

A LOOK AT A BOOK: MARK

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Until the period of modern criticism this gospel was the most neglected of all. Ancient commentaries on it are very scarce and it clearly made little appeal. It was entirely overshadowed by the more stately Matthew, and since it was commonly regarded as no more than an abstract of Matthew, this is not surprising. This opinion, however, was probably not the earliest view, since tradition closely linked it with Peter's preaching. Most likely, other gospel writers used Mark as a source.

I. Characteristics

A gospel of action

Immediately (1:29, 42; 2:12; 6:45; 9:24)

A glance at the contents of this gospel at once shows that for the writer movement is more fascinating than discourse. The vividness of the style gives the impression of a quickly-moving drama with the cross as its climax.

A gospel of detail

Examples of Mark's detail might be multiplied, but the following will be sufficient to illustrate it. Mark describes the breaking up of the roof of the house to let down the palsied man (Mark 2:4); the sleeping Jesus with his head on the pillow in the stern of the boat in a furious storm (4:37-38); the arrangement of the crowds in groups like an orderly vegetable patch on the green grass (6:39f.); the process by which Jesus healed the deaf and dumb man, i.e. by putting fingers into his ears and touching his tongue (7:33); the gradual restoration of sight to the blind man (8:23ff.); and Peter sitting with the servants warming himself by the fire in the high priest's palace (14:54). Such details as these are most naturally explained as being derived from eyewitnesses.

Mark's candor

Closely allied with the vividness mentioned is Mark's view of the disciples. He makes no attempt to cast a halo around them. He notes their lack of understanding on several occasions (4:13; 6:52; 8:17, 21; 9:10, 32). The attitude of Jesus' relatives is described with similar frankness; they considered him to be mad (3:21). Expressions of amazement on the part of Jesus' hearers are also included (1:27; 10:24, 32). Mark is equally unreserved in his description of the human reactions of Jesus. The emotions of compassion, severity, anger, sorrow, tenderness and love

are all in turn attributed to him (1:41 [compassion], 43 [stern]; 3:5 [anger]; 8:12 [sigh], 33 [rebuke]; 10:14 [indignant], 16 [tender], 21[love]). There is no doubt that this is a gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, as well as the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (1:1).

Mark's portrait of Jesus

Son of God (1:1) – Since the gospel describes Jesus by means of this title in its opening words, it must be assumed that it has some defining influence over the subsequent narrative, especially as the title occurs five times elsewhere in this gospel. This view of Christ is not developed in a doctrinal sense, but it is worked out in his divine activity. He possesses power over all types of illness and casts out evil spirits with irresistible authority. He stills storms with a word and thus shows his power over nature. When he dies, a pagan Roman centurion describes him as God's son (15:39).

Son of Man – It should be noted that all the evangelists record sayings in which the title occurs, always on the lips of Jesus himself. The problem is whether Jesus was referring to himself or to someone else, and whether he was using the title in a Messianic sense. Mark often records Jesus urging silence upon people who have observed his powerful works. It is certainly undeniable that Jesus did not make any open declaration of his Messiahship (messianic secret, 1:25, 34; 3:12; 9:30; 9:9). Jesus could not accept the term “messiah” for two reasons: (1) the Jewish messiah was a political figure destined to liberate God's people; (2) the Jewish messiah lacked the concept of divinity.

The Redeemer – In one of Mark's Son of Man passages, Jesus declares that his purpose was to be a ransom for many (10:45). Mark devotes a greater proportion of space to the passion narrative than any other of the gospels. Such an outlook is in full accord with the emphasis on the cross in primitive Christianity, as the early preaching and theology conclusively show (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:3ff; Philippians 2:5-11; 1 Peter 2:21ff.).

The book predicts the passion three times (8:31; 9:31; 10:33f.).

His followers must also expect to suffer (8:34ff.; 10:38f.). Perhaps the sign he was writing to a persecuted church in Rome.

The Healer – Mark includes a number of incidents in which Jesus is described as performing miracles of healing. This is clearly an important part of his total portrait.

II. Purpose

In his opening sentence, Mark declares his intention of writing what he calls a “gospel,” an account of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The cross and resurrection were the central features of the Christian gospel. He omits birth narratives and accounts of Jesus’ early life. The reader is at once confronted with Jesus, the Son of God, as a historical fact. Mark assumes his readers will know at once to whom he is referring.

III. Destination

It is impossible to decide the original destination of this gospel with any certainty. Yet there are various indications which point to Gentile readers and some further evidence which supports the view that these Gentiles were in Rome.

Mark explains Palestinian customs. The Pharisaic custom of hand-washing and the general traditions regarding purification are explained in 7:3-4, and this would not have been necessary for a Jewish audience.

Some Aramaic expressions, which are retained in the text, are interpreted into Greek, and this seems to be evidence that Mark’s readers would not otherwise have understood them. This point seems to rule out any possibility of Aramaic-speaking readers.

Latin expressions may be indications of Roman destination: legion (5:9, 15); denarius (6:37); census (12:14), Praetorium (15:16). Latin was the language of Rome.

There is a strong tradition that Mark wrote in Rome for Roman readers. Papias says that Mark was Peter’s interpreter, and since traditionally Peter was martyred in Rome, this would mean that Mark may have spent some time there, too.

Irenaeus also implies that Mark wrote after the deaths of Peter and Paul in Rome. On the other hand, Clement of Alexandria states that Mark wrote while Peter was still preaching the gospel in Rome. Although the traditions over dating conflict, those regarding the place of origin coincide.

The reference to Mark in 1 Peter 5:13 suggests Mark’s connection with Rome, if “Babylon” is to be understood in this metaphorical sense.

There would seem to be considerable justification for the view that Mark is a Roman gospel designed for a Roman audience.

IV. Structure

Mark was not intending to write a consecutive biography of Jesus. A problem, therefore, arises concerning what principle he adopted in the structure of his gospel. After an introduction, the narrative moves into the Galilean ministry (1:14-6:13), followed by an account of Jesus' work outside Galilee (6:14-8:26), the journey to Jerusalem (8:27-10:52), and the final ministry with its climax in the passion and resurrection of Jesus (11-16).

V. Authorship

So strong is the early Christian testimony that Mark was the author of this gospel that we need do little more than mention this attestation. Papias, Irenaeus, probably the Muratorian Canon, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Jerome all refer to Mark's authorship of the gospel. Moreover, all of them connect Mark with Peter in the production of the gospel.

Is the Mark of the gospel the Mark of Acts? "John Mark" is mentioned three times in the New Testament (Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37) and "Mark" several times (Acts 15:39; Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24; 1 Peter 5:13). In the Colossian reference he is identified as the cousin of Barnabas, which clearly equates him with the John Mark of Acts. It is very probable that his mother was a person of some substance since, according to Acts 12, her house was regarded as a meeting place for many members of the primitive church (cf. 12:12). Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas on part of the first missionary journey, although he drew against him Paul's anger when he forsook the party before the work was done. In spite of the fact that dissension rose between Paul and Barnabas over him, a reconciliation must have been effected later, since he was with Paul when the epistles to the Colossians and Philemon were written (Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11, "He is useful to me."). At a still later date, he was found in company with the apostle Peter in Rome (1 Peter 5:13), and this association with both Peter and Paul is a most significant feature about him.

The connection with Peter

The statement of Papias, preserved by Eusebius, is as follows: "Mark indeed, since he was the interpreter of Peter, wrote accurately, but not in order, the things

either said or done by the Lord as much as he remembered. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed Him, but afterwards, as I have said, [heard and followed] Peter, who fitted his discourses to the needs [of his hearers] but not as if making a narrative of the Lord's sayings; consequently, Mark, writing some things just as he remembered, erred in nothing; for he was careful of one thing – not to omit anything of the things he had heard or to falsify anything in them.” Papias clearly regarded Peter's preaching as the main source of Mark's witness. The relationship between Mark and Peter must be determined by the meaning of the word “translator/interpreter.”

Attitude toward Peter is painfully honest. Peter is shown as disgraced or rebuked in most Markan references to him (8:27ff.; 9:5f.; 10:28ff.; 14:29ff.). Peter's own confessions of failure may account for these episodes. His name is significantly attached to certain parts of the record where the other gospels only give a vague reference to “they” or one of the disciples (1:36; 11:21; 16:7).

VI. Date

It has already been noted that the early tradition is conflicting, one tradition maintaining that Mark wrote subsequent to the death of Peter and another holding that it was in Peter's lifetime that Mark's gospel was produced (reported by Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria respectively). Since both of these traditions were early and were almost contemporaneous, there must have been uncertainty about the origin of Mark. In spite of the confidence of the majority of scholars that Mark must be dated AD 65-70, it is by no means impossible to maintain an earlier date. In fact, Harnack maintained a date before AD 60 and Allen a date before AD 50.

VII. The ending of the gospel

The concluding chapter of the gospel presents a problem. The majority of manuscripts contain the full twenty verses, but most of these are late. The earliest Christian writings which show acquaintance with Mark assume their genuineness. And yet there is some important early evidence which suggests that the original ended at 16:8.

The two Alexandrian Uncial MSS, Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, end with 16:8. The following deduction may be made from this evidence: (1) the longer ending must have been attached to the gospel at a very early period in its history; and (2) there are some differences in the Greek style between 16:9-20 and the rest of the gospel.

But assuming that the evidence points most strongly to 16:8 being the original ending, can it be conceived that Mark would have intended to terminate his book with the words “for they were all afraid”?

VIII. Language

The Greek of Mark’s gospel is not of a literary type. It is rather the everyday spoken language.

Some language and ideas taken from Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Intervarsity Press: 1961) as well as multiple sources and Dr. Batson’s own insights.