

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK

### A. ORIENTING DATA FOR MARK

- **Content:** the story of Jesus from his baptism to his resurrection, about two-thirds of which tells of his ministry in Galilee, while the last third narrates his final week in Jerusalem
- **Author:** anonymous; attributed (by Papias, ca. A.D. 125) to John Mark, a sometime companion of Paul (Col 4:10) and later of Peter (1 Pet 5:13)
- **Date:** ca. A.D. 65 (according to Papias, soon after the deaths of Paul and Peter in Rome)
- **Recipients:** the church in Rome (according to Papias), which accounts for its preservation along with the longer Matthew and Luke
- **Emphases:** the time of God's rule (the kingdom of God) has come with Jesus; Jesus has brought about the new exodus promised in Isaiah; the kingly Messiah came in weakness, his identity a secret except to those to whom it is revealed; the way of the new exodus leads to Jesus' death in Jerusalem; the way of discipleship is to take up a cross and follow him

### B. OVERVIEW OF MARK

Although Mark is the earliest of the four Gospels (see *How to 1*, pp. 135–39), because it is shorter and has much less teaching than the others, it has often tended to suffer neglect. At one level his story is straightforward. After a prologue, which introduces us to the good news about Jesus Christ (1:1–15), the story unfolds in four parts. In part 1 (1:16–3:6), Jesus goes public with the announcement of the kingdom. With rapid-fire action he calls disciples, drives out demons, heals the sick, and announces that all of this has to do with the coming of God's rule; in the process he draws amazement from the crowds and opposition from the religious and political establishment, who early on plot his death.

Part 2 (3:7–8:21) develops the role of the three significant groups. Jesus' miracles and teaching are sources of constant amazement to the *crowds*; the *disciples* receive private instruction (4:13, 34) and join in the proclamation (6:7–13), but are slow to understand (8:14–21; cf. 6:52); the *opposition* continues to mount (7:1–23; 8:11–13).

In part 3 (8:22–10:45), Jesus directs his attention primarily to the disciples. Three times he explains the nature of his kingship—and hence of discipleship (8:34–38)—as going the way of

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the cross (as Isaiah's suffering servant; Mark 10:45), and three times the disciples completely miss it.

Part 4 (10:46–15:47) brings the story to its climax. The king enters Jerusalem and the crowds go wild with excitement, but in the end the opposition has its day. Jesus is put on trial, found guilty, and turned over to the Romans for execution on a cross—as “the king of the Jews” (15:2).

A brief epilogue (16:1–8) reminds Mark's readers that “[Jesus] has risen!”

## C. SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING MARK

It was a killing time in Rome. The church was experiencing the Neronian holocaust, in which many believers had been burned alive at Nero's garden parties and two of the church's more important figures (Peter and Paul) had been executed. Soon after, there appeared among them a small book (Mark's Gospel), written to remind them of the nature of Jesus' own messiahship (as God's suffering servant) and to encourage cross-bearing discipleship.

Mark has been described as one who cannot tell a story badly. In part this is due to his vivid style, which is what also gives his Gospel the sense of being rapid-fire. Almost every sentence begins with “and” (cf. KJV); forty-one times he begins with “and immediately” (which does not always refer to time but to the urgency of the telling), and twenty-five times with “and again.” But he also includes little details, including the Aramaic words of Jesus on six occasions. All of this reflects both a written form of oral recounting and the memory of an eyewitness.

The prominent place of Peter in the Gospel and the fact that early on so much happens in and around Peter's house in Capernaum suggest that the tradition has it right—that the Gospel in part reflects Peter's own telling of the story. But Peter's role in the Gospel is anything but that of a hero. He who urged others to “clothe yourselves in humility” (1 Pet 5:5) does not forget his own weaknesses while following Jesus; you will want to look for these features as you read. But at the end, after he vehemently denied knowing his Lord (Mark 14:66–72), he also remembers that the angel told the women at the tomb, “Go, tell his disciples *and Peter*” (16:7, emphasis added).

But brief and breathtaking as Mark's Gospel is, it is not at all simple. Indeed, Mark tells the story with profound theological insight. Absolutely crucial to your reading with understanding is to note how he presents Jesus as Messiah. Three things emerge at the beginning that carry all the way through to the end: (1) Jesus is the kingly Messiah, (2) Jesus is God's suffering servant, and (3) Jesus keeps his identity secret.

Mark's telling of the story thus emphasizes the “messianic secret,” the “mystery of the kingdom of God,” namely, that the expected coming King knew he was destined to suffer for the sake of the people. The demons, who recognize him, are silenced (1:25, 34; 3:11–12); the crowds to whom the King comes with compassion are told not to tell anyone about his miracles (1:44; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26); when finally confessed as Messiah by the disciples, he tells them to tell no one (8:30). What no one expects is for God's King to be impaled on a cross! But Jesus knows—and he silences all messianic fervor, lest it thwart the divine plan that leads to the cross. When the disciples are clued in to the “mystery,” even they fail to get it (8:27–33); they

are like the blind man who has to be touched twice (8:22–26; in their case, by Jesus' resurrection).

But in reminding his readers of the nature of Jesus' messiahship, Mark also reminds us that this is the way of discipleship as well. Indeed, the first instruction on discipleship (8:34), which calls for cross bearing, appears only after the first disclosure to the disciples of Jesus' own impending death (v. 31).

Mark also uses the theme of God's kingly suffering Messiah to show Jesus' connection to the story of Israel, especially Isaiah's (now long-delayed) new exodus. The key moments in the first exodus are deliverance, the journey through the desert, and arrival at the place where the Lord dwells. Isaiah (chs. 35; 40–55) announces the return from Babylonian exile as a new exodus. Notice how Mark puts us in touch with this theme in his very first sentence: "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus the Messiah, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet." Jesus then steps into the role of Israel (through the water and testing in the desert). The theme carries all the way through. Mark *cites* Isaiah at key points (the opposition's hardness of heart, "those on the outside" [Mark 4:10–12; 7:6; 9:48]; the inclusion of Gentiles [11:17]). He echoes Isaiah in all kinds of ways: Jesus' ministry is expressed in the language of Isaiah 53 (Mark 10:45); the parable of the tenants (12:1–12) recasts Isaiah's "song of the vineyard" (Isa 5:1–7); the motif of eyes that see but don't perceive and ears that hear but don't understand (Isa 6:9–10). The long-awaited Deliverer has now come, but contrary to common expectations, he has come to suffer for the people in order to lead them from exile into the final promised land (Mark 13).

A significant part of the new exodus included the gathering of the Gentile nations. Since Mark's Gospel is intended for people who are already a part of that mission, his way of placing them in the story of Jesus is by relating a series of non-Galilean (Gentile) narratives in 6:53–9:29. In this context he places the matter of ceremonial washing, for example, and he comments that Jesus in effect abolished the food laws (7:19b). Moreover, the Gentile mission delays the dropping of the final curtain on history (13:10), and in repossessing the temple as Israel's "king" (11:17), Jesus cites Isaiah 56:7 ("my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations" [= Gentiles]).

By looking for these various features as you read, you may find yourself among those who know Mark's Gospel as one of the rich treasures in the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [\*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 277–280.