

MARK

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Gospel according to Mark is a vivid and fast-moving account of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Its message is unmistakable and world-changing: Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in him the kingdom of God has drawn near. Mark tells the story with urgency and simplicity, confronting readers with Jesus himself and calling them to repent, believe the good news, and follow him on the way of the cross.

AUTHOR

Many of the specifics about this Gospel account are not told to us in the work itself. The author remains anonymous, and he does not specify where or when he wrote. His anonymity keeps the focus where he places it from the opening verse: on Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

There is, however, a strong and consistent early tradition that this Gospel was written by Mark, traditionally identified with the John Mark mentioned in the New Testament. Much of what we know about its authorship comes from early church writers. Papias, an early second-century bishop of Hierapolis, reports that Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote down accurately what he remembered of the things Jesus had said and done. Later in the second century, Irenaeus describes Mark as Peter's disciple and interpreter and says that he handed down in writing what Peter had preached. Clement of Alexandria also reports that after Peter had preached in Rome, his hearers asked Mark to preserve his teaching in writing.¹

From this early and consistent testimony, it is very likely that Mark wrote this Gospel and that Peter's eyewitness preaching stands behind it. The attribution to Mark is especially

¹ *And so greatly did the greatness of devotion enlighten the minds of Peter's listeners that they were not content to hear it only once. And they did not have enough of the unwritten doctrine of the divine gospel, but with all sorts of complaints they asked Mark, a follower of Peter, and one whose gospel survived, to leave a written testimony of the doctrine given to them orally. Nor did they cease until they prevailed over man, and thus became the occasion for the writing of the Gospel bearing the name of Mark.* (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 2.15.1–2, citing Clement of Alexandria and Papias)

The elder also said: Mark, after becoming Peter's interpreter, recorded exactly, though not in order, as he remembers the things said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but later, as I said, he followed Peter, who adapted his teaching to the needs of his hearers, without intending to tell us a connected story of events concerning the Lord, so Mark did not make a mistake in writing things the way he remembered them. Because he was careful about one thing - not to miss some of the things he heard, and not to point out any of them falsely. (Papias, quoted in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 3.39.15)

Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the church. 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. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who had leaned upon his breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia. (Irenaeus, Against Heresies 3.1.1)

credible because he was not a prominent apostle or leader. If the early church had simply wanted to attach an authoritative name to the Gospel, they would more likely have chosen Peter, Paul, or one of the twelve apostles.

Peter was an eyewitness who gave faithful testimony to what he saw and experienced as he followed Jesus. Mark, his associate and partner in gospel ministry, drew on what he had heard and learned from the apostle—likely in connection with Peter’s ministry in Rome—and crafted Peter’s remembered teaching into a beautiful, fast-paced, and coherent narrative so that believers could continue to learn about Jesus.

Many of the Gospel’s vivid details fit naturally with Peter’s personal memories. The Gospel also does not idealize Peter but is quick to point out his shortcomings and weaknesses. Since Peter was a central figure in the early church, such a candid portrayal fits well with an account rooted in honest eyewitness testimony rather than one intended to protect his reputation. Knowing that Mark’s Gospel rests on this testimony adds weight and credibility to the account and helps us read it as a faithful witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

JOHN MARK

John Mark—often simply called “Mark” in the New Testament—is traditionally understood to be the author of the Gospel of Mark. Although he is not a central figure in the Bible, he is mentioned several times in the New Testament, allowing us to piece together a short biography of his life. Mark was the cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10), and his mother’s home in Jerusalem was used as a place of prayer and gathering in the early years of the church (Acts 12:12).

Mark joined Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, but for unknown reasons, he left the mission early and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:4–13). Later, when Paul and Barnabas prepared for a second missionary journey, Barnabas wanted to take Mark with them. Paul refused because Mark had previously left the work, and the disagreement between the two leaders became so sharp that they separated. Paul chose Silas, while Barnabas took Mark with him to Cyprus (Acts 15:36–40).

Mark’s earlier failure did not define the rest of his life. He was later restored to partnership with Paul, who described him as a fellow worker and eventually wrote to Timothy, “Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry” (Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11). Mark also became closely associated with Peter, who affectionately refers to him as “my son” (1 Peter 5:13). The man who once turned back became a trusted partner of Barnabas, Paul, and Peter—and, according to early church tradition, the writer through whom Peter’s testimony about Jesus was preserved for future generations.

DATE AND AUDIENCE

As with the author, we cannot be completely certain about the date, but there is good reason to believe that Mark was written during the AD 60s, probably before the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in AD 70. From the early church sources mentioned above, it seems most likely that Mark wrote this Gospel in Rome for the Christians living there, near the end of Peter's life or shortly after his death during Nero's reign. This setting is also supported by Mark's use of Latin words and Roman expressions, as well as the places where he explains Jewish customs and translates Aramaic words for readers who may not have been familiar with Jewish life in Palestine.

The AD 60s were a tumultuous period for the Christian community in Rome. Christians endured hostility, slander, and misunderstanding. Because they refused to worship the Roman gods or participate in pagan religious practices, they could be regarded as irreligious, antisocial, or disloyal to Rome. Their gatherings and practices were also easily misunderstood and misrepresented. According to early Christian tradition, both Peter and Paul were executed during Nero's reign, and the church had to grapple with what the death of these important leaders meant for their own faith. Meanwhile, war broke out in Judea in AD 66, placing Jerusalem and the temple under threat and adding to the wider atmosphere of instability.

This pressure grew especially severe in AD 64, when a catastrophic fire devastated large parts of Rome. Three of the city's fourteen districts were completely destroyed, and seven more were severely damaged. Rumors spread that Nero himself had started the fire, perhaps in order to rebuild the city according to his own vision. To deflect suspicion from himself, Nero blamed the unpopular Christian community. Tacitus, a Roman historian, describes the terrible persecution that followed, including torture, public execution, and believers being burned alive.²

To be recognized as a follower of Jesus in this setting could lead to suffering, rejection, and even death. Some believers became martyrs for their faith, while others would have faced the temptation to hide or abandon it out of fear. To Christians living under such pressure, Mark proclaimed the good news of the Savior who suffered, died, and rose again. The suffering of Jesus did not mean that God had lost control, and neither did the suffering of his followers.

² *Therefore, to scotch the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. Hence, in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man.* (from Tacitus, Annals 15.44.)

Those who followed the crucified Messiah were called to take up their own cross and remain faithful, trusting that the risen Jesus would ultimately have the victory.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF MARK

The events of Mark's Gospel take place mainly in Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem during the years of Jesus' public ministry, approximately the late AD 20s to early AD 30s. To understand Mark's Gospel, it is helpful to know what had happened in the land in the centuries leading up to Jesus' ministry.

When the Old Testament story ends, Israel has returned from exile, and the temple and the walls of Jerusalem have been rebuilt. Yet the people remain under foreign rule, and the full restoration promised by the prophets has not yet come. The prophets had spoken of a coming day when God would fully restore His people and His land under His Messianic King. The next four hundred years carried this growing hope. These centuries are sometimes called "the silent years" because no prophetic books were added to the Old Testament, yet the longing for God's promised restoration continued to grow.

This intertestamental period was turbulent. Alexander the Great conquered the region and brought Greek culture, language, and philosophy into the land, beginning a long period of Hellenization. Later, under Antiochus IV, the Seleucid rulers attempted to suppress Jewish faith and identity more aggressively. The temple was raided and defiled with what came to be remembered as "a desolating sacrilege," and God's people were forbidden to keep the Sabbath, practice circumcision, or remain faithful to the Law. This sparked Jewish resistance, most famously under Judas Maccabeus. The revolt eventually led to a period of Jewish self-rule under the Hasmoneans.

Rome eventually took control of Palestine in the first century BC. Herod the Great ruled the region with brutality and crushed any hint of uprising. He completed many major building projects and began the massive reconstruction and expansion of the Jerusalem temple. After Herod's death, his son Herod Antipas governed Galilee, the region where Jesus spent much of His ministry, while Judea and Samaria were given to Archelaus. Archelaus was another harsh and hated ruler, and Rome soon replaced him with direct Roman rule through governors. In AD 26, Pontius Pilate became governor of Judea.

By the time Jesus began His public ministry, Israel had lived for generations under foreign, pagan rule. This rule was financially and religiously oppressive. Memories of the temple's earlier desecration remained powerful, and many feared that pagan symbols and worship could once again be imposed upon them. Revolts arose in hopes of freedom, and revolutionary leaders appeared promising liberation, but Rome quickly crushed such movements. Some Jews gave in to the cultural pressures of the day and abandoned their customs and faith. Others, like the Pharisees, emphasized strict observance of the Law, separation from Gentile influence, and renewed dedication to covenant faithfulness.

Against this backdrop of political instability, cultural pressure, religious longing, and hope for God's intervention, Mark announces that the kingdom of God has arrived in Jesus—but in a way that challenges every expectation.

PURPOSE AND THEMES

As mentioned above, Mark probably wrote this Gospel in Rome during the AD 60s, when Christians were living under hostility and persecution and leaders such as Peter and Paul were being put to death. One important purpose of his account was to preserve the story of Jesus and Peter's eyewitness testimony for future generations. As a close companion of Peter, Mark likely drew heavily from his firsthand experiences and teaching, shaping them into a reliable and authentic witness to Jesus.

Given these circumstances, another purpose of the Gospel was to encourage suffering believers and help them persevere in the midst of persecution. Mark presents Jesus as the suffering Messiah who calls His disciples to a life of self-denial and sacrifice, yet remains faithful to them in hardship. This would have been deeply comforting to Christians facing trials. Their suffering was not a sign that God had lost control or forgotten them; it was the very path walked by the Messiah they followed. Jesus Himself endured rejection, suffering, and death, and He warned His followers that they too would face tribulation. At the same time, Mark proclaims the hope that Jesus has conquered death and will return for His people.

Mark's Gospel also had an important theological purpose. From its earliest years, the church had to proclaim faithfully who Jesus was amid misunderstanding, competing claims, and false teaching. Mark gives a clear and authoritative witness to the identity of Jesus. From its opening line, he proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. Throughout the narrative, Mark highlights Jesus' authority over nature, demons, sickness, sin, and death. Yet His suffering and death do not undermine His identity but reveal it. Jesus goes to the cross knowingly, willingly, and in obedience to the Father. At the cross, where He appears weakest, a Roman centurion sees Him die and confesses, "Surely this man was the Son of God."

These purposes come together in several themes that run throughout the Gospel.

KEY THEMES TO WATCH FOR IN MARK

As you read and study the Gospel of Mark, watch for these recurring themes and patterns. They are meant to guide observation, not replace careful reading.

- **Jesus' Identity** – Notice how Mark reveals who Jesus is primarily through His actions rather than long explanations. Pay attention to who recognizes Jesus and who misunderstands Him.
- **The Kingdom of God** – Observe how Jesus announces that God's kingdom has drawn near and what that kingdom looks like in practice—healing, forgiveness, authority, and

restoration rather than the political conquest many expected. Watch also how the blessings of God's kingdom reach Gentiles and others who had been treated as outsiders.

- **Suffering and the Way of the Cross** – Trace how suffering shapes Jesus' mission and the call to discipleship. Notice how often Jesus predicts His suffering and how this redefines what it means to follow Him.
- **Discipleship and Failure** – Pay attention to the disciples' repeated misunderstandings, fear, and failure—and what Jesus does (and does not do) in response.
- **Servant Leadership and True Greatness** – Watch how Jesus consistently redefines greatness by serving others. Notice the contrast between Jesus' self-giving actions and the disciples' repeated desire for status, power, and recognition.
- **Authority and Conflict** – Watch how Jesus' authority provokes opposition from religious leaders, demons, and political powers. Notice what kind of authority Jesus exercises and how it differs from other forms of power.
- **Hardness of Heart and Softness Toward God** – Notice how hardness of heart appears not only among Jesus' opponents but also among His disciples. Observe how repeated exposure to Jesus does not automatically lead to understanding, and how humility, dependence, and openness are often linked to truly seeing and hearing.
- **Faith, Fear, and Response** – Pay attention to how people respond to Jesus—with faith, fear, amazement, or rejection—and how Mark invites the reader to consider their own response.

GENRE

The Gospel of Mark appears second in the New Testament canon largely because the early church generally believed that Matthew had been written first and gave it particular prominence. For many centuries, Mark received less attention than Matthew, and Augustine even considered it a shortened version of Matthew. Most scholars today, however, believe that Mark was the earliest Gospel to be written. Many also agree that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a primary framework when composing their own Gospel accounts of Jesus' life and teaching.

As the earliest Gospel writer, Mark played a crucial role in the life of the church. He gathered Jesus' teaching and the early church's oral traditions into a unified narrative that is far more than a loose collection of stories. Through it, Mark proclaims the gospel of the suffering, self-giving Messiah and calls believers to follow Jesus in costly, faithful discipleship.

Scholars commonly classify the Gospels as a form of ancient biography, often called *bioi*, or "lives." Ancient biographies focused on revealing the character, significance, teaching, and way of life of the central figure. They were written not merely to preserve information but

also to present a person as worthy of attention, admiration, and imitation. They could defend the significance of a figure, preserve his teaching, correct misunderstandings, and encourage readers to embrace a particular way of life.

Ancient biographies differ significantly from modern ones. Modern biographies often give greater attention to psychological development, inner motivations, and precise chronological order. Ancient biographies usually followed the broad framework of a person's life, but they did not always arrange every event in exact chronological sequence. Events were often grouped together because of shared themes, locations, or theological purposes. Ancient biographies also often gave special attention to how a person approached death, since death was seen as a final revelation of character and purpose. This is especially important in Mark, where the identity and mission of Jesus are revealed most clearly through His suffering, death, and resurrection.

The Gospels are historical, but their purpose is not merely to record events. They present the true story of Jesus in order to reveal who He is, renew faith, shape obedience, and form communities of disciples. Ancient readers would have approached the Gospels expecting them to proclaim and defend the significance of Jesus and His teaching. They would expect to encounter Jesus as one worthy to be heard, trusted, obeyed, and followed.

The Gospels also differ from other ancient biographies in one crucial way: their central figure is not merely a past teacher whose life should be remembered. Jesus is the risen and living Lord, present with His people by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the Gospels do more than preserve the memory of Jesus; they present His authoritative voice to the church and call readers to respond with faith and obedience.

HOW TO READ THE GOSPELS

Ancient biographies were intended to be read as a whole, not as disconnected episodes. Each of the four Gospels was written for a particular audience and should be read on its own terms before being compared with the others. This means paying attention to each Gospel's structure, emphasis, and narrative flow rather than immediately harmonizing accounts. Each Gospel provides enough context and detail to understand the meaning of its passages on its own. Comparing accounts too quickly can sometimes distract from the unique purpose of the Gospel being read.

Remember that Mark was written for us, but not originally to us. Mark gave his first readers enough information to understand his message with the help of the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures they had—the Old Testament. Matthew, Luke, and John may not yet have been written or available to them, and most of the New Testament letters would not have been gathered together as they are for us today. For this reason, as we study Mark, we should first stay within Mark's Gospel and allow his words to answer the questions the text raises. If Mark answers a question, we should receive the answer he gives. If Mark does not answer a

question, then that question is not necessary for understanding what Mark is seeking to teach us in that passage. Our first task is to listen carefully to Mark's own witness to Jesus.

Individual stories, as well as the overarching narrative, include familiar elements such as setting, characters, and plot. Careful readers should observe how these elements function within each passage. As noted above, events in the Gospels are not always arranged in strict chronological order but are often grouped thematically. When accounts are placed next to one another, it is important to ask what links them—whether by contrast, illustration, or by further developing a shared idea. One distinctive feature of Mark's storytelling is what scholars often call the “Markan sandwich,” where one story is placed inside another so that the two interpret one another and highlight a central theological point. For example, in Mark 5 the account of the woman suffering from bleeding is placed inside the story of Jairus and his daughter.

Because Mark's Gospel moves quickly from scene to scene, readers should pay special attention when Mark slows down or includes particular details and descriptions, as these often signal what he wants to emphasize. Mark begins his Gospel by quoting the prophets—“as it is written in Isaiah”—which alerts readers to the importance of Old Testament allusions throughout the book. When Mark echoes or quotes the Old Testament, it is often helpful to look up these passages in their original context to see how Mark is presenting Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises.

Ancient biographies often presented characters as positive or negative examples, prompting readers to ask: What is this story teaching? How does this help me know Jesus more truly? What does this show about discipleship, faith, fear, hardness of heart, or obedience? These accounts were not written merely to convey factual information but to shape understanding, faith, and obedience. Each story is carefully chosen and arranged to reveal who Jesus is and what it means to follow Him.

OUTLINE

The general outline of the Gospel of Mark closely reflects the pattern of Peter's preaching about Jesus found in the book of Acts. In particular, Peter's sermon to Cornelius in Acts 10:34–43 follows a similar movement—from Jesus' ministry beginning in Galilee, to his death in Jerusalem, his resurrection, and the call to respond in faith.

- I. Title (1:1)
- II. Jesus' Ministry in Galilee – The Coming of the Kingdom
 - a. Preparation for Ministry (1:2 – 15)
 - b. The Kingdom of God comes in Authority (1:16 – 2:17)
 - c. Growing Opposition (2:18 – 3:6)
 - d. The True Family of Jesus (3:7 – 35)
 - e. Teaching: Parables of the Kingdom (4:1 – 34)
 - f. Faith and the Kingdom (4:35 – 6:6)

- g. The Good Shepherd (6:7 – 56)
 - h. True Cleanliness (7:1 – 30)
 - i. A Second Look: Seeing and Misunderstanding (7:31 – 8:26)
- III. On the Way to Jerusalem – The Way of the Cross
 - a. You are the Christ (8:27 – 9:13)
 - b. True Greatness and True Discipleship (9:14 – 10:16)
 - c. The Way of Salvation (10:17 – 52)
- IV. Confrontation in Jerusalem – The King on the Cross
 - a. Triumphal entry (11:1 – 25)
 - b. Conflict and Questions (11:27 – 12:44)
 - c. Teaching: The Last Days (13:1 – 37)
 - d. Two meals: Anointing and Covenant (14:1 – 31)
 - e. Betrayal, Arrest, and Abandonment (14:32 – 52)
 - f. Jesus on trial (14:53 – 15:20)
 - g. Jesus crucified and buried (15:21 – 47)
- V. The Gospel Proclaimed
 - a. Jesus risen (16:1 – 8)
 - b. Epilogue – later ending (16:9 – 20)

MAIN RESOURCES USED

These studies were written through personal study of Scripture in conversation with a range of trusted resources. The books below were especially helpful in shaping the background, interpretation, and theological reflection throughout this Mark section.

- Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Mark*.
- Beale, G. K., and D. A. Carson, eds. *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*.
- Brooks, James A. *Mark* (New American Commentary).
- Cole, R. Alan. *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries).
- deSilva, David A. *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation*.
- Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark* (Pillar New Testament Commentary).
- English, Donald. *The Message of Mark* (The Bible Speaks Today).
- Evans, Craig A. *Mark 8:27–16:20* (Word Biblical Commentary).
- Garland, David E. *Mark* (NIV Application Commentary).
- Geddert, Timothy J. *Mark* (Believers Church Bible Commentary).
- Gombis, Timothy G. *Mark* (Story of God Bible Commentary).
- Guelich, Robert A. *Mark 1–8:26* (Word Biblical Commentary).
- Keener, Craig S. *Mark 1–4: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (International Critical Commentary).
- Keener, Craig S. *Mark 5–9: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (International Critical Commentary).
- Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*.
- Lane, William L. *The Gospel According to Mark* (New International Commentary on the New Testament).
- Marshall, I. Howard, et al. *New Bible Dictionary*.

- Osborne, Grant R. *Mark* (Teach the Text Commentary Series).
- Ryken, Leland, et al. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*.
- Schnabel, Eckhard J. *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries).
- Stein, Robert H. *Mark* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament).
- Strauss, Mark L. *Mark* (The Expositor's Bible Commentary).
- Tan, Kim Huat. *Mark* (New Covenant Commentary Series).
- Wenham, David, and Steve Walton. *Exploring the New Testament: A Guide to the Gospels and Acts*.
- Wright, N. T. *Mark for Everyone*.