

The Gospel of Mark

Background on the Gospel

Mark is the shortest and earliest gospel. It's believed that both Matthew and Luke used the gospel of Mark as one of their sources in compiling their own gospel narratives. Mark seems to "leave out" the parts of the gospel story that are most important to most Christians today: the birth story, the beatitudes, the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son, Mary and Martha, the Woman at the Well, and NO post-resurrection appearances of Jesus! Mark tells the story of a very human Jesus at break-neck speed. Jesus is on a rampage of healing across Galilee, and then to Jerusalem and the cross. There's lots of questioning in Mark's gospel, and little certainty about anything. Yet, many of the most famous Bible scholars view Mark as the masterpiece of all the gospels, for every word in the gospel of Mark was written with intentionality to weave together the story of Jesus Christ, the Son of God in such a way that by the end of the gospel everyone who's heard or read it feels compelled to pronounce along with the centurion at the foot of the cross, "Surely this man was God's son!" In the early church the gospel of Mark would have been read aloud from beginning to end in one sitting, and this is still a commendable practice to fully appreciate the faith-forming skill that Mark employed in the way he told the story.

Author and Audience

Mark was likely John Mark, a disciple of St. Peter, who wrote the gospel following Peter's death in Rome in the late 60's CE. According to Papias, a 2nd century elder, Mark wrote down all the sayings and doings of Jesus that he remembered hearing from Peter through his teachings, but that they weren't necessarily in the order in which they happened. The irony is that if this Mark was Peter's disciple, Mark's gospel offers the least flattering picture of Peter and the disciples out of all the gospels. If Mark the evangelist was John Mark, then he would have lived in Jerusalem as a youth, where his mother hosted a house church, and he would have met Peter and Jesus' mother and brothers and disciples as a child. He was a relative of Barnabas, who accompanied Paul briefly. Mark was likely writing to an audience of Roman Christians (both Jewish and Gentile) to give them courage following the intense persecution at the hands of Emperor Nero. This story of Jesus, which Mark recorded, had been passed down as sacred oral history for 30 years until Mark took pen to parchment. This gospel was the hinge point between the first generation of Christians and the second generation of Christians to preserve what had been taught by those who had actually known Jesus' personally and seen him in action, before all of those first "eye witnesses" had been killed off by persecution.

Recurrent Literary Devices

"Immediately": is used 42 times in the 16 chapters of Marks' gospel. From the beginning Jesus announces that "the time has been fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near" (1:15) and the whole rest of the gospel shows how God's time is

breaking into our own through the life and ministry and passion of Jesus as events move from one immediately into another.

Intercalation: Mark makes use of literary sandwiches to shed light on and interpret later events. He will start one story, go off on a tangent, and then finish the story. Or, he'll wrap similar stories around a different story to shed light on the whole. Keep a look out for literary sandwiches!

Secrets: Jesus is ok with keeping his disciples in the dark in Mark's gospel, if they don't know what he meant then Jesus doesn't tend to explain his teachings to them. Also, Jesus repeatedly tells people not to tell others about the miracles and healings that he performs and instructs them not to tell others that he is the Messiah, and he silences demons that try to tell people that he is the Son of God. Jesus does not seem to want everyone to know his true identity in Mark's gospel. This is referred to as the "messianic secret" and it is believed that this serves 2 purposes. First, it is a compelling rhetorical device. Jesus tells those the events are happening not to tell anyone, but of course they don't have to because we are already seeing the events unfold through our own relationship with the story as readers and hearers, by the end of the gospel we've already seen and heard and come to believe more than any of the individual people the events were happening to because we've seen the whole story unfold as a whole. Secondly, and more importantly, Jesus didn't want his disciples to say anything about his identity as Messiah or Son of God until after his death and resurrection, for the reality of what it meant for him to be the Messiah could not be rightly interpreted apart from the cross. He was not there for glory, but for death on a cross. He wanted his disciples to have the right frame of mind when thinking about what it meant that Jesus was with them.

3/1 Mark 1-4

Chapter 1

Verse 1 is the Title of Mark's work, the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ (Messiah), the Son of God. This Son of God identification is rare and important. Caesar was also referred to as "son of god," so Jesus' identification as the true Son of God is a direct affront to the Roman belief system. True kingship and Godhood looks like self-sacrificial love and death on a cross, not glory. John's baptism takes place in the wilderness –the traditional place of renewal. Everyone was going out to John for baptism! John's baptism was an outward symbol of an inward repentance that had already taken place, an outward symbol of the forgiveness of the sins that the people had already turned away from. There is no birth narrative in Mark's gospel, this baptism story of Jesus' being declared God's own son is the "birth" of his public ministry. Jesus saw the heaven's torn apart and the spirit descending upon him, and Jesus alone heard God's voice say, "You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased." The word for "torn apart" forms parenthesis around the entire gospel. It's only used here at the tearing open of the heavens at

the beginning, and at the end when the curtain in the temple to the holy of holies is torn in two. The barrier between heaven and earth has become thin, and is obliterated through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God's son.

Immediately, Jesus is forcefully cast out into the wilderness and tempted for 40 days. This is a kind of peaceable kingdom image, where he is with the wild beasts, and also reassuring to know that as Jesus is ultimately protected in this dangerous environment of the wilderness, so God will ultimately redeem God's son from death on the cross.

The good news of God (the gospel) is "the time is now, the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news." Everything that Jesus will do in his ministry is an example of this good news and inbreaking kingdom of God.

Jesus called his first disciples, and they went to the synagogue, and everyone was amazed because he taught as one who had the right to tell everyone what the scriptures REALLY meant, not like the scribes who had studied this stuff their whole lives. The scribes always cited renowned teachers to boost their authority, but Jesus speaks of his own authority. Jesus' first miracle is to cast out the unclean spirit.

Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law and she immediately begins serving them, she is the first deacon, and offers a model of the Christian life. Jesus heals us and we respond in service.

One example of intercalation: 1:28 & 1:45 –Jesus' healings are not kept secret, but his fame spreads throughout the region.

Chapter 2

Jesus' popular following resembles modern celebrities being followed by crowds and paparazzi. Jesus made his home in Capernaum. He was preaching, but so many were gathered around listening to him that those to be healed couldn't reach the front. When the paralytic was lowered to him, he announced that his sins were forgiven as shorthand for saying that he was made entirely well. In Jesus' time it was a common belief that people were made sick or injured because of their sins. The scribes were appalled because only God had the authority to forgive sins. Jesus not only had true authority to heal, but also to forgive sins. The crowd's response to the healing was to give God glory. Jesus then called Levi (Matthew) to follow him and ate dinner at Levi's house, even though it was filled with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus didn't care about his own reputation, he cared about his relationship with people who needed him. Jesus is also lord over the Sabbath, for it was made as God's gift to people, not the other way around.

Chapter 3

Jesus is grieved and angered by the Pharisees (and our own) hardness of heart. After Jesus heals on the Sabbath for the first time, the Pharisees go and conspire to destroy him for the first time. That escalated quickly. Hardness of heart so often

leads to the desire to destroy our enemies. This is antithetical to God's ways. Jesus called some of his disciples up a mountain and appointed 12 of them as his special "apostles" –the ones who would be "sent out" to spread his teachings and to heal as a sign of the inbreaking kingdom of God. Simon gets the nickname Peter (Rocky or Petrified), and James and John are referred to as the "Sons of Thunder" (does this have to do with their contentious personalities or their father's?). Then, Jesus went home to his families' home, and it's obvious now that his ministry has become incredibly disruptive to his whole family (they can't even eat dinner in peace). Jesus' family tried to restrain him and said that he had gone out of his mind. The scribes accused him of being possessed by the ruler of demons. I hope Jesus had thick skin. Jesus begins to pull holes in the scribes' logic, saying that he couldn't cast demons out if he himself was possessed, that would be weakening the demonic cause rather than strengthening it. Jesus then says that the unforgiveable sin is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which is precisely what the scribes had done, for Jesus was not possessed by Beelzebub, but had been literally possessed by the Holy Spirit since he emerged out of the Jordan river at his baptism. Jesus' biological mother, brothers, and sisters are replaced in Mark's gospel with his family of faith. The irony of course is that Jesus' mother and brothers and sisters eventually become important parts of the early church and apostles of Jesus in their own rights.

Chapter 4

The disciples are given the "secret" to the kingdom of God, but Jesus gets angry at his disciples for not understanding the parable. He explains it, and in his explanation you can imagine how it sounds on the ears of those in Mark's community who had just endured such extreme persecution. Those who are good soil into which the word is sown bear abundant fruit. Everything secret will come into the light. More intercalation in this chapter about the parable of the sower/seed. The gospel is like the mustard seed, which bears much fruit and provides life to the world (branches for shade).

Jesus sleeps through a terrifying storm, his disciples wake him up to abandon ship, and Jesus calms the storm, adding further support for his true identity as the son of God –even creation itself obeys him!