

Mark – The First Gospel

001 – Background and Introduction, Mark 1:1-8

All outlines, audio recording of discussions, and works referenced may be accessed and viewed at <http://markthefirstgospel.blogspot.com/> .

Background

1. Initial remarks
 - a. No irrefutable proof about any of the details about the composition
 - b. Scholars have come to many conclusions
 - c. What follows is what seems to be generally accepted by many
 - d. No strong counterarguments, on the other hand, either
2. Historical setting
 - a. Written during the reign of Nero whose second half was marked by irrationality, the burning of Rome (AD 64), and blaming and persecution of Christians
 - b. Life for Christians in Rome and environs became unpredictable and precarious

On this understanding, Mark's task was the projection of Christian faith in a context of suffering and martyrdom. If Christians were to be strengthened and the gospel effectively proclaimed it would be necessary to exhibit the similarity of situation faced by Jesus and the Christians of Rome. The Gospel of Mark is a pastoral response to this critical demand. When Roman believers received the Gospel of Mark they found that it spoke to the situation of the Christian community in Nero's Rome.¹

- c. Rejection, false accusation, persecution, death – identification with Jesus
 - d. Forgiveness for Christians who deny their Lord in the example of Peter (14:66-72)
 - e. Written in the decade between AD 60-70
 - f. Composed in Rome or Italy
 - i. Technical terms in Latin and time-reckoning that of Romans rather than Jewish
3. Author
 - a. Most likely to be John Mark who accompanied Peter on his travels
 - i. This tradition is found very early and no reason to not accept it
 - ii. The outline and words of the gospel are similar to Peter's sermon in Acts 10
 - b. The gospel tradition found in this book, therefore, is Petrine
 - i. But with a Marcan "spin" on it for his own theological and life purposes
 - c. John Mark
 - i. Son of a Jewish Christian mother, Mary, who owned a home in Jerusalem
 1. Probably where the core of Jerusalem Christians met

¹ *NICNT: Mark*, "3. The Life Situation That Occasioned the Gospel."

- 2. Where Peter came after his miraculous release from prison
 - ii. Saul/Paul and Barnabas took him on a missionary journey
 - 1. During which he abandoned Paul
 - iii. Barnabas was his cousin
 - 1. Who takes Mark on another missionary journey
- 4. Recipients
 - a. Christians in Rome and Italy experiencing a crisis
- 5. Literary features
 - a. It is a “gospel account”

It is intended to be neither a formal historical treatise nor a biography of Jesus, but proclamation.²

Mark's task was to project Christian faith in a climate of uncertainty where martyrdom had been a reality. He selected and arranged the tradition to present the Christ who continues to speak and act meaningfully in the context of crisis.³

- b. It may be loosely following the book of Isaiah⁴
 - i. Isaiah was addressed to an exiled community
 - ii. Promise of deliverance is made
 - iii. Literal Babylon vs. Rome as the new “Babylon”
 - iv. Isaiah was not heard or understood by the exiles; Jesus was misunderstood and rejected by his people
 - v. The “Suffering Servant” passages applied to Jesus
 - vi. The eschatological deliverance passages of Isaiah transferred to Jesus
 - c. Some see Mark’s unrefined, direct way of writing as showing little in the way of rhetorical planning and purpose
 - d. However, Lane writes “It is better to understand it as supporting a conscious literary or even theological intention. Simple sentence construction, parataxis, direct speech and the historical present serve to make Jesus the contemporary of those who hear or read the account. Through the Gospel, Jesus continues to manifest his presence and his authority among his people.”⁵
 - e. Three rhetorical “tools”⁶
 - i. Juxtaposition of contrasting accounts, e.g., 3:7-19 & 20-35
 - ii. Sandwich stories, e.g., 3:20-21, 22-30, 31-35 (house, scribes, house)
 - iii. Two independent cycles of tradition, e.g., 6:35-8:30 (two feedings of the multitude, use of “bread”)
6. Theology and purpose

² *NICNT: Mark*, “Introduction.”

³ *NICNT: Mark*, “7. Some Considerations on Style and Literary Method.”

⁴ *Reading Mark*, “Introduction.”

⁵ *NICNT: Mark*, “7. Some Considerations on Style and Literary Method.”

⁶ *Ibid.*

- a. The “hidden Messiah”
 - i. The true understanding of Jesus as Messiah cannot come until his crucifixion and death

This is why no one is allowed to acclaim Jesus openly as Son of God or Messiah, for any acclamation uninformed by the crucifixion is misleading and invalid. This is why, also, the people and the disciples are presented in Mark (much more so than in the other Gospels) as bewildered and even stupid. In Mark's view, no one could understand the true meaning of Jesus and his work until Jesus had actually completed it by his death as a ransom for others (10:45). Thus, there is a theologically profound reason for the emphasis on secrecy, mystery, and the dullness of crowds and disciples.⁷

- b. To bring Jesus into the midst of a suffering community

[Readers/Listeners] are called by the evangelist to stand where Jesus stood, and where he stands. Mark's concern to involve men in the crisis of decision prompted by Jesus' presence is reflected in the care with which he has structured the material of the Gospel.⁸

- c. To give courage to a community tempted to lose faith

R. A. Guelich points out that the strained situation of Mark's audience “may well have given rise to questions about who Jesus really was and the nature of the kingdom he had come to inaugurate” (in Green, p. 524). From that perspective, the Gospel through its explanations provides a basis for their faith. The author's ultimate intention is to create disciples who will not only follow Jesus, but will have the courage to do so no matter what the consequences might be.⁹

7. How should it be studied?

- a. The whole must be considered – form criticism vs. redaction criticism¹⁰
 - i. Form criticism: views gospel writers as editors of pre-formed tradition, focuses on formation of oral tradition, focuses on exegesis of individual units, often seeks to harmonize and compare parallel passages, sees as secondary life situation that prompted the gospel
 - ii. Redaction criticism: views gospel writers as shapers of tradition, focuses on completed written text, takes the entire body of work into consideration, seeks the overall theological intent behind arrangement of material, considers the life situation that prompted the account as vital to interpretation

⁷ *Understanding the Bible Commentary: Mark*, “Introduction: The Major Themes and Emphases of Mark.”

⁸ *NICNT: Mark*, “7. Some Considerations on Style and Literary Method.”

⁹ *Exploring Mark*, p. 15-16.

¹⁰ *NICNT: Mark*, “1. A New Direction for Marcan Studies.”

Introduction (Mark 1:1-8)

These verses, and continuing through verse 13, introduce the “gospel” according to Mark. It gives the overall theme and trajectory of the account. It provides a high-level overview of what Jesus means to Christians who are now experiencing hardships and even being martyred because of association with the name.

The Gospel of Mark will be the account of Jesus' trial, throughout which he decisively encounters Satan and receives help from God. This is what it means for Jesus to go out to the wilderness.¹¹

Verse 1

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (ESV)

1. The title for this book
 - a. Some believe this applies to the entire book
 - b. Others believe it applies to the first thirteen verses
2. What does Mark intend by “The beginning of the gospel”?

The word “gospel” (euangelion), “good news,” refers to the church’s message of God’s saving act in Jesus, the message proclaimed by the church of Mark’s day and ours. It does not here refer to a book representing the life and teaching of Jesus, a meaning the word did not attain until the middle of the second century.¹²

- a. The first word “beginning” is *archē* which can mean “beginning, source, and/or norm”¹³
 - i. The gospel is not a set of propositions, it is not a piece of writing, it is not a creed, it is not a set of doctrines,
 - ii. The gospel is a person and his story
3. The gospel account does have a “proper” ending
 - a. Because the gospel is not a static piece of information
 - b. The gospel lives through the church and her members

The unfinished nature of his testimony, juxtaposed to this strong, affirmative opening statement, suggests that for Mark, the life, ministry, death, and even the resurrection of Jesus Christ are not the end of the story. They are, instead, the events that set the gospel in motion. The “good news” story of Jesus Christ, Son of God, is an ongoing one, continuing into the story of the church’s birth and expansion, and into the lives of those who meet the living Christ today.¹⁴

- c. Mark’s account has two key points
 - i. 8:29 when Peter, a Jew, proclaims Jesus is “the Christ”
 1. Acknowledgment that this is the Deliverer of Israel as prophesied

¹¹ NICNT: *Mark*, “I. Prologue to the Gospel. Ch. 1:1-13.”

¹² *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, location 617.

¹³ *Feasting: Mark*, location 620.

¹⁴ *Feasting: Mark*, location 667.

- ii. 15:39 when the centurion, a Roman, proclaims Jesus is “the Son of God”
 - 1. Acknowledgment that Jesus is greater than Caesar
- d. “Gospel” was not a new term¹⁵
 - i. It was associated with the cult of the emperor
 - ii. His birthday was described as “the beginning of joyful tidings”
 - iii. The gospel is “an historical event which introduces a new situation for the world”

Mark's Gospel as a whole gives an interpretive account of the historical appearance of Jesus; it is concerned with his teaching far less than the other Gospels.¹⁶

- e. The reader is given privileged information (Jesus is Christ and Son of God) that the characters in the story do not have
 - i. Mark portrays the people in his story as slow to understanding and stupid
 - ii. On the other hand, the demons know exactly who Jesus is
 - iii. Those who recognize Jesus are told to keep silent

Verses 2-3

2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,
**"Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
 who will prepare your way,
 3 the voice of one crying in the wilderness:
 'Prepare the way of the Lord,
 make his paths straight,'" (ESV)**

1. Only time Mark directly quotes OT prophecy as being fulfilled – the rest of the time they are found as part of Jesus' sayings¹⁷
2. Citation references Exodus 23:20, Malachi 3:1, and Isaiah 40:3
 - a. The Law and the Prophets
 - b. All of Jewish scripture points to Jesus as the prophesied Messiah
 - c. Points to the wilderness as the setting of the Messiah
 - d. Exodus theme
 - e. The latter part of Isaiah is a prophecy of a second exodus
3. Verse 1 spoke to the Gentiles – Jesus, the Son of God, greater than Caesar
4. Verses 2-3 speak to the Jews – Jesus, the culmination of all prophesies and the fulfillment of all scripture – the new Deliverer who will lead his people on a new exodus

¹⁵ NICNT: Mark, 1:1. Also subsequent quoted text of this subsection.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Exploring Mark*, p. 39

Verses 4-5

4 John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. (ESV)

1. John the Baptist “just appeared” in the wilderness
 - a. The Baptist is an integral part of the story of the gospel
 - b. He is the initial “invasion” of God into the realm of sin and evil

Mark is the story of an invasion, an invasion of this world by God and God’s reign... This is an invasion that is going forward without any invitation. This is an invasion that neither expects nor requires any real receptivity on the part of those for whom the invasion is planned.¹⁸

2. Tradition of Jewish ritual cleansing and relation to baptism

Like many other ancient peoples, Jewish people practiced ceremonial washings. Their only once-for-all ceremonial washing, however, was the immersion that non-Jews had to go through when they converted to Judaism...

Jewish people also practiced “repentance” when they did something wrong, asking God’s forgiveness and determining to change... But the ultimate example of repenting, or turning from a wrong way of living to a right way of living, was when a non-Jew decided to obey the teachings of Israel’s God.

To tell Jewish people that they had to be baptized or repent the same way non-Jews did would have been offensive, because it challenged the prevalent Jewish belief about salvation. Most Jewish people thought that if they were born into a Jewish family and did not reject God’s law, they would be saved; John told them instead that they had to come to God the same way that non-Jews did. The point of John’s baptism is that everyone has to come to God on the same terms.¹⁹

3. Part of the “new exodus” is returning to the “wilderness”

The biblical concept of repentance, however, is deeply rooted in the wilderness tradition. In the earliest stratum of OT prophecy, the summons to “turn” basically connotes a return to the original relationship with the Lord. This means a return to the beginning of God’s history with his people, a return to the wilderness.²⁰

- a. Baptism may have connection to the first exodus and Israel passing through the Red Sea
 - i. The Red Sea separated Israel from Egypt – likewise the act of baptism may represent a separation of the new person from the old
- b. Israel was closest to God in the wilderness

¹⁸ *Feasting: Mark*, location 522.

¹⁹ *IVP Bible Background Commentary: NT*, Mark 1:4-5.

²⁰ *NICNT: Mark*, 1:4-5.

- i. This speaks to the suffering Christians – a wilderness experience does not mean God is far away. Quite to the contrary, history shows that he is often closest to his people in the wilderness.
 - c. God did not abandon the Jews in Babylon
 - i. In this second exile, God delivered them and returned them to their land
 - ii. A repentance was part of the deliverance from exile
 - iii. A new exodus requires repentance
- 4. One commentary suggests the people confessed and were baptized, but did not repent

It may be significant that although John proclaimed "a baptism of reversal of mindset (*metanoia*) for the forgiveness of sins" (1:4), Mark does not say that the people adopted a new mindset. He says only that they "were baptized, confessing their sins" (1:5). Their baptism and confession do not effect their death to human ways of thinking and acting (8:33); the baptism with which Jesus is baptized is a costlier matter, as he will warn James and John (10:38- 39).²¹

Verse 6

6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. (ESV)

- 1. Reinforces wilderness imagery
- 2. Evokes Elijah but not explicitly mentioned in Mark until 9:9-13
 - a. Elijah spent time in the wilderness (hiding from Ahab, hiding from Jezebel)
 - b. Speaks to suffering Christians on the run and in hiding

Verses 7-8

7 And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (ESV)

- 1. The reader/audience is left with questions
 - a. What does Mark mean by "after me comes"?
 - b. What does he mean by "mighty"?
 - c. What is the baptism of the Holy Spirit?

How can the one "crucified in weakness" (2 Cor. 13:4) be the Mighty One of divine power? This tensive question drives the plot of Mark's Gospel.²²

- 2. John the Baptist did not know the identity of the one who would come after
 - a. Was this mysterious person one of his disciples ("after me come" could mean a disciple)?
 - b. Was this person a representative of God, God himself, both? Did the latter two possibilities even cross John's mind?

²¹ *Reading Mark*, 1:1-13.

²² *Feasting: Mark*, location 658.

3. Significance of the Holy Spirit²³
 - a. The Spirit is said to have guided the Israelites during their exodus and wilderness experience (Isaiah 63:11, 14)
 - b. The second exodus will see a new outpouring of the Spirit (Isaiah 32:15; 44:3)
 - c. The Holy Spirit is present to guide and comfort during wilderness experiences

Summary and Questions

Summary quotations to ponder, from commentaries:

By introducing his Gospel with an account of the ministry of John, the evangelist re-creates for his own contemporaries the crisis of decision with which John had confronted all Israel.²⁴

Like Mark we can find yesterday full of profound help for today. Stability can come when we see that the faith we profess has seen people through all manner of circumstances, and there is no reason to believe it will be undone by those that we face.²⁵

Could it be that then—and perhaps now as well—God’s message of good news can be heard most clearly outside the trappings of institutions? Do our churches unintentionally exclude the very people who most need to hear God’s good news? From what “wilderness” places may God be speaking a fresh new word to us today, if we only have ears to hear?²⁶

Summary Points

1. Mark’s gospel account: written for Christians facing crisis with all the questions of theodicy and the like that suffering and persecution raises
2. “The gospel,” for Mark, is the explanation and meaning of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection and how that speaks to Christians
3. Mark’s gospel account is not primarily for evangelism, but for encouragement and exhortation to those that already believe²⁷
4. Mystery surrounding Jesus and who he is prominently in Mark’s gospel
5. It might be seen as *midrash* (commentary) on the second half of Isaiah
6. The Exodus and wilderness wanderings figure as prominent motifs of salvation history
7. The gospel is not static – it continues with every generation of the Church

What could it mean for congregations to believe that we, here today, are part of this ongoing story of good news, that the end of the story has not yet been written?²⁸

²³ NICNT: *Mark*, 1:7-8. And subsequent points in this section.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Feasting: Mark*, location 589.

²⁶ *Ibid*, location 702.

²⁷ The obligatory alliteration appears here.

²⁸ *Feasting: Mark*, location 674.