

# Brief Introduction to Mark's Gospel Account

## Authorship

**M**ark's Gospel does not have any statement about its author. It is unlike John's Gospel in which the author claims to be a witness of the events described in it (John 21:24). It also does not make a reference to a recipient like Theophilus that helps us identify the author of Luke. In terms of the practice of authorial humility, the best we have is an unidentified young man leaving his clothes and streaking away from authorities (Mark 14:51-52)!

Yet, because the process used to identify a canonical work included authorship by an apostle or close companion of an apostle (like Luke), it is likely that the church would have regarded the most well-known 'Mark' as a canonical author. The church would not have received a book whose authorship was suspicious. John Mark was a companion of the Apostle Paul, a friend of the Apostle Peter, and a cousin of Barnabas (Acts 12:12, 25; 13:5, 13; 15:36-39; Col. 4:10; Phil. 24; 2 Tim. 4:11; 1 Pet. 5:13). It is the uniform tradition of the Church Fathers that John Mark was a companion of Paul, Barnabas, and Peter.

Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, a fourth-century work, quoted Papius' *Exegesis of the Lord's Oracles* (c. 140), which refers to the authorship of the Second Gospel.<sup>1</sup> Papius, quoting another source known as 'the Elder,' who most likely was John the Apostle (cf. 2 John 1; 3 John 1), said that Mark wrote the Gospel associated with his name. Seemingly Mark

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1. *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus*, 3:39:15.

developed his work by following the preaching of Peter and his eyewitness testimony.

### **Audience**

The author of this Gospel wrote for a largely non-Jewish audience, most likely Romans. This accounts for Mark's explanation of Jewish customs and terms like 'Talitha cumi,' 'Corban' and the Unleavened Bread and Passover traditions (5:41; 7:3-4; 14:12; 15:42). It explains why Aramaic words and sentences are translated into Greek (cf. 3:17; 5:41; 7:11; 9:43; 10:46; 14:36; 15:22, 34), and the reason why Latin terms are used rather than their Greek equivalents (cf. 5:9; 6:37; 7:4; 12:14, 15; 15:15-16).

Seemingly, Mark's Gospel met a need for a quickly written, simple account of the life of Christ that affirmed His deity. Mark is the shortest Gospel account, omitting the nativity and genealogies, and including only two long discourses. He uses the term 'immediately' ('straightway') several times, which has the effect of moving his account forward swiftly – an account very appropriate for today's image-driven culture. Importantly, his account records a large number of miracles by Christ, and the Passion Narrative is six chapters long (chs. 11–16), reflecting important theological focuses in Mark.

### **Literary Features**

Several other significant literary features characterize Mark's account of the life of Jesus Christ. First, the author identified Jesus as the divine Son of God. Noteworthy for understanding the second Gospel are the declarations of divine Sonship at the beginning and end of the Gospel (1:1; 15:39). At Jesus' baptism and transfiguration the Father recognizes Jesus as His beloved Son (1:11; 9:7). Even the demonic forces recognize the divine Sonship of Christ, declaring 'You are the Son of God' and 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?' (1:24; 3:11; 5:7). In great contrast, the Jewish leadership is condemned for not recognizing Jesus' divine Sonship (12:1-12).

Second, discipleship and the disciples' role in learning from Christ is prominent. Many passages directly address the disciples' call to follow Christ or to serve as He serves (1:16-20; 3:13-15, 34; 4:1-20; 8:14-26, 35; 10:42-45, 52). In this story

of Christ's life, the disciples were called to suffer in the same vein as their Lord (8:34; 10:44-45).

Third, faith is emphasized and commended. One sees the expression of faith especially among women, Gentiles, and others outside of Jesus' primary followers (1:40-42; 2:5; 5:34; 7:24-30; 9:24; 10:52; 12:41-44; 14:3-9; 15:39). As a foil to those who believe, Jesus' family members, those of His hometown, and the Jewish leadership lack faith (3:31-35; 6:1-6; 11:27-33).

Fourth, Jesus often demands silence from people concerning His identity (1:25; 1:34; 1:44; 3:12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26; 8:30; 9:9); seemingly, Jesus is protecting Himself from 'false messianic expectations.'<sup>2</sup>

Fifth, there is a 'journey motif' in which Christ is frequently 'on the way' (e.g., 2:23; 8:3). The journey follows the 'way' of Christ announced from the beginning (1:2, 3). It is particularly evident in the second half of the account, leading up to the six chapters on the Passion (8:27; 9:33-34; 10:17, 32, 52; 11:7-10).

Sixth, Mark places great emphasis on the authority of Christ throughout the Gospel. Jesus rules over the forces of the wind and the sea, demons, disease, and death (4:35-5:43). He is in control of the events leading to His suffering and death (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). His authority extends to the untying of a colt for His entry into Jerusalem (11:2-3), the withering of a fig tree (11:20), His ability to refuse to answer and to silence His critics (11:33; 12:34), and identifying the location of the Passover meal (14:12-16). Although the Jewish and Roman leaderships do not submit to His authority, even in His voluntary submission He is in control of the judgment of His detractors (12:9, 40; 14:20)! Everything in the created order submits to His rule when He applies it to His service in the plan of redemption.

Seventh, Mark addresses his readers directly (2:10; 7:19), sometimes through Jesus' words (13:37), and by the use of rhetorical questions addressed to them (e.g., 4:41).<sup>3</sup> Such direct address seems to have the effect of including the reader in the story as an object of Jesus' ministry. Practically speaking, this

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2. J. R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, PNTC, 19. I develop this idea later in this work.

3. Thomas Constable, 'Notes on Mark, 2019 Edition,' <https://www.plano.biblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/mark/mark.htm>, accessed January 3, 2020.

is one of the reasons why the Gospel of Mark works as a good starting point for introducing people to the Christian faith.

### **The Message of the Gospel of Mark**

The subject of Mark is *the servant ministry of Jesus*. Every passage in the book relates to this idea; Mark focuses on serving, whether such service is exorcising demons, healing a fever or leprosy, providing food, opening the eyes of the blind, or dying on the cross. Reading each chapter with *the servant ministry of Jesus* in mind will open up the meaning of each passage. In this book, we are learning to serve as Jesus served. Mark will reveal an uncommon service to us. For example, almost as soon as Jesus begins His public ministry, as Mark records it, Jesus serves a man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue (1:21-28). Immediately following this episode, Jesus serves Peter's mother-in-law, and then the whole city of Capernaum (1:39-34).

Moreover, for the writer, the servant ministry of Jesus *reveals Him as the authoritative Son of God to those who have simple faith in Him*. Simple faith is a theme inherent in this Gospel account, as evident in humble desires like, 'If you will, you can make me clean' (1:40), 'if I touch even his garments, I will be made well' (5:28), and 'Son of David, have mercy on me' (10:47, 48). Such faith *grants the believing ones entrance into the kingdom of God, and calls them to like service in the way of God*. The message of Jesus in Mark is a call to enter the kingdom of God (1:15; 9:1, 47; 10:15, 23-25; 12:34); the message is a call to drink His cup and share in His baptism so that others might enter the kingdom of God.

Again, if you were to ask Mark what his Gospel account is about, he would say, *'The servant ministry of Jesus reveals Him as the authoritative Son of God to those who have simple faith in Him, granting them entrance into the kingdom of God, and calling them to like service in the way of God.'* That is, His process of making disciples (who inherently make disciples) is to serve those who place faith in Him. Mark is an invitation to move from being religious to becoming a disciple.

### **The General Structure of Mark**

This is a broad outline of the structure of Mark:

1. The divine Sonship of Jesus Christ, as attested by multiple witnesses, establishes the servant ministry of Jesus with the authority to proclaim the coming kingdom of God (1:1-15). Here Mark introduces the reader to his protagonist, anchoring the presentation of his Gospel in the plan of redemptive history by tying it to the Old Testament announcements of the coming of the Lord.
2. The servant ministry of Jesus in and around Galilee shows His authority as the Son of Man in encounters with disciples, the demonic, and those who reject Him (1:16-8:26). In this section there is great emphasis on Jesus' identity as the Son of Man (1:16-34; 2:3-12, 23-28; 3:11; 4:35-41; 6:45-52; 7:1-23; see also 10:1-12). There are a number of encounters with the demonic and related miracles (1:23-26; 5:2-8, 15, 16; 7:25-29; see also 9:17-25).
3. The servant ministry of Jesus finds triumph in the disciples' growing understanding of the relationship between His example in suffering and authority in the kingdom as He journeys to the cross in spite of rejection (8:27-16:8). In this section there is great emphasis on Jesus' identity as the Son of God (8:38; 9:7; 12:6-8; 13:32; 14:36, 61; 15:39). Such references tie together earlier themes in the story (cf., 1:11; 3:11; 5:7). Also in this section the writer gives attention to the suffering of Christ (8:31, 34-38; 9:30-32; 10:35-45; 14:24-42). It is in this part of Mark that we find cause for the words on the humiliation of Christ in the *Westminster Larger Catechism*:

**Q. 46.** *What was the estate of Christ's humiliation?*

**A.** 'The estate of Christ's humiliation was that low condition, wherein He for our sakes, emptying Himself of His glory, took upon Him the form of a *servant*, in His conception and birth, life, death, and after His death, until His resurrection.'

From the outset, Mark structures a story so that the Son of God journeys toward the cross where He might serve the many in redemption.





## He Came to Serve as God

(Mark 1:1-13)

**B**efore Mark recorded the calling of the disciples, one healing, a confrontation with the demonic, the proclamation of a parable, or any confrontation with the Jewish leadership, he established the most important fact about Jesus' servant ministry: *Jesus is God*. Mark introduces Jesus as the 'Son of God' in his opening verse. Doing so at the outset means that readers gain an insight into Jesus and His works that the people who encountered Him only gained over the course of spending time with Him.

For example, in His first public encounter with an unclean spirit, Jesus commands the unclean spirit to leave the man who cries out in the synagogue. The response of the people to this miracle is, 'What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him' (Mark 1:27). Their response reveals that they are unaware that God has entered the room in the person teaching with greater authority than the scribes. Yet readers are not shocked when the demons identify the unassuming rabbi as 'the Holy One of God,' and they might expect people to have made this connection between the authority of Jesus' teaching and His person. However, they did not.

Again, when the disciples are caught in a storm while crossing the Sea of Galilee, they are stunned at Jesus' ability to calm the wind and sea. In fear of Him, they talk among

themselves, asking, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?' (Mark 4:41). For readers, this question was answered in the opening verse and passage. They think to themselves, 'Of course Jesus rebuked the winds and spoke calming words to the sea, for He is Lord of heaven and earth. He made the winds, so they obey Him; He formed the sea by speaking it into existence, and it is still listening to His voice as the Word of the Creator!' However, in the Gospel even the disciples have yet to ascertain the deity in Jesus.

Mark kindly offers his readers a way to assume the deity of Jesus while reading so that the focus is not on the discovery of His divine identity. Instead, the focus will be on the manner by which the Son of God *serves*. We will watch the characters in the Gospel account discover the identity of the Son of God through His service to them.

In 1:1-15, Mark's meaning is, *The prophetically-fulfilled, divine witness to the identity of Jesus Christ affirms His deity as the Son of God from the beginning of His ministry in the Gospel account.* Mark will portray the work of the One who came to serve as the work of God Himself. This picture shapes the way one reads the rest of the Gospel. The Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, God the Father (and the Holy Spirit), Satan, wild beasts, and angels all enter into this account to give full color to this picture.

The first indication that Mark intends to communicate something *prophetically fulfilled* are the words, 'As it is written in Isaiah the prophet.' These words tie the events that follow to prophecies in the Old Testament. The coming of John the Baptist fulfills what both Malachi and Isaiah have foretold of the person who will 'prepare' 'the way' for the Lord to come to His people. Isaiah is unspecific regarding the nature of the way to the Lord, even though the herald announces a path through mountains and valleys. Mark draws upon the significance of the prepared 'way' to say that, with the dawning of the Messianic era, *repentance* is the *way* for the Lord to come to His own.

Mark also indicates that there is a *divine witness to the identity of Jesus*. He presents the deity of Christ without the need for a birth narrative announcing the coming of the 'Holy One of God' (Matt. 1:18-25) or a prologue that starts in eternity past to show that the Word is deity (John 1:1-18).



Yet he justifies his opening words by mentioning those who could witness to the deity of Jesus' character.

### **The Former Prophets Affirm that Jesus is God (1:1-3)**

Even though this is 'the beginning,' Mark skips over the first thirty years of Jesus' life. While such details would have been known to Mark via his travels with Paul and Peter, they are not significant to the portrayal of the life of Christ that he wishes to display. Yet this is 'the beginning' in many ways.

First, it is the very *opening* of the story Mark intends to tell. 'Beginning' signals, 'Pay attention and do not miss this part if you wish to understand the rest of the story.' In this way, viewing the introduction is akin to watching the opening in a movie so that one sees the significance of all that will follow in the production.

Second, this is the 'beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.' The double-entendre here is evident in the placing of the terms. It is unnecessary to say 'the beginning' at the start of an account, for such is obvious. Differently from the book of Genesis and the fourth Gospel authors, who both draw attention to realities and events at the beginning of creation – i.e., 'These things were so at the beginning,' Mark simply says, 'This is the beginning.' The obvious and redundant nature of the opening sentence invites the audience to ask, 'Is he saying something more, here?' Yes, he is saying more.

Coupled with the lack of a post-resurrection appearance of Christ, 'the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ' indicates this story will be the first part of the ministry of the gospel, and not the entirety of the Gospel story. The message of the gospel, as painted by the four evangelists and as repeated by Paul in the ancient creedal formula in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, shines forth in Mark: 'That Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.' Mark establishes a basis for the creedal statement as Jesus acts as 'a ransom for many' and repeatedly foreshadows the resurrection with the words, 'after three days he will rise.'<sup>1</sup>

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1. Mark 9:31; 10:34, 45. See 8:31, 9:9-10, 14:28 and 16:6 for other references in Mark concerning Jesus' rising from the dead.

Mark draws his account in a manner that causes the reader to look and see how the witnesses came to their conclusion. They will give testimony to the fact that the awaited Hebrew Messiah ('Christ'), seen in the person of Jesus, is God the Son. Mark asserts that the 'Christ' (anointed One) is the 'Son of God.'

Both Isaiah and Malachi foretell of One who would come before the Lord to make a way for His arrival. Mark quotes Exodus 23:20, 'Behold I shall send my messenger before you' (literally, your face), Malachi 3:1, 'who will prepare your way' (literally, 'the way before my face' in the Old Testament), and Isaiah 40:3. All four Gospels refer to Isaiah 40:3 in association with the coming of Christ (Matt. 3:3; Luke 3:4; John 1:23). Isaiah says a messenger will arise before the LORD comes, and Mark says that this prophetic writing is about the gospel of Jesus Christ, the divine God who came in the flesh.

### **The Forerunner Affirms that Jesus Is God (1:4-8)**

John the Baptizer appears.<sup>2</sup> His appearance before the launching of the public ministry of Jesus is significant to each of the Gospel accounts. John serves in the wilderness. Literally, the ministry in the wilderness looks *forward* to (1) Jesus' victory over both the earthly and cosmic forces threatening His work of redemption (Mark 1:12-13) and (2) the later ministry in desolated places.<sup>3</sup> The wilderness will not be an obstacle to John or Jesus.

The ministry in the wilderness also looks *backwards* in the history of Israel to her failure in the wilderness *en route* from Egypt to the Promised Land. Where Israel failed to exercise faith in the promises of God, John will call the nation to repentance. Their immersion in water will signify what is taking place in the hearts of those who respond to John proclaiming the need for repentance. They will be purified of their sins in the way that water washes away external stains. The participants in John's baptism and some of the early readers of this narrative were familiar with the practice in

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2. In the Greek, John is 'the baptizer,' e.g. 'the one baptizing' or 'the one who baptizes': Ἰωάννης ὁ βαπτίζων (John the Baptist).

3. Mark 1:35, 45; 6:31, 32, 35; 8:4.

Second Temple Judaism of the religiously faithful washing their bodies in water to cleanse themselves from impurity.<sup>4</sup>

John comes from the wilderness, thus identifying himself as the ‘messenger’ of 1:2 and Isaiah 40:3. He baptized as the means to ‘prepare the way.’ The *way* for the Lord to come to people is by them having hearts free from sin. The preaching of John alerted the people to their need to acknowledge their actions as sin in need of forgiveness before God. The baptizing follows both the response to the message and acts of repentance rather than providing repentance and forgiveness.

*Visually*, John’s identity comes from the Old Testament, associating him with Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). He comes as one clean according to the law (Lev. 11:20-23). The startling look and diet of the Baptizer would indicate that he is a prophet of the Lord.

*Vocally*, John’s identity is diminished before the coming One, for two reasons. First, the coming One is stronger than John, being sovereign over him; John, acting as the servant in the relationship, does not have enough worth in comparison to the coming One to even act as a servant. A task as menial as untying the strap of a sandal is too high a deed for John (or for any of us!) when the foot and sandal belong to Jesus. One can only say this in truth of One who is beyond human, for each human has equal worth.

Second, Jesus’ baptism exceeds John’s baptism *in kind*. John, taking advantage of the earthly resource before him, calling people to do what was possible for them to do volitionally, and performing what he was able to do physically, offered a baptism of the human realm. It was a necessary and symbolic baptism, but it also was an anticipatory baptism. What the One coming after John will offer is an experience that immerses people in the Spirit of God. This baptism is heavenly rather than earthly, offers to do for the people what they cannot do for themselves, and performs what only Jesus can do from the heavenly realms into the earthly realm. The superior nature of this baptism points to a Baptizer who has power beyond

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4. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Mark* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2017), 40. He also notes: ‘At Qumran, immersion signified purification from defilement due to sin and initiation into the community as the true or pure Israel.’ Thus, John’s repentance would have significance as an act of separation from sin and from the sinful world.

John's earthly realm; the baptism itself affirms the Son of God status of the coming One.

The prophets promised this unique blessing of the Spirit as the mark of the age to come.<sup>5</sup> In the Old Testament, it is the Lord Himself who will bring the comfort and joys of the age to come.

### **The Father Affirms that Jesus Is God (1:9-11)**

John baptized Jesus, but not because Jesus needed to repent from personal sin. The identity of Jesus as the Son of God in 1:1 guards against thinking He needed repentance before His baptism. Instead, in Mark's account, Jesus stood in the place of 'the many' in need of a ransom for sin. The baptism in the Jordan River pointed back to Israel's crossing of the Jordan *en route* to the Promised Land. This time, God's true Son will see that Israel has the righteousness to enter the land. Literally, Jesus was immersed in the waters as the others because He comes from out of the waters upon finishing His baptism.

Three things happened in association with Mark's baptism account: first, the sky was ripped open (by God the Father). One can imagine the happiness of God the Father in seeing the Son come to fulfill the long-awaited plan of redemption! The excitement led to this tearing so that the Father could participate in the celebration of righteousness without the hindrance of the sky. The act itself is reminiscent of Psalm 114 and the trembling of the Red Sea, the Jordan River (mentioned in Mark 1:9), and Mount Sinai. In Psalm 114, the climatic upheaval reveals God's presence in the form of a theophany. Yet one sees no theophany here; one only sees the very presence of the divine Son.

Second, the Spirit coming down like a dove alighted on Jesus. The Spirit already has a divine association (Mark 1:8). Certainly the One upon whom the Spirit alighted will have the ability to immerse others in that same Spirit. The baptism of the Spirit is a promise repeated by all four evangelists.<sup>6</sup> Jesus fulfilled this baptism on the Day of Pentecost with the outpouring of the Spirit of God upon believers to dwell in

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5. Isaiah 32:15; 44:3; Ezekiel 36:26-27; 39:29; Joel 2:28-32.

6. Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33.

them and His church permanently (Acts 2:1-4). That Pentecost was foretold in this baptism by the Baptizer in Mark (and parallel accounts) and is affirmed by the words of Jesus and Peter: 'For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now' (Acts 1:5), and 'And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit"' (Acts 11:16).

Third, the voice from heaven – the voice of Father – identified Jesus as His Son (with 'you' being emphatic in the sentence and 'with you' again emphasizing the Father's unique pleasure with Jesus). With no one else will the Father share such words of delight – the delight He expressed in the tearing open of the heavens. The picture is that of the Trinity together as in the first 'beginning' in Genesis 1:1-3 with the 'heavens,' 'the Spirit descending,' and the spoken word: 'In the beginning, God created *the heavens* and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the *Spirit of God was hovering* over the face of the waters. And *God said*, "Let there be light," and there was light.'

The echo in Mark 1:11 to Genesis 22 is striking. In the LXX<sup>7</sup> the 'beloved son' translates the Hebrew for 'only son' in Genesis 22:2, 12, and 16. It is there, in the great Aqedah passage, that Abraham binds his only son – the one he loves uniquely and differently than he does Ishmael – as he prepares to sacrifice him in obedience to God. The reader of redemptive history, still hoping in the seed of the woman who will come through Abraham to bless all of the families of the earth, hears the Father speak of His beloved Son and both cringes and explodes with delight. This will be the uniquely loved Son – the only Son of God – whom God, as His Father, will bind so as to sacrifice Him for us.

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7. The abbreviation, 'LXX' refers to the Septuagint – the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was the first translation of the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) into another language. It was completed between the third and first centuries before the birth of Christ. See Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 19-31. The Septuagint often is represented as Roman numerals: 'LXX' (L [50] + X [10] + X [10] = 70) (J. William Johnston, 'Septuagint,' *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* [Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016], n.p.).