

Unit 2 Introduction

The Gospel of Mark

Meeting new people involves introductions, and these can be uncertain and awkward. Introductions are necessary and affect whatever impressions follow. As the truism states: “First impressions are important.” Initial impressions of others are formed by our previous experiences in life. However, through time and personal involvement, enriched understandings of others may occur as their life stories, interests, challenges, and goals become more fully known.

Meeting a literary work is similar to meeting a new person. While reading a work for the first time, first impressions are formed and shaped by previous life experiences. Continued readings and study of the work encourage a deeper and enriched appreciation than originally held. This is true with the Gospel of Mark and other works of the Old and New Testaments as readers and hearers encounter the life stories, interests, challenges, and goals of others.

Mark’s Place Among the Gospels

Of the 27 writings in the New Testament, four are called gospels coming from the Greek word meaning “good news.” These documents present the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of the central figure of the Christian faith—Jesus Christ. If identical accounts relating to Jesus are expected, disappointment follows, particularly as one compares Matthew, Mark, and Luke (the Synoptics) with John. How these four works specifically relate to one another is a matter of debate, but most scholars agree that Mark was written first. Various observations have led to this understanding. For example, Mark is the shortest gospel with most of its content appearing in Matthew and Luke, and it provides the basic outline for Jesus’ story in Matthew and Luke. After presenting additional oral traditions and teachings relating to Jesus’ life, these gospels return to Mark’s ordering of events.

Key Questions Concerning Mark

Given that Mark was likely the first to write an account of Jesus’ life, introductory questions arise. Who was Mark? When, to whom, and why was he writing?

Concerning authorship, as many people today share the same name, such was the case in the ancient world. Another complicating factor is that the original manuscripts of the gospels were without titles. These were provided in the second century based on traditions within the church. According to tradition, Mark or John Mark was a traveling companion of Paul on his first missionary journey to Cyprus and eastern Asia Minor and later served as an interpreter of Peter in

Rome. While Mark was not an eyewitness to Jesus, he was closely associated with one who was. Well-known figures in the early church such as Papias, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen all give affirmation to this. In AD 180, Irenaeus declares: “After their departure, Mark the disciple and interpreter of Peter also did hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter.”

Biblical scholars often cite the time of Mark’s composition around AD 66-70, with clues largely found in Mark 13. While in Jerusalem, one of Jesus’ disciples was overwhelmed with the beauty of the temple complex. In response, Jesus indicated a future time when “Not one stone here will be left on another, every one will be thrown down” (13:2). Less than 40 years later in AD 70, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. With the temple’s destruction, Judaism was forever changed. Mark’s gospel was likely written when this transformative event was near, with some scholars locating the place of Mark’s composition in Palestine. Traditionally, another scenario has been dominant involving Christians in Rome.

While AD 70 was a tumultuous period for the Jews in Jerusalem, this was also the case for Christ’s followers in Rome in the 60s of the first century AD during the reign of the Roman emperor Nero. These followers are described as being “covered with wild beasts’ skins and torn to death by dogs” or being “fastened on crosses” and “burned to serve as lamps at light.” This is the description of events by the Roman historian Tacitus. Nero found himself in the precarious position of being both emperor of the Roman empire and primary suspect (rightly or wrongly) in the origin of a fierce fire that had destroyed much of the city of Rome itself. Nero was already feared by his people. To dispel any suspicions concerning his role in this tragic event, he followed a well-traveled path by identifying a group of people that could, for the Romans, be believably charged with such a violent crime. According to Tacitus, this choice was not difficult because among the citizens of Rome was, they believed, “a class of men loathed for their vices, whom the crowd called Christians.” Although untrue, these Christians were thought to hate humanity and be capable of arson or any other unspecified crimes. Those in Rome who believed and/or propagated these falsehoods would feel these people to be deserving of any punishment to be endured.

Most scholars believe Mark’s gospel was written to such a persecuted community. Supportive of Gentiles being primary recipients, Mark explained Jewish customs and practices (Mark 7:3-4) which would be unnecessary for Christians with a Jewish heritage. He also translated Aramaic expressions such as *Talitha koum* (“Little girl, I say to you get up!” Mark 5:41) and *Abba* (“Father,” Mark 14:36). Aramaic

was the common language of the Jews in Palestine at this time. In addition, Mark used Latin terms such as “Legion” (5:9) from *legio* and “palace” (15:16) from *Praetorium*.

Suffering or being persecuted for one’s faith was common to Christians with Jewish backgrounds; however, this was not generally the case for Gentile followers of Christ. In terms of religious ideas and practices, the Greco-Roman world was marked by diversity and toleration. Although the concept of false belief or heresy was largely absent, Christians were not accepting of all the religious systems comprising their environment. As believers, they affirmed that there was only one God in a world in which it was believed there were many.

Jesus’ Identity in Mark

Mark’s story of Jesus encouraged those who were not just metaphorically being instructed that to follow Christ would involve taking up one’s cross (8:34). Who then was this Jesus in whom they had placed their trust? Mark’s primary answer was clear. In verse 1, he began his work with the words: “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.”

The title Messiah came from a Hebrew word translated “anointed one.” In the Old Testament, certain people were set apart for God’s use through an anointing with oil. This practice was associated with priests (Leviticus 4:3), prophets (1 Kings 19:16), and kings (1 Samuel 24:6). Within Judaism, a hope arose for an anointed one, a king in the line of David (2 Samuel 7:12-16) whose kingdom would last forever (Psalm 89:3-4; Jeremiah 23:5-6). In Mark, Jesus, as Son of David, was the realization of this hope.

The idea of a divine man or son of God was not absent in the ancient world, as exemplified in the pharaohs of Egypt who were viewed as exhibiting divine rule. Rome was known for its emperor cult involving worship of its political leader. In the Old Testament, sonship was identified with the concept of obedience. Kings in the line of David (2 Samuel 7:14-17) and the people of Israel were depicted as sons or children of God (Isaiah 1:2). While retaining the association of sonship and obedience, Mark expanded the concept of sonship in relationship to Jesus. The exact designation of Jesus as “Son of God” (1:1) does not appear in all ancient manuscripts. However, this understanding of Jesus is presented elsewhere through titles such as “my Son, the Beloved” (1:11), “Son of the Most High God” (5:7), “the Son of the Blessed One” (14:61), and “God’s Son” (15:39). Jesus most clearly demonstrated His Sonship in His

obedient death on the cross. Scholars note that the cross of Christ appears to lie at the heart of Mark’s theology.

While depicted as the Messiah (or Christ) and as the Son of God, Jesus’ primary self-designation is that of Son of Man (8:31). In Aramaic, reference to a son of man often signified a person or a human being. The phrase itself also appeared with reference to a mysterious figure in Daniel 7:13-14 described as “coming with the clouds of heaven,” and being granted “authority, glory, and sovereign power.” While much debate concerns this figure in Daniel, Mark appears to fill this image with new meaning. The title Son of Man brought together two understandings of Jesus. He was fully human and divine.

Mark’s Narration of Jesus’ Story

Beginning with Jesus’ public ministry following His baptism by John (1:9-11) and ending with an angel’s proclamation at Jesus’ tomb that “He has risen! He is not here” (16:6), Mark’s telling of Jesus’ story provided a solid foundation for hope during troubled times. His rule or reign had been inaugurated and was expanding (4:30-32). He demonstrated mastery over nature and all human situations. He calmed violent life-threatening storms (4:35-41), raised the dead (5:41-42), healed the sick (5:35-42), fed thousands of people with five loaves and two fish (6:30-44), walked on water (6:45-52), and cast out demons (7:24-30). Having been confessed as Messiah by Peter (8:29), Jesus as the Son of Man spoke to His disciples of His upcoming suffering, rejection by religious leaders, crucifixion, and resurrection (8:31). Those who followed Jesus could expect suffering as well (8:34-36). Following Jesus’ troubling and hopeful words, He was depicted in heavenly glory conversing with Moses and Elijah (9:2-12). At this time, a voice from heaven declared His sonship (1:11). He was loved and was given all authority (9:7).

A formal study of Mark’s gospel is not required to appreciate his story of Jesus. However, moving beyond first impressions through examination of introductory issues reveals the difficult and dangerous challenges which Mark’s recipients faced. Moving beyond first impressions shows the depth of commitment to which they were called. Although the precise nature of the challenges and dangers in following Jesus changes with every generation, no less commitment is required for those who would call Jesus Lord today.

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