

Introduction to the Gospel of Mark

The word “gospel” is used frequently in the OT; the Hebrew word (*bsr*) is found 24 times, notably in Isaiah: 40:9; 41:27; 52:7; 60:6; 61:1. For purposes of the gospel according to Mark, Isaiah 61:1 anticipates One anointed by the Holy Spirit who would bring the “good news” (*bsr*; the “gospel”) to the afflicted. The prophet Nahum echoes Isaiah 52:7 in 1:15: “Behold! On the mountains the feet of him who brings good news (*bsr*, the “gospel”), who announces peace!” Mark begins his biography, identifying it as the “beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (1:1). Jesus identifies His message as the “good news” or “gospel” (Mark 1:14-15; 8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9; 16:15). Apparently that designation, “gospel,” came to be a title for the lives, or biographies, of Christ written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Justin Martyr, in the middle of the second century, was the first to use the designation “gospel” for the written record of Jesus’ life (*Apol.* 1.66; *Dial.* 10.2).

The gospels as a literary genre is unique to the New Testament. There are some parallels in some forms to other genres but the gospel genre is unique. That would be appropriate for the Man who is unique in Himself. While the gospels tell the story of Jesus, generally chronologically, from His birth to His death, the focus is on the last week of Jesus on earth. Indeed, Mark devotes 1/3 of his gospel to Jesus’ last week.

AUTHOR:

Papias lived about 130 A. D. and was a bishop in the church of Hierapolis in Asia Minor, roughly a generation after the apostles (John) quit writing. The church historian, Eusebius (4th century), quotes Papias relative to Matthew and Mark (*H. E.* 3.39.14-16; 127):

“And John the Presbyter also said this, Mark being the interpreter of Peter, whatsoever he recorded he wrote with great accuracy but not however, in the order in which it was spoken or done by our Lord, for he neither heard nor followed our Lord, but as before said, he was in company with Peter, who gave him such instruction as was necessary, but not to give a history of our Lord’s discourses: wherefore Mark has not erred in any thing, by writing some things as he has recorded them; for he was carefully attentive to one thing, not to pass by any thing that he heard, or to state any thing falser in these accounts.’ Such is the statement of Papias, respecting Mark. Of Matthew he has stated as follows: ‘Matthew composed his history in the Hebrew dialect, and every one translated it as he was able.’”

Other early writers which attribute this gospel to Mark are Justin Martyr, Muratorian Fragment, Taitian’s *Diatessaron* and the Old Latin and Old Syriac, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, and Eusebius. Some suggest that patristic writers after Papias were dependent on Papias, but that is not obvious.

John Mark was a cousin to Barnabas (Col. 4:10-14) and traveled with Paul and Barnabas (12:12-14, 25; 13:5). See also Acts 15:37-39; Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11; 1 Peter 5:13.

Why did early Christians append Mark’s name to the gospel if he was not the author?

THE “SYNOPTIC” PROBLEM:

J. J. Griesbach, a German living at the end of the eighteenth century, assigned the designation “synoptic” to the first three gospels since they were easily “viewed together,” the literal translation of “syn (together) optic (seen).”

You do not have to be particularly observant to notice that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are extremely similar. Only about 1/3 of Matthew is unique to him. Matthew has a total of 1,068 verses and encompasses about 80% of Mark’s gospel. Matthew and Luke have about 220-235

verses in common, but distinct from Mark. Mark has only about 30 verses that are unique to him, material found neither in Matthew nor in Luke. This similarity is reflected in chronology, content, and vocabulary.

That common material between Matthew and Luke is often identified as “Q,” abbreviated from *Quelle*, German for “Source.” While many see literary dependence between the three gospels, one might also simply recognize strong similarity. If they are quoting Jesus exactly, wouldn’t they have verbal similarities? If they are closely describing Jesus’ actions, wouldn’t they describe His action with verbal similarities? If they were guided by the Holy Spirit (see below), wouldn’t they be very similar? Isn’t it possible that Jesus could say the same thing, even repeating Himself in the same sermon, yet use different wording in each sentence that could explain differences in the gospels? Yet, at the same time, there are very great differences in each gospel, in their forms and content. It would not deny inspiration to say that each author wrote for a specific audience; yet, that does not mean he fabricated anything.

Q is a completely hypothetical document with no evidence for its existence except the preconceptions of scholars. Yet, many scholars completely fabricate a “Q” community, a history, theology, and leadership, built entirely from their notion that there even was a “Q” document which the author of Matthew used.

We have not found the “priority of Mark” view compelling, no more than a “priority of Matthew” view. There is far too much speculation and far too less knowledge about the early process of moving from the preached word to the written word. For example, did Mark choose to leave out the “virgin birth narrative” for his own purposes or did Matthew add the narrative for his own purposes? We have no idea. Did Mark summarize Matthew or did Matthew elaborate on Mark? We have no idea. It is noteworthy that in no Greek manuscripts which have more than one gospel is Mark ever placed first.

DATE:

There are references to the destruction of Jerusalem (13:1-29) which most scholars assume is considerably in the past from the writing of Mark, which is why he doesn’t refer to the destruction as having happened. We prefer to see the references as prophecies, which is how they are presented by Mark. With that being true, the book was written sometime before 70 AD. The Anti-Marcionite Prologue (dated to the late second century) and Irenaeus (185 AD) both indicate Mark wrote after Peter’s death. That would put the date of writing in the late 60s.

PROVENANCE:

This designates the place from which Mark wrote the gospel. Since Mark was associated with Peter in Babylon (1 Peter 5:13) and “Babylon” was recognized as a name for Rome, then it is assumed that Mark wrote for the Christians in Rome. There are some Latin words used in his gospel (12:42; 15:16; others will be noted throughout the commentary), but these might have been used by anyone in the Roman Empire. Mark identifies Simon of Cyrene as the father of “Alexander and Rufus” (15:21) and there is a “Rufus” associated with the church in Rome (Romans 16:13). If the two are the same individual (which we do not know), then there is a connection between Mark and the church in Rome. Since Mark identifies Simon in this way, it is a natural assumption that his audience would recognize “Alexander” and “Rufus.”

Other options, which do not seem to hold strong evidence, are: Antioch of Syria and Galilee.

Mark’s audience seems to have been a Gentile audience since he explains Aramaic expressions he uses: 3:17; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 14:36; 15:34.

INSPIRED:

One serious disadvantage of the “Synoptic Problem” research is that it leads scholars to reject the inspiration of the Scriptures. Some deny the evangelists were eyewitnesses. They

deny the authors wrote from memory. Some do not believe the gospels are literal records but that the stories developed and evolved.

Jesus Christ Himself, and His character is impeccable, said that the Holy Spirit would guide the apostles and they would not have to worry about remembering what they had seen and heard (John 14:25-26; 15:26-27; 16:13-14). Because the gospel message was so important (Rom. 1:16) that modification of that message carried an anathema from God (Gal. 1:6-9), we are on safe grounds that the Holy Spirit would have inspired the *writing* of the gospel just as much as He inspired the *preaching* of the gospel. That inspiration would have reached both the apostles, who were direct recipients of the promise, and the Christian prophets, such as Mark and Luke.

The writers, like the writers in the OT, share insights into the minds and hearts of people, which only an inspired writer could do (or a writer of fiction which Mark clearly is not).

As we have already indicated, patristic writers accepted the Gospel of Mark as inspired of God, on the same level as the OT writings accepted by the Jews. It is quoted frequently as inspired writing. These men lived within one hundred years of the inspired writers and were well-placed to detect fraud.

The apostles and other NT writers (except Luke) were Jews and within the Jewish faith, the written word of God was held in very high regard. The prophets, such as Jeremiah, warned strongly against speaking on behalf of God if He has not spoken. The NT writers would have inherited that respect for the word of God and would not have fabricated words and actions and put them into the mouth and life of Jesus Christ. Rather, their writings show that they had a quite negative view of adding something to Christ's gospel message.

Based on the understanding that Mark was inspired by the Holy Spirit, technically, there is no reason why he could not have immediately sat down on the Day of Pentecost and wrote out the gospel! Our guess is that Mark did not write the gospel until sometime after Cornelius was converted, partly to justify sharing the gospel with the Gentiles. If the text had been written before Cornelius was converted, there would have been a much stronger argument and support for the Jewish Christians to share the gospel with the Gentiles before God had to send Peter a special vision in Acts 10.

Of course, when anyone produced any written work in the early years of the church, there were many eyewitnesses who could have refuted anything that had been produced that was false or embellished. We have no record of any such refutation of the current canonical books. Yes, the Holy Spirit was the "Omniscient Narrator."

In addition to the guiding by the Holy Spirit, the fact that three of the gospel writers were eyewitnesses (Matthew, John) or probably an eyewitness (Mark; see, for example: 6:39), argues for its historical accuracy. Again, two of the four gospel writers were apostles (Matthew, John) and two were closely connected to apostles (Mark, Luke) which argues for their connection to those involved in the work of Jesus. Additionally, we have confidence in the God of love (1 John 4:8) that He would have made sure an accurate record of the life and teachings of Jesus would be preserved since the gospel is, in fact, God's power to save man (Rom. 1:16).

MARK'S USE OF THE OT:

The author of the gospel only quotes the OT once, in 1:2-3. However, he also records Jesus as quoting from the OT 19 times with a total of 69 references, including allusions. Three of those uses are unique to Mark's gospel: 9:48; 10:19; 12:32.

STRUCTURE:

Mark's gospel is largely chronological but not strictly.

Parables Only in Mark:		Miracles Only in Mark	
Parable of the seed growing secretly	4:26-29	Healing of deaf and dumb man	7:31-37

		Healing of blind man at Bethsaida	8:22-26
Blocks of Sermons in Mark			
Sayings on salt	9:49-50		
Other Passages Only Found in Mark			
Flight of the young man	14:51-52		

CHRONOLOGY OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST:

See this writer's Introduction to Matthew.

TEXT:

There are a few peculiarities to Mark's writing style we wish to point out. He uses more than 150 times the "historical present." This verb is in the present tense, although the text is clear that Mark is describing the past. He uses the "historical present" to portray the vividness of the event. We will translate the "historical present" as Mark wrote it - in the present tense. He also uses the word "immediately" very frequently, which we will also translate, even at the expense of its redundancy. Mark uses the word (*euthys* - "immediately") 42 times while Matthew uses it six times and Luke and John use it three times each. Also, Mark likes to begin sentences with the word "and."

THE GREEK TEXT:

The gospel of Mark is half the length of a standard scroll. Both Matthew and Luke are roughly the size of a standard scroll. John is roughly 1/3 of a scroll. The questions regarding Mark's earliest manuscripts revolve around 1:1 and 16:9-20. Regarding 1:1, the expression "Son of God" is missing in a few early manuscripts (notably κ). The phrase is found in the majority of early manuscripts. The ending (16:9-20) is much more controversial with the majority of scholars, even those who respect the authority of the New Testament, do not believe this paragraph is authentic and do not make comments on the text at all.

The paragraph is missing:

1. From two earliest manuscripts (κ , B), as well as others.
2. The early Christian named Jerome and the church historian Eusebius write that the manuscripts available to them did not have the paragraph.
3. Other endings for Mark are also available in some manuscripts. This suggests that there was some confusion over the ending of Mark from very early times.
4. The longer paragraph (16:9-20) supposedly has some non-Markan phrases.
5. Supposedly, verses 9-20 do not flow from verse 8.

On the other hand, the early writers Tatian (*Diatessaron*; 172-175 AD) and Irenaeus (170 AD) knew of the fragment (16:9-20) and the latter understood it to be the ending of Mark.

The earliest manuscript, or manuscript fragment, of Mark dates to the second century. It is known as Papyrus 45. The earliest complete text of Mark's gospel is found in Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, both of which date to the 4th century. We are using the United Bible Societies Greek text, 4th edition, for our translation. This text was made by scholars who compared the 5,800 existing Greek manuscripts and pieces of manuscripts and, based on criteria developed over the centuries, compiled an extremely reliable and consistent text.

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