

## SESSION ONE An Introduction to Mark and the Prologue (1:1-13)

It is important that we know to whom Mark was writing and what he wanted his particular audience to take from his story. (In literary terms, this is the historical context). We explore Mark's special themes as he narrates the life of Jesus to a persecuted church. In the Prologue, he tells through story what the church would spend decades trying to state in rational terms, that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed both fully human and divine.

In beginning a study of Mark, it is important to read the entire narrative in one sitting. Mark was probably writing his narrative to be performed. (See Christopher Bryant's A Preface to Mark). His audience would have eagerly listened to the drama from the beginning to end and in that way would have grasped the full impact of the story.

Questions for reflection as you read:

1. After reading the entire narrative, how would you describe Mark's emphases or themes?
2. What makes this Gospel a well-told story?
3. How does Mark in the Preface(1:1-13) show Jesus as both human and divine?

### I. INTRODUCTION

The author of the Second Gospel, Mark is the first New Testament writer to tell of the life of Jesus. By the time he wrote, after 64 CE (Common Era), Paul had completed his epistles (letters to the young churches) and had no doubt gone to his reward, but Paul did not give us an account of the life of Jesus. Instead, he testified to what the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus meant for the church and the world.

To find out what Jesus did day by day, what he taught as he moved from place to place, how his disciples and other contemporaries viewed him, how he came to be crucified, why the church has long believed that the tomb of death did not hold him, we must turn to the Gospel narratives, especially Matthew, Mark, and Luke. (The Fourth Gospel, John, is a different kind of account, and we will examine it in Sessions #14 and 15.) If Mark is the earliest of the Gospels, as most modern scholars claim, it makes sense to begin a study of Jesus with his narrative.

Mark works quite well as drama. In the 1980s, the Shakespearean actor Alec McCowen dazzled secular audiences in his off-Broadway performance of the Gospel of Mark. Having memorized the entire Gospel, he simply recited it and with mime conjured up the intriguing images of the story.

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A decade or two after Mark wrote, Matthew and Luke both used his narrative and added many of Jesus's teachings that were not in Mark, and they added their birth and resurrection accounts as well. (By resurrection accounts, we mean those stories that tell of the Risen Christ, what happened after Jesus died on the cross.)

## II. MARK'S THREEFOLD TASK

Mark was not an historian in the way we think of historians today, nor was he a trained theologian. Rather, as the church has maintained for many centuries, he was primarily an evangelist. He made it his task to bring the good news of Christ to his fellow Christians and to those outside the Christian realm. Gospel in fact means "good news."

His task, like the task of the evangelist (or preacher, "good news bearer") of our day, was threefold: First, to pass on the stories that told of God's saving work in Jesus. Second, to address the particular needs of those who read or listened to his words. Third, to make his own points, develop and promote his own interpretations of the saving work of God in Christ.

1. Passing on the tradition The first scribes of Israel carefully preserved the traditions passed on to them by their ancestors. In the words of the Moses of Deuteronomy: "But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children." (4.9) The amazing thing about Hebrew Scripture is that so many versions of what eyes had seen were preserved. To the credit of the scribes of Israel, they were willing to preserve traditions that were not their own, interpretations of events with which they did not agree. They somehow realized what St. Augustine was to say much later: The truth is greater than that which is believed, and that which is believed is greater than that which can be put into words. No single writer had the truth; truth emerged from the total story told in the Bible by many people.

It is in the spirit of the Old Testament scribe that Mark attempted to pass on the traditions that had come to him. In the words of Papias, Bishop of Phrygia, who lived from about 60 to 140 CE: "So then Mark made no mistake, while he thus wrote down some things as he remembered them; for he made it his own care not to omit anything that he heard, or to set down any false statement therein." The traditions Mark sought to pass on came from several sources: Hebrew Scripture, individual stories about Jesus and many of his teachings, clusters of stories and sayings that had been grouped together before Mark wrote, and finally early Christian rituals that Mark himself participated in. Mark was not an eyewitness to the events in life of Jesus. He had, however, listened well to what certain eyewitnesses had said about Jesus.

Jesus left no written document; his only known writing was in the sand. Thus, it was left to his followers to remember and pass on by word-of-mouth the teachings of Jesus and the stories about what he did while he was in their midst. Many of the teachings and stories, as remembered by the early church, existed independently of each other. They were short so as to be easily remembered, usually with one central point. In the first three Gospel narratives, they are called "pericopes" [pe-RIC-o-pees], a word which means "cut around." Often the teachings and stories of Jesus can be "cut away" from the rest of the narrative and stand fairly complete by themselves, much like short Scripture readings in church stand fairly complete by themselves. When we speak of a pericope in this course, we mean simply a little story or teaching from the life of Jesus.

Mark would not be passing on the whole tradition for the sake of generations yet unborn if he did not pass on the church practices and rituals of his day. What we know of the practices and rituals of the Church from 50 to 100 CE comes almost entirely from the New Testament. We can assume that the Last Supper, which is recounted in three Gospels and in Paul's writings as well, was a central act of worship. In Mark's Gospel when Jesus feeds the five thousand, he ritualistically goes through several motions, which could well reflect the way in which the first-century church "fed" its members: Jesus takes the bread, gives thanks to God, breaks the bread, and gives it to the disciples to distribute. Mark's heavy emphasis on training for discipleship and on healing may indicate similar emphases in the church from which Mark came and in which he grew.

2. Addressing the needs of his audience Until recently, most scholars agreed with the early tradition that Mark wrote in Rome for the Roman church, not long after Nero's persecutions of the Christians in 64 CE. Now scholars are less sure where Mark was living and for whom he wrote his Gospel. Probably Mark was writing for all the churches that had been established by the late 60s but especially for the badly persecuted church at Rome. Christopher Bryant in his A Preface to Mark has helped us see that Mark's Gospel was more than likely acted out and, like other Roman drama, offered throughout the Roman Empire. There are many indications in the Gospel narrative itself that Mark was writing for those who were living through times of persecution (see especially Mark 4:17 and 8:34-38).

We know from historical sources that the Roman Emperor Nero persecuted the Christians in Rome in 64 CE. The historian Tacitus wrote the following to explain how the emperor shifted the blame away from himself for the great fire in Rome in 64 CE.

But all the endeavors of men, all the emperor's largesse and the propitiations of the gods, did not suffice to allay the scandal or banish the belief that the fire had been ordered. And so, to get rid of this rumor, Nero set up as the culprits and punished with the utmost refinement of cruelty a class hated for their abominations, who are commonly called Christians. Christus, from whom their name is derived, was executed at the hands of the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius. Checked for the moment, this pernicious superstition again broke out, not only in Judea, the source of the evil, but even in Rome, that receptacle for everything that is sordid and degrading from every quarter of the globe, which there finds a following. Accordingly, arrest was first made of those who confessed [to being Christians]; then, on their evidence, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much on the charge of arson as because of hatred of the human race. Beside being put to death they were made to serve as objects of amusement; they were clad in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified, others set on fire to serve to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had thrown open his grounds for the display, and was putting on a show in the circus, where he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or drove about in his chariot. All this gave rise to a feeling of pity, even towards men whose guilt merited the most exemplary punishment; for it was felt that they were being destroyed not for the public good but to gratify the cruelty of an individual.

Church tradition has long held that Peter and probably Paul were among those who "confessed" to being Christian and died in this mass execution. (Jesus had appointed Peter to be the head of his church.) It is hard to overemphasize the importance of the Neronian persecution for the church at Rome, and for all the Christian communities in the Mediterranean Basin that would soon have heard the news.

In order to get some idea of its effect on the Christian community, the Roman church in particular, we might compare this persecution to the Nazi execution of six million Jews before and during World War II. Though tiny compared to the Holocaust, Nero's persecution of the Christians was just as vicious and cruel. How could anyone who lived through the Holocaust—or any serious Jew anywhere—help but make that event a watershed in his or her life? So it must have been with the Christians who lived, while their sisters and brothers (including their great leader Peter and perhaps Paul) died to satisfy the whims of an emperor. One might also compare the persecution of 64 CE with the huge impact the 9/11 terrorist bombings have had on virtually all Americans.

Whether Mark wrote in 68, 70, or 75 CE, the primary problem of the people to whom he wrote must have been their fear. Would a Roman soldier break into their homes or their household church without warning and demand to know if they were followers of that "pernicious superstition"? A related need must have been feelings of unworthiness. As in later persecutions, some, no doubt, denied being Christians when the Roman authority interrogated them. Others could not imagine being able to follow in the footsteps of Peter and the many sisters and brothers who walked the way of the cross, as Jesus had done before them.

Besides their fear and their feelings of unworthiness, the people Mark addressed would have felt torn apart over the Jewish-Gentile question. There they were, while the wolf prowled at the door of the church, squabbling bitterly among themselves over whether Christianity should be an extension of Judaism or quite free of its Jewish past. They needed a way to bring Jew and Gentile together. With Roman tyrants like Nero around, they could not afford the luxury of internal dissension.

A fourth need, which Mark's audience must have shared with all contemporary Christians, was their bewilderment that Jesus, who had promised that he would return within the lifetime of those close to him (see 9:1), had not returned. Over thirty-five years had passed since his death; the church was now composed largely of second generation Christians. But there was no sign of the Second Coming, only the devastation before the Second Coming. Was Jesus wrong in his prediction? Or had the church misunderstood what he meant? Or had he returned already? Was that the real meaning of the resurrection? Mark sought to address those questions.

Besides addressing the needs peculiar to the Christians of his day, Mark, the pastor, was addressing needs common to Christians of all ages:

-Issues of faith: What do you do about a faith that seems so small, about the size of a mustard seed?

-The tragedy of severe illness: How can you find healing if your body has suffered unrelenting pain for years?

-The threat of death: How can you cope when your child seems to be dying?

-Issues of discipleship: Once you make a commitment to follow Christ, how do you then know what to do, day by day?

3. Offering his own interpretation Like any evangelist, Mark has his own points to make, his own themes of the faith to emphasize:

a. God's mystery is given to be known, though gradually. Much has been made over the fact that Jesus in Mark tries to keep his identity secret (see, for example, 1:44 and 3:12), at least during the first part of his ministry. Is he offering God's mystery to only a few? (4:21, 22). Mark seems to think that Jesus makes his divinity known only gradually so that his followers will not believe too quickly. Then their commitment-like the seeds sown on rocky soil-after quickly sprouting will quickly wither away (see 4:5,6).

b. The disciples, especially Peter, show human frailty. Mark is harsher on the disciples than either Luke or Matthew. He presents them as obtuse, power seeking, weak. Mark, however, is not attacking them to denigrate them; he writes of them in this way to show their human-ness. The first-century church at the time of Mark's writing already knew of the strength, the faith, even the martyrdom, of the original disciples. We know, for example, from Acts 12:2, that James, like Peter, was executed. In his narrative, Mark assured the fledgling Christians that the great leaders of the church were like themselves, subject to weakness and doubt.

c. A ruling elite is dangerous. Jesus criticizes everyone who holds authority-whether Pharisee, scribe, Herodian, even the disciples, everyone except the Romans. (Mark's Jesus does not attack the Roman authority because such an attack would have been suicidal in a church so unprotected from Rome, "the whore of Babylon," to use an image of the Book of Revelation.) On the other hand, Mark celebrates the simple faith of the multitudes, the people. We might call him today a "populist," one distrustful of all earthly power. While Mark's Jesus identifies with the people, he does not embrace their "underground" revolution to free them from Rome, for such a revolution would likely result in a new ruling elite, which could also be dangerous.

d. God loves all people. Mark's style of writing, like that of other writing of his day, is sometimes cryptic. One of his key messages is easily discernible, however, if one reads between the lines. More than Matthew and in a way different from Luke, Mark shows that Jesus has come to bring the good news to those "outside" as well as to those inside, to the Gentile as well as to the Jew. For example, in Mark there is a feeding of four thousand Gentiles as well as the feeding of five thousand Jews. Every time Jesus "crosses over" the Sea of Galilee, he is crossing into Gentile territory, signaling that he has come to bring the good news to those "on the other side."

e. Jesus offers a way to walk through life. The image of the road-Jesus and the disciples walking hurriedly from place to place-looms large in Mark's Gospel. The Greek word for "road," *hodos*, also means "journey," "the way one walks through life." It was also the first name for the church, the way.

f. Christ lives in the midst of the Church. Mark presents Jesus the way he does so that the late first-century audience will know that the risen Christ is in their midst. Though Jesus has been dead for a generation, Mark believes the risen Christ is giving the early church healing, wholeness, and quiet in the midst of the storm in the same way that Jesus gave those things to his followers. For Mark, the "historical" Jesus and the risen Christ are the same.

g. You can walk the way of the cross if you must. Several of Mark's themes come together to help his Christian sisters and brothers know that they can walk the road that Jesus walked before them: God's mystery is theirs; the people who have walked that road before are people like themselves; the way to walk has been given them; Christ lives in their midst, strengthening them with the bread of heaven, giving them what they need for their journey. Neither Nero nor any successor of his can have ultimate power over them.

We find no compelling reason to reject the early tradition that the John Mark mentioned in chapters 12, 13, and 15 of the Book of Acts is the author of the Second Gospel. (John is his Jewish name; Mark is his Roman name.)

### III. THE PROLOGUE (1:1-13)

1. Jesus: divine and human The Prologue shows Jesus as the unique Son of God in two ways. First, the highly influential John the Baptizer, who prepares the way, pales into insignificance before Jesus; second, a voice from heaven speaks, announcing that this is the Son. But the Prologue also shows Jesus as fully human, a theme Mark develops more fully than the other Gospel writers. Like all humans, Jesus comes from a particular time and a particular place. Like all others, he must be baptized, thus purified and given new life. Finally, like the rest of us, he is subjected to the temptation of Satan and must be ministered to by God's messengers, the angels. (Through story, the Gospel writers could do what it took the fourth century church decades to do: show that Jesus was both divine and human. See also the Prologue to John's Gospel.)

2. John the Baptizer From out of the desert came John the Baptist, a man wearing a rough coat of camel's hair and living off the food of the ancient prophets: locusts and wild honey. The early church believed that the prophet Elijah, who lived in the ninth century BCE, had returned in the person of John the Baptizer (see Luke 1:13-17). Jesus himself implies as much, after the execution of John, when he tells his disciples that Elijah has already come and that they (the authorities) did with him as they pleased (Mark 9:11-13). Also, John the Baptizer wore "the leather belt" of Elijah (II Kings 1:8).

Like Elijah, John preached prophetic judgment to the great and small alike. Elijah had confronted the king, Ahab, because the king participated in a plot to deprive a man named Naboth of his vineyard, his home. "You have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord," Elijah said to the king. "I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel." (I Kings 21:20,21) John the Baptizer, in his time, condemned Herod, another king, for taking his brother's wife, Herodias (Mark 6:17-19). As prophet, John had the task of proclaiming God's Law and holding whoever broke the law responsible. He did the work of what Martin Luther called "the left hand of God"-apologies to all left-handed people. See also Luke 3:7-14.

Jesus usually (but as we will see, not always) does the other work of God. He begins his ministry proclaiming the good news that we are loved by God (Mark 1:14). He then says, "Repent!" Turn your life around! John begins with confrontation; Jesus begins with good news. John baptizes with water, which, like the Law, can overwhelm, can drown; Jesus through the Holy Spirit will baptize the world with lifesaving Affirmation.

3. The particularity of the Incarnation God appears in a particular man, Jesus, at a particular place, Nazareth, at a particular time, when Quirinius was governor of Syria (see Luke 2:2). Particularity was essential to God's message, the writers of the Christian Scripture believed. God's Word would not be pure intelligence, like the Greek Unmoved Mover; nor would it be a system of law, like the Torah, nor a chosen nation, like Israel; nor would it be written testimony like the Koran. Rather, as God's perfect manifestation to the world, God's Word made flesh would be a person like everyone else, Jesus of Nazareth. The road that Jesus asks his disciples to walk will be walked by individual persons, each with his or her own name, each living in a special time, a special place. Forever after, each human life would be sanctified, blessed.

4. The Baptism of Jesus On a certain day of his life, Jesus received the baptism of John and set out on the road. In receiving the baptism from another, Jesus was showing that he was fully human, a person like the rest of us, who needed to be baptized. But for the early church, he was also "the Son," "the Christ," "the Beloved." The voice from heaven makes that clear. The passage recalls the story from Genesis when Abraham felt called to offer his son, his only son, his beloved (22:1-14) as God is now offering his!

As far as we know, there was no Jewish equivalent to the baptism John administered. The closest ritual to baptism was the purification by water of a Gentile proselyte who intended to become a religious Jew. This cleansing was necessary because all Gentiles were considered "unclean." But why would John have baptized fellow Jews? Perhaps to let them know that they, like everyone else, also needed purifying if they were to become part of the true Israel. If that were the case, you can easily see why Jesus and his followers participated in this rite and ultimately made it into one of the great sacraments of the church.

5. Jesus in the wilderness In the Hebrew Scripture, the wilderness is a place of danger, struggle, growth, and healing. After the Exodus, the Israelites journeyed forty years in the wilderness before they reached the Promised Land. They fought fiercely among themselves as well as with their external enemies, but those forty years were also a time of growth. The difficulties helped produce a people determined to reach their goal, fulfillment at the end of the journey. It was also in the wilderness that the prophet Hosea hoped to bring home his wife Gomer (a symbol for Israel), who had broken the covenant relationship:  
Therefore, I will now allure her,  
and bring her into the wilderness,  
and speak tenderly to her (2:14).

Upon leaving the baptism waters, Jesus is driven immediately into the wilderness. The Greek word that we translate "immediately" or "thereupon" or "straightway" is used twenty-five times in Mark. It is one of those tag words that holds the narrative together, especially when read aloud or acted. Mark means to give his narrative a sense of urgency. Jesus moves fast, like one for whom there is only a short time to act.

Now is the time for him to go out into the wilderness. He has no choice! The Spirit throws him into the wilderness like a spear. (The word drove is more precisely translated "hurled" or "cast out," and is used when Jesus casts out demons.) He is in the wilderness forty days, an expression in Scripture meaning "a long time." There he is tempted by Satan, the Evil Force that separates humankind from God and one another. But the fully human Jesus, Son of God, triumphs as God's messengers, the angels, minister to him, bring him healing.

6. Conclusion Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian-philosopher-poet of the 19th century, told many stories to explain the Incarnation. Here is one attributed to him. It went something like this:

Years ago a certain farmer was preparing for winter when he realized he would have to find a way to persuade a flock of pigeons to go into his barn, for they would never survive the harsh winter if left outside. The farmer tried to shoo them inside, but they would not be forced. He tried to tempt them by sprinkling grain in a line from where they were all the way into the barn, but they would not be tricked; they ate the grain up to the barn door but would not go inside. They had never been in that barn and would not risk going inside now. The farmer thought and thought. Finally, it came to him what he must do, the only thing he could do.

He of course became a pigeon himself. He did not disguise himself as a pigeon; the other pigeons would certainly have seen through the disguise. No, he became fully a pigeon. Now the other pigeons would follow.

For the early church, subject at any time to arbitrary persecution, God had to become fully human. Being divine, Jesus could keep his followers safe, no matter what the external world hurled at them. Being human, one of them, Jesus could lead.

Personal Connections:

1. If you had been a member of the persecuted church at the time Mark wrote his Gospel, what would have helped you keep the faith? How would Mark's story have strengthened you?
2. Mark, the Evangelist, set out to meet particular needs of his audience as he told the story of Jesus. What would he emphasize if he were telling the story of Jesus today?
3. If you have been baptized, try to visualize your baptism. What does it mean for you now? How does it (or did it) relate to the baptism of Jesus?
4. Can you talk about a wilderness experience when the angels ministered to you?
5. How important is it for you that Jesus is both a great human leader but also divine, and as divine can save-make whole-no matter what life hurls your way?