

Peter's Scribe: St. Mark and his Gospel

By Steve Ray

His voice boomed over the crowds in Rome as they had all around the Empire. The large fisherman was aging but his voice was still filled with intensity and conviction. The thronging crowds listened with curiosity. Rome was the hub of the civilized world and Peter preached the message of a Jewish rabbi named Jesus from the far away country of Israel. Many in the crowd had believed in Jesus and had become part of this new society called the Church—the Church of which Peter was the acknowledged head. Standing at his side was his fellow-worker and secretary John Mark.

(Picture: Peter preaching in Rome; Mark writing down his gospel)



Mark was his Roman name, John his Jewish. He lived in Jerusalem with his mother Mary and associated with the apostles (Acts 12:12). As Barnabas' cousin, he had been one of Paul's first missionary companions around AD 45 (Acts 13:5; Co 4:10), but left Paul and for a time and journeyed with Barnabas (Acts 15:37). Mark later ministered again with Paul (Philem 24; 2 Tim 4:11) around ad 61, this time in Rome, sarcastically named "Babylon", where he was Peter's fellow-worker and interpreter (1 Pet 5:13). Peter probably baptized Mark himself since he calls him his son. Peter sent Mark to preach the Gospel in Egypt and today the largest church in Cairo is dedicated to St. Mark who first brought the Gospel.

From Eusebius (c. 260–c. 340) we learn that, "So brightly shone the light of true religion on the minds of Peter's hearers that, not satisfied with a single hearing or with the oral teaching of the divine message, they resorted to appeals of every kind to induce Mark (whose gospel we have), as he was a follower of Peter, to leave them in writing a summary of the instruction they had received by word of mouth, nor did they let him go till they had persuaded him, and thus became responsible for the writing of what is known as the Gospel according to Mark. It is said that, on learning by revelation of the spirit what had happened, the apostle was delighted at their enthusiasm and authorized the reading of the book in the churches" (*The History of the Church* 2, 15). (Endnote 1)

St. Peter gave Mark the first-hand account of “all that Jesus said and did” and the Holy Spirit inspired Mark to put it in writing. So, as we read the Gospel of Mark we are reading the oral teaching of the great Apostle Peter who was now a very humble man. In each of the other Gospels Peter holds a place of great prominence (walking on water, given the keys, renamed “Rock”, appointed shepherd, etc.) but none of this is found in Peter’s preaching. In Mark we only read of Peter’s weaknesses and failures—he has learned humility and leaves it to others to promote his unique authority.

Writing for a primarily Roman audience, Mark emphasizes the power and action of Jesus, something the Romans knew and respected. In the RSV New Testament, the word “immediately” is used 75 times, an amazing 35 of which are in the Gospel of Mark. Romans were men of action, power, and orderliness. Jesus is shown to be in complete control and on the move. That Mark is writing to a non-Jewish audience is apparent from the fact that his Jewish terminology is translated and the geography of Israel is explained; in fact, twice Mark gives a Latin explanation for a Greek word (Mk 12:42; 15:16). Twice Jesus limits his ministry to Jews in Matthew’s gospel saying, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt 15:24), but you will not find this in Mark; rather, you find Jesus ministering to crowds from Gentile lands (Mk 3:8–10). And, it is a Roman centurion who concludes the Gospel with the declaration, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”

In writing to the Romans, Mark is spreading Peter’s message to the whole Gentile world. He is demonstrating the divinity of Jesus through the powerful miracles and control over nature and the spirit world. Matthew and John emphasize the *teaching* of Jesus; Mark emphasizes Jesus’ action and powerful miracles that only God could perform. In fact, Mark’s gospel opens the first chapter, “immediately” with Jesus performing miracles. In Mark’s gospel there is no Sermon on the Mount or hierarchical Church, no Petrine primacy or High Priestly prayers—Mark invests all his energy into proving the power and divinity of Jesus. He leaves the rest to the other apostles and inspired writers. His main goal is not so much to present Jesus as the Messiah of the Jews, but, speaking to the Romans, he is more interested in demonstrating Jesus as the Lord of history and master of creation.

There is no genealogy given in Mark. Jesus is the servant of God and servants need no genealogical introductions. However, Mark tells us straightforward that Jesus is not only a servant, but an obedient son. He opens his Gospel with the revealing words “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” which tips his hand right from the start: the theme is set. Even a demon blurts out—“You are the Son of God!” The Gospel concludes with the same affirmation of Jesus’ identity, this time by a Roman centurion, a leading man of the very nationality Peter and Mark are trying to convert and teach. At the foot of the cross the worldly, political, Roman centurion declares, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” Mark, like John, frames his Gospel with these statements to make his intent for writing the Gospel clear. Jesus is not your average Jew—he is

literally the unique Son of the Living God. The Gospels were not written primarily to relay history, as the twentieth century knows history, but they are primarily theological works of historical accuracy intended to teach about Jesus and elicit faith in him.

A key verse in Mark which summarizes the whole Gospel falls from the lips of Jesus, “For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). Jesus is the servant. In Matthew’s gospel Jesus is presented as the king reigning over the kingdom of God, but in Mark’s gospel, he came not as royalty, but as a servant, laying down his life for others. This is the emphasis here. Jesus came to do the will of his Father and expend himself.

Halfway through the Gospel we notice a change. In the first half, Jesus reaches out to the Jewish nation and, interestingly enough, to the Gentiles. Whereas in the second half, after Peter acknowledges by divine revelation that Jesus is the Messiah, the emphasis changes. Jesus now concentrates, much like in the Gospel of John, on training his specially chosen disciples in preparation for the Passion and beyond.

(Picture: Mark preaching and establishing the Church in Egypt)



Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the *Synoptic Gospels*: from *syn*-together or similar, and *-optic*, vision or seeing. These three gospels are similar and see things together. Mark is the shortest gospel with only 746 verses, compared to 1068 in Matthew and 1140 in Luke. Almost all of Mark’s verses are included in the other two gospels, except for a mere 50 verses exclusive to Mark. This was one reason why Mark’s gospel was the least used in antiquity and St. Augustine even referred to Mark as “the abbreviator of Matthew”. Realizing Mark’s gospel may have been the first Greek gospel written and possibly a source for the others, it has found great favor with modern scholars and students of Scripture.

The ending of Mark is somewhat uncertain with several extant endings. Though not proven to be the words of Mark himself, the longer version included in Catholic and most other Bibles has early support (e.g., Tatian, St. Irenaeus), and the decree on Scripture at the Council of Trent removed any doubt for Catholics as to the longer version’s inclusion in the sacred text, and therefore its inspiration (*Denzinger*, no. 784).

Mark's gospel is a gem of simplicity, fast-paced action, and intimate knowledge of the truth. It is picturesque, written in the manner of simple folks without the polished linguistics of other New Testament writers. One can imagine the big fisherman speaking rapidly and passionately to a crowd in Rome. He is thinking in Aramaic, his original language, yet trying to relay his eyewitness account realistically and convincingly so they can understand in their native tongue. Peter, not the intellectual giant but the average working man, gesticulates with his calloused hands as he tells them the Good News, what he experienced, what impressed him. And there at his side is his trusted friend Mark interpreting and writing so that twenty centuries later we could believe from the mouth of an eyewitness that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

Text Box: Papias (c. 60—130) wrote, “This, too, the presbyter used to say. ‘Mark, who had been Peter’s interpreter, wrote down carefully, but not in order, all that he remembered of the Lord’s sayings and doings. For he had not heard the Lord or been one of His followers, but later, as I said, one of Peter’s. Peter used to adapt his teachings to the occasion, without making a systematic arrangement of the Lord’s sayings, so that Mark was quite justified in writing down some things just as he remembered them. For he had one purpose only to leave out nothing that he had heard, and to make no misstatement about it’ (Eusebius, *History of the Church* 3, 39). (Endnote 2)

Text Box: “The principle purpose of St. Mark is enunciated in the first verse of his Gospel: ‘The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.’ His aim is identical with the preaching of St. Peter, who declares that Jesus Christ is ‘the Lord of all’ (Acts 10:34–43), and thus his entire Gospel serves to prove the divinity of Christ” (John Steinmueller, *A Companion to Scripture Studies*, 3:85).

Endnotes:

1. Pg. 49 in the Penguin Classics edition.
2. Staniforth’s translation in Penguin Classics, pg. 103-104.