



mark: an introduction

Mark's Gospel is the earliest Gospel written—the first attempt of a Christian to write the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Matthew and Luke who wrote their Gospels ten to twenty years later appear to have used Mark's work as a primary source.

the world Mark was writing about

Mark is writing around the year 70AD, but is writing about the adult life of Jesus which had taken place some forty years prior. By the year 30AD Israel had been under the oppressive occupation of the Roman Empire for a generation. The Empire had taken control of all of the structures of government and power. They had installed their own king (Herod), who was answerable to Caesar. They had taken over the Temple, appointing High Priests who were loyal to the Empire.

This was not the first time Israel had been occupied. Two hundred years prior the Greeks had taken over Israel, but a small band of revolutionaries, led by a man called Judas Maccabaeus, overthrew Greek control.

There was hope in Jesus' day that another revolutionary leader would be raised up by God to save them all. Many people saw Jesus as one such leader; one such savior.

the world Mark lived in

The world had changed a lot in forty years, unfortunately not for the better. Rome had burned to the ground under Emperor Nero, and the Christian community had been blamed for the fire. An intense persecution of Christians in Rome followed.

In the year 70AD, tensions in Jerusalem reached a boiling point, and the Roman Empire destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple. They slaughtered the priests and Jewish religious leaders. Survivors ran for Antioch in Syria, where they tried to figure out what to do and why God had allowed all this to happen.

Mark's Gospel has been called a "wartime Gospel." He wrote his "Good News" of Jesus in a time when the world desperately needed some.

features of Mark

The Way

The Greek word *hodos*, which means “the way” is used throughout the Gospel. It is oftentimes obscured by English translations which render it as “the way,” “the path,” “the road,” etc. But, Mark is referring to more than just a road from one town to the next. He’s talking about the Way of Jesus, the Way of the Cross, the Way from death to life. Before Christians were ever called “Christians” we were called “Followers of the Way.” Mark’s Gospel is a document which is meant to show Jesus’ Way, and to compel us to follow it, even when the world seems to be going upside down. Perhaps especially then.

“For Mark, following Jesus is not a ticket to glory, it is the path to suffering; being a disciple does not bring exaltation, but humiliation and pain. Mark stresses, however, that the suffering would not last forever. In fact, it would not last long. Just as Jesus was vindicated, so too will be his faithful followers.”

*Bart D. Ehrman, The New Testament: A Historical Introduction. New York
Oxford University Press, 2000. Pg. 74*

The Kingdom of God

Very little of Jesus’ teachings in Mark’s Gospel have anything to do about himself. Unlike the Gospel of John, Mark does not spend a lot of time talking about who Jesus is. Jesus’ teachings in Mark center on the Kingdom of God. “Kingdom” was a thoroughly political word in that day. There was the Kingdom of Herod and the Kingdom of Caesar. Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom of God has an undeniable confrontational tone to it. And, obviously, Jesus’ challenge to the kingdoms of this world was cause for his execution.

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Immediately

Like the repeated use of *hodos*, there is also the constant repetition of the Greek phrase *kai euthos*, which means “immediately.” Almost everything in the Gospel of Mark happens immediately. It adds to a dramatic sense of urgency to the Gospel. Mark, who is writing during a time of great turmoil sees the message of Jesus as being critical, necessary, and he thought that time was running short to get on board. Related to this point, Mark’s Gospel is written with no poetry or flourish. There is no telling of Jesus’ birth, childhood, and even no appearance of Jesus following his resurrection. It’s the shortest of the four Gospels. Again, this brevity adds to the sense of urgency. Mark isn’t convinced that there’s time for unnecessary stories or details. The word needs to get out, and get out as quickly as possible.

The Secret

One curious detail in Mark is that oftentimes when someone figures out who Jesus actually is, or he performs some great miracle, he commands them to say nothing about it to anyone. It’s as if Jesus doesn’t want people focusing on him to the detriment of focusing on The Way or the Kingdom of God. This “Messianic Secret,” As it is often called, keeps Jesus’ teachings and actions focused beyond himself.

The Sea of Galilee

As pointed out by Dr. Alexander Shaia, a theologian and anthropologist, in Mark’s Gospel Jesus has his disciples cross the Sea of Galilee five times. The Galilean Sea is known for being a dangerous place where storms can come up very quickly. In fact, in two of these crossings the disciples encounter a storm that they fear will sink their boat. Shaia notes that Mark’s Gospel, written in a scary and dangerous time, shows Jesus not steering his followers away from the Sea, but guiding them to it; yet, not abandoning them.

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The Ending

There are two endings to Mark: an original one, and a longer ending which was written and added sometime after Mark had put his pen down. The original ending closes the Gospel with the women going to the tomb, hearing from an angel that Jesus had risen from the dead, and the women running away in fear resolved to say nothing to anyone about it. That's not exactly an inspiring ending. Apparently someone felt uncomfortable with this ending that they wrote a second ending where the resurrected Christ appears to the disciples, and sends them out.

who was Mark?

The Book of Acts speaks of a “Mark” or “John Mark,” who was a traveling partner of the Apostles Paul and Barnabas. Eventually this Mark and Paul had a falling out, and Paul left him behind. It may be the case that they repaired their relationship, for Paul invokes Mark's name in Colossians (4:10) and 2 Timothy (4:11) as a trusted co-minister of the Gospel. Peter also had a co-worker who he called “my son Mark,” who appears to have been his secretary. An early 2nd century source says that this Mark wrote down the stories of Jesus that Peter had told him. Could this be the Gospel that bears his name? Tradition says that after the death of Peter, Mark went off to Egypt to bring the Gospel to the Egyptian people. Christians in Egypt to this day—called “Coptic Christians”— credit Mark with founding their church.

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