

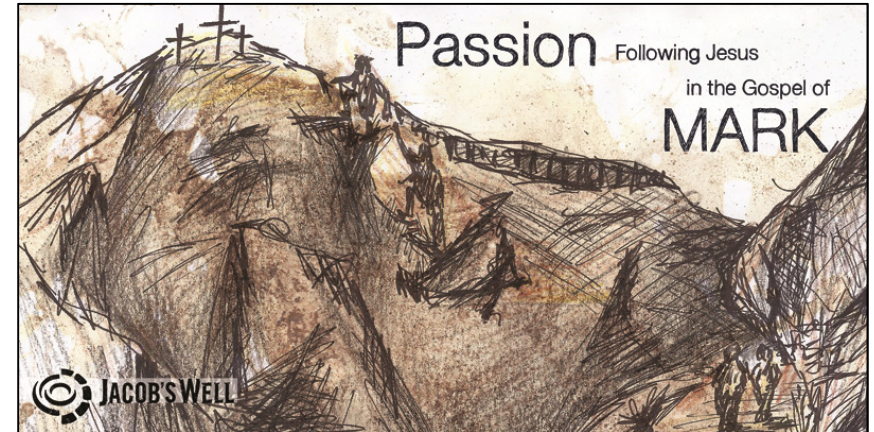


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Background, Introduction and Themes in Mark's Gospel  
Reid S. Monaghan

## INTRODUCTION

Some of the most unique writings in history are found in the gospels of the New Testament. These ancient scriptures place the life, teaching, kingdom, sacrificial death and glorious resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth on full display. Out of an obscure corner of the globe, from a small tribe of people came forth a figure that transformed all of human history. He was a man with a focused mission and the Gospel of Mark funnels our own lives into his story. The recounting of the life of Jesus by Mark brings to us fast paced action with a sense of divine drama and movement. We know Jesus is going somewhere; his life had a date with destiny. Mark unfolds the identity and mission of Jesus with a sense of passion and immediacy and by reading this book we enter into the drama which was brought forth from eternity.

In the gospel of Mark, we have no doubt that Jesus is bringing a new reality to the earth and heading to an appointment with

suffering and triumph. We follow him today with a focus and passion for the great mission he entrusted to us...to see the salvation of God proclaimed to the world.

By God's grace, over the course of the next eight months, we will be journeying through Mark's gospel together to continue our growth into worshippers and disciples of Jesus who live out his mission here in central New Jersey. As we begin I want to take some time to lay out some background for the gospels in general and the gospel of Mark in particular. Also, I will highlight some books in the bibliography that I think will be helpful to your personal growth, family and missional community.

This essay will contain a few sections in order to orient us to the New Testament gospels. I will first give a short introduction to the shape and purpose of the biblical gospels. I will then briefly focus on the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke and look at how Mark has been studied in order to treat the similarities and differences in these three gospel accounts. I will then turn to some basic background and introductory information for the gospel of Mark before offering a practical conclusion. The conclusion will highlight some of the features of Mark that I pray will continue to shape the Jacob's Well community in a profound way.

## THE GOSPELS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

To come to know Jesus in spirit and in truth we must arrive to him instructed by the canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. We must have knowledge of him as he really is, while the Spirit of God persuades us fully that he is the Christ, the Son of the living God. To know Jesus we must see him in the gospels and experience the living Jesus spiritually present with us by the Holy

Irenaeus, "Against Heresies", Christian Classics Ethereal Library <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.iv.ii.html> (accessed Jan 4 2012).

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Spirit. Both truth and spiritual experience unite when we meet Jesus in the Scriptures.<sup>1</sup> In Jesus God became flesh and lived among the people of the earth displaying to us his nature and his glory. Jesus is the majestic one and the written and proclaimed Word of God brings his majesty to us.

In the gospels of the New Testament we have compiled eyewitness accounts<sup>2</sup> from people who walked with Jesus, talked with him, were taught by him, lived with him and were commissioned as his ambassadors and messengers to the world. The canonical gospels were all first century documents compiled as the mission of God spread geographically<sup>3</sup> and as the apostles neared the end of their lives on earth. They wanted to be certain to pass on the life, teaching and mission of Jesus to the broader Christian community and movement<sup>4</sup> who would continue to carry out his work as he had commanded (Matthew 28:18-20). These gospels, inspired by God, would grow in their importance as false teachers began to arise and circulate strange and esoteric opinions about Jesus which were not a part of the apostolic teachings. Many of these writings were posing "gospels" purporting to give secret knowledge and teachings about

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1John Calvin, "Institutes of the Christian Religion." says this well "Scripture will ultimately suffice for a saving knowledge of God only when its certainty is founded upon the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit" (Book I, viii, 13).

2 A compelling case for the gospels being comprised of eyewitness testimony is found in Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses : The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2006).

3 David Alan Black, following the work of William Farmer and Bernard Orchard gives an interesting hypothesis that the gospels were written during the periods of missional unfolding during the apostolic era. Matthew in the Jerusalem period, Luke in the gentile mission of Paul, Mark in Rome and John adding his theological gospel towards the end of the apostolic age. See David Alan Black, *Why Four Gospels - the Historical Origins of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001).

4 See Richard Bauckham, *The Gospels for All Christians : Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids, Mich. ; Cambridge, U.K.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997), 8-49.



Jesus. Such writings were rejected by early leaders of the faith such as Irenaeus of Lyon who were directly connected to the apostolic tradition.<sup>5</sup> These works were never considered part of the Bible, have never been part of the Bible and never will be part of the Bible.<sup>6</sup> They were false teachings rejected firmly by pastors who loved their people. The four gospels of the New Testament are the agreed upon standards for the life of Jesus accepted by all Christians everywhere. Protestants, Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believers all look to these works as the divine and inspired revelation of Jesus Christ. Now let us turn our attention to what makes a gospel writing “a gospel” and focus for a moment on the literary genre.

### History, Biography, Theology?

When we come to the gospels we arrive at some very unique writings composed of many kinds of literature. These writings are composed of genealogies, narrative storytelling, historical facts, proverbs of wisdom, teaching parables, commands, and some apocalyptic sections. Many questions can rightly be asked about these books. Are these books of history, mere biographical sketch or simply theological books aiming to teach us truths about God? For instance, there are certainly historical realities about the gospels in that they are set in real time and real places speaking about real

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<sup>5</sup> See Irenaeus, “Against Heresies”, Christian Classics Ethereal Library <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.iv.ii.html> (accessed Jan 4 2012). Irenaeus is said to have heard the gospel from a man named Polycarp who was a disciple of some guy named John the apostle. The point is Irenaeus, in refuting false teachings, was in the position to know.

<sup>6</sup> Some scholars today such as Bart Ehrman of UNC Chapel Hill and Elaine Pagels of Princeton present these other books as “Lost Scriptures” from “Lost Christianities” rather than “rejected books” and “rejected” Christianities. This is historical revisionism at its worst. For a treatment of these issues see Darrell L. Bock, *The Missing Gospels-Unearthing the Truth Behind Alternative Christianities* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006).

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### General Resources for the Study of the Gospels

- ◉ *Rethinking The Synoptic the Problem* edited by David Alan Black and David R. Beck
- ◉ *Why Four Gospels* by David Alan Black
- ◉ *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses, The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* and *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* by Richard Bauckham
- ◉ *Promises Kept, The Message of the New Testament* by Mark Dever
- ◉ *Can We Trust the Gospels* by Mark D. Roberts
- ◉ *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* by Craig Blomberg

### The Gospel of Mark

- ◉ *The King's Cross* by Timothy Keller – popular level treatment derived from some of Dr. Keller's teaching at Redeemer NYC from the book of Mark.
- ◉ *Mark for Everyone* by N.T. Wright – though we do not stand with Wright on some important theological positions, this commentary is helpful, devotional and accessible.
- ◉ *The Gospel According to Mark*, Pillar New Testament Commentary by James R. Edwards – excellent commentary that is scholarly but not overwhelmingly technical.
- ◉ *The Gospel of Mark* by William Lane – comprehensive and excellent commentary that will take you into Mark with some depth of understanding.
- ◉ *The Gospel of Mark, A Socio Rhetorical Commentary* by Ben Witherington – a unique commentary focusing on the social and rhetorical contexts that are the backdrop of Mark.

[9] You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. [10] But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. [11] If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

Romans 8:9-11 ESV

Today, now, and until eternity, we have the Holy Spirit living in us to transform our lives, empower and embolden us to proclaim the gospel and joyfully follow Jesus...all the way home friends, all the way home. If the Kingdom of Heaven is our final home and his call upon us now is to follow in life and mission we indeed must give ourselves fully to this work. To do anything else, as the writer of Ecclesiastes teaches us, is but a chasing after the wind.

Yours for seeing, savoring, following and being transformed by Jesus as he is revealed to us in the gospel of Mark. The journey begins, with a passionate summons from our King. Let us respond and follow with great passion of our own.

In His Name in the year of our Lord 2012



Pastor Reid S. Monaghan

people. They do not speak about another mythical world in a galaxy far far away. So in that way the gospels are historical but they are not mere compilations of historical facts and figures. They endeavor to teach us more than that. Furthermore, it should be noted that the gospels may well be properly classified in the genre of ancient biography.<sup>7</sup> When we hear the word “biography” we may think of a show on A&E, VH1 behind the scenes or a book aiming to tell the whole life story of a certain person. We know the gospels do not do this as they only contain parts of Jesus's story; parts that serve the purpose and theological aims of the particular gospel in question. This may lead us to see the gospels as books of theological facts but this seems far less personal than what we find when actually reading them. Scottish New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham gives a wonderful classification for the gospels in describing them as 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.*<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, we shall see the gospels as eyewitness testimony pointing to a real person, in real history, revealing to us real truth about God, ourselves and Jesus of Nazareth, who is called the

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<sup>7</sup> See genre analysis in Richard A. Burridge “About People, by People, for People: Gospel Genre and Audiences” in Bauckham, *The Gospels for All Christians : Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, 113-145.

<sup>8</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses : The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 5,6.

Christ. It is my hope that we might enjoy a lifetime of studying these writings, meeting Jesus in them and growing spiritually through their nourishment as the Word of our God. Before we move into a general introduction to Mark's gospel I want to provide a brief treatment of the importance of Mark to a particular area of gospel studies.

## 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 have labeled this the *synoptic problem*. The question arises from both the similarity and differences between the texts of Matthew, Mark and Luke and the potential 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 thoughtful summary of the current discussion I recommend *Rethinking the Synoptic Problem* published by Baker Academic.<sup>9</sup> It is only about 160 pages so throw it in your Amazon shopping cart.

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

includes service to others, suffering for others and sacrifice in mission. To serve means to be inconvenienced and to bear others burdens. To love, particularly the unlovely, the difficult and the challenging, will mean we will suffer. To simply follow Jesus in a world where many do not like him or his message means we too will endure some persecution for our faith (2 Timothy 3:10-17). Mark's gospel reveals a beautiful purpose in Jesus's life and mission and hence our own:

[42] And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. [43] But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, [44] and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. [45] For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Mark 10:42-45 ESV

## Triumph into Mission

The gospel of Mark is about Jesus who is the pinnacle of the story of the Bible. We must remember that the story of God is written in history and the Scriptures record but a beginning and commissioning of the mission of God. The final book of the Bible records the great return of King Jesus to vanquish all evil, to reconcile all things back to God and place all his enemies under his feet. Mark's gospel teaches us that we are part of the story and mission of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. His final triumph on the earth was over the grave itself where God the Father powerfully raises Jesus from the dead. The apostle Paul tells us that this triumph extends into our lives now when he wrote:

the question: *Lord Jesus, what are you going to do next!?* I

personally love a good story or film at the movies. Yet I do think we can neglect the significance of the story of our own lives. We watch a movie with suspense and expectation but we do not seem to watch "Tuesday" in the same way. Reading the story of Jesus makes me realize that he is present with me every day in significant events and in the normal routines of eating and sleeping. He also calls us to follow him in his work on the earth now. This calling, when obeyed, leads to some joyful suspense as well as opportunities to let faith conquer our fears. My hope is that Mark would encourage us to swing our bat each day and joyfully watch as Jesus works in our lives and world. Standing on the sidelines, sitting the bench, standing with the bat on our shoulder as the pitch goes by, not trying at all to follow is lame Christianity as religion. I pray that in the joyful suspense of believing and following we might find life in his name (John 1:12). Sometimes there is a cross and pain in the trail before us, sometimes there is resurrection glory, yet on either path our hope is in Jesus. With this hope as a firm anchor to the soul (Hebrews 6:19) and our joy is seeing him lead us and surprise us day after day.

### **Sacrifice, Service and Suffering**

There is a current sickness of sin in the modern American church which brings many to proclaim a dangerous half-truth to people. God only wants you to be rich, happy and never face sickness or extreme suffering or difficulty, they say. The Bible calls BS on this sort of teaching, yet the airwaves and interwebs are filled with such nonsense. Yes, God is the source of every blessing (James 1:16, 17). Yes, we should pray for healing (James 5:13-15). Yes, joy, when found in the right things, is a great gift of God. In fact, in God's presence there is fullness of joy (Psalm 16). We must never forget, however, that Jesus both calls and models a life for us that also

### *First Issue - We know the Gospels are Compilations*

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 this a bit later in this essay. So if the gospels are compilations which were written down at different times, for different purposes, 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 every version of 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 has provoked 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 which I will only sketch in bullet form here.

### *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

different King than the temporal rulers and potentates of our world. Those who call him Lord are transformed and live under a different reality now and forever. God's people become a tangible expression of the rule of Jesus now as we extend the gospel to others around us. The good news of the Bible is that God's King has come, we can live under his rule and we enter his covenant community by repenting of sin and placing complete faith and trust in Christ.

### **Identity through Action OR Identity in Action**

How do you get to know someone? Personally, I have read books and biographies about people where I feel like I know a little bit about them. You can listen to others tell you about a friend and you can also actually watch him live. The disciples and apostles lived with Jesus and watched him live out his ministry. Peter, through Mark's writing, wants to let us in on this action. Mark's gospel says this to us: “If you want to know the identity of Jesus, just watch him.” What does he do? How does he go about his purpose and mission? Yes, Mark does contain some of Jesus's teaching in its pages but far less than the other gospels. The reason seems to be that Mark wants us to know Jesus by watching what he does in fast and furious *action*. As we read Mark, illuminated by the Spirit, we see someone to follow quite clearly. We need to experience Jesus in both his teaching and his works and then obey and follow. The apostle John describes this as the “abundant life” with Christ as our chief shepherd; our master and commander in life.

### **The Joy of Suspense**

What will he do next? I find myself asking this as I read through Mark. A great exercise for me has been to listen to Mark read aloud. The sense of movement and anticipation is quite a joyful experience. In the same way our lives are similar. We should always be asking



message. Follow the example of Jesus in the midst of their own 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, his kingdom and his story to constantly define our own. This is our invitation, to see Jesus as the founder and definition of our faith, the definer of life and the person whose story gives us reference points for every turn of life ahead.

## THEMES OF MARK

Though much could be said about all the teaching and themes found in the gospel of Mark, for our purposes here I simply want to bring the following to light for the Jacob's Well family. These themes are important theologically to understand ourselves and our Lord so that we might live out the gospel mandate in our time.



### King and Kingdom

Two inextricably connected realities explode on to the scene in the very first chapter of Mark's gospel. Here we read, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" and further, "...Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel'." Here is the language of the arrival of a King and a great Kingdom, yet not just any royal reign. This is God's King and God's Kingdom. A new way of living under the rule and reign of Christ, the Messiah, God's anointed king has arrived and all of history, including our lives, will be forever changed. Jesus is a

studies today.<sup>10</sup> 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, suggests that we are trying harder to grasp the meaning of this, *the earliest of the gospels*."<sup>11</sup> There are many reasons for thinking Mark may have been written first.<sup>12</sup>

- ◉ 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"<sup>13</sup> (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; it is simply a literary inference.* 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 in explaining the synoptic gospels.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 17.

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

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

<sup>13</sup> More on "Q" can be found here Peter Kirby, "Q Document "  
<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/q.html> (accessed Jan 4 2012).

However, in the last several decades there have been others who are arguing quite convincingly for the priority of Matthew.<sup>14</sup> This holds promise for a couple reasons. First, the earliest traditions and teachings in church history are 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.<sup>15</sup> I personally enjoy this work and would love to see more scholars attend to it.

Let me close briefly by saying that all evangelical scholars—whether those who hold to the two source/Markan priority 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.*<sup>16</sup>

Though the precise solution to the literary connectedness of the gospels is not of central importance to our faith, it is good to be

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<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> Black, *Why Four Gospels - the Historical Origins of the Gospels*.

<sup>16</sup> Black and Beck, *Rethinking the Synoptic Problem*, 18.

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.<sup>28</sup>

Nero sounds like a punk 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

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<sup>28</sup> Tacitus, "The Annals", MIT Internet Classics Archive

<http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/annals.11.xv.html> (accessed Jan 4 2012). Emphasis added.

persecution under the maniacal leadership of Nero. That story requires 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 AD 64 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.<sup>27</sup> 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 historian Tacitus. Oh, how our sisters and brothers suffered for the sake of the name of Christ. Here is the account:

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



aware of these issues. Many so called “contradictions” that skeptics claim to find in the synoptic narratives are easily resolved when we realize that each author arranged his material to tell the story of Jesus 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. Each of the synoptic gospels takes us to this Jesus in a unique way.

## THE GOSPEL OF MARK - BASIC BACKGROUND

In terms of historical attention, the gospel of Mark has been a bit of a little step brother to the lengthier 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.<sup>17</sup> Historically there has been much more preaching on John and Matthew. Even today, you will not encounter as many sermons preached from Mark's gospel as you will from the more theological gospel of John. In recent times much more *scholarly* focus has been given to this gospel due to its helpfulness in a solution to the Synoptic Problem (see above). Mark is a mere sixteen chapters and is a fast paced accounting of the teaching and life of Jesus. It contains no genealogies or birth narratives 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

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

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<sup>17</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark; the English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids,: Eerdmans, 1974), 3.

footnotes. I am convinced that Jesus must just love good footnotes. At least I do. Smile.

### Authorship of Mark

All of the gospels do not have the author's 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 (in modern day Turkey), and Irenaeus, a bishop from Lyon (in what is 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. <sup>18</sup>*

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 8.

either consideration, Mark is one of the earliest gospels recorded to pass the teaching and story of Jesus on for the generations which were 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 likely writing with a Gentile audience in mind.<sup>25</sup> 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 AD 20-30 and second, the mid first century culture of Rome in the 60s.<sup>26</sup> 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

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<sup>25</sup> Lane, 25.

<sup>26</sup> Witherington, 31.

In looking at the date of Mark's gospel 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 precedes 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 persecution under Nero after a great fire in AD 64. 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-50s<sup>24</sup> 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 AD 70. 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 AD 62. 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 AD 65. With

It is estimated the Papias tradition is very early and dates perhaps to within 90-100 AD.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup> 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 Rome (c. 64). It is possible that he had been outside of Rome since his departure in 62.

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<sup>19</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2002), 4.

<sup>20</sup> Irenaeus.

<sup>21</sup> Lane, 10-12.

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<sup>24</sup> This is the position favored in Carson, Moo, and Morris.



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.
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.<sup>22</sup>

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

### 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.<sup>23</sup> 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 over the incident. Paul simply doesn't trust Mark after he tapped 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 encouraging. Paul's last comments about him are very endearing. Just before Paul's death, he asks Timothy to send for John Mark; he wanted his friend at his side in his last days (2 Timothy 4:11)

### 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

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Wallace, "Mark: Introduction, Argument, and Outline", Bible.org  
<http://bible.org/seriespage/mark-introduction-argument-and-outline> (accessed Jan 4 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Edwards, 5.