



The Gospel According to St. Mark

Lesson 2

Lesson 2 Commentary **Mark 1:1 – 1:45**

Lesson 3 Questions **Mark 2:1 – 5:43**

Introduction

The first chapter of Mark is very fast moving. While the events covered are familiar to us, Mark keeps events short and succinct/to the point. For instance, the temptation of Jesus in Matthew and Luke cover eleven and thirteen verses, respectively. St. Mark covers the same event in just two verses. Mark mentions nothing about the genealogy of Jesus and there is no discussion of His birth or the visitations of the shepherds or the Magi. It is situations like this that have led scholars to the “two-source” theory. One can note that the words of Mark in the temptation story are close to the words of Matthew and Luke. However, then you can see a great deal of duplication between Matthew and Luke outside of Mark. That duplication between Matthew and Luke are what some scholars believe are contained in Q. The information in Matthew and Luke that are not duplicated and are not found in Mark is generally referred to as “Special Matthew” and “Special Luke.” Examples of Special Matthew and Special Luke would be the two visitation events. In Matthew, the Magi visit the infant Jesus. In Luke, the shepherds visit the infant Jesus. Regardless of all these theories, the key point to remember is that there is ONE Gospel depicted by four different human authors inspired by the same Holy Spirit.

The Prologue

The first fifteen verses of Mark are generally referred to as the Prologue. Right off the bat, Mark declares that Jesus Christ is the *Son of God*. This is a major theme of Mark. Note how Matthew does not use this language, but rather calls Jesus Christ the *son of David, the son of Abraham*. One of Matthew’s major themes is Jesus as the messianic King. Luke does not use a title in his opening section and John calls Jesus the *Word of God*. These differences between the writers are an example of how the Holy Spirit allowed the human authors to use their own faculties to write.

One last point is that the first verse has no verb. Because of this, many view the first verse to be a title, rather than a verse, originally.

Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark has no infancy narrative or genealogy. Mark starts with the preaching of John the Baptist. He begins with a verse attributed to Isaiah, the prophet. Some early manuscripts leave out the reference to Isaiah and simply reference “the prophets,” which may be more accurate. It reads, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Interestingly, this is not a quote from Isaiah, alone. It is a combined quote from three OT passages, Isaiah 40:3, Exodus 23:20, and Malachi 3:1.

- Isaiah 40:3 – “A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.””
- Exodus 23:20 – “I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.”
- Malachi 3:1 – “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.”

The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible provides the following explanation.

“The Exodus passage recalls how Yahweh appointed a messenger (angel) to lead Israel from the slavery of Egypt to the safety of the Promised Land. Isaiah projects this memory from the distant past into the future, announcing that both Israel and the nations will experience a New Exodus in the messianic age. Preparations are in order for a new Deliverer, the Suffering Servant, who will bring the nations from the darkness of sin and idolatry to the light of Mt. Zion. Malachi’s oracle presents the dark side of this scenario, warning Jerusalem that the coming of the messianic Lord will mean disaster if the shepherds of Israel are unprepared to welcome his arrival. For Mark, these passages are linked together by a common call to prepare the “way” of the Lord: John is the herald who points out the “way” of this New Exodus, while Jesus is the “Lord” and Suffering Servant who accomplishes it.”¹

Unlike Matthew who quotes the OT extensively, Mark does not normally quote from the OT as the narrator. This is the only time this happens in Mark.²

In verse 6, we read, “Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.” This verse shows two specific things about John.

¹ Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 65.

² Hahn and Mitch, *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament*, 65.

First, his appearance is reminiscent of Elijah. 2 King 1:8 reads, “They answered him, “A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist.” He said, “It is Elijah the Tishbite.”” It also shows that John is obedient to the Laws of Moses. In Leviticus 11:22-23 we read, “Of them you may eat: the locust according to its kind, the bald locust according to its kind, the cricket according to its kind, and the grasshopper according to its kind. But all other winged insects that have four feet are detestable to you.”

There has been a great deal of debate about the origin of John’s baptism. There is no real precedence for it in the OT other than the rituals of purification which “are self-administered and repeated frequently, while John is the agent of a baptism that is not repeated, prepares for the eschaton, and implies moral conversion.”³ John Meier suggests that John’s baptism was original (that is, created and instituted by John the Baptist). “Hence I think it more likely that John saw his baptism as (1) acting out the candidate’s repentance and pledge of new life as well as (2) symbolically proclaiming, anticipating, and assuring the cleansing from sin that the holy spirit would effect on the last day when it was poured out like water on the repentant sinner by the stronger one [Jesus Christ].”⁴

If John’s baptism is one of repentance for the forgiveness of sin, why would Christ be baptized? He was without sin! CCC 536 tells us: “The baptism of Jesus is on his part the acceptance and inauguration of his mission as God’s suffering Servant. *He allows himself to be numbered among sinners*; he is already “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (emphasis added).

In verse 10, Mark makes an interesting word choice. Depending on your translation, Jesus saw the heaven “opened” or “torn open” or “torn apart.” The Greek word used is *σχίζω* (transliterated *schizo*). The word elicits a much more violent action than just “opens.” The only other time that Mark uses that word is in verse 15:38. “And the curtain of the temple was torn (*schizo*) in two, from top to bottom.” Also, in verse 10 and, again in 12, we see the first two occurrences of an often-used term by Mark. The Greek term is *εὐθύς* (transliterated *euthys*). Depending on the translation, it may be translated as “immediately,” or “just as,” or “at once,” etc. (As stated earlier, Mark is very fast moving. Things happen quickly. There appears to be a “time is of the essence” theme throughout.) To help with this, Mark provides transition sentences like verses 14 and 15, where we see John’s mission ending and Jesus’ mission beginning. These verses conclude the Prologue and take us into the public ministry of Jesus.

³ John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 2, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 62.

⁴ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew, Rethinking the Historical Jesus: Volume Two, Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1994), 55.

The Beginning of Jesus' Public Ministry

The first step in the public ministry of Christ was the calling of the first four Apostles – Simon, Andrew, James, and John – who were all fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. We will get to the location of the events, below, but why would Jesus choose these men? All were fishermen. A Jew living at the time of Christ would likely have seen this (probably in retrospect) as a Messianic act. Turning to Jeremiah 16:14-16, we read: “Therefore, the days are surely coming, says the LORD, when it shall no longer be said, “As the LORD lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of Egypt,” but “As the LORD lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the lands where he had driven them.” For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their ancestors. *I am now sending for many fishermen, says the LORD, and they shall catch them ...*”

Notice in verse 1:21 that they went to Capernaum. We will see that Capernaum is where Jesus and the Apostles set up shop. Now, let's think about the important places in Israel. Bethlehem is the birthplace of Jesus and King David. Jerusalem is the capital and has an unbelievable history. Jerusalem certainly would have warranted being the “beginning” of Christ's public ministry. Why Capernaum? He does not seem interested in providing explanations except when explaining Jewish customs. To get a hint as to why, one must look at Matthew. Matthew 4:12-16 reads:

“Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.””

In Jesus's time, this citation from Isaiah 9:1-2 was understood to be a prophecy about where the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel was supposed to begin. Guess where Capernaum is? It is very near the intersection of Zebulun and Naphtali. When you read Mark 2:1, you see that Jesus considers Capernaum as home.

Next, we read about the man with the unclean spirit that enters the synagogue. The possessed man identifies Jesus as the “Holy One of God.” Jesus silences the demon and casts the demon out of the man. This will not be the last time that Jesus tries to hide his identity in Mark. In fact, it has a name – “the messianic secret.” *The Ignatius Study Bible* gives a good explanation of this.

“The “messianic secret” is a leading theme in Mark. Jesus frequently enjoins silence on demons (1:25, 34; 3:12) and men (5:43; 7:36; 8:30; 9:9) to conceal his identity as the Messiah (CCC 439). Several considerations account for this strategy. (1) Jesus wanted to avoid a sensationalist reputation of being no more than a wonder-worker. Publicizing his deeds by word of mouth comes with the danger that rumors will begin to disconnect his miracles from his saving message. (2) He wanted to sidestep popular expectations that the Messiah would be a political and military leader. (3) He did not wish to ignite the wrath of his enemies before the appointed time of his Passion.”⁵

Like the third option, “To many Jews in the first century AD, the titles “Messiah” and “Son of God” carried political overtones. If Jesus had identified Himself as a messianic king, Pilate would have been forced to eliminate Him and His followers for fear that they might incite an insurrection”⁶

Note that verses 21 through 38 all happen within a single 24-hour period? Mark is not known for giving time references the way that you find in Matthew, Luke, and John. For instance, in John, one sees that Jesus travelled to Jerusalem on three distinct occasions to celebrate Passover. This is the reason that most scholars believe that His public ministry lasted three years. Mark does not do this. On the morning of the Sabbath (Saturday morning) he enters the synagogue to teach (verse 21). We know this because, according to custom, the Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday and the service is held the first thing on Saturday morning. After casting out the unclean spirit, he “immediately” leaves the synagogue (verse 29) and goes to Simon’s house and heals Simon’s mother-in-law. Jesus must have stayed at the house the entire Sabbath because observant Jews of the time would not do anything that was considered “work” on the Sabbath. But what happens at sundown? The Sabbath ends at sundown on Saturday. It would have been a great deal of work to bring “him all who were sick or possessed with demons (verse 32).” The next morning, before daybreak (verse 35), Jesus goes to pray. Then Simon finds Jesus and they have a conversation (verses 36-38). Was Mark trying to send us a message? I think Mark is showing (1) that Jesus followed the laws of Moses and (2) that Jesus built in time, even in the middle of the night, to pray.

The last event of Chapter 1 deals with Jesus curing a leper. First of all, leprosy in the Bible is not always what we think as leprosy in today’s world. Leprosy today is known as Hansen’s disease. “In Scripture, the term “leprosy” is used for a wide variety of skin diseases or conditions as well as lesions or infections that might occur on the skin, on fabrics, and even on the walls of houses (Lev 13:47–59; 14:33–53).”⁷ These skin diseases made the victim unclean

⁵ Hahn and Mitch, *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament*, 67–68.

⁶ Brendon R. Witte, “Messianic Secret,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

⁷ Scott Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 2009), 535.

for worshipping and they were separated from the general population. Leviticus 13 outlines Israel's response to leprosy. Most importantly, if an observant Jew touched a leper, the observant Jew also became unclean and purification was necessary. In other words, the uncleanliness of the leper was stronger than the cleanliness (or holiness) of the observant Jew. But what happens here? Jesus' holiness is stronger! His cleanliness overcomes the uncleanliness of the leper and the leper is cured.

One final point related to this event is found in verse 41. After the leper "prays" to Jesus, we read in verse 41, "*Moved with pity*, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean! (emphasis added)" The Greek word translated as "moved with pity" is *ὀργίζω* (transliterated as *orgizo*). This word is used eighteen times in the NT and this is the only time it is translated "moved with pity." In every other case it is translated as "anger," or "angered," or "angry," or "raged," or "enraged." Why would the translator use "moved with pity" in this case? It seems obvious based on His reaction that He was not angry with the leper. Some scholars have suggested that Jesus was angry because the leper interrupted his teaching or that the leper was treating him as the Messiah (see the messianic secret discussion, above) or that the leper doubted Jesus' ability to clean him. However, this interpretation does not fit with Jesus's word or actions in response to the leper's request. If Jesus was angry, it was at the isolation of the lepers by the Jewish community at the time and the lack of compassion for the sick. One other explanation that would fit, in my opinion, is "indignation at the disease or the evil power which caused the disease."⁸

⁸ Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Mark*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 66.

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 3
Mark 2:1 – 5:43

Day 1 – Just as Jesus had to rise before daybreak to find time to speak to his Father, rise before light and pray!

Day 2 – Scan the lecture notes. Write down one or two points that you consider most interesting.

Day 3 – Read Mark chapter 2

What do you notice about verse 5 and how might we equate it to the sacraments? (Hint: Who's faith heals the paralytic?)

After reading Mark, read Daniel chapter 7. Any thoughts on what is going on here? (Hint: Jesus, for the first time, calls Himself the "Son of Man.")

After reading Mark, read 1 Samuel 21:1-6 and 1 Kings 2:26-27. What do you notice? (Hint: There appears to be a discrepancy between the Old Testament and the New Testament.)

Day 4 – Read Mark chapter 3

After reading Mark, read Matthew 10:2-4, Luke 6:14-16, and Acts 1:13. What are the similarities and differences? Can you come up with an explanation for the differences?

Day 5 – Read Mark chapter 4

After reading Mark, read Psalms 107:23-30. What are your thoughts on the similarities between this and Mark 4:37-41? (Hint: Who calms the storm in Psalms?)

Day 6 – Read Mark chapter 5

What similarities do you notice between Jairus' daughter and the hemorrhaging woman?