

# MARK

**“When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark” (Acts 12:25).**

Johanan (John) and Marcus (Mark) were among the most common Hebrew and Roman names in the first century. At that time, it wasn't unusual to have both a Hebrew and a Roman name. For example, in the Acts of the Apostles Luke makes clear which “Mary” he means in his use of “John Mark:” **“When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying” (Acts 12:12).** Mark's mother, Mary, owned a home in Jerusalem where the early Christians used to meet and where the disciples stayed after the Ascension (Acts 1:13).

Mark or John Mark was not an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry, but was Peter's “secretary” or scribe. As such, the Gospel of Mark is essentially the result of Peter having dictated his life experiences with Jesus to Mark. Indeed, one can sense see Peter's well-known impetuous manner in Mark's composition of the life of Jesus, for it practically glows with Peter's enthusiasm in preaching the Good News. As a young evangelist, Mark also accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey.

Everywhere throughout Mark's Gospel there is a certain attention to detail. While the gospels of Matthew and Luke record that certain men carried the paralytic to Jesus, Peter tells us they were exactly four in number (Mark 2:3). When the disciples were in the boat with Jesus, Peter alone notices that there was only one loaf for them all (Mark 8:14). At the healing of Jairus' daughter, Peter attests that she was twelve years old, and that the little girl did not simply rise at Jesus' command, but that she **“got up and started walking”** as children would naturally do (Mark 5:42). And after the Transfiguration, at the foot of Mount Tabor, while the scene of the possessed boy is sketched rather lightly in Matthew and Luke, Mark's gospel gives a more vivid account: the boy writhes at Jesus' feet, foams at the mouth, and grinds his teeth (Mark 9:17-20).

## **Date of composition: A.D. 68 – 70**

Although Matthew is traditionally considered the first written gospel, Mark is actually the oldest. One reason Matthew is often listed first is because it was the most frequently referenced gospel among the early Christians. This is likely because Matthew—the Jewish tax collector and later Apostle—wrote his gospel largely for Jewish-Christians, and so naturally he quotes often from the Old Testament. Certainly the former Jews who were now Christians would have appreciated Matthew's use of the Hebrew Scriptures.

However, another reason for Mark being listed after Matthew is that Mark is significantly *shorter* than the other gospels. Mark comprises only sixteen chapters compared to Matthew's twenty-eight, Luke's twenty-four, and John's twenty-one. So short, in fact, is Mark that St. Augustine considered it a mere *abbreviation* of Matthew. As such, because Mark's lack of structure and organizing theme was considered not as “developed” or refined as the other gospels, no one bothered to write a commentary on Mark until the sixth century. Furthermore, Mark has no account of Jesus' birth or Resurrection. On this point alone later Christians considered the lack of a Resurrection account such a serious omission that they relegated Mark *after* Matthew.



The lion is Mark's symbol because the voice of John the Baptist early in his gospel rises like a roar: **“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness”** (Mk. 1:3; Isa. 40:3).

Also, Mark has a number of “problem passages” or difficult statements of Jesus which Matthew and Luke edit before including them in their gospels. For example, in Mark 4:11-12, Jesus explains why he often speaks in parables: **“To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again and be forgiven.”** In Matthew the same passage reads, **“This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand”** (Matthew 13:13). And in Luke: **“To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but for others they are in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand”** (Luke 8:10). The point is that in all three gospels Jesus is preaching God’s judgment—a judgment the people reject. However, Mark wants to make clear that it is due to their stubbornness of heart that the *message* itself causes the people to be blind and deaf to the call to repent; and if there is no repentance, *then* there can be no forgiveness of sins.

Finally, Mark was written first among the gospels because eighty percent of Mark’s verses are reproduced in Matthew, and sixty-five percent of them are reproduced in Luke.

**Place of composition:** traditionally believed to be Rome, during Emperor Nero’s persecution of the Christians.

**Audience:** Gentile Christians living in Rome because Mark carefully explains Jewish customs and traditions to a mostly non-Jewish audience. There is no reference to the Law or expressed compliance with Jewish customs. Instead, Mark explains Jewish traditions and customs to a Gentile audience. Mark also translates Hebrew terms, and he gives the value of Jewish money in Roman currency. Mark also refers to the “River Jordan,” and that the Mount of Olives is located opposite the Temple, both of which Jews would have already known (Mark 3:17; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 14:36; 15:22, 34).

**Sources:** According to Bishop Papias of Hierapolis (south central Turkey), Mark’s main source was indeed the preaching and teaching of Peter. Papias, a disciple of St. John, wrote in A.D. 125: *“Mark, having been the interpreter of Peter, wrote accurately, though not in order, all that he remembered of the things said or done by the Lord. For he had neither heard the Lord nor been his follower, but afterwards, as I said, he was a follower of Peter, who gave his instructions as circumstances demanded, but not as one giving an orderly account of the words of the Lord. So that Mark was not at fault in writing certain things as he remembered them. For he was concerned with only one thing, not to omit anything of the things he had heard, and not to record any untruth in regard to them.”*



St. Peter and St. Paul

The setting of Mark’s gospel is primarily the Galilean countryside where Jesus spent most of His ministry (Mark 1:1-9:50). In Mark, Jesus travels only once to Jerusalem where he is crucified and rises from the dead (Mark 10:1—16:8). About a third of Mark is an account of the eight days between Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem and his Resurrection.

Mark’s gospel begins with John the Baptist and Jesus’ temptation in the desert, followed by Jesus’ first proclamation of the Good News in Galilee: **“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel”** (Mark 1:15). As the shortest of the gospels,

there is an unmistakable sense of urgency in Mark, for he uses the word *euthus* (Greek, “immediately” or “directly”) some forty-one times. This urgency is no doubt fueled by the terrible persecution that followed the burning of Rome in late July, A.D. 64. Rome’s citizens blamed Nero, who in turn blamed the Christians:

*“But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order (from Nero). Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called “Chrestians” by the populace. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired” (Tacitus, Roman historian, A.D. 56-118).*

Such was the bloody background to Mark’s gospel—a life of Christ intended to strengthen the faith of the early Christians suffering persecution. No wonder Mark’s gospel emphasizes Jesus’ Cross and the taking up of one’s own cross.

Another key word in Mark is *exousia* (Greek, “authority”). Everything Jesus does he does with authority, such as his first time teaching in the Capernaum synagogue: **“The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law”** (Mark 1:22).

Another unique characteristic of Mark’s gospel is its simple objectivity. Mark is not reflective or concerned with chronology or psychology. Rather Mark reads more like a “transcript” of the life of Jesus. There is a simple, natural development to his gospel, beginning with Jesus’ baptism and temptation in the desert. From there Mark gives us “a day in the life” of Jesus, revealing his popularity as a teacher and healer. Then follows a series of incidents in which Jesus clashes with the authorities—an opposition that slowly intensifies until his arrest in Gethsemane.

Mark is also fond of numbers: Jesus’ temptation in the desert lasts forty days (1:13); a woman suffers a hemorrhage for twelve years (5:25); the disciples are referred to as “the Twelve” (6:7; 10:32; 14:10, 20); the disciples are sent out two by two (6:7); feeding the five thousand would cost two hundred denarii (6:37); and the ointment Mary uses to anoint Jesus costs three hundred denarii (14:5).

For all of these reasons, Mark’s plain, direct style of writing had popular appeal, especially for the practically-minded Romans. For Mark, the gospel points more so to Jesus’ deeds rather than his words, which is also a reflection of Peter who was likewise a man of action. Mark’s gospel reads like a breathless narrative of the kingdom of God now breaking into the world; and Mark invites his readers to embark on the same journey that he and the disciples have begun, and who have committed their whole life to him.

### **Mark’s portrait of Jesus**

Mark highlights Jesus’ unfailing kindness and willingness to help; no one who appeals to him is left unanswered. Little children receive a blessing from his hands; and the outcast members of society (e.g., lepers) know that he truly understands their plight.



Emperor Nero of Rome  
(A.D. 54-68)

Jesus' courage and determination are also apparent. He shows no fear in the presence of demoniacs. Purposefully, Jesus enters the Temple precincts, overturning tables and driving out moneychangers. And when the scribes and Pharisees try to entrap him in his speech, Jesus calmly escapes their best efforts. Until the last hours of his life, when he stands before the high priest and then Pontius Pilate, Jesus remains every inch a king.

Mark endeavors to portray the personality of Jesus in such a way that the suffering, persecuted Church may persevere and remain faithful (Hebrews 12:3). For Jesus Christ is the Son of God proclaimed by the heavenly Father (1:11; 9:7), by demons who know him (3:11; 5:7), and by Jesus himself (12:6; 14:61). This is the "messianic secret" that is particular to Mark, in that Jesus intentionally keeps quiet his true identity in order to proceed without hindrance to Jerusalem, where the "secret" will be revealed in the Resurrection.

### **The miracles of Jesus**

Unlike Matthew's gospel which recalls how the Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus, Mark simply wants to give an account of his life. Included in this account are eighteen miracles, which is more than any other gospel, including some not found in the other gospels: the curing of the deaf and dumb man (7:32-37), and the blind man whom Jesus cures with his saliva (8:22-26). In fact, so much does Mark stress Jesus' miracles that his gospel is called the "Gospel of miracles"—miracles which Mark hopes will appeal to the recently converted Christians of Rome to accept more readily the divinity of Jesus.

Jesus does not preach a Sermon on the Mount as in Matthew, nor does he give a lengthy discourse on the Bread of Life as in John (Matthew 5:1-7:29; John 6:25-71). Instead, for Mark, the life and deeds of Jesus are the very gospel of God (1:8, 35; 10:29). As Jesus expected his listeners to see themselves and their situations in the parables, so Mark expects his readers to see themselves reflected in the crowds that followed Jesus. After Jesus calms the storm, the disciples' question, "**Who then is this?**" is the key question (4:41). Mark gives the answer both at the beginning of his gospel—"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" . . . "**Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased**" (1:1, 11)—and at the end, in the words of the Roman centurion at the Cross: "**Truly this man was the Son of God**" (15:39).

### **Mark's two endings**

On the third day after Jesus' death and burial, Mark describes an angel announcing to the women who have come to anoint his body that Jesus has risen from the dead. The women hastily leave the tomb in fear and silence (Mark 16:1-8). According to the earliest manuscripts this is where Mark's gospel ends. However, the longer ending—verses 9-20—appears in our Bibles today, and often with the footnote that these last verses are not in the earliest manuscripts. Scripture scholars are virtually unanimous, that these last verses were written by a Christian of the late first or early second century who sought to "remedy" the abrupt ending of verse eight. The Church accepts this addition because the Holy Spirit's inspiration is not limited to the original writer, but encompasses each biblical book in its final edited form.