



Gospel of Mark Bible Study

Session #1 September 15-20 Mark 1:1-13

Tuesday 6am @LW – Tuesday 5:15pm @AV

Wednesday 10am & 6:15pm @LW

Sunday 10:30am @AV

BACKGROUND Mark and His Gospel

Who was Mark?

Tradition ascribes the Gospel of Mark to a first-century Jewish Christian named John Mark. That is, John was his first name, and Mark (or Marcus) was his surname. His Latin surname may indicate that he, like the Apostle Paul, was a Roman citizen. His mother was a Christian woman named Mary, who lived in Jerusalem and was well-acquainted with the Apostle Peter (Acts 12:12). John Mark was also cousin to Barnabas, Paul's earliest missionary companion (Col. 4:10).

We do not know whether the author of this Gospel was an eyewitness to the ministry of Jesus. If John Mark was indeed the author, he would have had opportunity as a resident of Jerusalem to see Jesus. But whether or not he was in fact an eyewitness (as some believe Mark 14:51-52 implies), his connections with Peter (1 Peter 5:13), Paul, and Barnabas gave him a firsthand knowledge of the apostolic traditions about Jesus. Indeed, the second-century church historians Papias and Irenaeus wrote that Mark's Gospel was basically a record of the preaching material of Peter. More recently, the late T. W. Manson theorized that Mark was Peter's interpreter or aide-de-camp during Peter's ministry in Rome.¹ While the Gospel of Mark does not identify its author, John Mark's background and training, combined with the early Church tradition, which names this Gospel after him, make it likely that the man whom Peter called "my son" was indeed the author of the shortest of our four gospel accounts.

Date and audience

Modern scholars are virtually unanimous in viewing Mark as the earliest of the four Gospels. Many historians believe Mark wrote his gospel account after the death of Peter but before the fall of Jerusalem—i.e., between AD 64 and 70. The text of Mark's Gospel makes it virtually certain that he was writing to a Gentile audience. For example, the fact that Mark explains certain Jewish practices to his readers means that they must have been unfamiliar with them (7:3-4; 15:42). In addition, Aramaic forms that remain in the text are interpreted (5:41; 7:34; 14:36).

While it is less certain where Mark wrote his Gospel, Rome seems the most attractive alternative (see, for example, the note on Mark 12:42, as well as other notes throughout the study guide). Other suggested venues include Egypt and Syria.

Purpose

Mark seeks to explain to Gentiles, whether Christians or non-Christians inquiring about Jesus, how the Jewish Messiah was rejected by His own people because He came in a way they did not expect: not as a glorious warrior-king, but as a suffering servant. In this way Mark grounds the gospel message in history, so that his readers might know (1) that the message they have heard is true, despite its being rejected by the Jewish nation, and (2) that the gospel is the fulfillment of God's promises through and to Israel, and cannot be understood apart from that historical context. Mark's emphasis on suffering and persecution may also be relevant to his readers' situation if they were Roman Christians during Nero's persecution (about AD 65).

Mark's relationship to Matthew and Luke

Gospel is an Old English word that means “good news.” It translates the Greek word $\epsilon\upsilon\alpha\gamma\epsilon\lambda\iota\sigma\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$ ($\epsilon\upsilon$ -, “good” and $\alpha\gamma\alpha\lambda\iota\alpha$, “message”), which also gives us words like “evangelist” and is related to words like “angel.”

When the first Christians wanted to record the “good news” about the Man who was God, none of the familiar forms of literature seemed suitable. The Christians didn’t write the kinds of biographies or sacred texts that were common in Greek, Roman, or Jewish culture. Instead, they created a new form: the Gospel.

One need not be a scholar to recognize the strong resemblance between the Gospel of Mark and those of Matthew and Luke. John’s Gospel, while preserving a few of the traditions present in the other three, is written from a much different perspective. Hence Mark, Matthew, and Luke are called the $\sigma\upsilon\lambda\lambda\alpha\gamma\mu\alpha$ Gospels (from the Greek word meaning “to see together”).

Because Mark is much shorter than either Matthew or Luke, Christian writers from the second century onward tended to neglect it in favor of its lengthier counterparts. Matthew’s Gospel was generally the most popular; Saint Augustine, for example, believed that Matthew was written first, with Mark being a sort of *Reader’s Digest* condensed version.

Within the last two hundred years biblical scholars have generally argued that Mark is the earliest of the four gospel accounts. Among the points of evidence they cite are the following:

- Mark may be divided into 105 sections. Of these, ninety-three occur in Matthew and eighty-one in Luke.
- Mark contains 661 verses, compared to Matthew’s 1,068 and Luke’s 1,149. Of these 661 verses in Mark, Matthew includes 606 (with some variation), while Luke includes 320. Only thirty-one of Mark’s verses do not occur in either Matthew or Luke.
- Matthew occasionally varies Mark’s order of events. So does Luke. Matthew and Luke together, however, *never* vary Mark’s order. One of them always agrees with Mark’s order of events; most often, both do.
- Matthew and Luke frequently “smooths the rough edges” off Mark’s rather coarse Greek. Matthew tends to simplify the language of the Markan accounts he uses, while Luke often improves them stylistically. At other times, however, Matthew and Luke—particularly Matthew—reproduce Mark’s language exactly.

On the basis of these considerations, among others, it is reasonable to believe that both Matthew and Luke had at least portions of Mark’s Gospel at their disposal when they wrote their own. A few modern scholars hold out for Matthew’s being the earliest written Gospel account, but this view is not generally accepted. Thus it appears that John Mark, cousin of Barnabas and companion to both Peter and Paul, was the creator of the Gospel format.

Life Application Study Notes

A. BIRTH AND PREPARATION OF JESUS, THE SERVANT (1:1-13)

Mark, the shortest of the four Gospels, opens with Jesus’ baptism and temptation. Moving right into action, Mark quickly prepares us for Christ’s ministry. The Gospel of Mark is concise, straightforward, and chronological.

1:1 When you experience the excitement of a big event, you naturally want to tell someone. Telling the story can bring back that original thrill as you relive the experience. Reading Mark’s first words, you can sense his excitement. Picture yourself in the crowd as Jesus heals and teaches. Imagine yourself as one of the disciples. Respond to his words of love and encouragement. And remember that Jesus came for us who live today as well as for those who lived 2,000 years ago.

1:1 Mark was not one of the 12 disciples of Jesus, but he probably knew Jesus personally. Mark wrote his Gospel in the form of a fast-paced story, like a popular novel. The book portrays Jesus as a man who backed up his words with action that constantly proved who he is—the Son of God. Because Mark wrote the Gospel for Christians in Rome, where many gods were worshiped, he wanted his readers to know that Jesus is *the one true* Son of God.

1:2 Jesus came at a time in history when the entire civilized world was relatively peaceful under Roman rule, travel was easy, and there was a common language. The news about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection could spread quickly throughout the vast Roman empire.

In Israel, common men and women were ready for Jesus too. There had been no God-sent prophets for 400 years, since the days of Malachi (who wrote the last book of the Old Testament). There was growing anticipation that a great prophet, or the Messiah mentioned in the Old Testament, would soon come (see Luke 3:15).

1:2-3 Isaiah was one of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament. The second half of the book of Isaiah is devoted to the promise of salvation. Isaiah wrote about the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, and the man who would announce his coming, John the Baptist. John's call to "make straight paths for him" meant that people should give up their selfish way of living, renounce their sins, seek God's forgiveness, and establish a relationship with the almighty God by believing and obeying his words as found in Scripture (Isaiah 1:18-20; Isaiah 57:15).

1:2-3 Mark 1:2-3 is a composite quotation, taken first from Malachi 3:1 and then from Isaiah 40:3.

1:2-3 Hundreds of years earlier, the prophet Isaiah had predicted that John the Baptist and Jesus would come. How did he know? God promised Isaiah that a Redeemer would come to Israel, and that a messenger calling in the desert would prepare the way for him. Isaiah's words comforted many people as they looked forward to the Messiah, and knowing that God keeps his promises can comfort you too. As you read the book of Mark, realize that it is more than just a story; it is part of God's Word. In it God is revealing to you his plans for human history.

1:4 Why does the Gospel of Mark begin with the story of John the Baptist and not mention the story of Jesus' birth? Important Roman officials of this day were always preceded by an announcer or herald. When the herald arrived in town, the people knew that someone of prominence would soon arrive. Because Mark's audience was primarily Roman Christians, he began his book with John the Baptist, whose mission it was to announce the coming of Jesus, the most important man who ever lived. Roman Christians would have been less interested in Jesus' birth than in this messenger who prepared the way.

1:4 John chose to live in the desert (1) to get away from distractions so he could hear God's instructions; (2) to capture the undivided attention of the people; (3) to symbolize a sharp break with the hypocrisy of the religious leaders who preferred their luxurious homes and positions of authority over doing God's work; (4) to fulfill Old Testament prophecies that said John would be "a voice of one calling: in the desert prepare the way for the LORD" (Isaiah 40:3).

1:4 In John's ministry, baptism was a visible sign that a person had decided to change his or her life, giving up a sinful and selfish way of living and turning to God. John took a known custom and gave it new meaning. The Jews often baptized non-Jews who had converted to Judaism. But to baptize a Jew as a sign of repentance was a radical departure from Jewish custom. The early church took baptism a step further, associating it with Jesus' death and resurrection (see, for example, Romans 6:3-4; 1 Peter 3:21).

1:5 The purpose of John's preaching was to prepare people to accept Jesus as God's Son. When John challenged the people to confess sin individually, he signaled the start of a new way to relate to God.

Is change needed in your life before you can hear and understand Jesus' message? You have to admit that you need forgiveness before you can accept it. To prepare to receive Christ, repent. Denounce the world's dead-end attractions, sinful temptations, and harmful attitudes.

1:6 John's clothes were not the latest style of his day. He dressed much like the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8) in order to distinguish himself from the religious leaders, whose flowing robes reflected their great pride in their position (Mark 12:38). John's striking appearance reinforced his striking message.

1:7-8 Although John was the first genuine prophet in 400 years, Jesus the Messiah would be infinitely greater than he. John was pointing out how insignificant he was compared to the one who was coming. John was not even worthy of doing the most menial tasks for him, like untying his sandals. What John began, Jesus finished. What John prepared, Jesus fulfilled.

1:8 John said Jesus would baptize them with the Holy Spirit, sending the Holy Spirit to live within each believer. John's baptism with water prepared a person to receive Christ's message. This baptism demonstrated repentance, humility, and willingness to turn from sin. This was the *beginning* of the spiritual process.

When Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit, however, the entire person is transformed by the Spirit's power. Jesus offers to us both forgiveness of sin and the power to live for him.

1:9 If John's baptism was for repentance from sin, why was Jesus baptized? While even the greatest prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) had to confess their sinfulness and need for repentance, Jesus didn't need to admit

sin-he was sinless. Although Jesus didn't need forgiveness, he was baptized for the following reasons: (1) to begin his mission to bring the message of salvation to all people; (2) to show support for John's ministry; (3) to identify with our humanness and sin; (4) to give us an example to follow. We know that John's baptism was different from Christian baptism in the church because Paul had John's followers baptized again (see Acts 19:2-5).

1:9 Jesus grew up in Nazareth, where he had lived since he was a young boy (Matthew 2:22-23). Nazareth was a small town in Galilee, located about halfway between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea. The city was despised and avoided by many Jews because it had a reputation for independence. Nazareth was a crossroads for trade routes and had contact with other cultures. (See also John 1:46.)

1:10-11 The Spirit descended like a dove on Jesus, and the voice from heaven proclaimed the Father's approval of Jesus as his divine Son. That Jesus is God's divine Son is the foundation for all we read about Jesus in the Gospels. Here we see all three members of the Trinity together-God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

1:12-13 Jesus left the crowds and went into the desert where he was tempted by Satan. Temptation is bad for us only when we give in. We should not hate or resent times of inner testing, because through them God can strengthen our character and teach us valuable lessons. When you face Satan and must deal with his temptations and the turmoil he brings, remember Jesus. He used God's Word against Satan and won. You can do the same.

1:12-13 Satan is an angel who rebelled against God. He is real, not symbolic, and is constantly working against God and those who obey him. Satan tempted Eve in the garden and persuaded her to sin; he tempted Jesus in the desert and did not persuade him to fall. To be tempted is not a sin. Tempting others or giving in to temptation *is* sin. For a more detailed account of Jesus' temptation, read Matthew 4:1-11.

1:12-13 To identify fully with human beings, Jesus had to endure Satan's temptations. Although Jesus is God, he is also man. And as fully human, he was not exempt from Satan's attacks. Because Jesus faced temptations and overcame them, he can assist us in two important ways: (1) as an example of how to face temptation without sinning, and (2) as a helper who knows just what we need because he went through the same experience. (See Hebrews 4:16 for more on Jesus and temptation.)

John the Baptist Prepares the Way - Mark 1:1-8

1. How would you prepare for a home visit from your boss or another important person?
2. What were the two aspects of John's ministry? (1:4)
3. What was the theme of John's message? (1:7-8)
4. What does the message of Jesus offer to people?
5. In what ways can you prepare others for Christ?

The Baptism and Temptation of Jesus - Mark 1:9-13

7. What does the word "temptation" bring to mind?
8. What happened right after Jesus' baptism? (1:12)
9. What happened to Jesus in the desert? (1:13)
10. What role did angels play in this event? (1:13)
11. What temptations are difficult for you to resist?
12. How can we depend more on the power of God to help us resist temptation?

Bible Memory Verse: As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Mark 1:10-11