

Introduction to Mark

Mark is the first author we know of to compose a written document that he calls a “gospel,” a word that he borrows from the preaching of the apostle Paul. While Paul used the term to mean proclamation about Jesus, Mark’s usage provides the primary way that we today understand the word *gospel*—as a story about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. This gospel, however, is not meant to simply convey information about Jesus. It is also intended to create and strengthen faith in Jesus and to develop disciples of Jesus.

An important thing to remember about Mark’s gospel in its original setting is that literacy rates were low in antiquity, so most people would have first heard rather than read about Jesus. Even though we often experience the gospel as readers, we should keep in mind that Mark probably intended it to be read out loud, a fact that he reinforces by repeating three times: “If you have ears to hear, then hear!” (4:9, 23; 7:16).¹

Mark’s gospel drops us right into the action as John the Baptist bursts onto the scene to proclaim the imminent arrival of the Messiah. Though the story begins in the wilderness near the Jordan River, most events in the first part of Mark occur in the northern region of Galilee (see the map “Key Locations in Jesus’ Time” on page 47), and the Sea of Galilee plays a prominent role in Mark’s narrative both as a means of transportation for Jesus and his disciples and as the location of his most powerful deeds. The action proceeds at a steady clip as Jesus preaches, heals the sick, and casts out demons. He attracts both admiring crowds and bitter enemies immediately; the first threat to his life occurs in the third chapter.

The gospel changes pace, however, as Jesus and his followers head for Jerusalem, the capital city. While chapters 1–10 reflect up to three years of ministry, chapters 11–16 record the events of a single week. The pace slows down, but the action intensifies. In Jerusalem, Jesus changes tone; his speeches are longer and his encounters more treacherous. At times he is sharply critical, but his humorous side comes out as he amuses the crowds with his wit. This attracts even more powerful enemies. As the narrative slows down in the last chapters of Mark, we see Jesus betrayed to the Romans, the colonial overlords of Judea and Galilee. Mark’s gospel leads his readers to the cross and to the mystery of the resurrection, which comes to Jesus’ disciples as only a terrifying rumor.

A key theme to watch for in the Gospel of Mark is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. On the one hand, Mark’s narrative is critical of the twelve disciples. He presents them, especially Peter, as constantly misunderstanding Jesus and, in the end, denying and abandoning him. In short, they present a negative example of what it means to be a disciple. On the other hand, Mark constantly invites his readers into the way of Jesus. The reader is granted special access to Jesus’ identity and his teachings, access that exceeds that of the disciples. Mark calls his readers into a relationship with Jesus and challenges them to think of themselves as Jesus’ true disciples.

Mark fills his gospel with mystery and irony. A key component of the mystery of Jesus is his teaching style. Rather than straightforward sermons or pronouncements, Jesus tends to speak to the crowds that follow him in parables. Mark, citing Isaiah 6:9–10, even goes so far as to claim that Jesus tells parables precisely to confuse people (Mark 4:11–12)! In keeping with this tendency, Jesus tries very hard to keep his identity as the Messiah under wraps. Though the demons recognize him, he refuses to let them speak, and when he does deeds of power for people, he instructs them not to tell anyone about it. This tension constitutes the principal irony in Mark; though Jesus refuses to reveal his identity to his opponents, we as the readers have known

¹ Mark 7:16 is not included in the main text of the NRSVue. See the NRSVue text note at Mark 7:15. In *Lutheran Study Bible, Second Edition*, see p. 1585, note w.

who he is from the very first verse! This irony continues through the end of Mark. The centurion at the cross mocks Jesus for his shameful death, but we know that he unwittingly speaks the truth when he says, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (15:39). Likewise, we as the readers know that Jesus’ resurrection is good news, not something to flee from in terror (16:8). In sum, Mark invites us as readers and hearers into a privileged position from which we can follow Jesus, whom we know is the Christ, the Son of God.

