

Appendix 1: The Gospel of Mark—Introductory Matters

AUTHORSHIP

The title “according to Mark” (*Kata Markon*) was not originally part of the manuscript but was added later (before A.D. 125). Yet the unanimous testimony from early church fathers is that Mark, the close associate of Peter, was the author. The earliest testimony of this comes from Papias, writing about A.D. 110 and quoting “John the Elder” (presumably the Apostle John). The following information from Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor until about A.D. 130, was preserved by the ancient church historian Eusebius, writing in A.D. 325 (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15):

It is in the following words: “This also the presbyter said: Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not indeed in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, he followed Peter, who adapted his teaching to the needs of his hearers, but with no intention of giving a connected account of the Lord’s discourses, so that Mark committed no error while he thus wrote some things as he remembered them. For he was careful of one thing, not to omit any of the things which he had heard, and not to state any of them falsely.” These things are related by Papias concerning Mark.

This evidence was subsequently confirmed by the testimony of Justin Martyr, the *Anti-Marcionite Prologue* to Mark, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and the writings of both Clement of Alexandria and Origin (the latter two cited by Eusebius). All but the last were from the second century A.D.

As to the identity of this “Mark,” most interpreters conclude that this was none other than John Mark, mentioned some ten times in the NT (Acts 12:12, 25; 13:5, 13; 15:37, 39; Col 4:10; 2 Tim 4:11; Phm. 24; 1 Pet 5:13). It appears that John Mark had been a resident of Jerusalem at one time (note Acts 12:11-12), had become one of the early Hebrew Christians (though there is a question whether this was before or after the resurrection—cf. Mk 14:51-52), was a cousin to Barnabas (Col 4:10), and had been closely associated with both Paul (on the first missionary journey) and Peter (note 1 Pet 5:13). His close association with Peter would naturally explain his access to numerous details from Jesus’ life and ministry that enabled him to write this gospel account. Although he abandoned Barnabas and Paul on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:13)—which later became the source of conflict between the two apostles (Acts 15:36-41)—Paul eventually forgave and commended John Mark to others (Col 4:10; 2 Tim 4:11). Yet Barnabas, once he and Paul had separated, chose Mark to serve alongside him in ministry.

If “Babylon” mentioned in 1 Pet 5:13 is really a *veiled reference* to Rome (as most conservative scholars believe), this would imply that Mark had been in Rome with Peter and closely associated with him at the latter part of his life:

¹³ She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings, and *so does* my son, Mark.

According to the ancient church historian Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 2.25.5-8), both Paul and Peter were martyred in Rome during the reign of Emperor Nero. It would have been quite natural for Peter to have left behind an account of Christ’s life prior to his own martyrdom, and this he was able to do with the help of his younger companion. Hence, Mark’s close link to Peter provided a firsthand resource for much of Mark’s information, not to mention that Mark would have personally heard many of Peter’s sermons. This would help account for the recollection of unusual detail in the narratives that suggests they were derived from such an “inner-circle” eyewitness as Peter (cf. 1:16–20, 29–31, 35–38; 5:21–24, 35–43; 6:39, 53–54; 9:14–15; 10:32, 46; 14:32–42). Mark’s gospel also vividly records Peter’s words and deeds (cf. 8:29, 32–33; 9:5–6; 10:28–30; 14:29–31, 66–72). That the influence of Peter lies behind much of Mark’s account is also supported by the way in which the twelve are pictured (more so than in any other gospel account) as cowardly, spiritually blind, and hard of heart. Only an apostle would have been able to have been so critical of the twelve. Not surprisingly Peter figures prominently in Mark, and some of the references are most naturally explained as coming from Peter (for example, the mention of Peter “remembering” in Mk 11:21 and 14:72).

In addition to the contributions by Peter, there is what Mark himself would have known from his Jewish origins in Judea and his firsthand experiences with the early Jerusalem church, not to mention what he would have learned in serving alongside Paul and Barnabas. Also, he would have been quite familiar with the geography of Palestine at that time, as well as Jewish customs, rituals, and festivals. Finally, though Mark himself was not regarded as an apostle, Peter’s authority in the early church as one of the chief apostles—and Mark’s known association with him—helped to give Mark’s gospel account immediate credibility in the early church as inspired Scripture.

DATE

The book itself makes no explicit statement regarding the date it was written. Proposals have been made for as early as the A.D. 40s to as late as the 70s, though most contemporary scholars tend to date Mark in the mid to late 60s. There is some evidence that Peter was in Rome in the mid-50s, making it possible to date Mark that early. [Peter was probably in Corinth before A.D. 55-56 when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians (see 1 Cor 1:12; 3:22), and in Rome about 63 (the probable date of 1 Peter)].

Much of the debate concerns whether Mark wrote his account before or after Peter's death. Irenaeus's statement could be interpreted as implying Mark wrote after Peter's death: "After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what *had been preached* by Peter" (*Against Heresies*, 3.1.2). Yet Clement of Alexandria implied that Mark wrote before Peter's death:

When Peter had preached the word publicly in Rome and announced the gospel by the Spirit, those present, of whom there were many, besought Mark, since for a long time he had followed him and remembered what had been said, to record his words. Mark did this, and communicated the gospel to those who made request of him. When Peter knew of it, he neither actively prevented nor encouraged the undertaking.

[Recorded by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.6-7].

Nero's famous persecution of Christians in Rome took place in A.D. 65, and tradition records that both Paul and Peter were martyred during Nero's reign (r. A.D. 54-68), probably around A.D. 67-68. Mark records Jesus' prophecy of Jerusalem's destruction (Mark 13), but the fact that he makes no comment about the fulfillment of this at the hands of the Romans in A.D. 70 suggests that his gospel account was written prior to A.D. 70. Hence all we can safely say is that Mark wrote his gospel account sometime during the period A.D. 55-69.

RELATIONSHIP OF MARK TO THE OTHER SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

One of the most puzzling challenges today for biblical scholars is the relationship of Mark to Matthew and Luke. While each of these accounts has its own peculiarities and emphases, there are a great many places where they seem to draw upon the same source(s). Related to this is the question of which account came first and whether the subsequent gospels quoted or relied upon the earlier one(s). Almost all the material in Mark's gospel is also found in Matthew and Luke (except for three pericopes: Mk 4:26-29; 7:31-37; and 8:22-26). Historically the Christian church relied primarily on Matthew's account and assumed it was the first of the gospels to have been written. Yet by the early nineteenth century, a radical shift on the value of Mark occurred, and scholars began to hypothesize that Mark was the *earliest* of the gospels and the primary source for Matthew and Luke. This theory of Markan priority—though not uncontested—continues to be held by the majority of scholars today. Yet although such questions as the order of the gospels and their relationship to one another certainly make for interesting study, the more critical issue is that of the spiritual lessons that Mark's gospel has to teach us.

PLACE OF ORIGIN AND DESTINATION

There is near unanimous agreement that Mark wrote his gospel from Rome, and this view has the support of early tradition. According to the anti-Marcionite prologue to Mark (late second century A.D.), Mark wrote his gospel "in the regions of Italy." This is also the view of Irenaeus (*Against Heresies*, 3.1.2) and Clement of Alexandria (see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*

6.14.6-7). Naturally if Mark had relied heavily upon Peter for his information, a Roman origin would be quite sensible (1 Pet 5:13).

One of the primary evidences for a Roman origin is the considerable number of *Latinisms* in the gospel. For example, Mark explains that the widow's two copper coins equal a *kodrantēs*, a Roman coin (12:42), and notes the "courtyard" (*aulē*) as being a *praitōrion*, a distinctively Roman/Latin name (15:16). The fact that Jewish customs are explained (cf. 7:3–4; 14:12; 15:42), and Aramaic expressions are translated into Greek (cf. 3:17; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 9:43; 10:46; 14:36; 15:22, 34) would be expected, given a Gentile audience. The many allusions to suffering in Mark's gospel would have been particularly appropriate if it had been written under the shadow of persecutions of the church in Rome (particularly if it was written in the mid-60s during Nero's Christian persecutions). The fact that at a climactic point in the gospel a Gentile Roman centurion unwittingly proclaimed Jesus' deity (cf. 15:39) would certainly have been of interest to Roman readers, despite the fact Matthew and Luke also include this note.

If Mark indeed wrote his gospel account in Rome, the simplest inference is that he probably wrote to Roman Christians. Also of interest is the fact that Mark, after writing his gospel in Rome, may have been the first to have brought a gospel account to Egypt. In Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 2.16.1) we read, "They say that this Mark was the first that was sent to Egypt, and that he proclaimed the gospel which he had written, and first established churches in Alexandria."

PRIMARY THEMES AND PURPOSE

Mark's account is the shortest of the four gospels. Yet one characteristic of Mark is the fast-moving action of the narrative (signaled by the 40 occurrences of the word "immediately"). There is a strong focus on the activity of Jesus and particularly His working of miracles, His power over nature, and His authority over the demonic realm. Following Jesus' stilling of the storm, Mark notes the reaction of the disciples in the boat with Him, "They became very much afraid and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?'" Also of interest is the extended treatment that Mark gives to Jesus' march to Jerusalem followed by the passion account (8:31–15:47). Hence, Mark presents a balanced Christology: His miracle-working power and authority (the focus of 1:14–8:30) is set beside His suffering and death (8:31–15:47). The One identified as "the Son of God" in Mk 1:1 is the same One of whom the Roman centurion confesses, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" By this arrangement, Mark wants his readers to see not only that Jesus is "the Son of God," but that He is the *suffering* Son of God. In fact, He is the fulfillment of Isaiah's suffering servant who atones for the sins of others (Isa 53:5, 10). The way to the kingdom is through suffering and being a humble servant to others, and the Lord Jesus is the quintessential example of this (Mk 10:45)!

At the same time, Mark's gospel puts a heavy emphasis upon the demands of discipleship. The twelve are rebuked for their lack of understanding, the shallowness of their faith, and their hardness of heart (6:52; 7:18; 8:17-18; 16:11, 14). This was partly because Jesus did not exactly meet their expectations of what they thought Messiah would be and do, for they were expecting that He would come as a conquering king to establish and reign over His kingdom. Jesus, on the other hand, came more in the mold of a suffering servant. The disciples struggled to grasp and master the spiritual lessons Jesus sought to teach them about how His kingdom citizens were to live and the faith they were to have in Him as their Lord. Yet despite their sluggishness, the Lord Jesus never gave up on them but patiently worked with them and sought to develop them into faithful disciples who would be utterly committed to Him and His kingdom. The lessons on discipleship are many, culminating with Jesus' challenge in Mk 8:34, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me."

Hence, we might say that the gospel of Mark has two main purposes: (1) to answer the question of "who is Jesus?" and (2) what is He calling His disciples to be and to do? Jesus is nothing less than the Lord of glory who has humbled Himself as a servant to suffer and die for the sins of mankind, and those who would be His disciples must make a total surrender to Him . . . even to the point of being willing to be martyred for His sake. Those who have learned these two great lessons can be said to have learned what it means to *Follow the Master*.

