

MARK

Mark or John Mark was not an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry, but was Peter's "secretary" or scribe. As a young evangelist, Mark also accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey. 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).

In the 1st century Johanan or John was among the most common Hebrew names, and Marcus or Mark was among the most common Roman names. At that time it wasn't unusual to have both a Hebrew and a Roman name (Paul's Hebrew name was Saul, Acts 13:9)). For example, in the Acts of the Apostles Luke makes clear which "Mary" he means and so he uses "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). Luke also uses "John Mark" when speaking of Paul's first missionary journey: **"When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark"** (Acts 12:25).

Date of composition: A.D. 68-70

Although Matthew has traditionally been considered the first written gospel, Mark is actually the oldest. One reason Matthew's gospel is often listed first is because it was the most frequently referenced 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 quotes numerous times from the Old Testament. Former Jews now Christians would have appreciated Matthew's use of the Hebrew Scriptures.

However another reason for Mark's place 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, no one bothered to write a commentary on Mark until the 6th century, because Mark's lack of structure and organizing theme was considered not as "developed" or refined as the other gospels. 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.

Finally, 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



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).

stubbornness of heart that the *message* itself cause 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.

In the end, Mark is the first written gospel. Eighty percent of Mark's verses are reproduced in Matthew, and sixty-five percent 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 (3:17; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 14:36; 15:22, 34).

Sources: According to Bishop Papius of Hierapolis (south central Turkey), Mark's main source was the preaching and teaching of Peter. Papias, a disciple of St. John, wrote in A.D. 125: *"Mark, having been the interpreter 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

Mark's gospel is set primarily in the Galilean countryside where Jesus spends most of His ministry (Mark 1:1-9:50). In fact, Jesus travels only once to Jerusalem in Mark, 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 begins with John the Baptist and Jesus' temptation in the desert, followed by Jesus' first proclamation 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 of the Christians at the time. In late July, A.D. 64, Rome was consumed by a great fire, for which 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 gospel which was intended to strengthen the faith of the early Christians in the midst of 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 characteristics of Mark's gospel is its simple objectivity. Mark is not reflective or concerned with chronology or psychology. Instead 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 was fond of numbers: Jesus' Temptation in the Desert lasted 40 days (1:13); a woman suffered with a hemorrhage for 12 years (5:25); a favorite expression for the disciples is "the Twelve" (6:7; 10:32; 14:10, 20); the disciples are sent out two by two (6:7); feeding five thousand would cost 200 denarii (6:37); and the ointment Mary used to anoint Jesus cost 300 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 points to Jesus' deeds rather than His words, which is also reflective of Peter who is likewise a man of action. Mark invites his readers to embark on the same journey that he and the disciples have begun—the adventure of learning who Jesus is and committing one's whole life to Him. Mark's gospel is like a breathless narrative of the kingdom of God now breaking upon the human scene.

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.

Jesus' courage and determination are also apparent. He shows no fear in the presence of wild demoniacs. Purposefully Jesus enters the Jerusalem Temple, 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 Pontius Pilate, Jesus is every inch a king.

Mark's purpose is 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.



Emperor Nero of Rome
A.D. 54-68

Jesus' miracles

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 of Jesus, more than any other gospel, and 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 He omits major sections of the other gospels, such as the Sermon on the Mount and those parables where Jesus explains important aspects of the life of the Church. Accordingly Mark's gospel is called the "Gospel of miracles"—miracles which Mark believes will help the Gentile Christians of Rome to see more clearly the divinity of Jesus.

In sum, for Mark the life and deeds of Jesus are the very gospel of God (1:8, 35; 10:29). Jesus does not preach a Sermon on the Mount as in Matthew, nor give a lengthy discourse on the Bread of Life as in John (Matthew 5:1-7:29; John 6:25-71). As Jesus expected His listeners to see themselves and their situations in His parables, so Mark expects his readers to see themselves reflected in the disciples and in the crowds that came to Him. After Jesus calms the storm, the disciples' question, "**Who then is this?**" is in fact 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 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 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. 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.