



## The Gospel According to St. Mark

### Lesson 1

**Lesson 1 Commentary**      **Context and Overview**  
**Lesson 2 Questions**      **Mark 1:1 – 1:45**

### Gospels

Just as all books of the bible, the four Gospels are divinely inspired. Catechism of the Catholic Church (hereafter referred to as “CCC”) 125 tells us, “The Gospels are the heart of all the Scriptures ‘because they are our principal source for the life and teaching of the Incarnate Word, our Savior.’” CCC 126 goes on to tell us that there were three phases to the development of the Gospels – (1) the actual life and teachings of Jesus, (2) the transmission of the life and teachings of Jesus through oral tradition, and (3) the writing of the four Gospels by the human authors and the Holy Spirit. Dei Verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, (hereafter referred to as DV) 11 states, “In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by Him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted.” One need only look at the individual Gospels for a matter of minutes and determine that they are not identical. In fact, a great deal of ink has been spilled comparing the individual Gospels to each other. One of the best books illustrating the differences and similarities, in my opinion, is *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* edited by Kurt Aland. For example, have you ever wondered why Matthew, a Jewish tax collector, would describe a visitation by Gentile Magi (the three wise men), while Luke, a Gentile physician, would describe a visitation by Jewish shepherds? Does this constitute a “disagreement” or does it constitute a theme used by the respective human authors that the divine author wanted to affirm? I choose to believe the latter. Upon analysis of the individual Gospels, there are reasons why Matthew and Luke chose to cite their respective visitations. That does not mean that either is wrong. Both visitations probably occurred!

Another debate that rages is related to the order of the Gospels. Tradition holds that the order in the Bible is the order of writing (that is, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). Both tradition and scholarship appear to agree that John was written last. However, the majority in scholarship would contend that Mark was written first, then Matthew and Luke, independent of each other,

used Mark and a second source called Q (from the German word *Quelle*, meaning “source”), which has not survived. At times, I will compare the Gospels to illustrate a specific point. Interestingly, the Apostolic Fathers were often reluctant to speak of Gospels based on Galatians 1:6-8.

“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!”

The point being is that there is ONE Gospel written using the faculties of four different human authors. Look at John 21:25. “But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”

One point related to the next section is whether the Gospels were circulated “anonymously,” and were later attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John so that they would be considered “authoritative.” However, this argument is weak for several reasons, not the least of which is “why these authors.” Why would you attribute a Gospel to Matthew? Yes, he was an Apostle, but he was a tax collector hated by the common Jew. He is only mentioned a few times and never in a position of authority. Why would you attribute a Gospel to Mark or Luke? They were not Apostles or even mentioned in any of the Gospels. Why not attribute it to Peter (in the case of Mark) or Paul (in the case of Luke). It should be noted that there have been no “anonymous” versions of any of the Gospels ever found. In addition, there are no documented “rival” claims to authorship. The Apostolic Fathers are unanimous on the authors of the Gospels.

### Authorship

The Church’s tradition is that the author of the second Gospel was Mark, a disciple of Peter. 1 Peter 5:13 reads, “Your sister church in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings; and so does *my son Mark* (emphasis added).” Scholars have also noted that if one looks at Peter’s sermon in Acts 10:36-43 and looks at Mark’s Gospel, the general outlines are similar. “Outside the NT, several Church Fathers insist that Peter’s authority stands behind the second Gospel. Papias (A.D. 130) describes Mark as the “interpreter” of Peter, while Irenaeus (A.D. 180), Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 200), and Tertullian (A.D. 200) echo this tradition.”<sup>1</sup>

In Acts 12:25, we learn that Mark (Roman name) was also called John (Jewish name) and that he travelled with Saul (Paul): “Then after completing their mission Barnabas and Saul returned to Jerusalem and brought with them *John, whose other name was Mark*” (emphasis added). In

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 61.

Colossians 4:10, we see that Mark was Barnabas' cousin: "Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, as does *Mark the cousin of Barnabas*, concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him" (emphasis added). In Acts 13:5, we see that he accompanied Paul on his first mission: "When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. *And they had John also to assist them*" (emphasis added). In Acts 13:13, we see that for some unknown reason, John Mark left Paul and Barnabas to return to Jerusalem: "Then Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. *John, however, left them and returned to Jerusalem*" (emphasis added). In Acts 15:36-41, this appears to have irritated Paul and caused a rift between Paul and Barnabas: "Barnabas wanted to take with them *John called Mark*. But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; *Barnabas took Mark* with him and sailed away to Cyprus" (emphasis added). It seems that John Mark and Paul later reconciled considering Colossians 4:10, above, and Philemon 23-24: "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do *Mark*, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers" (emphasis added). Finally, in 2 Timothy 4:11, Paul considers Mark useful: "Only Luke is with me. Get *Mark* and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry" (emphasis added). One more point of interest about John Mark can be found in Acts 12:12: "As soon as he [Peter] realized this, he went to the house of *Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark*, where many had gathered and were praying" (emphasis and bracketed item added). This may be the upper room where the Last Supper was held and where the Holy Spirit descended on Pentecost.

According to tradition, after the Ascension, Mark travelled to Alexandria and founded the Church of Alexandria. He became the first bishop of Alexandria and he is considered the founder of Christianity on Africa continent. "After governing his see for many years, St. Mark was one day seized by the heathen, dragged by ropes over stones, and thrown into prison. On the morrow the torture was repeated, and having been consoled by a vision of angels and the voice of Jesus, St. Mark went to his reward."<sup>2</sup> In the ninth century, the purported relics of Mark were smuggled from Alexandria by two Venetian merchants and taken to Venice, where they are said to remain today. A mosaic in St. Mark's Basilica in Venice, which one can see today, depicts sailors covering the relics with pork and cabbage leaves. Since Muslims are not permitted to touch pork, this was done to prevent the guards from inspecting the ship's cargo too closely.

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<sup>2</sup> John Gilmary Shea, *Pictorial Lives of the Saints* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1887), 197.

## Dating

There are three significant events that frame our discussion of dating. The first event is the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Because of this event, the world of Judaism changed forever. Without the Temple no sacrifices could be made. Without these sacrifices, the Laws of Moses could not be observed. The religion of the Pharisees survived and remains the basis of today's Judaism. In Mark 13:1-2, Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple: "As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.""

The second event was the execution of Peter in Rome. "Peter probably died and was buried in Rome as a result of Nero's persecution sometime in late A.D. 64 or, more probably, 65. The scriptural, traditional, and archaeological evidence show this. In 1 Peter he indicated he was in "Babylon" when he wrote (1 Pet 5:13). Babylon was a common Jewish pseudonym for Rome (Rev 14:8; 17:5; 2 Baruch 11:1, 67). 2 Peter 1:14 and John 21:18-19 seem to indicate that Peter would be crucified ("stretch out the hands") and that he knew of this prophecy. 1 Clement 5-6 says Peter was martyred in a time of persecution. Eusebius (*H.E.* 3.1) says he was executed by crucifixion with his head downward. Peter's grave is clearly in Rome. Gaius, a second century presbyter of Rome, wrote that one could still see in his day the grave marker of Peter in the Vatican (quoted in Eusebius, *H.E.* 2.25)."<sup>3</sup>

The third event was the execution of Paul. According to tradition, Paul was executed in Rome, around the same time as Peter. He appears to have also died in the Neronian persecution. Since Paul was a Roman citizen, he could not be crucified. Therefore, he was beheaded.

With these three events as background, we can turn to the dating of Mark. Many scholars give Mark and the other Synoptic Gospels (Matthew and Luke) a post-A.D. 70 dating. The main argument is that Jesus' prediction in Mark 13:1-2 of the destruction of the temple are simply too accurate and must have been "prophecies after the event." I hold a different position, along with others that give Mark, as well as Matthew and Luke, a pre- A.D. 70 dating. Going back to the order of the Gospels, both tradition and scholars agree that Luke was written after Mark. It is clear from the opening verse of Acts that Luke wrote both the Gospel according to Luke and Acts. The three events described above would have been three of the most significant events in the life of the fledgling Church. Yet, Luke never mentions any of these events in Acts. In fact, at the end of Acts, Paul is still alive! I find it difficult to believe that if these three events had occurred before the writing of Acts, they would have been included. Therefore, I believe that Matthew, Mark, Luke and Acts were written pre- A.D. 70. "Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 200)... maintains that

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<sup>3</sup> David A. Fiensy, *New Testament Introduction*, The College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin: College Press Pub. Co., 1997), 343.

Mark wrote his Gospel *before* Peter’s death. Still another witness, Eusebius (A.D. 340), fixes a date for Mark during the reign of the Emperor Claudius between A.D. 41 and 54.”<sup>4</sup>

### Audience

“That Mark wrote primarily (though not exclusively) for the church at Rome seems likely... in light of the content of his gospel, which appears to address a community that has suffered persecution from the outside and division from the inside.”<sup>5</sup> One reason for this belief is found in Mark 15:39. “Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” Mark uses a Roman centurion to proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God. But this is not the only clue. Look at Mark 7:1-4”

“Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.)”

Mark likely explains these Jewish customs because the audience is not Jewish. In addition, Mark translates Aramaic words and phrases in 3:17, 5:14, 7:11 and other verses. Again, if he were writing to a Jewish audience, this would have been unnecessary. If our dating is correct, this may explain why Mark was writing to a Roman audience. The Neronian persecution was occurring in Rome from approximately A.D. 64 to A.D. 68. “His Gospel, then, may have been written to remind Roman believers of the suffering endured by their Lord and to encourage them to remain faithful during their own time of trial.”<sup>6</sup>

### Themes/Characteristics

Mark is short. In fact, it is not difficult to sit down and read the entire Gospel in one sitting. I heard recently of a one-man show where the only actor had memorized the entire Gospel of St. Mark. His show was to recite it in a theatrical manner.

It is fast-paced. The Greek word, *εὐθύς* (transliterated *euthys*) appears fifty-one times in the Synoptic Gospels. The word is translated into English as “at once,” “immediately,” “quickly,”

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<sup>4</sup> Hahn and Mitch, *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament*, 61.

<sup>5</sup> 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), 42.

<sup>6</sup> Hahn and Mitch, *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament*, 61.

etc. Of these occurrences, forty are in Mark with eleven appearing in Matthew and Luke, combined.

Another characteristic of Mark is that Jesus attempts to hide his identity. This commonly known as the “Messianic Secret.” On several occasions, Jesus silences unclean spirits who know who he really is (1:25, 1:34, 3:12). In addition, he orders people not to speak of his miracles or his identity (5:43, 7:36, 8:26, 8:30; 9:9).

The Sonship of Jesus is noted throughout, from the opening verse (1:1) to His proclamation before Caiaphas (14:62). There are two proclamations from Heaven of his Sonship (1:11; 9:7). As noted above, even the demons know he is the Son of God.

Mark uses geography throughout to move the Gospel message along. At first, Jesus is in Galilee, “which in Mark’s theological geography is the place for the revelation or manifestation of Jesus as a powerful teacher and healer.”<sup>7</sup> Next is the journey narrative where He travels to Caesarea Philippi in the northern section of Galilee to Jerusalem. Here He instructs His disciples on what it means to follow Him. It is in this narrative that He explains that He must suffer, die, and rise. Lastly, He arrives in Jerusalem, where He undergoes His Passion and Resurrection.

### Structure<sup>8</sup>

While Mark’s Gospel is not as structured as, say, Matthew’s, the following represents a typical breakdown of Mark’s Gospel. Due to the 7-week schedule of covering the Gospel, I had to break these up differently than outlined below. I tried to keep the amount of reading fairly equal, and then looking to the nearest natural breaks in the Gospel.

1. Prologue: Preparations for the Coming Messiah and His Forerunner (1:1–15)
  - a. Preaching and ministry of John the Baptist (1:1–8)
  - b. Baptism of Jesus by John (1:9–11)
  - c. Testing of Jesus by Satan (1:12–13)
  - d. Jesus Begins to Preach the Gospel (1:14–15)
2. Public Ministry: The Messiah’s Secret and His Widespread Ministry (1:16–8:30)
  - a. Jesus becomes popular and controversial in Galilee (1:16–3:12)
  - b. Jesus teaches the Apostles through words and deeds (3:13–7:23)
  - c. Jesus travels to Gentile regions where Peter confesses his identity (7:24–8:30)
3. Passion Narrative (8:31–15:47):
  - a. Passion predictions and formation of disciples on the way to Jerusalem (8:31–10:52)
  - b. Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem and his conflict in the temple (11:1–13:37)
  - c. Last Supper, Trials and Crucifixion (14:1–15:47)
4. Resurrection Epilogue: The Risen Messiah and Easter Narratives (16:1–20)

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<sup>7</sup> Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 23.

<sup>8</sup> Hahn and Mitch, *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament*, 63.

The Gospel According to Mark – Lesson 1

- a. Empty tomb of Jesus (16:1–8)
- b. Resurrection appearances and the Great Commission (16:9–18)
- c. Jesus' ascension and the spread of the Gospel (16:19–20)

## QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 2

### Mark 1:1 – 1:45

**Day 1** – Scan the lecture notes. Write down one or two points that you consider most interesting.

Why do you think that the Church decided to put four Gospels in the Canon?

**Day 2** – Read Mark 1:1-8. Scan Matthew chapters 1 and 2 and Luke chapters 1 and 2.

Why do you think that Mark begins his Gospel so differently than Matthew and Luke? Based on the discussion of the characteristics of Mark, why would Mark eliminate certain details?

What do you note about the sentence structure of verse 1? What would account for this sentence structure?

Verse two is attributed to the Prophet Isaiah by St. Mark. Read Isaiah 40:3, Exodus 23:20 and Malachi 3:1. What do you note about Mark 1:2 when comparing to the three OT texts?

In verse 6, we learn how John is clothed. Read 2 Kings 1:8. How does John's clothing compare to that of the Elijah? What are the possible implications of the similarities?

Verse 6 also tells us about what John ate. Read Leviticus 11:22. What does John's diet imply about his identity/office/role/character?

**Day 3** – Read Mark 1:9-15.

Compare Mark 1:9-11 with Matthew 3:13-17, Luke 3:21-22 and John 1:29-34. Write down one or two differences that you noted. How do these differences compliment on another?

**Day 4** – Read Mark 1:16-20.

After reading Mark, read Jeremiah 16:14-16 and Luke 5:10. What do you think the Jewish community saw as a common thread when Jesus called James, John, Simon, and Andrew to follow Him?

**Day 5** – Read Mark 1:21-34.

Why do you think Jesus wants his identity to stay a secret?

**Day 6** – Read Mark 1:35-45

When Jesus touches the leper, the leper is cured. In the teachings of Moses, when an observant Israelite touched a leper, he or she must go through a cleansing process. What does this indicate related to Jesus and the teachings of Moses? Which is stronger, cleanliness or uncleanness?

Go back and read verse 21, then verse 29, then verse 32, then verses 35-38. What are some things that you notice about verses 21 through 38?