



GOSPEL OF MARK: INTRODUCTION

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MARK: THE EARLIEST GOSPEL

- The relationship between Matthew, Mark and Luke (and probably John) is *literary*. One or more gospels operated as a 'source document' for one or more of the others.
- Although it is possible that Mark is some kind of *summary* of Matthew and Luke and thus later, it makes more sense of the evidence to propose Mark as the *source* for Matthew and Luke. We call this *Markan* priority. Therefore, Mark is the *earliest extant narrative account or 'life' of Jesus*.
- This could be important for historical reasons (earlier = more accurate historically), but history is usually more complicated than that. We won't be focussing on those historical issues.
- Instead, Mark marks a fundamental shift in the development of early Christian thought: *the reconnection of the life of Jesus to the death and resurrection of Jesus as an essential part of the 'gospel'*.

MARK: A GOSPEL SET IN CONFLICT

- The setting and location of the gospel and the community for which it was written are contested. The main alternatives are Rome or Syria/Palestine.
- The date of the gospel is also debated. But there is a general view that the gospel somehow relates closely to the events of the Jewish revolt and war against Rome that took place in 66–70/73CE. Mark may well have been written just before, during, or just after this decisive military conflict.
- The key text to interpret in this regard is Mark 13: a text that refers to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple (13:2), war (13:78), and idolatry/defilement of the cult (13:14).
- For me, the crucial aspect here is that these settings and possible dates locate Mark in a context of imminent, present, or remembered *conflict*. The precise

details may be lost to us, but understanding this context helps us to grasp why Mark has written the story of Jesus in the way that he has.

- In particular, it explains why Mark's story has such a strong focus on themes of kingship and power, conflict at many levels, suffering, and vindication.

THE STRUCTURE OF MARK

Again, in the middle of all of the debates there lies a basic consensus. Mark is a gospel with two or three main sections: one in which Jesus *travels around* Galilee and its environs and one in which Jesus *travels towards* and arrives in Jerusalem. I prefer two sections because I think that the second half is of a piece. So:

1.1-15: Prologue

1.16-8.26: Section 1 – Jesus Public Ministry in Galilee

8.27-9.1 –Interlude / Hinge: Caesarea Philippi

9.2–15.47: Section 2 – Jesus Journey To and Passion in
Jerusalem

16.1-8: Epilogue

MARK 1–8: CONFLICT IN GALILEE

- The public ministry of Jesus is prefaced by narratives of divine approval (1:9–11) and satanic conflict (1:12–13). The opening chapters of the gospel basically unpack that tension.
- The theme of satanic / spiritual / cosmic conflict comes to the fore in key narratives of Jesus confronting evil spirits: see 1:21–28; 1:34; 3:11–12; 5:1–20. The strange saying about 'binding the strong man' (see 3:20–30) seems to place this at the centre of Jesus' self-understanding.
- But that text connects satanic conflict to political conflict: scribes from Jerusalem make the accusation against Jesus. This theme is also present in the opening chapters. See 2:1–12; 3:6; 7:1–2. It will become a major focus of the Passion narrative in Mark 11–15.
- But there are two additional conflicts that people often miss. The first is with Jesus' own family (see 3:31–35) and the second is with the disciples themselves.
- Mark portrays the disciples as those who are called and commissioned by Jesus, but whose lack of understanding places them in a position of opposition to Jesus, through lack of faith or failure to understand Jesus' authority. The focus of this layer of the story are the sea-crossing/feeding stories in Mark 6–8, culminating in the passage in 8:14–21

THEOLOGICAL THEMES IN MARK

There are lots of theological ideas in Mark. The story of Jesus that he tells is often direct and clear, but at other times it is allusive and ironic. But the two main ideas that emerge in the gospel are explorations of and responses to the reality of conflict.

(1) **Christology:** the Gospel opens with a strong affirmation to the reader that this will be an account of the 'gospel of Jesus Christ [the Son of God]'. This is not yet the language of Christian theology as it is the language of Jewish hope and expectation. Jesus in Mark is portrayed as Israel's Messiah and in the first half of the gospel he performs the messianic script in obvious ways: teaching with authority, healing, symbolizing and re-enacting Israel's formation as a people (12 disciples) and liberation (crossing the sea and wilderness feeding).

But there are some additional notes that suggest a particular kind of messianic identity is at work here. The main one is the so-called 'secrecy theme'. This seems to function to the reader as a way of conveying initial ambiguity about Jesus messianic identity; an ambiguity that will be partially resolved in the second half of the gospel.

But the crucial thing is the messianic ideas are a way of talking about reign, rule, authority, and power in the ancient world of Second Temple Judaism. The reign of God is made present in the ministry of Jesus in the form of *healing* and *confrontation*, and an alternative vision of what power and 'rule' and 'empire' might look like is revealed. See 5:1–20 for an exploration of these themes in directly contextual terms

(2) **Discipleship:** the other focus of the opening chapters is on the capacity of the disciples to truly grasp the significance of what they are witnessing and participating in. This leads us to consider one final text.

CAESAREA PHILIPPI AS THE CENTRE OF MARK'S STORY

This well-known story brings many of these themes together as a summary of the message of Mark 1–8 and in anticipation of the narrative in Mark 9–16.

- The initial question relates to the messianic identity of Jesus, something that Peter rightly recognizes in the light of the events of the preceding chapters: see 8:27–20
- But this answer is not enough: secrecy gives way to openness (see 8:32) and Jesus now speaks directly of suffering. Jesus as Messiah is now to be interpreted through the lens of Jesus as the suffering Son of Man.
- This raises the question of the possibility of discipleship: Peter is rebuked as aligned with the satanic forces of hostility to God's rule.
- But does the rebuke contain an invitation? The Greek phrase *ὀπίσω μου* (*hopisō mou*) is used here, but it echoes the call to discipleship in Mark 1:17.
- Discipleship is then the theme of the sayings that follow, the invitation now is to the way of the cross and the willingness to lose one's life for the sake of the gospel.

So, in summary, these two themes are Mark's response to the reality of conflict, portrayed in chapters 1–8, and implied by our understanding of the local context in which the gospel was written. The gospel seems to be written in order to confirm that God's rule will always come into direct conflict with other regimes of power. It portrays Jesus as Israel's true king, and this is seen *both* in his authority and power *and* in his suffering and death. To be a Christian disciple is to respond to the invitation to confess that truth and walk in that way. And all of this, life, teaching, death and resurrection, constitutes the *good news*.