

Mark

Session 1: Okay, so it was a hard decision not to file this document under *Session 32* of the Bible Study *How the Church Began...*, but I was beginning lose track of sessions and figured the easiest solution was to go back to square “1.” I’m excited about examining the early history of the Christian movement, and I think that a study of the Gospel of Mark will lend itself to the original course of study. And since the last time I conducted a Bible study on Mark I’ve enjoyed reading some new material and I’ve prospered from the insights others (i.e. you) have shared over the years.

So it’s a new year; it’s a new study. It’s a new focus, though focus has never been my strong suit, but to keep me somewhat centered I’ve purchased and started reading *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Mark* by two Catholic priests, John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington which offers great commentary and works through the Gospel verse by verse. So far I’ve found it easier to read than John Dominic Crosson’s *The Birth of Christianity* which I’m also wading (crawling?) through along with *The Power of Now* and *The Master and His Emissary* (on a whim I purchased Henry James’ *The Turning of the Screw* but I’m not sure if that novel will influence this study in any perceivable manner).

And off we go...

Brief overview of Mark’s gospel. We should begin with an overview of the culture from whence Mark’s gospel sprung. Before any tradition is written, it is spoken. While the Gospel of Mark is the earliest written testimony of the story of Jesus of Nazareth, the writing was mostly a compilation of oral traditions about Jesus from unknown sources (incidentally the Gospel of Mark is written by an unknown source). Based on what I know about the credibility that courtrooms confer on eyewitness testimony (not much), I would guess that there were lots of stories about Jesus circulating.

And the stories, as they were received and transmitted, were modified to meet the needs of the receiver just as it had met the needs of the transmitter. Those needs were both individual and social. In any serious Bible study we should do our best to understand what German theologians call the “sitz im leben,” (the place in life). That means the culture and the environment in which the text was composed. What was day-to-day life like? For men? For women? What stories did they tell, what dances did they dance, and what songs did they sing around the campfire; in other words, what was their religion? What crises did they experience? A common theory about the Gospel of Mark is that it was written in Rome for Christians who were suffering intense persecution under Emperor Nero (late 60s AD), a persecution that took the life of the Apostle Peter.

Of course these considerations have to be weighed with the intent of the writer: was his intent to address the concerns of a particular community, or was he intending to speak to the Christian community *in general*? Or was it both. Regardless, the Christian community, be it Palestinian or Roman, was facing great hardship – in Rome, due to the persecution under Nero from the mid 60s to the early 70s and in Palestine as a result of the Jewish revolt which was in the same timeframe.

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Before we begin studying The Gospel of Mark, let me share with you a little of the history of study of the book. The Gospel of Mark was neglected for a long time because 1) scholars concluded that it was written by someone who was using the texts of Matthew and Luke and condensing them, 2) because it was not considered to have been written by one of Jesus' disciples (as Matthew and John were believed to be, and 3) its language and content were considered coarse on not very interesting considering that much of the narrative was included in both Matthew and Luke.

But in the nineteenth century scholars started to question those conclusions. For one thing, some of the stories in Mark are more detailed than they are in Matthew or Luke. Furthermore, if Mark was using Matthew and / or Luke to write this condensed narrative, *why would he omit the birth narrative and the resurrection appearances of Jesus?* When scholars began to examine all three of the synoptic gospels and compare them, many concluded that Mark was written first, and Matthew and Luke had used Mark's text when crafting their own gospels, often omitting some of the details that Mark included in his work. Furthermore, Matthew and Luke had obviously shared material that was *not* in Mark's gospel, material that came from a hypothetical source called Q. This new view of Mark as the *primary* gospel attracted new attention to the text, and a far more sophisticated style of writing was detected (like the use of *intercalations*) as well as some interesting motifs (like *The Messianic Secret*).

A study of the Gospel of Mark reveals that it is divided into three main sections: The Galilean ministry (1:1-8:21), the Journey to Jerusalem (8:22-10:52), and the Jerusalem Ministry and Passion (11:1-16:8). So without further ado,

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.(Mark 1:1)

A powerful beginning: 'Good news' (*euangelia*) suggests a formal announcement of great news. The word was a word used by one Roman writer to refer to the birthday of Emperor Augustus.

The word *Christ* means messiah, a term that identified some savior, though Jews had different ideas as to nature of the salvation that the messiah might bring. To apocalyptic sects like the Essenes, the messiah was a harbinger of the coming of God's kingdom and the beginning of universal peace and justice.

The Son of God: We should remember that the current Roman Emperor was often referred to as son of the god as emperors were declared divine upon death. It's worth noting that, in antiquity, people believed that gods and humans interacted all the time, and children were often born from the union of humans and gods.

*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'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" ',*

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Mark assumes that his audience is familiar with the Old Testament. Here he combines several OT texts and tweaks them to better suit his intentions:

prepare your way instead of *prepare the way before me* (Malachi 3:1)

make his paths straight instead of *make straight... desert a highway for our God*