**Mark’s Gospel:**

**Witness to the Son of God - #1**

**Historical Notes to the Gospel of Mark**

*Welcome one and all! This evening begins George’s 14th year of Wednesday night Christian and biblical study here at E91. George retired from the divinity faculty at Cambridge University, England, in the spring 2004 and, now living in Carmel, Ind., continues to teach, study and write locally and worldwide. George reads and speaks multiple languages, is a Bible translator and is a world-renowned church history scholar. His classes offer theological, scriptural and doctrinal depth both in his teaching and class discussions. George’s series on Mark continues weekly until mid-November.*

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**What is the Gospel?**

A gospel, meaning "good news" is comparable in meaning to the [Greek](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koine_Greek) ***εὐαγγέλιον*** (euangelion). Gospel is an old English word meaning “god-spell.”

**Is old news good news?**

A letter from my mentor Philemon

Brother George,

May the Joy of Jesus himself be in your heart forever, for this is the good news that we have. Old news is not good news, simply because when any of your teachers tell you that this or that was known to the other nations, so what is new? The old story of the six days of creation was known before Moses, fine, where is the good news?

Now in the apocryphal gospels [there appear] a lot of fantastic stories about our Lord, fine. Are these [the] good news? Moslems say that Jesus did not die which means that there is no resurrection, so I did ask some of them, “Where is the good news?”

Be aware my dear brother that good news has to be eternal, for time can change any news and make it old, but God’s good news is eternal for in God there is love that is eternal and what is good news is His love for sinners. This is unknown to [many] in our history.

The Lord is with you in the struggle with your studies.

Philemon

20 Sept 1965

**Our interest in the origins**

Since Darwin and Freud impacted our awareness to trace ideas and events to an origin, Biblical studies fell into the same line:

Who wrote the gospels?

How can we date them?

Are the 4 gospels reliable?

Let’s try to answer.

The title of the gospel of Mark was copied in all our Greek MSS (MSS = *“manuscripts”*) as “*According to Mark*” which was a common name in the old Roman world. Luke gives his name as John Mark (Acts 12:12, 15:37).

The Early Church knew Mark as the writer of his gospel according to the writing of Papias, bishop of Hierapolis (near Laodicea in Syria). His writing was lost but the church historian Eusebius (around 324) quoted a fragment (*History of the* Church, 3:39,4). Papias was one who has heard John the Evangelist according to a later writer known to us as Irenaeus (about 180). Papias may be dated round 110.

Irenaeus says: "Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, himself also handed down to us in writing what was preached by Peter" ([*Against Heresies* 3.1](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103301.htm) and [10.6](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103310.htm)), relying on the authority of "the elder presbyters," tells us that when Peter had publicly preached in Rome many of those who heard him exhorted Mark, as one who had long followed Peter and remembered what he had said, to write it down, and that Mark "composed the Gospel and gave it to those who had asked for it" ([Eusebius](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05617b.htm), [*Church History* VI.14](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/250106.htm)).

On the Gospel of Mark in his book (*Hist. Eccl./Church History*, 3.39), Eusebius wrote:

“For information on these points, we can merely refer our readers to the books themselves; but now, to the extracts already made, we shall add, as being a matter of primary importance, a tradition regarding Mark who wrote the Gospel, which he [Papias] has given in the following words:

"And the presbyter said this. Mark having become the interpreter of Peter wrote down accurately whatsoever he remembered. It was not, however, in exact order that he related the sayings or deeds of Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor accompanied Him. But afterwards, as I said, he accompanied Peter, who accommodated his instructions to the necessities [of his hearers], but with no intention of giving a regular narrative of the Lord's sayings. Wherefore Mark made no mistake in thus writing some things as he remembered them. For of one thing he took especial care, not to omit anything he had heard, and not to put anything fictitious into the statements."

Irenaeus wrote (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1):

"After their departure [of Peter and Paul from earth], Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter." Note that Irenaeus had read Papias, and thus Irenaeus doesn't provide any independent confirmation of the statement made by the earlier author.

**Evidence for Mark**

However, there is one other piece of external evidence that may confirm that the author of the Gospel of Mark was a disciple of Peter. Justin Martyr quotes from Mark as being the memoirs of Peter (*Dial.* 106.3). In Acts 10:34-40, Peter's speech serves as a good summary of the Gospel of Mark, "*beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached.*"

That Mark’s Gospel may have been written in Rome was raised as a question long ago, since it has so many Latin words:

*census* (κῆνσος, “poll tax,” 12:14)

*centurio* (κεντυρίων, “centurion,” 15:39, 44, 45)

*denarius* (δηνάριον, a Roman coin, 12:15),

*legio* (λεγιών, “legion,” 5:9, 15)

*modius* (μόδιος, “peck measure,” 4:21)

*praetorium* (πραιτώριον, “governor’s official residence,” 15:16)

*quadrans* (κοδράντης, a Roman coin, 12:42)

*sextarius* (ξέστης, quart measure, “pitcher,” 7:4)

*speculator* (σπεκουλάτωρ, “executioner,” 6:27)

*flagellum* (φραγελλόω, “to flog,” 15:15).

Scholars have long been curious about the use of “foreign” terms and phrases in NT Greek. One subset of those terms is the use of Latinisms. There are some 18 Latin words found embedded in NT texts, but no less than 10 of them (listed above) are found in Mark’s Gospel which is in fact more than in any other literary Greek text we know.

In two places Mark pauses to explain Jewish terms with Latin terms. For example at Mark 12:42 he explains the two lepta (*“very small copper coins” NIV)* of the widow using the Latin term ***quadrans***, and at Mark 15:16 he refers to the governor’s hall as the ***praetorium***. Other examples in Mark would be the use of the term ***modius*** in Mark 4:21 for a measuring vessel, or ***census*** in Mark 12:14, or the use of ***flagellare*** to refer to the whipping of Jesus (Mark 15:15). There is in addition the use of the term ‘sextarius’

for a measuring cup (only in Mark), the use of ***speculator*** for a member of the governor’s staff (only in Mark), and so on. Something has to account for these loan words showing up in Mark in greater profusion than anywhere else in the NT, especially in the first two cases where terms are explaining by means of Latin. Indeed, over half of the Latinisms in the NT are in Mark.

Now if you have read your Mark commentaries, you will know that most commentators rightly take this as a clue to Mark’s provenance, namely that it was not merely written in Rome, but for Romans (hence the Latin explanations), and this fits nicely with the testimony of Papias that Mark took down memoranda of Peter in Rome.

But this leads to further clues. Let us take for a moment the term we come across in Mark 7:26, “Syro-Phonecian,” a term the First Evangelist converts to “*a Canaanite woman*”. The term Syro-Phoenician does not stand alone in ancient vocabulary; it has a parallel term “Libo-Phoenician.” We are talking about two places in the Mediterranean where Phoenicians once ruled the day – one on the coast of modern day Lebanon, the other on the coast of north Africa. But here is the deal – these labels were not used by the locals to describe themselves, these are the labels Westerners and in particular Romans used to describe these two regions and their peoples.

Nevertheless, even though the author may have been a disciple of Peter at some point, the author of the Gospel of Mark needn't have limited himself to Peter's preaching for his material. The NAB introduction says: "Petrine influence should not, however, be exaggerated. The evangelist has put together various oral and possibly written sources – miracle stories, parables, sayings, stories of controversies, and the passion – so as to speak of the crucified Messiah for Mark's own day."

There is an example in which the author of Mark shows himself to be dependent on oral tradition. The story of the feeding of the multitude is found twice in Mark and once in John. Prior to Mark's Gospel there seems to have been two cycles of traditions about Jesus' ministry in Galilee, each one beginning with one version of the feeding miracle (Mark 6:32-44 and Mark 8:1-10). Before these cycles were created, the two versions of the feeding would have circulated as independent units, the first version attracting to itself the story of Jesus' walking on the water (a development also witnessed in John 6), while the second version did not receive such an elaboration. Behind all three versions of the miracle story would have stood some primitive form.

**Geography**

The Gospel of Mark does not show detailed knowledge of the geography of Palestine. Randel Helms writes concerning Mark 11:1, (*Who Wrote the Gospels?*, p. 6): "Anyone approaching Jerusalem from Jericho would come first to Bethany and then Bethphage, not the reverse. This is one of several passages showing that Mark knew little about Palestine; we must assume, Dennis Nineham (former lecturer in Cambridge) argues, that “Mark did not know the relative positions of these two villages on the Jericho road” (1963, pp, 294-295). Indeed, Mark knew so little about the area that he described Jesus going from Tyrian territory “by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee through the territory of the Ten Towns” (Mark 7:31); this is similar to saying that one goes from London to Paris by way of Edinburgh and Rome.

The simplest solution, says Nineham, is that “the evangelist was not directly acquainted with Palestine” (*The Gospel of Saint Mark*, page 40). Nineham states the following on the provenance of the Gospel of Mark (*Saint Mark*, pp. 42-43): "…of all the places suggested Rome has been by far the most popular, and, so far as the evidence permits of any conclusion, it is perhaps the most likely.”

**Who was the Gospel written for?**

The Gospel of Mark was clearly intended for a church consisting largely of Gentile members (see e.g. 7:3f., 11:13, 12:42), and one which had known, or was expecting, persecution for faith (cf. 8:34-38, 10:38f., 13:9-13). All this is compatible with Roman origin, and if the Gospel circulated from the beginning with the authority of the Roman church it is easier to explain how it so soon won an authoritative position."

**Date of Composition**
The Gospel of Mark is generally ascribed to the period between 65 and 75 CE (AD).

Dead Sea Scroll Fragment 7Q5 - [Mark 6:52-53](https://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/Mark%206.52-53)

This may be the earliest [fragment of NT papyrus](https://bible.org/article/7q5-earliest-nt-papyrus):



The complete text in Greek:

ου γαρ

συνηκαν επι τοις αρτοις,

αλλ ην αυτων η καρδια πεπωρω-

μενη. και διαπερασαντες [επι την γην]

ηλθον εις γεννησαρετ και

προσωρμισθησαν. και εξελ-

θοντων αυτων εκ του πλοιου ευθυς

επιγνοντες αυτον.

English translation:

*For they did not
understand concerning the loaves
but was their heart hardened. And crossing over [unto the land]
they came unto Gennesaret and
drew to the shore. And coming forth*

 *out of the boat immediately
they recognized him.*

**Investigating Prophesies**

The date was selected against the prophecy of our Lord in Mark 13, which seems to refer to events of the First Jewish Revolt in 66-70, in which the Roman troops leveled the Temple in Jerusalem. For the vast majority of interpreters this passage indicates that the writer is aware that the Temple in Jerusalem either has been destroyed, or is about to be destroyed. Additional support for this may be derived from the focus on plundered and destroyed Temples.

Mark 13:13 even refers to "my name's sake," which is a clear term for a "Christian" to describe Jesus' followers and dates from long after this time. Early Christians referred to themselves as "the Saints" or "the Elect," as the authentic letters of Paul demonstrate. Exegetes also see Matthew verse 11:17 as referring to the occupation of the Temple by Jewish insurgents during the Jewish War of 66-77. Joel Marcus (1992) has argued that the situation presupposed in Mark 12:9 echoes the situation in northern Palestine during the opening phases of the war, when Syrians and Jews massacred each other in great numbers, according to Josephus.

The following verse, Mark 13:14 is one of the most famous verses in the Gospel:

 *14: But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up*

 *where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let*

*those who are in Judea flee to the Mountains; (RSV)*

This is the famous "Abomination of Desolation" that the writer derived from Daniel 9:27. The majority of scholars hold that it refers to the occupation of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 by Roman troops, who "worshipped" their [Roman Empire] standards [flags and symbols] there, according to Josephus. The reference to "false Christs" in 13:21-22 may well be a reference to messianic pretenders like Simon Bar Giora, a key Jewish leader of that war, which would also put the Gospel of Mark after 70. The "Legion" of the demoniac that was sent into pigs may be a reference to Legio X Fretensis, which occupied the Temple after 70 and among whose legionnary standards (symbols) was a boar.

**Jewish Nation eliminated**
However, a handful of exegetes see Mark 13 as referring not to the revolt of 70 but to the later revolt of 135, in which the Jewish nation was not only defeated but eliminated. The Jews were evicted from Palestine, the Temple area was occupied by a Roman Temple, and Jerusalem was renamed. Even the name "Judea" disappeared as Hadrian renamed the area "Syria Palestine" to deliberately blot it out.

The later revolt also fits the descriptions in Mark, in some ways slightly better. The catalyst for the Jewish Revolt of 135 was Hadrian's erection of not merely a statue of himself, but a statue of Jupiter and a Roman Temple on the site of the Jerusalem Temple. Construction began during the Emperor's visit to the area. When he left in 132 the rebellion began to swell as Jews fortified villages and occupied strongholds all over Palestine. A savage war ensued whose devastation far exceeded the affray of 70. Units or subunits of twelve Roman legions were brought in, some from as far away as Britain. The enormous number of Jews participating in the revolt forced the Roman leader, Julius Severus, to follow a policy of scorched earth and starvation rather than open confrontation. These events may also be seen in Mark 13, particularly since Hadrian persecuted both Christians and Jews, and animosity between the two groups grew throughout the second century. Since Legio X Fretensis remained in Palestine and occupied Jerusalem in the second century, the possible reference to it in Mark 5 is also supported, perhaps even enhanced.

There are other indicators of a date after 70 at least. There is another reference to persecution in [Mark 4:1-20](http://www.michaelturton.com/Mark/GMark04.html#4.p.1.20). That same pericope (*extract from a text – ed.*) also contains vocabulary common in Christian writings of a later date (Ludemann 2001, p 27). There are several references to synagogues that suggest that the writer lived in the Jewish diaspora, for he appears to conceive of them as large and containing many rulers, like diaspora synagogues. This may also indicate a later date, for Jesus is pictured performing miracles and upbraiding the Jewish authorities in these large synagogues, whereas the early Christians thought of themselves as Jews and were accepted at many synagogues into the second century. In Mark 9 Peter is depicted as asking that Jesus stay put and set up booths, which may be a veiled reference to an established Church. Perhaps a stronger indicator of a late date is that the Crucifixion scene in which Jesus lives [longer], while those on his right and left hand die, is strongly reminiscent of a similar scene in Josephus' *Life*, which dates from at least after 95, and more probably 110.

This possible reliance on Josephus highlights another problem: it is dangerous to read the presentation in Mark 13 as taking place in the writer's own time. To do this is to confuse the writer's point of view with the writer himself, an elementary mistake in analysis. In Mark 13 the writer of Mark has clearly arranged events so that Jesus' prophecies point to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, or at least, that is how the passage was understood in antiquity (see, for example, the discussion in Eusebius). The fact that the passage points to 70, however, tells us nothing about the time it was written. The sad reality is that the events outlined in Mark 13 and elsewhere in Mark are compatible with several dating schemes.

However, there is evidence both in Scripture and in history to support John Mark, cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10), early traveling companion of Paul (Acts 12:25), and spiritual son of Peter (I Peter 5:13) as the author of the gospel.

**Internal Evidence**

The non-literary writing style and syntactical features probably indicate that the author's first language was not Greek, but rather a Semitic language such as Aramaic. The author also includes vivid details that are unnecessary to the flow of the narrative, an indication that the author is writing from eyewitness accounts. These factors can be interpreted as consistent with the traditional view that Mark, a Palestinian Jew, wrote the gospel using Peter as his source.

The internal evidence is corroborated by early attestations, including an ancient caption ("according to Mark"), and testimony by Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. The nearly universal acceptance of Mark as the author of the gospel in light of the fact that he was neither an apostle nor a hero in the first century church lends credence to the validity of the traditional claim that John Mark wrote the gospel, which bears his name.

The explanation of Jewish customs (e.g., 7:3; 14:12; 15:42) and the translation of Aramaic expressions into Greek (e.g., 3:17; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 9:43; 10:46; 14:36; 15:22, 34) indicate that they probably were not Aramaic-speaking Jews. Referring to four watches of the night (6:48; 13:35), Mark also employs a Roman system of time instead of the traditional Jewish three. The inclusion of transliterated Latin terms in reference to the military (e.g. *legion* in 5:9; *praetorium*in 15:16; *centurion* in 15:39), the courts (e.g. *speculator* in 6:27; *flagellare* in 15:15), and commerce (e.g. *denarius* in 12:15; *quadrans* in 12:42) implies a Roman destination, as Latin speakers would have been found most readily there. Additionally, it is likely that the identification of Alexander and Rufus as the sons of Simon the Cyrene (15:21) is because these men were known to Mark's intended recipients -- Roman Christians (Romans 16:13).

There is also substantial external, direct evidence to suggest that the intended readers were Roman Christians. Peter and Mark are believed to have been together in Rome (2 Timothy 4:11, 1 Peter 5:13) where Clement of Alexandria and Irenaeus locate the writing of the gospel. Eusebius also claims that Papias wrote that Mark composed his gospel for Peter's hearers in Rome. Though it is impossible to be sure about the composition date, evidence points to the latter part of the seventh decade, likely after Peter's martyrdom in AD 64, but probably before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. If he wrote in Rome, either while there with Peter, or perhaps shortly after Peter's death, then Mark probably was writing for the Roman Christians, and possibly to address the crisis in the church around the intense persecution that was beginning to be directed at them during this time.

**Purpose**

According to the apostle Paul, every word of Scripture is inspired and "is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). It follows that God would have caused Mark to write a narrative not merely to chronicle a series of events, but rather to build a theological argument allowing the man of God to "be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:17). Two of the other gospel writers elucidate their reasons explicitly within their text -- Luke states his intent "to write an orderly account" that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:3-4), and John explains that "these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). Mark, however leaves only implicit clues as to his main purpose for writing.

Mark's gospel is characterized by action, vividly portraying the non-stop work of Jesus, making frequent use the Greek adverb meaning *immediately* or *straightway* and the conjunction translated as *and*, *also*, or *even* to tie events together, and giving miracles a prominent place in the record. His abundant use of the historical present tense, peppered with many personal touches, leaves the impression that the story is unfolding before the reader's eyes. Mark is careful not only to record the human emotions of Jesus - compassion (1:41, 6:34, 8:2), sighing (7:34; 8:12), indignation (3:5; 10:14), and distress (14:33-34) - but to pay attention to reactions of people around Him - amazement (1:27), criticism (2:7), fear (4:41), astonishment (7:37), and bitter hatred (14:1). He also documents over a hundred different questions, many of them asked of Jesus and even more asked by Him. After inquiring about others' opinion He asks, "*But who do you say that I am?*" (8:27). It could be said that Mark wrote his gospel to invoke a response from his readers to this most important question of all.

Mark thrusts his theological premise before his readers in the very first verse, declaring it to be the *beginning*, *origin*, or *basis* of the gospel, asserting that Jesus is not just the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, but the very Son of God. He then portrays Jesus as a sympathetic man, identifying with men, demonstrating compassion for them, and sharing their sufferings. The author devotes a significant portion of his text to the mutually supporting ministries of service and suffering. Two pivotal verses serve as bookends to the central section of the book in which Jesus first lays down the demanding standard of discipleship: "*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*" (8:34). He wraps up a series of three passion predictions by reasserting the standard with Himself as the model: "*For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*" (10:45).

Through his candidly persuasive writing style, his deeply provocative questions, and his dramatic portrayal of the Suffering Servant, Mark leaves little room for the reader to miss his point. His Gentile audience in Rome would no doubt have identified with the themes he develops, being drawn into the story and forced to draw a conclusion about Jesus. If they agreed with their countryman who declared at the foot of the cross, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (15:39), they would then need to determine what to do with Him. Much more than a rudimentary recounting of the events surrounding Jesus, Mark's gospel can be seen as a clarion call for evangelism and discipleship. The argument of the book will therefore be traced to follow his purpose: Mark discloses the Son of Man as a compassionate savior through His acts of service and acts of suffering to summon unbelievers to become disciples and so that believers would understand what it means to be committed followers of Jesus.

**Back to the Origins**

STORY: There was an old story of a man who was wounded by an arrow. He wanted to know where the arrow was made and what material and its price and the name and the history of the man who shot him before he can receive any medical help. He sadly died because the arrow had a deadly poison.

LESSON: What comes first [should be] our care for our life; looking at the origins of ideas and events does not help us.

*The good news – Gospels – are good and joyful because they can change our life.*

**Geography**

The Gospel of Mark does show detailed knowledge of the geography of Palestine. (See. Randel Helms writes concerning Mark 11:1 (*Who Wrote the Gospels?* p. 6): "Anyone approaching Jerusalem from Jericho would come first to Bethany and then Bethphage, not the reverse. This is one of several passages showing that Mark knew little about Palestine; we must assume, Dennis Nineham (former lecturer in Cambridge) argues, that “Mark did not know the relative positions of these two villages on the Jericho road” (1963, pp, 294-295).

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Nineham states the following on the provenance (*origin or derivation – ed.*) of the Gospel of Mark (*Saint Mark*, pp. 42-43): "of all the places suggested Rome has been by far the most popular, and, so far as the evidence permits of any conclusion, it is perhaps the most likely.

But in the entire NT there is no description of Jesus himself, how he was dressed, his habits, the languages he spoke other than Aramaic. This does not mean that Jesus was not a historical person.

When reporting good news where do we think where do we look for the focus?

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