

The Gospel of Mark

Introduction

The Gospel of Mark was written by a disciple of the Apostle Peter sometime in the 60's AD to encourage a persecuted group of Christians in Italy, most likely Rome.

The Author

The tradition of the Church holds that Mark was the writer of the second Gospel. The Gospel itself does not name an author. However, the earliest testimonies attribute its authorship to Mark who was a ministry companion of the Apostles and a disciple and assistant to the Apostle Peter.

Some of the earliest Christian writers indicate that Mark wrote the second gospel. The first church father to mention Mark as author was Papias, the bishop in Asia Minor around A.D. 130.

There are no existing copies of Papias' writings however we know some of what he said from quotes in other works such as the historian Eusebius, who wrote around A.D. 325. In his work *Ecclesiastical History* Book 3 chapter 39 section 15, Eusebius quotes Papias:

Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not 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.

By "interpreter", he likely means Mark translated Peter's Aramaic speech into Greek or Latin. In this role he would have had an intimate knowledge of the content of Peter's stories and experience with Jesus.

Two other sources in the early church also affirmed that Mark wrote this gospel. For example, the *Anti-Marcionite Prologue* to the second gospel, written around A.D. 170, asserts Mark's authorship. The church father Irenaeus, who wrote around A.D. 177, also affirmed this view. And in addition to this, the earliest Greek manuscripts that give a title to this book call it "According to Mark."

We first hear of Mark in Acts 12:12. We learn that he was the son of a woman named Mary who lived in Jerusalem. Peter flees to their house after being released from Herod's prison by an angel. We are later told that Mark joins the company of Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. (Acts 12:25) Barnabas was Mark's cousin. (Col. 4:10) However, Mark deserts them in the middle of their trip and returned to Jerusalem. This became a point of contention later for Paul and Barnabas when Paul would not allow Mark to rejoin them because of the desertion. Barnabas and Mark then departed to minister in Cyprus, and Paul chose Silas to join him in ministry to Syria and Cilicia. (Acts 15:36-41)

At some point later, Mark joined Peter in ministering from Rome (1 Peter 5:1). Peter calls him "my son". Also at some point later, Mark regained the confidence of Paul by ministering to him while he was imprisoned. Paul says, "He was a comfort to me" (Col. 4:11) and in 2 Timothy, Paul encourages Timothy

to bring him because he is “very useful to me for ministry”. (2 Tim. 4:9) And in another letter, he calls him a “fellow worker”. (Philemon 1:24)

Original Audience

The bishops of the early church, Papias, Clement and Irenaeus all taught that Mark wrote his Gospel from Italy and some identified specifically Rome. Irenaeus (130-200) says that the Gospel of Mark was written "When Peter and Paul were preaching the gospel in Rome and founding the church there"; he adds, "After their departure, Mark, Peter's disciple, has himself delivered to us in writing the substance of Peter's preaching".⁹

In the first letter of Peter, Mark is identified as a disciple of Peter's in Rome:

“She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son.” --1 Peter 5:1

“Babylon” is Christian code language for the city of Rome. It is likely therefore that the Gospel was written by Mark from Rome for Italian Christians. We have this confirmed by many of the internal features of Mark's Gospel.

The Gospel itself often explains Jewish customs to his readers. For example in Mark 7:3-4, he parenthetically explains Pharisaic and Jewish traditions such as washing hands, cups and other items. (See also, 14:12 & 15:6-9, 42-43) He must have had a largely Gentile audience in mind. He also translates Aramaic terms to Greek (see 3:17, 5:41, 7:11, 7:34, 10:46, 15:22, 34). He points out geographic details that would not be known to a non-Jewish audience such as: “As he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple...”. (13:3)

Also, Mark often uses Latin words transliterated into Greek at least 15 times, which indicates that a large portion of his audience understood Latin, a language not primarily spoken outside of Italy at that time. For example:

- Mark 4:27: modios = Lat. modius (a measure)
- Mark 5:9, 15: legiôn = Lat. legio (legion)
- Mark 6:27: spekoulator = Lat. speculator (guard)
- Mark 6:37: dênariôn = Lat. denarius (a Roman coin)
- Mark 7:4: xestês = Lat. sextarius (container)
- Mark 12:14: kênsos = Lat. census (tribute money)
- Mark 15:15: phragellan = Lat. fragellare (to whip)
- Mark 15:39, 44-45: kenturiôn = Lat. centurio (centurion) (Both Matthew and Luke use ekatontrachês, the equivalent term in Greek.)

“Internal, indirect evidence for a Roman readership is the fact that in his passion narrative Mark unnecessarily (from a literary point of view) identifies Alexander and Rufus as the sons of Simon the Cyrene (15:21). The probable reason that Mark does this is that these men are known to his readers:

⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1; cf. Eusebius, *Church History* 5.8.2-4

Mark wants to ensure that they know that Simon the Cyrene mentioned in the text is the father of these two men. A man named Rufus is mentioned in Rom 16:13, being a member of the Roman church. If the Rufus in Rom 16:13 is the same as that in Mark 15:21, then likely Mark's intended readers were Roman Christians."¹⁰

The Occasion for the Gospel

The primary reason for the Gospel was to capture the preaching and teaching of the Apostle Peter prior to his death. The early Christians knew that they would not have the apostles with them in person for much longer. Clement of Alexandria (150-215) in his Hypotyposeis says that the Christians in Rome asked Mark to record Peter's message:

"When Peter had preached the gospel publicly in Rome...those who were present...besought Mark, since he had followed him (Peter) for a long time and remembered the things that had been spoken, to write out the things that had been said; and when he had done this he gave the gospel to those who asked him. When Peter learned of it later, he neither obstructed nor commended".¹¹

Though Bishop Clement says that Peter neither "obstructed nor commended" Mark's writings, it is quite possible that Mark was commissioned by Peter to write the Gospel. We read in 2 Peter 1:

¹³ I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder, ¹⁴ since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me. ¹⁵ And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.

The only way Peter could make every effort to remind the church of his apostolic teachings after his death (Greek: *exodus*) is to have them written down. We know from 1 Peter 5:12 that he used assistants to write for him. In the case of Peter's first letter it was Peter's "faithful brother" Silvanus (also translated Silas). We already learned from Bishop Papias that Mark served in a similar capacity in Rome as a "interpreter", or translator for Peter.

A secondary reason for the Gospel's writing is to encourage the Gentile Christians who were undergoing persecution during the reign of the Roman Emperor Nero. Mark's Gospel emphasizes the crucifixion of Jesus and the persecution of the disciples. He certainly wanted the readers to know what it meant to "take up their cross and follow Jesus." (Mark 8:34)

"The 60's A.D. in Rome was a really tough time for Christians. You've got to remember that up until that time, in Roman law, if you were Jewish you were part of a recognized religion; it was known as the *religio licita*, a permitted religion. And so there's not much persecution coming to Jewish Christians because the Romans are thinking, "Well, they're just part of

¹⁰ <http://www.abu.nb.ca/courses/ntintro/mark.htm>

¹¹ Eusebius, *The Church History* 6.14.6-7

Judaism.” But what happens when the Roman authorities begin to sense, “Ah, this new religion seems to be including Gentiles, non-Jews, and is rather different to Judaism?” Suddenly it’s no longer a safe or permitted religion, and the Roman authorities might get rather uptight about that. Now, that’s precisely what’s beginning to happen, or being recognized, in Rome in the early 60’s A.D. The year 59, Nero goes slightly mad, and the first five years of his reign are rather good, but from then on until he dies in 68, he’s becoming more and more unpredictable. Then you’ve got Paul arriving in Rome in about A.D. 60, and he’s willing to die for Christ and willing to show that this newfound religion is for everybody, including the emperor Nero. And it’s possible that as Nero encounters this, he begins to realize, here is a religion which I don’t like. I’m meant to be in charge, and here are these Christians proclaiming, “Jesus is Lord.” So, when there’s a great fire in Rome on July the 18th, A.D. 64, and Nero gets the blame, if you like; he then passes the blame on to this new group, this new sect called the Christians, and it’s tragic what we hear of that.”

— Dr. Peter Walker¹²

The purpose of the Gospel of Mark was to record the eye witness testimony of the first Disciple and Apostle Peter. It was also written to encourage Italian Christians to remain faithful in the face of increasing persecution from the Empire.

“Life was difficult in many ways for the Christians in and near Rome during this period. And as we’ll see, Mark designed his gospel to minister to their circumstances. While there are many ways to describe Mark’s purpose for writing, in this lesson we’ll focus on the idea that Mark wrote his gospel to strengthen the persecuted Christians of Rome.

“Mark’s gospel made it clear that whatever difficulties and temptations the Roman Christians faced as they suffered for Christ, they could be sure that Jesus had already faced them. He had been unjustly condemned in a Roman court. He had been beaten by Roman soldiers. And he had been crucified on a Roman cross. But through his suffering, Jesus had been victorious. And Mark wanted to assure his audience that if they followed Jesus faithfully, they would be conquerors too. Yes, they would suffer. But their suffering would be their path to glory, just as it had been for Jesus.”¹³

¹² Dr. Peter Walker, quoted in *The Gospels*, Lesson 3 from <http://thirdmill.org/seminary/manuscripts/GOS3.doc> p.7

¹³ <http://thirdmill.org/seminary/manuscripts/GOS3.doc> p. 7-8.

Structure and Content

It has often been observed that the Structure of Mark's gospel follows the general pattern of Peter's recorded preaching to the Gentiles recorded in Acts 10:34-43¹⁴:

Here is a table of the similarities among Peter's speech and Mark's Gospel:¹⁵

Acts 10:36-42	The Gospel of Mark
"Telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ" (v. 36)	"The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ" (1:1)
"After the baptism that John preached" (v. 37)	"Jesus . . . was baptized by John" (1:9)
"God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit" (v. 38)	"Jesus . . . saw the Spirit descending on him" (1:10)
"Beginning in Galilee" (v. 37)	The Galilean ministry (1:16-8:26)
"He went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil (v. 38)	Jesus' ministry focuses on healings and exorcisms; e.g. "Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons" (1:34)
"We are witnesses of everything he did . . . in Jerusalem" (v. 39)	"Jesus entered Jerusalem" (11:11); see chapters 11 to 14
"They killed him by hanging him on a cross" (v. 39)	"And they crucified him" (15:24)
"God raised him from the dead on the third day" (v. 40)	"He has risen! He is not here" (16:6)
"He was seen . . . by witnesses . . . by us" (v. 41)	"Tell his disciples and Peter . . . 'you will see him'" (16:7)
"He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify" (v. 42)	See the first commission (6:6b-13) and 13:10

For the purposes of this study we will use the following outline¹⁶:

- A. The Announcement of the Messiah (Mark 1:1-1:13)
- B. Power of the Messiah (Mark 1:14-8:26)
- C. The Apostles' Affirmation of the Messiah (Mark 8:27-8:30)
- D. The Suffering Messiah (Mark 8:31- 15:47)
- E. The Victory of the Messiah (Mark 16:1-8)

¹⁴ For an interesting article comparing Acts 10 and Mark: http://www.affcrit.com/pdfs/2009/01/09_01_ts.pdf

¹⁵ D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. 2nd ed. Zondervan, 2005. p.106

¹⁶ <http://thirdmill.org/seminary/manuscripts/GOS3.doc>