

# MARK



Barbara Hall

## **Preface**

Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels, the first to be written. Legend holds that the author wrote what St. Peter dictated, but this is not certain, and the author is actually anonymous. Significant portions of the Gospel according to Mark are used in the other two synoptic gospels, Matthew and Luke.

## **The Gospel According to Mark**

The Gospel according to Mark tells the story of Jesus the crucified Messiah in a setting of high and dramatic fervor that longed for better days ahead. The Jewish-Roman war from 66-70 AD ended in the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, the center of Jewish life, and the devastation of the land. The defeated Jews and Christian Jews responded in different ways to the Roman victory. Among some the expectation that a Messiah would come and deliver the Jewish people was

crushed, since such a figure did not appear. But among some Christians who stood close to Jewish belief, there was an expectation that had been nurtured in the church for thirty to forty years. This expectation was that Jesus the Messiah (the Christ) would soon return to establish the promised Kingdom of God. Such a hope had long been expressed in dire terms of warfare and cataclysm. What worse could happen than this war just finished, the people of God defeated, their land and temple destroyed? Some Christians talked and dreamed that *now* was the time when the Messiah would come, victorious over the hated Romans, bringing with him his triumphant followers.

Not all Christians responded with such expectations, and it may be that there was conflict in the church over just what God's intended will was for the church in this dramatically charged moment. Informed and inspired by this situation, Mark addressed his Christian brother and sisters in an unusual way—he wrote a gospel. He collected the stories and traditions about Jesus which were known and

told in his church, and he joined these to the accounts of Jesus' last days in one, whole, connected account.

As far as we know, Mark was the first to do this. The effect must have been startling. When a Christian teacher used a known anecdote from Jesus' life that is one thing. The church must have treasured the few traditions about Jesus which they had. But to see or hear a series of individual incidents from Jesus' life put together in a connected whole would change their impact and cause one to see them in a new and different way. This is what happened to Mark's readers:

Especially surprising would have been the clear overall theme of Mark's telling of the story: Jesus is, from the very beginning of the gospel, on his way to the cross. He begins his ministry "after John (the Baptist) was arrested." (Mk 1:14). The gospel of Mark does not begin with marvelous stories and the glories of Jesus' miraculous birth, as do Matthew and Luke. Nor does Mark begin with a meditation on Jesus as the eternal word of God, as John does. Mark begins with Jesus'

baptism by John, the Spirit's descent (of which only Jesus is aware), followed by his time in the wilderness—alone. The reader knows, of course, that the baptism and presence of the Spirit denote Jesus' designation as the Messiah. But there is nothing publicly exalted about this. Then, an ominous note tells of John the Baptist's arrest. Things do not go well, from the very beginning, for those who are specially designated representatives of God.

There is an allusion to Jesus' end in Mk 2:20 and a clear reference in Mk 3:6, both very early in the gospel. Jesus is the mighty teacher/healer, who gets the better of everyone. This Jesus is known and worshipped in the church of Mark's time and place. But in Mark's telling, the story of Jesus is overshadowed from the very beginning by the defeat that will end his life and ministry on earth.

The story is filled with urgency and conflict. The two are not the same, but they come together in Mk 3:6. The signal of urgency throughout is the word, "immediately." Mark uses it 35 times in this

short gospel. Everyone seems to be in a hurry all of the time. In Mk 3:6 Jesus' enemies **immediately** plot to get rid of him.

The story line becomes Jesus' urgent mission to do what he does (he heals and teaches, encounters and engages various people and situations) and to deal with everyone—friend and foe—as the One he is, the master of events. Over all of the gospel hangs the shadow of the counter-story: Jesus' opponents seeking every opportunity to entrap and destroy him.

The conflict is with very diverse opponents. Mark's first readers (and we) know how the story will end; therefore, the conflict with the authorities is expected. Not surprising, given the beliefs of the day, is Jesus' conflict with the demons and spirits that cause disease and suffering (1:23-26; 5:6-8). But what are we to make of Jesus' family and friends, who do not seem to support him (3:20-21, 31-35, 6:1-5)? Even his closest disciples do not appear to support or understand him (9:33-35; 10:35-45). The urgency and the conflict work to build the suspense in

Mark's story, to heighten the tension that points to the end—the crucified Messiah.

A pause in the middle of the gospel allows the pace and emphasis change. The discerning reader notes a climax of sorts that prefigures the end of the gospel. The passage is Mk 8:27-10:45, and Mark gives his readers a signal there is something special by the two accounts that precede and follow: Mk 8:22-26 and Mk 10:46-52. Each tells of the cure of a blind man. In this section Jesus works with his disciples to make them understand who he is and what his mission is.

Three times he predicts his coming death (8:31; 9:30; 10:33-34) and resurrection. Each time his disciples either reject or misunderstand what he says. They long for positions of power as his allies (9:33-34; 10:35-39). In sharp contrast, Jesus describes the sort of people they are to be and the lives they can expect as his followers (8:34-38; 9:35-37; 10:13-16, 42-44).

How would Mark's earliest readers have understood this central passage? They would surely recognize Mark's own

interpretation at work here. The life of the Christian is not to be a glorious one, sharing the triumph of their risen and returned Lord. Not yet. It will be a life like the suffering Messiah's. To follow Jesus is not to share his rule in the Kingdom of God. Not yet. Now it is to expect and endure hardship in his name.

The message is strongly enforced in Mk 13. There, in response to the disciples' question, "When?" Jesus spells out Mark's message to his church. "Take heed! The time is not yet! The gospel must be preached to all nations. No one knows the day or the hour. What I say to you, I say to all: Watch. Truly I say to you, this generation shall not pass away before all these things take place." (See also Mk 9:1)

The events described are those commonly associated with expectations of the end-of-time in both Jewish and Christian tradition. They can also be read as a description of what the Roman-Jewish war was like for those who experienced it. For example, in Mk 13:9-13 we hear echoes of pressure on early Christians to declare their allegiance to Jewish forces during the war.



Mark tells his readers that the time of the Messiah's coming is indeed near, but it cannot be calculated or predicted, and it may come soon. Mark was himself over-optimistic (9:1, 13: 30). Later gospel writers soften this conviction about the end. Mark's great gift to his church and ours was that he insisted that God's timetable is not known to us, and, in the meantime, the Christian life will require endurance and sacrifice.

The end of Mark's story is utter defeat. Jesus goes obediently, but not serenely (Mk 14:33-36), to the humiliation of the betrayal, the false (and illegal) trial, the fleeing of his disciples, the denial of Peter, the agony of the cross, alone and deserted, even by God himself (Mk 15:34). Mark is undoubtedly using traditions about Jesus' crucifixion which were known in his church; he was not inventing a story unknown to his readers. But he tells it in a way that sets forward dramatically the devastating defeat of this crucified Messiah. Mark's passion narrative (chs 14-15) is bleak and desolate. Modern readers need to read it on its own to receive the full impact intended.

Even the triumphant end of the story—Jesus' resurrection—that Mark's readers surely knew and was the ground of their hope, is muted in Mark. There are no resurrection appearances as in the other gospels. There is only the young man telling the women at the tomb that Jesus is risen and gone to Galilee (why?), and at the very end the women leave and tell no one because they are so scared! People have puzzled over Mark's strange ending for centuries, but this is not such a serious problem since the announcement that he is risen is given. Galilee may have had some special meaning to Mark's church, lost to us now (see Mk 14:28). But what is the reader to make of the women's fear and silence? Whatever first readers concluded, they knew that Mark was denying them any basis for a triumphant stance in the present. The crucified Messiah is not the public King of the Kingdom of God, *yet*.

What do we modern Christians make of Mark's gospel? Ours is hardly a situation like that of Mark's first readers. Few of us suffer or are persecuted for being

Christians, as were they. And especially, it is no small thing that some 2000 years have passed since Mark told his readers that the Kingdom would come in their lifetimes. It is not obvious what we are to gain from Mark.

One suggestion is to imitate Mark in our use of our own sacred tradition, in this case - Scripture. Mark, by writing his gospel, says to his community, "Read *this* version of Jesus life. See if it calls forth in you a different view of what God wants of us, a different way to interpret what God has done for us in Jesus." It was Mark's offering to his church. Enough people found it of value so that it was saved, and we have it today. Mark's offering was helpful and produced something not before known.

Mark did not invent the story he wrote. Rather, Mark was *in conversation* with the traditions of his community. He and those traditions *together* gave the church new resources for dealing with a very difficult situation. We might be in serious conversation with *Mark* and see what happens. We certainly want to hear Mark in his own

voice telling the story in his own way. But it may be that the story is not complete without our attempt to state in our own time and place what we understand Jesus calls us to be and to do. If we do that with Mark's narrative at our elbow, we may learn something that neither he nor we knew before. We might hear Jesus' call to us today.

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