

Gospel of Mark Introduction and Chapter 1:1-39

Introductory Comments

1. The gospel of Mark presents the ministry of Jesus from his baptism by John the Baptist to his death and burial and the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb. Unlike Matthew and Luke, there is no miraculous birth story, and unlike John there is no understanding of divine pre-existence. Instead, Jesus is presented in the form of an epic hero – he is a man of action, a dispeller of demons, a healer, and a worker of miracles. He is also called “Son of God,” but, curiously, tries to keep his messianic nature a secret. Throughout the gospel, the disciples fail to understand his ministry and his instructions, which gives the author of Mark a chance to repeat or explain things for the benefit of the audience/reader. Mark's original ending (16:8) involves the discovery of the empty tomb, a promise to meet again in Galilee, and an unheeded instruction to spread the good news of the resurrection. Given the apparent lack of resolution, extra verses were added at a later date (16:9-20) to tie things up and bring Mark more into alignment with Matthew and Luke. I contend, however (in agreement with most modern scholarship) that Mark's peculiar ending in 16:8 is intentional and achieves a specific, dramatic effect. More on that later...
2. *Authorship and Date:* Like all of the gospels, the Gospel of Mark is anonymous. Most scholars date it to just after 70 CE, when Titus (a Roman general and subsequently emperor) destroyed the temple after a protracted siege of Jerusalem. Mark was written in koine Greek, in a simple, conversational style likely intended for a gentile audience. Given some of its Latin colloquialisms and its pro-Roman polemic (i.e. Pilate doesn't want to kill Jesus and the Centurion at the cross confesses Jesus as “Son of God”) Mark was probably composed in Rome, although some argue that it was written in either Galilee or Antioch (third-largest city in the Roman Empire, located in northern Syria). Early Christian tradition attributed authorship to the John Mark mentioned in Acts, but such claims have been generally rejected.
3. *Genre:* The consensus among modern scholars is that all of the gospels are a form of ancient biography. Ancient biographies were concerned with providing examples for readers to emulate while preserving and promoting the subject's reputation and

memory, and also included morals, rhetoric, and propaganda in their works. As such, they are not (and were not intended to be) historical documents the way modern readers understand that term. Gospels are trying to make an argument, and of greater import for understanding is not the “facts” they may tell us or what we think about them, but how what they say motivates us to “act.”

4. *Parabolic Hinge*: Mark utilizes two central parables to convey his message and orient readers as to what is going on. Those parables are: the Sower (Mk 4) and the Tenants (Mk 12). Much of the Gospel is an extended reflection on the Sower; the interactions of Jesus throughout his ministry can be seen as illustrations of the varieties of soil that are out there and how particular people/soil can either enhance or foil his message. Also, the parable of the Tenants enables the reader to fully understand the nature of Jesus’ mission (even where the disciples consistently miss it) and it points us toward an inevitable choice which must be made by any follower of Jesus. What is that choice? You’ll have to wait and see...

Read Mark 1:1-39

Questions for Discussion

1. **Mark's story starts with, "The beginning of..." What does this language make you think of? What do you think Mark means by saying "The *beginning* of the Good news of Jesus Christ..."?**
2. **If you were to write "the gospel according to you," how would you begin the story of Jesus? Why do you think Mark starts it the way he does?**
3. **For background on John the Baptist, read Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1. What is significant about these passages relating to John? They identify John with the second coming of Elijah, which portends God's saving action. They establish Mark's intention to locate Jesus within the history of Jewish prophets.**
4. **If John the Baptist would show up today, what would happen? What always happens – he'd be viewed as a crazy man.**

5. What is the significance of the heavens tearing and the dove and the voice? (1:9-11) *Isaiah 64 uses similar imagery to reflect the saving action of God as Israel was about to be set free from exile. The heavens tearing open portends God's saving action.*

6. What happened to John the Baptist? (1:14) What happened to Jesus? (1:12-13)

7. Why do you think Simon, Andrew, James, and John "immediately" left everything and followed Jesus? (1:16-20)
Following Jesus is an act that requires full commitment and participation. You cannot be "one foot in, one foot out."

8. What does it mean when the people say that Jesus taught "with authority"? (1:22 and 27). *What Jesus says, happens. His teaching is self-authenticating. What is the irony of the authority that Jesus has? He can control unclean and demonic spirits, but he can't control his own disciples.*

9. Who makes the more profound confession of who Jesus is: the people or the unclean spirit? (1:21-27) *The demonic spirits see and name more clearly who Jesus really is.*

10. Why does Jesus not let the demons speak and declare who he is? (1:34) *Throughout the gospel, Jesus tries to maintain the Messianic secret. While it plays a role in the narrative, it is likely a nod to the reader/hearer, so that they stay engaged with the story to discover when the right time to share the secret might be.*

11. What might be seen as offensive about Jesus' healing of the man in the synagogue and Simon's mother-in-law? *Jesus healed an unclean man, and touched and healed a woman on the sabbath. Mark is saying that there are no limits to Jesus' power and authority. What is the effect of Jesus' healing? Healing restores someone to their social position in the community. Notice how when Jesus heals, the effect is that someone is allowed to become part of the social fabric again.*

12. What surprises you most about Jesus' praying: the time? the place? that the disciples didn't know where he was? that Jesus had to pray at all? (1:35-39)

For next session, read Mark 1:40-2:28