

The Gospel of Mark

1. Introduction

Traditionally, the Gospel of Mark was thought to be a summary of the Gospel of Matthew (cf. Griesbach hypothesis) and, as a result, it was neglected for many centuries. During the 18th and 19th centuries this view changed when Markan Priority became the widely accepted view among NT scholars. Initially the interest was in the origin of the Gospel, because it was believed to be closer to the oral traditions that preceded the written accounts of Jesus. Form critics viewed it as a nearly random collection of 'pericopes' (units) that had been strung together by Mark to form a kind of narrative ('string of pearls'). This view was heightened by early references to Mark by Papias (see below). However, more recent scholarship has come to regard Mark as a much more carefully woven account.

2. Authorship – Origin – Date

The link of the gospel to 'Mark' is dated to a comment made by Papias (bishop of Hierapolis, around 125 CE):

'Mark, who had been Peter's interpreter, wrote down carefully, but not in order, all that he remembered of the Lord's sayings and doings' (Papias, quoted by Eusebius in *History of the Church*).

Popular tradition links Mark to John Mark, the companion of Paul (Acts 12:12, 25; 13:13; 15:37-39; Philemon 24) who may later have joined Peter (I Peter 5:13). He has also been linked to the unnamed figure who fled at the arrest of Jesus (Mark 14:51-52), but there is very little hard evidence in support of this.

Clues as to the origin of the Gospel have been looked for in the text itself ('internal evidence'). What does the text *imply* about the author and his setting? The *implied author* is a construct used both in historical studies (to place the author in context) and by literary studies (to understand what can be gleaned about the author from the text).

Three different suggestions:

- **Rome** The gospel is traditionally linked with Peter and, as a result, Rome. A non-Jewish setting is suggested by 'Latinisms' (e.g., Mark 3:6: 'Herodians held a council'; 15:39: *centurio* becomes *kenturiôn*) and explanation of Jewish customs. A general anti-Jewish sentiment may link the Gospel to a Gentile readership (post 70 CE), when Jews were very unpopular in Rome.

- **Galilee** Large sections of the narrative take place in Galilee, and place names are used without explanation (although Mark's geography is not always accurate). This would cohere with the idea of imminent danger during the Jewish revolt of the late 60s (see Mark 13).
- **Antioch** This might provide a compromise between Jewish/Palestinian influence and Roman influence. Antioch was a key Roman city, with a Jewish colony and an early Christian community. Peter (Gal. 2:11) and John Mark (Acts 11:22-26) also had connections with the city, but again there is little direct evidence.

The question of date is again linked to origins and clues are given by the text and tradition. The traditional link to Peter would suggest late 60s, but it could be after the Jewish War (70 CE).

3. Content

This is the shortest of the four canonical gospels, with no account given of the birth of Jesus or post-resurrection appearances. The first half of the narrative is set largely in Northern Palestine (especially Galilee). The pivotal moment is Peter's confession that Jesus is 'the Christ' (8:27-30). Jesus then heads towards Jerusalem, where he is crucified.

1. **Prologue (1:1-13)** This provides the key to the whole gospel and sets Jesus in relation to John the Baptist. It also offers vital clues about the identity of Jesus (1:11: 'You are my beloved Son').
2. **The Kingdom Proclaimed (1:14-8:26)** Preaching the 'gospel' and performing miracles leads to immediate attention, recognition (by demons) and opposition (from religious authorities). The disciples struggle to understand who Jesus is (4:41) and this is echoed by the crowds and even by his own family (3:20ff). There is relatively little direct teaching (except the parables in Mark 4) and it mostly arises from encounters with people.
3. **Watershed (8:27-30)** Peter recognizes Jesus as the Messiah ('the Christ'). What did Peter understand by this? Jesus' teaching to them changes after this.
4. **The road to Jerusalem (8:31-15:39)** The journey to Jerusalem is marked by Jesus' teaching of the disciples (e.g. about divorce, wealth, power). The arrival into Jerusalem is a mixture of messianic expectations and a popular uprising that never happened. Chapter 13 stands apart as 'apocalyptic discourse'. Jesus' period in Jerusalem sees mounting opposition from the Jewish authorities, who eventually

demand that the Romans execute Jesus. Jesus' death impresses the centurion to recognize him as the Son of God.

5. **Epilogue (15:40-16:8)** Jesus' body is laid in a tomb. When the women come to prepare it, the tomb is empty and they are directed to tell the disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee. They ran away frightened.
6. **Later ending** The oldest manuscripts end abruptly at 16:8. Later copyists added a shorter and longer ending.

4. Style and Message

Mark writes in a direct style, with Greek that is sometimes awkward and which is often corrected by Matthew and Luke. The use of the linking 'and' (*kai*) of sentences, the continuous flow of action (*euthus* = immediately) and emphasis on events rather than teaching gives an immediate if not frantic feel to the narrative. This is not detached reporting; the narrator often interprets what is happening (cf. 5:24-34 and Luke 8:43-48). Mark is not always the shortest account (cf. 5:24-34 and Matt. 9:20-22).

The message appears to be paradoxical: Jesus proclaims the kingdom, but he is not recognized by and is rejected by his people and dies alone on the cross. For Mark:

- a) There is no 'gospel' without the cross: this could be an attempt to relate the sufferings of early Christians (Nero's persecution in Rome 64 CE or Jewish War in 66-70 CE) to those of Jesus.
- b) The crucified Jesus is the Son of God: readers may have been all too aware of Jesus' suffering. The crucified Messiah theme runs throughout the gospel.

5. The 'Messianic Secret'

Wilhelm Wrede (1901) pointed out that, in Mark, Jesus often commands silence from those whom he healed (1:34; 1:44; 5:43; 7:36; 9:9; 9:30). Wrede suggested that this was because Jesus made no claim to be the Messiah, but the Early Church had to justify its claim that he did. The 'secret' is not consistent in Mark (e.g., Jesus does not prevent Bartimaeus in 10:46-50). Whatever the explanation of the origin of the secret, it is a key theme for the interpretation of Mark.

6. 'Messianic Titles'

Jesus never refers to himself as Son of God (Mark puts this title on the lips of others – narrative (1:1); God (1:11); centurion (15:39). Jesus often uses the term ‘Son of Man’ but not consistently. In Aramaic this phrase was simply a self-reference (one such as I), but in Greek it became a title. It is used in some places (13:26; 14:62) with echoes of Daniel 7, where it could be interpreted as a title. Scholars are divided as to whether ‘Son of Man’ was an understood messianic reference.

7. Narrative Criticism (with reference to the Gospel of Mark)

This way of analysing texts is peculiar to biblical studies. It is less interested in the ‘real’ author or ‘real’ readers and is more interested in how the story (narrative) gives clues about the author (the *implied* author) and the *implied* reader. What does the author (narrator) know and how does the author impart this ‘knowledge’ to the readers? What must the reader ‘know’ to understand this narrative? How does the narrative shape the ‘knowledge’ of the reader?

Narrative critics look for clues as to how the implied reader is guided through the narrative. These clues can be found in various ways:

1. **Point of View** Norms, values and general worldview is assumed in the text (particular point of view for a scene or story).
2. **Narration** This can shape the way that characters or events are perceived, and the ‘inside’ knowledge of what is going on. In Mark 5:25-34 we are ‘inside the head’ of the woman and of Jesus.
3. **Symbolism and Irony** Symbolism uses devices that cannot be taken literally at face value. These may be universal symbols (likely to be recognized by the readers), culturally conditioned symbols (shared by people with the same setting), or symbols created by the author, which the implied reader should recognize. Irony is a device that points to the real meaning being the opposite to the apparent meaning (e.g., crowning of Jesus with thorns).
4. **Narrative Patterns** The structure and content of the text can guide the way it is read and understood. Simple patterns (repetition, contrasts, comparisons) are relatively easy to grasp. The effectiveness of more subtle patterns is more open to question.

8. Mark as Narrative

Modern interpreters regard Mark as a more carefully crafted text than simply a series of units of tradition strung together. In a gospel such as Mark

narrative devices function through plot (events), characters and setting. Examples are repetition ('Son of God' theme), intercalation (see Mark 5), deliberate narrative intrusion (13:14: 'Let the reader understand') and repeated motifs (the amazement and fear of crowds and disciples is associated with a lack of understanding as to the identity of Jesus).

The ending of Mark has been a great source of discussion for narrative critics. Historical approaches would see it as evidence of an unfinished work (or a torn scroll). Narrative critics see in it just the kind of puzzling end that fits with Mark's style and purpose: the women probably did not fear overcome them or the story would never have been told.