



Crookwell Uniting Church

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Introduction to the Gospel of Mark

Background

The majority of scholars agree that the Gospel of Mark was probably the first of the four gospels written, sometime between 65 and 73 CE. Many scholars also believe that the authors of Matthew and Luke had a copy of Mark's gospel in front of them when they wrote.

The Gospel was written during a time of persecution and war. Around the year 70 CE, two major developments occurred which seem to have an influence on the Gospel:

- Tradition holds that many Christians, including leaders like Peter and Paul, were killed in Rome; and,
- The Jewish War with Rome broke out, leading to the Roman conquest of Jerusalem, and the destruction of the Jewish temple for the second (and final time).

The text of the Gospel itself doesn't reveal who wrote it, but by the beginning of the second century Christians were labelling the text 'According to Mark.' Nevertheless, the author appears to be writing for people who already know the basic Christian message and understand terms like 'Messiah', and Latin words and concepts from the Roman world. As such, scholars think that Mark was probably writing for an audience of Roman Christians suffering a time of persecution.¹

Structure

There are several ways that we could divide up the Gospel of Mark. One useful structure is provided by Robert Kugler and Patrick Hartin:

- Part 1: Overture in the Desert (1:1-13)
- Part 2: Ministry in Galilee (1:14-8:21)
- Part 3: Jesus turns to Jerusalem (8:22-10:52)
- Part 4: Jesus in Jerusalem (11:1-13:37)
- Part 5: Climax - The Suffering and Death of Jesus (14:1-16:8)²

¹ Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 128-130.

² Robert Kugler & Patrick Hartin, *An Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 367.

Some other things to note about structure:

- Scholars agree that the Gospel of Mark originally ended at 16:8, with verses 9-20 added in later manuscripts (several English translations acknowledge this). This means that the original text of Mark ended with the empty tomb, not an experience of the resurrected Jesus.
- Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, in their book *The Last Week*, note that the Gospel divides Jesus' time in Jerusalem into 6 days, beginning with Palm Sunday and ending with the crucifixion on Friday.³
- The Transfiguration marks a major turning point from Jesus' ministry in Galilee, to his death in Jerusalem.
- The Gospel of Mark does NOT contain any stories of Jesus' birth. Instead, the story begins in Jesus' adulthood, as he comes to John for baptism.

Themes

Matt Skinner from WorkingPreacher.org has provided some helpful introductions to the Gospel of Mark.⁴ Here he notes 5 unique characteristics of Mark's Gospel:

1. Mark sees God's work in terms of incursion, deliverance, and mercy

For Mark, Jesus mission is an invasion of territory held by an enemy.

2. Mark sees a new kingdom emerging as Jesus breaches and redefines boundaries

Jesus consistently crosses boundaries which divide people from each other, or people from God. This includes crossings of the Sea of Galilee, dealing with both Jews and Gentiles, and approaching those who had long been excluded from their communities (such as the man possessed by demons).

Significantly, Jesus also breaks the barrier between God and people. Twice Mark uses the verb *schizo* (to tear apart): at the start of his story, when the heavens are 'torn apart' at Jesus baptism as the Spirit descends like a dove (1.10); and at the end of the end of the narrative, during the crucifixion account, when the curtain in the temple is 'torn in two, from top to bottom' (15.38).

³ Marcus Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: The Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem* (London: SPCK, 2008).

⁴ Matt, Skinner, 'Preaching Mark in Times of Strife (Part 2 of 2)'. *Working Preacher* (16/11/17). <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5001>

3. Mark sees a deliverer who often eludes easy definition

Mark's Gospel contains a strange feature that many scholars refer to as the 'Messianic secret'. Here, Jesus forbids people from revealing his identity until 'the time is right' (during the passion narrative in 14.62, when Jesus least looks like a powerful 'King of the Jews'. Jesus challenges people's expectations of what the Messiah should look like.

The question of Jesus identity also frames the entire book:

- At Jesus' Baptism (Mark 1:11) when a voice from heaven declares, 'You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'
- At the Transfiguration (9.7) when a voice again declares, this time in front of the disciples, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'
- At the Crucifixion (15.39) when the Roman Centurion declares, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

4. Mark sees outsiders who have insights

In Mark's Gospel, the disciples often get things wrong. Indeed, through the middle of the Gospel the disciples are often compared to the blind people who come to Jesus seeking healing (8:22-10:52).

Indeed, it is often not the disciples, but complete outsiders who provide insight into Jesus' identity and call. For example, read the story of the Syrophenician woman (7.24-30).

5. Mark sees discipleship defined by his rejection and death

To quote Matt Skinner directly:

'Discipleship according to Mark means following Jesus to the cross. Just as Jesus calls disciples to share in his ministry (for example Mark 3:14-15; 6:7-13), he also calls them to share in his fate (for example 8:34-38). They, too, will expose regnant lies and be deemed unsafe to the status quo. Through them and their deeds, greatness will manifest itself in acts of service. Displaying the gospel of divine deliverance, they will bring bread and hope to people who lack those essentials (for example the feeding of the masses in 6:31-44 and 8:1-9).'⁵

⁵ *Ibid.*

Another Important Theme: A Very Human Jesus

Compared to the other Gospels, the picture of Jesus presented in Mark's account is perhaps the most 'human'. This is not to say that Jesus' is no extraordinary in Mark's Gospel as well - only that the picture of Jesus in Mark's Gospel might be closer to our own experiences.

Here Jesus gets hungry (11:12), tired (6:31); angry (3:5); and sad (3:5). He seems capable of getting things wrong (7.24-30), and on the cross this is not the triumphant Jesus found in John's Gospel, but a broken figure who cries out 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' What a powerful image of God's Messiah!⁶

Bibliography & Further Reading

Borg, M. & Crossan, J.D. *The Last Week: The Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem*. London: SPCK, 2008.

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⁶ Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 134.