knows Jesus (14:66-72)
4. Jesus' testimony before the Roman authorities (15:1-15)
5. Gentile soldiers mock the king of the Jews (15:16-20)
6. The crucifixion (15:21-32)
7. The death of the Son of God (15:33-39)

Epilogue: The tomb and the promise (15:40 - 16:8)

1. Jesus is buried (15:40-47)
2. He has been raised; he is not here; you will see him (16:1-8)

Appendix (16:9-20)

1. Mary Magdalene (16:9-11)
2. Two disciples (16:12-13)
3. Mission to the whole world (16:14-18)
4. Jesus is taken up to heaven (16:19-20)

Mark in the lectionary

1:1-8	2nd Sunday of Advent, Year B
1:7-11	The Baptism of the Lord Year B
1:6-11	January 6th
1:12-15	1st Sunday of Lent, Year B
1:14-20	3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
1:14-20	Monday of Week 1 of Ordinary Time
1:21-28	4th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
1:21-28	Tuesday of Week 1 of Ordinary Time
1:29-39	5th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
1:29-39	Wednesday of Week 1 of Ordinary Time
1:40-45	6th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
1:40-45	Thursday of Week 1 of Ordinary Time
2:1-12	7th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
2:1-12	Friday of Week 1 of Ordinary Time
2:13-17	Saturday of Week 1 of Ordinary Time
2:18-22	8th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
2:18-22	Monday of Week 2 of Ordinary Time
2:23 - 3:6	9th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
2:23-28	Tuesday of Week 2 of Ordinary Time
3:1-6	Wednesday of Week 2 of Ordinary Time
3:7-12	Thursday of Week 2 of Ordinary Time
3:13-19	Friday of Week 2 of Ordinary Time
3:20-35	10th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B
3:20-21	Saturday of Week 2 of Ordinary Time
3:22-30	Monday of Week 3 of Ordinary Time
3:31-35	Tuesday of Week 3 of Ordinary Time
4:1-20	Wednesday of Week 3 of Ordinary Time
4:21-25	Thursday of Week 3 of Ordinary Time
4:26-34	11th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B
4:26-34	Friday of Week 3 of Ordinary Time
4:35-41	12th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
4:35-41	Saturday of Week 3 of Ordinary Time
5:1-20	Monday of Week 4 of Ordinary Time
5:21-43	13th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
5:21-43	Tuesday of Week 4 of Ordinary Time
6:1-6	14th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
6:1-6	Wednesday of Week 4 of Ordinary Time
6:7-13	15th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
6:7-13	Thursday of Week 4 of Ordinary Time
6:14-29	Friday of Week 4 of Ordinary Time

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6:30-34	16th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
6:30-34	Saturday of Week 4 of Ordinary Time
6:34-44	Tuesday after Epiphany
6:45-52	Wednesday after Epiphany
6:53-56	Monday of Week 5 of Ordinary Time
7:1-8,14-15,21-23	22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
7:1-13	Tuesday of Week 5 of Ordinary Time
7:14-23	Wednesday of Week 5 of Ordinary Time
7:24-30	Thursday of Week 5 of Ordinary Time
7:31-37	23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
7:31-37	Friday of Week 5 of Ordinary Time
8:1-10	Saturday of Week 5 of Ordinary Time
8:11-13	Monday of Week 6 of Ordinary Time
8:14-21	Tuesday of Week 6 of Ordinary Time
8:22-26	Wednesday of Week 6 of Ordinary Time
8:27-35	24th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
8:27-33	Thursday of Week 6 of Ordinary Time
8:34 - 9:1	Friday of Week 6 of Ordinary Time
9:1-9	2nd Sunday of Lent, Year B
9:2-13	Saturday of Week 6 of Ordinary Time
9:14-29	Monday of Week 7 of Ordinary Time
9:29-36	25th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
9:30-37	Tuesday of Week 7 of Ordinary Time
9:37-47	26th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
9:38-40	Wednesday of Week 7 of Ordinary Time
9:41-50	Thursday of Week 7 of Ordinary Time
10:1-12	Friday of Week 7 of Ordinary Time
10:2-16	27th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
10:13-16	Saturday of Week 7 of Ordinary Time
10:17-30	28th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
10:17-27	Monday of Week 8 of Ordinary Time
10:28-31	Tuesday of Week 8 of Ordinary Time
10:32-45	Wednesday of Week 8 of Ordinary Time
10:35-45	29th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
10:46-52	30th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
10:46-52	Thursday of Week 8 of Ordinary Time
11:1-10	Palm Sunday Procession, Year B
11:11-26	Friday of Week 8 of Ordinary Time
11:27-33	Saturday of Week 8 of Ordinary Time
12:1-12	Monday of Week 9 of Ordinary Time
12:13-17	Tuesday of Week 9 of Ordinary Time
12:18-27	Wednesday of Week 9 of Ordinary Time

12:28-34	31st Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
12:28-34	Thursday of Week 9 of Ordinary Time and Friday of Week 3 of Lent
12:35-37	Friday of Week 9 of Ordinary Time
12:38-44	32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
12:38-44	Saturday of Week 9 of Ordinary Time
13:24-32	33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
13:33-37	1st Sunday of Advent, Year B
14:1-15:47	Palm Sunday, Year B
16:1-8	Easter Sunday Vigil, Year B
16:9-15	Saturday in Easter Week
16:15-20	Ascension Thursday, Year B