

# Mark: An Unfamiliar Gospel of an Unfamiliar Jesus

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## —Who?

• According to church tradition, the author of the gospel was one "John Mark." (according to Christian tradition, the following are references to the author of the Gospel of Mark: Acts of the Apostles 12:12, 25; 13:5, 13; 15:37, 39; Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24; 1 Peter 5:13)

• **BUT, since nothing in these passages identifies the author of the Second Gospel, or connects the author with Simon Peter (see below), most modern scholars have concluded that "the Gospel of Mark" is actually an anonymous work**

## —What?

• Mark 1:1—"The beginning of the good news [εὐαγγέλιον—euangelion] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God"; see also 1:14-15; 13:10

## —When?

• 70 C.E.??? (See Mark 9:1; 13:30; 14:62; but especially all of Mark 13—called "The Little Apocalypse")

## —Where?

• Rome? Syria?? Galilee??? Or???? But if Mark knows Judea, Galilee, and Syria why Mark 5:1? Why Mark 7:31?

## —Why?

• See Mark 1:1, 14-15; 13:10 again

## —How?

• Eusebius (mid-4<sup>th</sup> century CE) → Papias (early second century CE) → The Elder (late 1<sup>st</sup> century CE) → the tradition about John Mark as the recorder of Peter's recollections

And the Presbyter [John] used to say this, "Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered, **not, indeed, in order**, of the things said or done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord, nor had he followed him, but later on, as I said, followed Peter, who used to give teaching as necessity demanded but not making, as it were, an arrangement of the Lord's oracles, so that **Mark**

**did nothing wrong in thus writing down single points as he remembered them.** For to one thing he gave attention, to leave out nothing of what he had heard and to make no false statements in them." (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.15-16; **citing Papias**).

In addition, Eusebius also cites Irenaeus (late second century CE), who says that Mark didn't write his gospel until after Peter had been martyred (64 CE?).

- On the other hand, scholars today generally agree that what we call "the Gospel of Mark" was probably the product of anonymous early Christian storytellers who created a narrative out of pieces of miscellaneous oral tradition about Jesus. (See Mark 13:6, 21-22, and see Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983.)

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### **A Dozen Observations on the Unfamiliar Jesus of Mark's Unfamiliar Gospel**

**1. There is no miraculous conception and birth in Mark (for that, see Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2); no heavenly pre-existence (for that, see John 1:1-18). Rather, in Mark, Jesus becomes the Son of God by a declaration of adoption by a voice coming down from heaven. (See Mark 1:11; probably inspired by Psalm 2:7)**

2. The Jesus of Mark's Gospel is a very human Jesus, the most down-to-earth, ordinary, human Jesus of the whole New Testament. He is emotional, vulnerable, and limited in power and knowledge. (Mark 1:41; 3:5; 14:32-36; 10:18; 13:32)

He dies an anguished, human death. His last words are: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:33-34)

3. Jesus' mission in Mark is to establish the Kingdom of God, and to usher people into it (Mark 1:14-15). Opposing the Kingdom are the transcendent power of Satan and demonic spirits and the earthly power of the Jewish and Roman elites. Jesus does not get much help in establishing the Kingdom from his disciples and his family.

4. In the first half of Mark's Gospel, Jesus is a man of great power and authority. There are 'more miracle stories per square inch' (so to speak!) in the first half of Mark than in just about any piece of ancient literature.

Paradoxically, however, in the second half of Mark, from Mark 8 on, Jesus renounces power and authority. From chapter 8 on the emphasis is on self-sacrifice, being least, being last, being the slave or servant of all. (Mark 8:34-9:1; 9:33-37;

10:41-45) So Jesus is a man of power and authority who renounces power and authority as the hallmark of Messiahship and therefore also of discipleship.

5. "Miracle," however, is a misleading word to describe what is happening regularly in the early chapters of Mark. "Miracle" is a modern word, not a New Testament word. The Greek word that Mark uses repeatedly is **dynamis**, which literally means "power." (Mark 5:30; 6:2, 5; 9:39)

That Jesus has **dynamis** is never in dispute. What is in dispute is *the source of* his power. Is his power from God, or is it from Satan? Or is he simply crazy? (see Mark 3:19-35) The gospel seems to acknowledge all of these as possibilities.

**6. Shockingly, the disciples of Jesus never seem to understand what he is about (one example among countless examples: Mark 8:14-21). As the story progresses, instead of learning and growing from their experiences, the disciples of Jesus seem to get 'dumb and dumber.'**

Even more shocking, the family of Jesus, including his mother, never understands him and in fact are estranged from him. Or rather, Jesus divorces himself from his family. (Mark 3:21, 31-35; 6:2-4; 15:40, 47; 16:2; see also 10:28-31; see also John 7:3-5) The Mary of Mark's Gospel is not the virgin handmaid of God that we see in Matthew and Luke, nor is she the devoted mother at the foot of the cross that we see in John. All of those portrayals of Mary are alien to Mark.

**7. Mark's Gospel likes to maneuver us into having to choose between following, on the one hand, the Twelve disciples and the family of Jesus, or, on the other hand, Jesus. It is as if Mark was written in a time and place where the Christian Church had become too self-preoccupied and self-satisfied, concerned too much for its own wealth, prestige, security, and power. Mark summons the Church of his day to follow, not the leaders of the Church (symbolized by the Twelve and the family of Jesus), but Jesus. (8:31-33; 9:38-41)**

The characters in the gospel who seem to be the most successful in living the Jesus way of life are the so-called 'little people,' the minor characters who may only put in an appearance once but who nevertheless display deep insight and faith. How ironic that major characters in the story routinely fail Jesus, but minor characters routinely shine!

8. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is an apocalyptic visionary, preaching the impending end of the age and the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God, in power and glory. The fulfillment of this apocalyptic eschatological expectation will take place, as the story says, in "this generation." That sounds to us like Jesus talking about Jesus' day, but it's probably actually Mark talking about hopes and expectations in Mark's day. (See Mark 9:1; 13:26-30; 14:62)

The apocalypticism of Mark—not of Jesus, but of Mark!—was surely prompted by Mark's experience of catastrophes in the 60s CE: persecutions and martyrdoms in Rome and the war in Judea, which led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the

Temple. (echoed in Mark 13, which reflects Mark's time and place, not Jesus' time and place)

Whether we in the 21st century identify "this generation" with Jesus in the 30s CE or with Mark in the 70s CE, obviously *the Eschaton* ("THE END") has not happened in the last 2000 years in any literal, historical sense, right? What do we do with this embarrassing reality?

9. The "Messianic Secret" in Mark—strangely, Jesus tries to hush up people who identify him; he tries to remain incognito; etc. — this is odd, in a gospel that begins by proclaiming boldly that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of God." (see Mark 1:1, 34, 44; 5:43; 7:24, 36; 8:26, 30; 9:9) How do we make sense of a Messiah who tries to keep his Messiahship under wraps?

**10. Unlike all the other gospels, there is no familiar, traditional, Easter resurrection appearance story in Mark. Rather, there is only an empty tomb, which is open to interpretation! (Mark 16:1-8)**

**Three women run away from the tomb in fear and trembling, and they say (literally) "nothing to no one, for they were afraid"! A most unusual ending!**

Later generations hasten to 'complete' Mark's gospel by adding appendices that end Mark in a more upbeat and satisfactory fashion. Matthew, Luke, and John make sure to provide one or more Easter resurrection appearance stories. Scribes copying the text of Mark borrow from Matthew, Luke, and John to add on twelve extra verses at the end of Mark (Mark 16:9-20). And so the process of clarifying Mark's mysteries and solving his puzzles continued in the early centuries.

**11. Why such an ending? And why the surprisingly negative portray of the Twelve and the family of Jesus? I suggest that the point is to put responsibility for the story on the shoulders of the reader or the members of Mark's audience. From beginning to end, Mark's story is oriented to the reader of the text of the gospel or to the audience of story, if it is performed orally. Everything in the story—everything!—is told for the sake of the reader/audience member. Even if everyone in Mark's story fails Jesus, there is still the reader/listener, who might yet succeed where others failed.**

12. Summary: What was the fate of Mark's Gospel, and of Mark's Jesus, at the hands of the gospel writers who followed in his footsteps? •The shortest of the gospels was added to and made much longer. •Mark's abrupt verbal style was smoothed out and made more elegant. •Mark's frequent ambiguous moments were frequently clarified. •Mark's haunting paradoxes were straightened out and rendered logical. •Mark's narrative puzzles were repeatedly clarified. •An often mysterious and challenging story was rendered more comfortable and comforting. •A down-to-earth, human Jesus became ever more lofty and divine.

The Jesus we know today is typically Matthew's, Luke's, or John's Jesus. The Jesus of Mark's Gospel remains, after 1900 years, hauntingly unfamiliar.

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- Rhoads, David, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie. *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 3rd ed. Philadelphia: Fortress, 2012.

## Oral Performances of Mark

- Alec McCowen, "St Mark's Gospel," [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-oOaIeythFw&list=PL63YmxIB5KwET9Tw6z\\_7yXZ5mF0NiNfb1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-oOaIeythFw&list=PL63YmxIB5KwET9Tw6z_7yXZ5mF0NiNfb1). Shortened: <http://bit.ly/2mf0e8i>.
- David Rhoads, "Dramatic Performance of the Gospel of Mark." (Sadly no longer available, but originally distributed on VHS videotape by SELECT, c/o Trinity Lutheran Seminary, 2199 E. Main Street, Columbus, OH 43209-2334, 614-235-4136.)
- Phil Ruge-Jones, "The Gospel of Mark," [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OS\\_hpt\\_xeU&t=18s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OS_hpt_xeU&t=18s). shortened: <http://bit.ly/2CU9Hve>.
- Wayne S. Turney, an actor well-known to Cleveland audiences, performed the Gospel of Mark at Trinity Cathedral sometime in 2003. If anyone has

promotional literature for that performance, let me know. Even better would be a video of one of his many performances of Mark over the years.