

Welcome to the Gospel of Mark

The Gospel of Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels and is generally regarded to be the earliest Gospel written, around 70 CE. Its writing established two key markers for later stories about Jesus:

- It introduced the genre of writing we know as a Gospel. It does this in its opening verse ... 'The beginning of the *Gospel* of Jesus Christ' where Gospel = good news = *euaggelion* in Greek. While scholars have debated whether the Gospels fit more into the category of ancient biography or ancient history writing, the important point is that Mark chooses to set down the life of Jesus as a *story*.
- It set the parameters for how the story of Jesus is told – where it begins (with Jesus' baptism by John), where it ends (with the death and resurrection of Jesus), and what are the major conflicts. The later Gospels enlarge aspects of Mark's story but do not change its basic shape. The hinge or pivot point of the story is Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus' teaching that as Messiah he must suffer and die and the transfiguration of Jesus on a mountain. These are three key turning points in the story.

Mark and eyewitness testimony

Mark, also known as John Mark, was not one of the Twelve chosen disciples, yet according to our NT writings he was a close associate of both Peter and Paul, two important leaders in the early church. In Acts 12:12 when Peter escapes from prison, he goes directly to the house of Mark's mother to meet other members of the early church, which was presumably one of the places where the disciples met. In 1 Peter 5:13, Peter describes Mark as 'my son' suggesting a close relationship between the two.

When Paul begins his mission journeys, he travels initially to Cyprus with Barnabas and Mark (Acts 12:25, 13:5). Mark returns early to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13), which makes Paul unwilling to take him on a second mission journey (Acts 15:36-39). Instead Barnabas returns to Cyprus with Mark. Paul later reconciles with Mark and writes that he is a useful co-worker in ministry (2 Timothy 4:11, Philemon 24).

There is documentary evidence from the early church fathers that Mark also travelled extensively with Peter and that he translated Peter's preaching messages from Aramaic into Greek. This matters because it means that Mark's writing – the Gospel of Mark – is based on the *eyewitness testimony of Peter* and is therefore highly credible. It is interesting to note that (Simon) Peter is the first disciple to feature in Mark's Gospel in 1:16 and also the last to be mentioned at the very end of the Gospel in 16:7. So Peter's recollections and testimony have clearly shaped Mark's writing.

Some scholars think that Mark himself may make an anonymous appearance in the story as the young man who flees naked after the arrest of Jesus (Mark 14:51-52) but this is by no means certain.

Some insights into Mark's style

Mark does not include a genealogy of Jesus or any backstory, but launches immediately into John's baptism of the adult Jesus. Likewise, the ending of the Gospel is quite abrupt with no appearance of the risen Jesus but rather the women fleeing from the empty tomb filled with fear and amazement.

From beginning to end, Mark's story is fast-paced and consists of short episodes often introduced by the Greek term *euthus* meaning 'immediately'. This gives the story a sense of urgency and continual movement. It was also convenient for the compilers of the weekly Lectionary because it meant that the story could be broken into short sermon-sized chunks, like Peter's preaching on which it is based.

Mark's key themes

Unlike the other three Gospels, Mark contains relatively little of Jesus' *teaching*. Instead it focuses more on the *actions* of Jesus and his *interactions* with others such as the Pharisees and also demonic spirits. It is likely that this Gospel was written for a mainly Gentile audience, quite possibly in Rome.

The main theme of the Gospel – remembering that it was the first of its type to be written – is on the *person* and *identity* of Jesus. It presents Jesus as both Son of Man (identifying with humanity) and Son of God (identifying with God, a feature highlighted at his baptism and at his transfiguration). He is a person of great authority having power to heal, power over nature and power to forgive sins. Jesus is also shown to be the servant figure from Isaiah who gives up his life for others.

The other main theme of the Gospel is *discipleship* – what it means to be a follower of Jesus and how costly this commitment will be. These themes are highlighted in chapters 9-11, the so-called road of discipleship, as Jesus travels towards Jerusalem and his impending death. Generally the disciples, led by Peter, are shown to be slow to understand Jesus and sometimes unfaithful, as when they all desert Jesus following his arrest. Since this Gospel is based, we think, on the preaching of Peter, this is probably an accurate if not a particularly flattering presentation of the disciples.

A few brief highlights ...

When Jesus is being baptised, the heavens are dramatically torn apart, the Spirit descends as a dove and a voice proclaims 'You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.' (Mark 1:11)

When Jesus calls the first disciples he says 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people' (1:16)

When a leper says to Jesus 'If you choose you can make me clean', Jesus responds with compassion and says 'I do choose. Be made clean!' (1:40-41)

'How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself it cannot stand. ... No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man' (3:23-27)

Jesus teaches the crowds in parables: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow ...' (4:3-9)

Speaking on discipleship, Jesus says 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me' (8:34)

Speaking about what it means to be truly great, Jesus emphasizes the call to serve and says 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many' (10:45)

Pilate asks the crowd what they want him to do with the man they called King of the Jews. The crowd shout back 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' (15:12-15)

Early on the Sunday morning when the women come to anoint the body of Jesus they are greeted by a young man who says: 'Jesus of Nazareth has been raised. Look, there is the place they laid him. Go tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' The women flee, amazed and terrified and say nothing (!) to anyone. (16:6-8)

References

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