

An Introduction to the New Testament, Gospel Literature and the Book of Mark

By Reid S. Monaghan

Introduction

Each of our lives is defined by various moments, events and decisions as we travel in life from beginning to end. The journey we travel has twists and turns, ups and downs requiring a unique perspective if we are “to see” our way forward in the mission of Jesus. Often people look to the life of Jesus to find a moral example, to find encouragement, or to learn a life lesson. We find all of these when our gaze finds the living Jesus. Yet the story of Jesus is much more than the recounting of a great person and his teachings – it is the story by which all of us are defined.

This article has a few ambitious goals. First, we want to introduce the New Testament and its relationship to the rest of the Scriptures. Second, we want to look at a particular genre of Scripture, that of gospel literature. In doing so we will look specifically at what are known as the *synoptic gospels*, Matthew, Mark and Luke. Third, we will rifle our view towards the gospel of Mark itself, a fast paced and succinct look at the person, teaching and works of Jesus Christ. Finally, we’ll close together as we find our way by finding him, giving an overview of some major themes carved out in the most extraordinary life ever lived.

Testaments – Something Old, Something New

When we arrive at the book of Matthew in Scripture there is a mass of literature that has come before it. Many followers of Jesus can forget that there are 39 books of the Bible before we come to the first book of the New Testament. We labored in detail elsewhere¹ to communicate the importance of the Old Testament...why the Old School matters so much. So here I want us to look briefly at the relationships between the Old and New as we begin, so we might see the significance of the last 27 books of the Bible. In a simple way we will begin by looking at the word Testament. What exactly is a Testament?

Now I know you may be able to pick up some *Testaments* in a Christian bookstore among the other Jesus junk, but there is much more to the word. In looking at the language of the Scriptures the word for *testament* is actually the same word (Greek - διαθήκη *diathēkē* and Hebrew - בְרִית *berith*) which we translate *covenant*. If you remember from our introduction to the Old Testament, we defined a covenant as follows:

The idea of a covenant was prominent in many cultures that existed in the time of the Old Testament. A covenant was usually seen as a treaty or contract between two parties binding them to certain benefits *and* consequences should one party prove unfaithful to the deal. In his book *Christ of the Covenants*, O. Palmer Robertson defines a covenant with firm sobriety: *A covenant is a bond in blood, or a bond of life and death, sovereignly administered.*² In other words a covenant is a bond between two parties in relationship that is not casual in nature but has commitments of a life and death nature.³ As such this relationship and its terms are conveyed to us and established by the Sovereign

¹ Reid Monaghan, *An Old Testament Overview and Introduction to the Prophecy of Habakkuk* (Inversion Fellowship, 2007, accessed August 2 2007); available from http://www.inversionfellowship.org/mediafiles/article_oldschool_paper.pdf.

² O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 14, 15.

God of the universe. It is both a privilege and a responsibility before God to be his people by covenant.⁴

In short, in the Old Testament, God establishes and unfolds his covenant or relationship with humanity, in the New Testament he fulfills it and brings it to fullness in Jesus Christ. Or as Mark Dever aptly puts it, the Old Testament records *promises made* by God, the New Testament records his *promises kept*.⁵ The New Testament is not a dangling grouping of books unrelated to the rest of Scripture. Rather, we find in the New Testament the revelation of the life, person, work and teaching of Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises of God. Remember, Jesus is only seen in his fullness (High Def, HD Jesus⁶) in light of both the Old and New Testaments. It is only in the backdrop of the redemptive history in the Old that we properly see Jesus in the New.

The Old Testament closes with the book of Malachi in mid 5th century BC. That particular book records a prophetic rebuke to the people of God but also a pointing forward to a coming messenger who would prepare the way of the Lord. This messenger would be known some day as John the Baptizer, the one who introduces Jesus onto the world scene. In the roughly 450 years that follow this prophet, an era known as the *intertestamental period*, the word of God ceased in Israel and God was silent. There was no prophet in the land and Scripture was not being given. Yet this silence should not be seen as inactivity, for God was preparing the world for what Paul would later call “the fullness of time.”⁷ For in the coming time of Jesus, God’s ultimate purposes for the world would be fully known in and through a man who would be born in Bethlehem.

During the time between the testaments many things took place. A Greek language and culture was established as much of the known world was *Hellenized* by the conquests of Alexander the Great (356-323 BC). Vast transportation routes and law and order were brought to Europe, North Africa and the near east by the firm hand of the Roman Empire. The Romans had a tenuous relationship with the Jewish people in the province of Judea and they had adopted the ancient Persian practice of crucifixion to execute criminals and enemies of Rome. It was into this world where God became a human being. He stepped into a world with a common language where a message could be widely proclaimed. He stepped into a world where free movement was possible, and the trade routes and port cities of the empire became the seedbeds of the Church.⁸ He stepped into a world where a Roman cross was waiting, a world where the Son of God would be pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities as predicted in the fifty third chapter of the prophecy of Isaiah. Into this world Jesus lived and died; it was in this world that the gospel rang forth and has continued until this day. So the New Testament begins in a proper place, with the story of Jesus in the gospels. In these books, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John we find a body of literature passionately proclaiming and presenting Jesus before a waiting world. Before turning to these gospels let us first look at the overall breakdown of the New Testament.

⁴ Monaghan, (accessed).

⁵ Mark Dever, *Promises Kept: The Message of the New Testament* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005). And *Promises Made: The Message of the Old Testament* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006).

⁶ Reid Monaghan, *The Importance of the Old Testament - Hd Jesus* (Power of Change, 2007, accessed August 2 2007); available from http://www.powerofchange.org/blog/2007/01/the_importance_of_the_old_test_2.html.

⁷ Galatians 4:4-6 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”

⁸ For an excellent study of the influence of early Christianity in port cities see Rodney Stark, *Cities of God : The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome*, 1st ed. ([San Francisco?]: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

The Books of the New Testament

The New Testament, shared by Protestants, Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians is comprised of 27 individual books of varying length and literary genre. A genre is simply a kind of writing. Poetry, narrative stories, legal literature, prophecies are simple examples of different literary genres. The New Testament contains four main genres of literature: gospel, narrative, epistle/letter and apocalyptic. Many of these genres contain different sub genres such as parables, poems, creedal material as well as personal testimony. The following is only a brief description of the parts of the New Testament.

The Gospel Literature – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

There are four books in the New Testament classified as gospel literature. The books of *Matthew, Mark, Luke and John* are considered to be gospels. The word gospel is derived from the Greek term *euangélion*, which simply means good news or good tidings. So the gospels are books containing good news, but not just any kind of news. It would be one thing if a historical rise in the stock market or the fortunes of a nation are recorded dispassionately as history. That might be interesting, but it would not be world changing. The New Testament gospels however record something different—they record good news of God's action in history, to bring people into a relationship of love and worship through Jesus Christ. The gospels are a fairly unique form of writing comprising several literary forms. In some ways they are part biography, part history and part theology. They have the goal of presenting and persuading – they endeavor to present Jesus but also to teach us who he is and what our response to him should be. Each of the gospels had a different audience which originally received the work and each was composed by a different author. As such they record some of the same details of Jesus' life but at times in different ways. There is a commonality in the events, but a different recording depending on the purposes of the author and his intended audience.

The Synoptic Gospels

The gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke are known as the *Synoptic Gospels*, in that each provides a synopsis, or outline of the life and teaching of Jesus. The word synoptic is derived from two Greek terms that when combined mean *to see together*. When examined together, these gospels present a multifaceted view of the life and teaching of Jesus. There is an interesting body of scholarship whose goal has been to investigate the origin and compiling of the synoptic gospels from early oral tradition and eyewitness accounts. Scholars call this the *synoptic problem*. The question arises from both the similarity and differences between the texts of Matthew, Mark and Luke and the literary and source connections between them. A complete summary of the synoptic problem is well beyond our purposes here, but I think a brief summary will help you at least know some of the issues. I will lay out a few of the issues that make the synoptic puzzle an interesting area of New Testament studies. For those interested in a very brief, approachable, but scholarly summary of the current discussion I recommend *Rethinking the Synoptic Problem* published by Baker Academic.⁹ It is only about 160 pages so throw it in your Amazon.com shopping cart.

First Issue - We know the Gospels are Compilations

⁹ David Alan Black and David R Beck, *Rethinking the Synoptic Problem* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

The fact that the evangelists, the writers of the synoptic gospels compiled their accounts from other sources is non controversial. It is the clear teaching of the Bible and of church tradition. For instance, Luke begins his gospel with the following statement:

¹Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ²just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

Luke 1:1-4 ESV

A few things should be noted about Luke's goals in writing his gospel. First, he acknowledges others have taken up the task to compile a written narrative of Jesus. Second, these compilations are based on eyewitness accounts from those who were with Jesus and ministers of the word. Third, his concern was to put together a written, orderly, factual account of the teachings of the Christian faith. Additionally, there is a strong tradition stating that Mark's gospel is a compilation of the account and preaching of Peter which was written around the time of the apostle's death. We'll have more on that later. So if the gospels are compilations which were written down at different times, for different communities, by different authors it is likely that they shared some of the same sources and perhaps used one another's writings.

Second Issue - Same Stories, Different Accountings

If you ever interact with people who are skeptical about the Bible they are sure to bring up the so called "contradictions" in the gospel narratives. You see some of the stories are the same, sometimes verbatim (see next issue), but sometimes the stories are similar but have some pretty significant differences. A quick read of the resurrection narrative accounts in the synoptic gospels will suffice to illustrate. How many angels were there at the empty tomb? If you go after answering that question for a moment you run into a feature of the synoptic problem. My answer? Probably, at least two...but each does not always get props in the story.

Third Issue - Same Stories, Same Wordings

Many times the synoptic gospels contain the exact same stories and teachings of Jesus Christ. This would be rather uninteresting as a mere accounting of the same life would suffice to explain this occurrence. However, many times in the gospels we find Matthew and Luke repeating Mark almost word for word. Additionally Matthew and Luke contain some of the same sayings of Jesus that are not found in Mark. This asks the question: Who was using what writings in compiling their work? In any account, there appears to be a literary interdependence of the synoptic gospels and their sources. This has led to the dominant position among many scholars today known as the Two Source hypothesis.

The Dominant Solution – Two Source Hypothesis

✠ Mark was written first. The view that Mark was the first gospel is simply assumed by many in New Testament studies today.¹⁰ For example, Ben Witherington begins his commentary with a simple statement regarding studies of the gospel of Mark: "The sheer volume of recent studies, however,

¹⁰ Ibid., 17.

suggests that we are trying harder to grasp the meaning of this, *the earliest of the gospels.*"¹¹

There are many reasons for thinking Mark may have been written first.¹²

✚ Matthew and Luke had Mark available to them as they wrote

✚ Scholars have formed a hypothesis (a good and educated guess) of another source which they have called "Q"¹³ (from the German *quelle* for "source"). It is held that this source contained sayings that Matthew and Luke share in common but are absent from Mark. Q is a working hypothesis used by some scholars. *There is not a single shred of archaeological evidence of its existence.* We do not have one copy of this source. Yet it is a reasonable inference due to the material shared by Matthew and Luke. It is questioned by some scholars and an assumed hypothesis by others.

✚ Today, Markan priority and the use of Luke/Matthew of Mark/Q remains the dominant view.

However, in the last several decades there have been others who are arguing quite convincingly for the priority of Matthew.¹⁴ This holds promise for a couple reasons. First, the tradition and teaching of church history is univocal that Matthew was written first. This was unchallenged for over 1800 years. Second, this school of thought is giving much more credence to patristic studies, studies of the writings of the church fathers. For those interested in this school of thought will want to see *Why Four Gospels* by David Allan Black.¹⁵

Let me close briefly by saying that all evangelical scholars—whether those who hold to the two source hypothesis or the priority of Matthew—hold that the synoptic gospels were written down by the inspiration and direction of the Holy Spirit. All evangelical New Testament scholars agree that each view is compatible with the truth that the writers of the gospels recorded scripture as inspired by God.

Dr. Craig Blomberg sums this up well:

*...it is important to state up front that none of the major solutions to the Synoptic problem is inherently more or less compatible with historic Christian views of the inspiration and authority of Scripture.*¹⁶

Though the precise solution to the literary connectedness of the gospels is not of central importance to our faith, it is good to be aware of these issues. Many so called "contradictions" skeptics claim to find in the synoptic narratives are easily resolved when we realized that each other arranged his material to tell the story of Jesus to a specific audience of Christians from a particular perspective. Our chief concern with Matthew, Mark and Luke is the person to whom they testify. Our gaze is the person of Jesus who lived in history, taught us many things, gave his life as a sacrifice for sin and rose from death to set people free. This Jesus is the Jesus of the synoptic gospels – and to him, the final gospel calls boldly to us...Believe!

John's Gospel – Believe!

¹¹ Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark : A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2001), 1. Emphasis added.

¹² D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992), 32-36.

¹³ More on "Q" can be found at Peter Kirby, *Q Document*(2001-2006, accessed August 13 2007); available from <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/q.html>.

¹⁴ Most influential has been the late William Reuben Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem, a Critical Analysis* (New York: Macmillan, 1964). See brief discussion in R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 42.

¹⁵ David Alan Black, *Why Four Gospels - the Historical Origins of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001).

¹⁶ Black and Beck, *Rethinking the Synoptic Problem*, 18.

John's gospel states its goal forcefully and with clarity in the twentieth chapter of the book. *These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name* (John 20:31 ESV). John is writing for the purpose of presenting Jesus as the Christ, the one sent from God to deliver his people from sin, and calling us to believe. It is a narrative of the miracles and teaching of Jesus which has a different feel from the synoptic gospels. John wrote his material with the divinity of Jesus in the forefront and wants no neutral readers. To read John is to be brought close to the Son of God in his glory with majesty on display. The fourth gospel cannot be ignored and calls for a radical commitment of life to the Savior. All who hear his voice in Scripture will follow and believe and no one who comes to him will he cast out; this is the radical message of John.

Narrative Literature – The Book of Acts

The book of Acts is primarily narrative in nature as it records the unfolding and preaching of the gospel from Jerusalem outward through the Roman Empire. It begins with the story of the coming of the Spirit at a Jewish feast known as Pentecost and people in Jerusalem becoming followers of Jesus. It continues with opposition and persecution in Jerusalem and the spread of the gospel outward in the first missionary efforts of the church. The bulk of the narrative contains the travels of Paul and his companions establishing Christian communities throughout the trade routes of the world. It tells a story and as such it is narrative literature.

Epistles and Letters – From Paul and Others

A large portion of the New Testament is made up of letters written and distributed widely to teach and instruct the early church. Whereas the gospels lay out the life teaching of Jesus, the epistles expound on the gospel leading us in how to live as followers of Jesus on his mission. The epistles further explain the gospel, give us instruction on how to move into the world as Christ's followers and teach us how we are to live together as the church. The letters are usually divided into two groups, the letters of Paul and those known as the general epistles. We'll look briefly at both groupings.

Paul's Letters

Much of the New Testament was written by a guy named Paul. Paul was sort of a big time guy in his day that had it on his mind to stamp out the new Christian movement. As a religious Jew he saw the followers of Jesus as departing from the way of their fathers and began to persecute the church heavily with permission from civic leaders. On his way to give some people a beat down the tables were turned on him. Jesus smacked him around, blinded him for a few days and told him that he would now be a Christian and bring the gospel to the Gentiles (non Jews). Paul then became a pretty radical guy who nobody could silence. He preached the gospel with courage and at great peril to his own life. In establishing new churches Paul would write to them, inspired by God, to teach and instruct the new followers in the way of Jesus. Thirteen of Paul's letters make up a large portion of the New Testament. Many of the letters are named after cities where the new churches were living. The book of Romans was written to those in Rome, 1 and 2 Corinthians to the church in Corinth, etc. If they were written today they would be something like 1 Nashvillians. The Pastoral Epistles were written to Paul's younger disciples teaching them how to be servant leaders in the church and named after these men. Finally, Philemon is the name of a friend of Paul and that letter bears his name. Here is a listing: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, 1 and 2

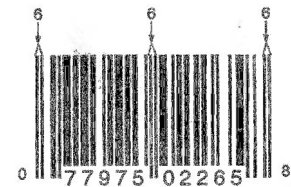
Thessalonians, Galatians; The Prison Epistles – letters written during his house arrest in Rome – Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon; The Pastoral Epistles – 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus

General Epistles

The remaining letters of the New Testament were written by apostles and early Christian leaders dealing with particular concerns of missional living and doctrine in the early communities. One book, though early on held to be written by Paul, has remained anonymous in its authorship. It simply is titled the epistle to the Hebrews. Here is a listing of these books: Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, Jude, 1, 2 and 3 John

The Apocalypse – The Revelation of Jesus Christ

The final book of the New Testament has a unique literary genre known as apocalyptic literature. The word apocalypse comes from the Greek word which means to reveal, to uncover, unveil or disclose. As such the book is commonly called *Revelation*. This book has proved very controversial over the centuries with many schools of thought on how we should interpret it. The book however is very clear in its purpose from the opening lines. It is a *revelation of Jesus Christ*. Whether the book is about bar codes on our



foreheads, apache helicopters, one world government, meteors crashing into the earth or being left behind I will leave up to you. But one thing we must know, the book is about Jesus, not just the end of the world. The book is about the worship and praise and ultimate revealing of Jesus Christ. We would do best to focus here when reading this book.

That is but a brief fly-over of the New Testament writings, but our focus is on the gospels and the gospel of Mark in particular. So let us move to the gospel literature, the books that focus us on the life, teaching, death and resurrection of the carpenter from Nazareth.

The Gospels – A Reliable and Biased Testimony to an Unparalleled Life

Skeptics throughout the ages have asked whether the gospels are to be trusted because they were written by biased people, the followers of Jesus himself. They surely must have had a skewed point of view as to who this Jesus is. After all, you cannot trust someone's biggest fans to give an objective account of someone's life...can you? Recently this skepticism has been found unwarranted for a couple reasons. First, we know that eyewitness accounts are always the most reliable when looking at events that we ourselves did not observe. If the gospels demonstrate themselves to be the testimony of eyewitnesses they are then the most trustworthy views of Jesus we possess. Second, the claim that someone is unable to correctly convey a story because they are "biased" is highly unwarranted. We will look at each of these issues.

Eyewitness Testimony in the New Testament

When asking the question "What happened with this Jesus guy?" the first persons we should ask are those who walked with him, talked with him and lived their lives with him. Or as 2 Peter 1:16 rightly records, those who *were eyewitnesses of his majesty*. This requires us to look at the claims of the gospels to be just that – a written record of eyewitness testimony. This was a view taken for granted for years until the advent of critical scholarship in the 19th century where the origin and source of all the gospel writings was

brought into question. Revisionist historians and liberal New Testament scholars began to claim the gospels were 3rd or 4th century compilations of Christian communities which did not reflect anything close to eyewitness testimony.

However, there has been much movement in New Testament studies over the last several decades which has ruled out the revisionist ideas of liberal theology. The late 3rd and 4th century dates have been utterly repudiated and we have been able to date all the gospels conclusively to the first century. This has been due to amazing archaeological discoveries such as a fragment of John's gospel dating to around 125 AD. Additionally, recent scholarship has shown that there are very good reasons to understand the gospels as *testimony*. In 2006 Scottish Richard Bauckham published *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses – the Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* which makes a strong case for our understanding the gospels as containing the testimony of those who knew the life and teaching of Jesus directly. More and more scholars are coming to the position which the church has always held. The gospels are the most reliable portrait of the life and teaching of Jesus because they contain the accounts of the people who were there. But where these people just Jesus fan boys, too biased to be trusted? Good question.

Bias is not Always Bad

The question of bias is important, after all, the gospel writers did not leave us with a simple narrative that records nothing more than rote historical facts. No, they were convinced of the truth of Jesus' teaching and their account of history contains the teaching of theology about Jesus as well as historical data. Yes, there are towns, rulers, times and places mentioned, but also teaching as to the identity of Jesus and his mission from God. But does this one sided account, that of Jesus' followers, disqualify their testimony as being valid? In fact I will argue that if you want to know something about something or someone, you are better off asking people who are passionately committed to the story he shares. A few examples can help us see that Bias is not always bad.

One example comes from the world of technology and through a simple question. If you desire to know about the ins and outs of Macintosh computers, would you ask someone has never touched a Mac to be your teacher? Of course not...who would you ask? You probably would ask one of those MacIdolaters who are loyal subjects of the cult of Steve Jobs. You know that crazy Apple guy who has to put down Windows every time the subject arises. You know the guy who is flossing¹⁷ his iPhone for all to see. You may be that guy. My point is this. The people from whom you will get the best information about Macs are probably the ones who are the most biased; the ones who are passionate about their elite computers. In like manner, NASCAR fans should be consulted on the intricacies of Stock car racing, indie rockers should be the ones you talk to about what is happening in the music scene and his original followers are the ones we should consult about Jesus Christ.



One final example of a more serious kind should be mentioned. To exclude a person who was involved with an event, who passionately cares that the story be told, as being a reliable witness would be quite odd indeed. This sort of reasoning would rule out the accounts of Jewish historians of the Holocaust. They are most interested as they were the ones most closely involved with this horrific course of events. We would

¹⁷ See the Urban Dictionary for a definition of the word floss - *The Urban Dictionary*, (accessed August 14 2007); available from <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=floss>.

not think of discounting someone's testimony because they are "biased" against the Nazi's because their family went through the Holocaust. No, rather we trust them as they were the closest people to the events and care most passionately about conveying and passing on this history.¹⁸

Until someone is shown to be an *unreliable* witness we ought to take their word for something until they are shown to be not trustworthy. The philosopher Immanuel Kant rightly showed some time ago that an assumption that all people are lying all the time is self-refuting. We should assume truth telling unless we have good reason to think that someone is not telling the truth.¹⁹ If we find that someone is in their right mind and capable to tell the truth, is willing to do so, his words are recorded and preserved with integrity and his testimony is validated by other witnesses, we should trust the words of that person.²⁰ It seems that this is precisely the sort of reality that we find in the writers of the gospels.

It was their intention to tell the truth

- ✠ Most of them were religious Jews who thought that intentional falsification (lying) was a direct violation of one of the Ten Commandments. Lying was not a virtue in their community. This does not mean there were not religious Jews who were liars at the time, but it was not a virtue extolled in the community.
- ✠ The New Testament writers were concerned with "delivering" the teaching of Jesus and the gospel to the next generation in their writing. The Apostle Paul specifically says that he delivered or passed on to the Corinthian church the gospel. This gospel was considered by the early Christians as a matter "of first importance." See 1 Corinthians 15:1-3. There is good evidence that they believed they were passing on what they saw as a holy tradition through their writings.²¹

They were able to tell the truth

- ✠ They were a culture steeped in a tradition of oral teaching and memorization. In fact, scholars have shown that ancient peoples could memorize massive amounts of information, with an important focus on maintaining the very words of their teachers.²²
- ✠ If they experienced any external pressure it was against the preaching of their message. They gained nothing in the way of position, power and possessions for faithfully telling the Jesus story. To the contrary most of them were killed for it.

Their Words Preserved Accurately

- ✠ It is beyond the scope of this paper but there is good textual evidence that we have the New Testament documents today in a form that is extremely close to the original manuscripts. This is non controversial. Most scholars agree that the current Greek texts of the New Testament are very accurate. To put it simply, we have pretty much what was written. Interesting enough, one of the few controversial passages, Mark 16:9-20, is in the gospel of Mark.
- ✠ Additionally, there was very little time between the actual events of Jesus and the writing of the New Testament. The less time that passes the less likely legendary development occurs. The gospels were

¹⁸ For a more sophisticated look at the uniqueness of Holocaust testimonies see the treatment in Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2006), 493-502.

¹⁹ James Porter Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1987), 137-138.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 144.

²² See particularly chapters 10 and 11 of Bauckham, 240-263.

all finished by around 90AD with Mark and Matthew likely within just a few decades of the resurrection of Jesus. In the period in which the gospels were written down many eyewitnesses of the events would have still been alive. As Richard Bauckham states, “The Gospels were written within living memory of the events they recount. Mark’s gospel was written well within the lifetime of many of the eyewitnesses, while the other three canonical Gospels were written in the period when living eyewitnesses were becoming scarce, exactly at the point in time when their testimony would perish with them were it not put in writing”²³

They are Corroborated/Validated by Others

✠ If an author shows that he tells the truth on matters that are verifiable externally, he is thought to be a reliable witness. The New Testament writers note at least thirty historically confirmed people in their works. The gospels in general and the passion narrative in particular find corroboration in several ancient sources outside of the New Testament.²⁴ In addition, we find quotations at length from the gospels in the sermons and writings of the early church fathers.

When the gospels are examined, they show a strong historicity which is only doubted when a bias against the supernatural is brought to bear. Many skeptics have written off the testimony of the gospels because they were written down by men who believed in God, who record the occurrence of the miraculous and the resurrection of an incarnate Savior God. Yet such bias against the supernatural is just the work of a closed mind. Someone who says – I cannot believe the words of the New Testament because I don’t believe in God or miracles – is already closed off to any amount of evidence. They are saying “I don’t believe because I don’t believe.” Such views are intellectually stifling and hardened to what God might say if they simply read the gospels with an open heart and mind to see the unparalleled life of Jesus on display.

In closing, the gospel literature is unique indeed. It is part biography, part history, part theology yet passionately what Bauckham simply calls *testimony*.

Understanding the Gospels as testimony, we can recognize this theological meaning of the history not as an arbitrary imposition on the objective facts, but as the way the witnesses perceived the history, in an inextricable coinherence of observable event and perceptible meaning. Testimony is the category that enables us to read the Gospels in a properly historical way and a properly theological way. It is where history and theology meet.²⁵

Let’s go get some history and theology, in a portrait of the person of Jesus, truthfully set forth in the gospel of Mark.

The Gospel of Mark

In terms of historical attention, the gospel of Mark has been a bit of a little step brother to the longer gospels of Matthew, Luke and John. In fact, many in the ancient world considered Mark to serve the church as a sort of abstract, or a short outline version, of the Gospel of Matthew.²⁶ Historically there has been much more preaching on John and Matthew. Even today, you will not find as many sermons preached from Mark’s gospel as you will from the more theological gospel of John.²⁷ In recent times much more *scholarly* focus has been given to this gospel due to its helpfulness in a solution to the Synoptic Problem

²³ Ibid., 7.

²⁴ See the chapter “The Corroborating Evidence” interviewing history professor Edwin Yamauchi in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist’s Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 73.

²⁵ Bauckham, 5,6.

²⁶ William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark; the English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids,: Eerdmans, 1974), 3.

²⁷ This is not a scientific survey, but if you compare the two pages on SermonCloud.com and you will see the disparity. Mark - <http://www.sermoncloud.com/sermons-on-Mark/> and John - <http://www.sermoncloud.com/sermons-on-John/>

(see above). The work is a mere sixteen chapters and is a fast paced accounting of the teaching and life of Jesus. It contains no birth narrative as do Matthew and Luke and is very concerned with presenting Jesus' Passion Week as the focus of the story. In fact, about half of the book is about the last week of Jesus life. This will be only a brief introduction to the background of the book and its teaching. For those who want more just follow the yellow brick road called the footnotes. I am convinced that Jesus just loves footnotes. At least I do.

Authorship of Mark

All of the gospels do not have the authors name as part of the text itself, but the four gospels have never really been anonymous in church history. The author's name which is associated with the book is that of a man named Mark. This person is mentioned several times in the New Testament and was commonly known as John Mark. The earliest church traditions all associate this gospel with Mark and his task to record the account of the apostle Peter in writing. The earliest sources we have are from the writings of Papias a church leader in Hierapolis and Irenaeus bishop in Lyon (modern day France). Papias' work survives in a text written by the prominent early church historian Eusebius. It reads as follows:

And the Elder said this also: "Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately whatever he remembered of the things said and done by the lord, but not however in order." For neither did he hear the Lord, nor did he follow him, but afterwards, as I said, Peter, who adapted his teachings to the needs of his hearers, but not as though he were drawing up a connected account of the Lord's oracles. So then Mark made no mistake in thus recording some things just as he remembered them. For he took forethought for one thing, not to omit any of the things that he had heard, nor to state any of them falsely.²⁸

It is estimated the Papias tradition is very early and dates perhaps to within 90-100 AD.²⁹ Irenaeus, writing in the second century recorded the following:

After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him.³⁰

The oldest traditions all hold that Mark was the other who arranged the teachings of Peter to give a written account of Jesus Christ to the church. In addition to the tradition there is good internal evidence in the book that Mark's gospel greatly reflects the preaching of Peter that we see in the book of Acts.³¹ New Testament scholar Daniel Wallace provides a great summary of the internal connection with Mark and Peter; I will quote him at length:

1. John Mark had contact with Peter from no later than the mid-40s (Acts 12:12) and it appears that the church met at Mark's own residence.
2. Both Peter and Mark were connected to the churches in Antioch and Jerusalem.
3. Paul sent Mark from Rome to the Colossian church and to Philemon in 60-62. If Peter were in Rome at this time, Mark would have had contact with him there.
4. 2 Tim 4:11 we find Paul giving Timothy instructions to bring Mark with him from Ephesus to Rom (c. 64). It is possible that he had been outside of Rome since his departure in 62.
5. Mark is with Peter in Rom in c. 65 (1 Peter 5:13) perhaps after his return at Paul's request. Peter also calls Mark his "son" in this passage indicating a more long-standing relationship.

²⁸ Lane, 8.

²⁹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2002), 4.

³⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*(Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed August 15 2007); available from <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.iv.ii.html>.

³¹ Lane, 10-12.

6. The book of Mark's outline follows the Petrine teaching recorded in Acts 10:36-41. (1) John the Baptist (2) Jesus Baptized by John (3) Jesus' miracles show he is from God (4) he went to Jerusalem (5) was crucified (6) he was raised on the third day. This shows that perhaps Mark even received a *framework* for the oracles of Jesus from Peter.
7. The low view of Peter and the other apostles in Mark shows that the person writing was not trying to put them on a pedestal. A non-apostolic writer would have done this unless he was recording what he actually had received from Peter.³²

So we have good reasons, both external testimony from tradition and content of the book itself that John Mark arranged the instruction of Peter who gave eyewitness testimony to the life and teaching of Jesus Christ his Lord.

Who was John Mark

John Mark is mentioned several times in the New Testament as an associate in ministry of both Peter (1 Peter 5:13) and Paul (Acts 12:25, 15:37-39; 2 Timothy 4:11). In some ways he is one of the key players in the early church as he is a disciple and co-laborer of the two men who most shaped the Christian movement after the ascension of Jesus. In the early days in Jerusalem the church apparently met in his house (Acts 12:12), the same house in which the last supper was held.³³ He exhibits great ability as a storyteller and takes us on a journey to the central focus of the gospel – the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

One of the things I appreciate most about John Mark is that he is a bit of a comeback kid. In his relationship with Paul we see him as one of the earliest missionaries taking the gospel out into the world. Then apparently he becomes a little freaked out in the field and abandons the mission. This of course had Paul a little miffed and Paul and Barnabas actually part ways. Paul simply doesn't trust him after Mark punked out on him. Yet Barnabas, whose name means *son of encouragement*, gives him a second chance and Mark was greatly used by God. He eventually becomes Peter's right hand man and what God does in his relationship with Paul is amazing. Paul's last comments about him are very endearing. Just before Paul's death, he asks Timothy to send for John Mark; apparently he wanted his friend at his side in his last days.

Dating of Mark

Many events factor into a dating of the gospel of Mark and knowing some important and confirmed/accepted times from the first century is always helpful. These dates will be brought into our discussion of a date for Mark's writing.

EVENT	DATE (AD)
Fall of Jerusalem	70
Martyrdom of Paul and Peter	64-68
Epistles of Paul	45-68
Some Oral Tradition	32-70
Crucifixion of Jesus	32

In looking at Mark's date we find several important issues. First, if we accept the tradition that he recorded the teaching of Peter then we must place it somewhere in the locus of the life of the apostle. Second, if one finds the two source/Markan priority hypothesis as a good solution to the Synoptic Problem, then Mark must precede Matthew and Luke and this affects its dating. Third, we have testimony from the early church that Mark wrote either just before or just after the death of Peter which we date to the

³² Daniel Wallace, *Mark: Introduction, Argument, and Outline*(Bible.org, accessed August 15 2007); available from http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=1093.

³³ Edwards, 5.

persecution under Nero after a great fire in 64 AD. With the theme of suffering so prominent in Mark and Peter's execution in the mid sixties, most prefer a date for the gospel between 60 and 70, usually right around 65.

Yet some who favor Markan priority place it in the mid 50s³⁴ for the following reasons. If Mark was written first then the gospel of Luke must be dated after Mark. Dating Luke's gospel is not so difficult. We know from the text itself that the same author composed by Luke and Acts as a two part volume with Luke compiled first. A few dates help us position Luke-Acts. First, Acts has no mention of the fall of Jerusalem which we date conclusively to 70AD. This would be strange if this painful event had already occurred. This gives us confidence to place the writing of Acts to before 70. Additionally, Acts also ends with Paul living under house arrest in Rome. We estimate that Paul is martyred in between 64-68 so this would place Acts some time before his death. If Luke came before Acts we find that gospel coming on to the scene in the very early part of the 60s with some placing it around 62AD. So if one favors the thesis that Mark was written first, then a date preceding Luke, sometime in the late 50s seems to be preferred. However, if you hold to the tradition that Matthew was first, then Mark can be happy at around 65AD. With either consideration, Mark is one of the earliest gospels recorded to pass the teaching and story of Jesus on for generations to come.

Provenance of Mark

Here is our big word for the day...provenance. It simply means the origin of the writing or the place where it was written. The church has always held that the gospel was written from Italy, in the imperial capital of Rome. The use of technical Latin terminology, the use of Roman accounting of time (6:48; 13:35) all point towards Rome. Mark's use of the Greek version of the Old Testament, his explanation of Jewish customs and practices, his translation of Aramaic terms indicate he was writing with a Gentile audience in mind.³⁵ Finally, Mark's lack of inclusion of a Jewish genealogy for Jesus perhaps points to a Roman audience as well. We have no good reason to doubt that the gospel originated in the first century Christian community in Rome.

Context and Purpose of Mark

Ben Witherington's commentary on Mark calls to mind two very important cultural contexts which are in play in Mark's gospel. First, the culture of early first century Galilee/Judea in 20-30 AD and second, the mid first century culture of Rome in the 60s.³⁶ It is an interesting fact that both contexts presented great difficulty for both the Jewish and early Christian communities. Galilee/Judea was under Roman occupation and rule where Jesus and his following appeared a religious-political threat to imperial power. Rome in the mid 60s presented an intense, though brief, time of suffering and persecution under the maniacal leadership of Nero. That story needs a brief explanation.

In the early days of Nero's reign Christians lived in relative peace in the empire. They were seen with some suspicion due to their rejection of pagan gods and festivals as well as their preaching of the gospel. Aggressive seeking of converts put them at odds with the established and ancient religions of the day. Though Peter and Paul were executed for their leadership in preaching the gospel, aggressive, wide spread persecution of Christians as a class of people was not yet the reality. This changed around 64 AD with a widespread fire in Rome. The cause of the fire is uncertain with some blaming the emperor as the source. Nero, however, found a different scapegoat to turn suspicion away from him. He blamed the Christians. This was significant for two reasons. First, he was the first emperor to treat the Christians as followers of a different religion than that of the Jews. This made them believers in a new religion, not an ancient and accepted faith.³⁷ Second, he declared open season on Christians and set off unprecedented abuse of Christian people. After the time of Nero's persecutions, a brutal account was recorded by the ancient

³⁴ This is the position favored in Carson, Moo, and Morris.

³⁵ Lane, 25.

³⁶ Witherington, 31.

³⁷ Ibid., 34-35.

historian Tacitus. Oh, how our sisters and brothers suffered for the sake of the name of Christ. Here is the account of Tacitus:

But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. *Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car.* Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed.³⁸

Nero sounds like a pretty big jerk to me and just making an educated guess I imagine that he received a really, really warm reception in the afterlife. The themes in Mark reflect this context of suffering and persecution. In the gospel Jesus is presented as the suffering servant, wrongly and brutally punished by the hand of Rome. Christians in Rome under Nero's reign would have understood this message. Follow the example of Jesus in the midst of suffering.

Such is our own call – we are called to Jesus and to live together in his mission. Whether we live in times of open suffering or lulled to sleep by comfort and familiarity we must be shaken loose from our current views of life in order to follow Jesus in our world today. We need his life and story to constantly define our own. This is our invitation, to see Jesus as the founder and perfecter of our faith, the definer of life and the person whose story gives us signposts for ever turn of life ahead.

Themes in the Gospel of Mark

In looking at some major themes of the book I have no illusions that we will be able to probe the depths of this book. However, while we cannot plumb its depths, we will ascend its heights and run across its peaks. Our main concern is having our vision of life transformed by the wonders we see in Jesus Christ and his gospel. It is our hope that our vision and love of Jesus is aroused and our feet made swift in following.

The Gospel is Our Life

The book of Mark begins with a resounding clarity of purpose: The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Here we find a beginning of a new chapter in an unfolding story, here we have good news coming forth, here we find the name of a person which means "The Lord Saves," here we find a person unique in all of history; a Son but no ordinary man. Human beings have been made and fashioned for worship and our hearts will glory in all manner of things be it through religion, the pursuit of pleasure, the identification with a certain group or the exaltation of self. Yet our lives will wander adrift without the lifting of our burdens of sin and the receiving of grace and peace with God.

³⁸ Tacitus, *The Annals* (MIT Internet Classics Archive, accessed August 15 2007); available from <http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/annals.11.xv.html>. Emphasis added.

When religion beckons we must find the root of our story in the good news. It is not what we do that makes us acceptable to a holy and good God, it is what has been done by Jesus himself in the fullness of time on the earth. Jesus' first words in the gospel of Mark beckon us to action: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

Healing Comes from Jesus

In a world that daily echoes the remnants of the fall of man we know that we are in desperate need of healing and wholeness. Our bodies are broken and will surely pass away at an appointed time. Our relationships are broken with communities constantly separating and being fractured. Spiritual powers torment and destroy lives daily around the world and our souls are stained with the reality of sin. We live today with the present world groaning and longing for redemption and renewal. Jesus tells us that the self-righteous, the proud, the self-sufficient and the denial of our condition have no place with God. For he tells us in Mark 2:17 – "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." All sinners may come to him and none will be cast out.

We Live In His Story

There are many ways to define life and communicate its ultimate meaning and purpose. Many have chosen to describe the world only in scientific terms. Many have chosen to weave complex philosophies for the consumption of humanity. Others have danced through a myriad of political visions, cultural revolutions and social engineering. Yet how did Jesus teach us and define for us the ultimate reality and the Kingdom of God? He told stories to teach those who could hear. Stories designed by God to both reveal the hidden secrets of the rule and reign of Jesus and to conceal them from those who would have no part in worshipping their Creator. In the parables of Jesus life finds form and definition. In his stories we see our story with clarity and soul humbling and soul refreshing life. In fact, in the large story of the gospel we find the truth and see our faces as we are meant to be.

The Hero of Every Story

If life is the unfolding of a great story, the story of God, then that story has a beginning, a climax, and a final resolution. It also has a hero, a great rescuer and every story of Scripture whispers his name³⁹. The identity of Jesus, Son of Man, Son of God is the most important issue in all of history. In the last part of Mark four we see a question emerge from the lips of the disciples, "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?" In this signpost we look at the hero of history in a story that includes uncertainty, calamity, fear, peril and chaos – sound like life? It ends with Jesus speaking definitively into hearts filled with trepidation and the peace and calm that results.

A New Living Way

So many times we get consumed with the external realities of appearances, morality, religion and wearing masks for people all around us. Yet what is the reality of the human heart? The picture that Jesus paints for us is not pretty as he tells us all matter of sin and wickedness flows out from our hearts. Though his picture of humanity is one of depravity, he does not leave us there. He knows that a mere coat of paint to cover our brokenness will crack and crumble in life. No, instead of a simple pious makeover, he reminds us that the problem we have is not simply our poor religious performances. In order to transform us into new people and place us on a path of life, it requires radical heart surgery. It is what comes out of a man that makes him unclean, and it is a renewal and recreation of our very selves which we most desperately need. Is this possible? Seeing Jesus in Mark 7 tell us YES! But we must come to God needy and hopeful – in faith – for the work only he can do.

³⁹This phrase is borrowed from the subtitle of what I consider to be the best children's Bible available today. Sally Lloyd-Jones, *The Jesus Storybook Bible - Every Story Whispers His Name* (Grand Rapids: Zonderkidz, 2007).

A Continual Unfolding

There are some high mountain peaks in every narrative, crucial plot turns which move the story to its climax. As the story of Jesus unfolds in Mark we see some very important events go down. First, Peter confesses Jesus to be the Christ a confession upon which the church will be built. Second, Jesus begins to foretell what was prophesied about him long ago, that the Son of Man must suffer, be murdered and rise from death. This was an unexpected turn of events for the disciples that he repeats with them driving home the central focus of his mission. Third, God reveals Jesus is his glory on the top of a mountain. His radiant beauty and manifest glory was displayed for the disciples just before they turn towards leading the mission towards a cross in Jerusalem. The cost of following Jesus, a Jesus who would be rejected by people and die an ignoble death, was being made clear.

Do We Really Want Jesus?

Upon his entry to Jerusalem Jesus was being treated like a political religious rock star. He was on the Jay Leno show, Carson Daly wanted to hang out and pretty much the whole town was in an uproar at the arrival of Jesus. Their hero had come to save the day for Jerusalem and the reigns of the Roman oppressor would soon be conquered by the Messiah, a great warrior King! Or was there another plan? Many of the people who welcomed Jesus would soon stand on the other side of his cause. He would threaten religious power by bringing the salvation of God. Those who desire to lead men in religion, rather than to the throne of grace, would soon shout out with ferocity "Crucify Him!" Even his closest of friends, the man who just had confessed him as the Christ of God would turn on his friend in a moment of trial. Peter himself would deny Jesus. So I ask us...do *we* really want Jesus?

Death by Love and Life By Death

The final apex of Mark's story comes to a head in the final chapters of the book. Everything that began in chapter 1 has moved to this final station where death will come by love and life for God's people will come by death. Jesus, the creator of all things, is mocked, rejected and tried as a common criminal. His people abandon him and he submits himself to a shameful death, even death on a cross. Yet such was the will of a loving God, for it pleased the Father to crush the Son. Putting an end to sin, death and hell in one act and by death would come life to all men who believe. This is the crown jewel of our faith. The songs of men might sing of self-sufficiency and the triumph of our human ingenuity. We will have no portion on this plate – we will preach and live Christ. Christ crucified, victoriously raised, on mission on the earth today beckoning to each of us...Follow Me.

This is my prayer – joy in following Jesus in the mission of God on the earth,



Reid S. Monaghan

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