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Introduction to "Mark"

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Mark

Mark, the shortest of the four Gospels, was most likely the first Gospel written. Extensive study has demonstrated that it likely served as a source for both Matthew and Luke, both of which edit material from it in different ways.

AUTHOR

Formerly anonymous, Mark was probably composed for readers personally acquainted with the author. The title "According to Mark" was likely added to manuscripts when it began to circulate in broader circles. It does not appear in all manuscripts, but scholars have not yet found any other attribution. The tradition that Mark was the author emerged very early. Eusebius reports that Papias (early second-century AD) identified Mark as recording Peter's memoirs about Jesus, a tradition supported by Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and others.

The New Testament mentions only one "Mark." Acts 12:12 calls him "John Mark" and identifies him as a Jewish Christian who then accompanies Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey to Cyprus (Acts 12:25; cf. Col. 4:10; Phil. 24). Since Mark's family seems to have been in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12), it is plausible that he knew Peter.

DATE AND AUDIENCE

Tradition places the setting for the writing of Mark in Rome. While some believe that the Gospel reflects the persecution that Christians faced under Nero around the 60s AD, the suggestion that the book of Mark provided material for both Matthew and Luke might indicate a composition perhaps in the late 50s or early 60s. The tradition that associated the Gospel with Rome correlates with the one of Peter visiting and later being martyred there. Further evidence to support such a possibility is the reference to Rufus, which implies that the Gospel's readers personally knew him (Mark 15:21; cf. Rom. 16:13). Also, the explanation of Jewish customs (Mark 7:3, 4), the translation of Aramaic sayings (5:41; 14:36; 15:34), and the use of Latin terms to explain Greek ones (12:42; 15:16) further speak in favor of a more Romanized audience.

PURPOSE AND MAIN THEMES

The Gospel of Mark focuses on the question, "Who is Jesus?" In the first half of his Gospel, Mark recounts a series of stories that reveal different aspects of the identity of Jesus (1:1–8:30). Mark especially emphasizes that Jesus possesses divine authority: in His teachings (1:22), when driving out powerful demons (1:27; 3:15), and in performing remarkable miracles (2:10). However, people, including His own disciples, misunderstand and resist Jesus more than in the other Gospels (4:13; 6:45–52; 7:17, 18; 8:17). In this manner, the Gospel confronts readers with the need for them to decide what to



Date of writing
most likely the AD 60s

do with their knowledge of Jesus' identity as "the Messiah, the Son of God" (1:1). The climax occurs in chapter 8, where Peter confesses Jesus is the Christ.

In the second half of the Gospel, Jesus helps His disciples—and the readers of Mark's Gospel—understand what this actually means. Instead of coming as the Messiah whom the Jews expected would defeat the Romans, Jesus had come to suffer (8:31; 9:12, 31; 10:33, 34), to serve, and to give His life as a ransom on the cross (10:45). It was through His death and resurrection that Jesus had conquered the real enemies of God's people—the power of sin and death. For Mark, one can adequately understand Jesus' messiahship only in light of the crucifixion story. Only then can the reader make a mature decision about who Christ really is.

STRUCTURE

The Gospel of Mark is the most action-packed of all the Gospels. It begins suddenly and dramatically with the baptism of Jesus (1:1-13), and then quickly moves from one story to another, recounting the ministry of Jesus in Galilee (1:14-3:6; 3:7-6:6a), how His ministry was misunderstood (6:6b-8:21), and the events connected to His journey to Jerusalem (8:22-10:52) and His ministry there (11:1-13:37). The Gospel ends with the passion and resurrection of Jesus (14:1-16:8). The Gospel maintains a sense of rapid pace by often joining its stories together with the adverb "immediately" (e.g., 1:10, 12, 18, 20, 21). In doing this, Mark depicts Jesus as a man of action whose greatest action is His death and resurrection.

It is also noteworthy that the Gospel ends rather abruptly in Mark 16:8, considering that the earliest manuscripts do not contain verses 9 through 20. This ending, however, fits into Mark's message and makes the story interesting in a unique way.

As you read Mark's Gospel, note the way it invites the reader to make a decision about Jesus, "the Messiah, the Son of God" (1:1), by considering both parts of his ministry: His miraculous deeds and His sacrifice.

OUTLINE:

- I. Introduction: The Beginning of the Good News of Jesus (1:1-13)
- II. The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry of Jesus (1:14-3:6)
 - A. A Summary of the Message of Jesus' Kingdom (1:14-15)
 - B. The Calling of the First Disciples (1:16-20)
 - C. Miraculous Signs of the Authority of Jesus (1:21-1:45)
 - D. Opposition in Galilee (2:1-3:6)
- III. Later Phases of the Galilean Ministry of Jesus (3:7-6:6a)
 - A. A Summary of the Ministry of Jesus (3:7-12)
 - B. The Calling of the Twelve Disciples (3:13-19)
 - C. Jesus, His family, and Opposition (3:20-35)
 - D. Parables of the Kingdom (4:1-34)

- E. The Authority of Jesus over Evil Forces (4:35–5:43)
- F. Opposition and Rejection in Nazareth (6:1-6a)
- IV. Expanded Ministry and Misunderstanding (6:6b–8:21)
 - A. The Mission of the Twelve and the Death of the Baptist (6:6b-31)
 - B. Miracles and Misunderstanding (6:32-56)
 - C. Jesus and the Tradition of the Pharisees (7:1-23)
 - D. Ministry beyond Galilee (7:24–8:10)
 - E. More Misunderstanding (8:11-21)
- V. Ministry on the Journey to Jerusalem (8:22-10:52)
 - A. Jesus Heals a Blind Man (8:22-26)
 - B. Peter's Confession of Christ (8:27-33)
 - C. Anticipating the Cross (8:34-9:50)
 - D. Ministry in Perea and Judea (10:1-52)
- VI. The Closing Ministry of Jesus in Jerusalem (11:1-13:37)
 - A. Conflict with Scribes and Pharisees (11:1-12:44)
 - B. The Prophecy of the Fall of Jerusalem and the Second Coming (13:1-37)
- VII. The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus (14:1-16:8)
 - A. The Plot to Kill Jesus and His Anointing in Bethany (14:1-11)
 - B. The Last Supper (14:12-31)
 - C. The Betrayal, Arrest, Trial, and Death of Jesus (14:32-15:47)
 - D. The Resurrection of Jesus (16:1-8).
- VIII. A Scribal Epilogue (16:9-20)

USE OF PARABLES

Rabbinic literature widely used parables as an essential method to teach ethical and moral lessons. The rabbis also emphasized the value of parables for understanding the deeper meanings of the Torah. Several of Jesus' parables appear in rabbinic literature, though with some differences. Still, the parables found in the New Testament have features unique to Jesus: in general, they are more provocative and eschatological. When trying to understand His parables, it is essential to keep in mind that the explanations Jesus Himself or the author in the text gives are most helpful. For example, in the parable of the wicked tenants (12:1-11), Mark tells us that the chief priests and scribes recognized that the story referred to them (11:27; 12:12). They also understood that the parable was denouncing them for something they had done wrong.

Another critical point is that parables have applications for the life and faith of their audience. Readers of the Gospels should focus on these elements that are found within the text. In this way, they will be more able to uncover the richness of Jesus' teachings.