

# THE GOSPEL OF MARK

## A YALE BIBLE STUDY

with Allen Hilton

### Session One – “Jesus Right on Time”

#### Mark 1.1-15

#### PART ONE – THE STORY BEGINS

##### The Main Mystery of Mark

Jesus must have been impressive to those who met him. He wasn't like the people they knew, so they understandably asked why. Who was he? And how did he get this power? Not surprisingly, when Mark set out to write Jesus' life, his characters asked that question often. They spend a lot of time trying to size Jesus up. Here are a few examples:

- The disciples ask it when Jesus stills the storm on the Sea of Galilee: “Who is this, that even the wind and the waves obey him?!” (4.41)
- The Jewish leaders who oppose Jesus question his authority to do things that only God can do. (2.7)
- The same Jewish leaders acknowledge Jesus' power to heal, but they speculate that it must come from evil origins. (3.20-27)
- We know that the multitudes who experience Jesus have asked this question, because when Jesus asks Peter who the crowds think he is, Peter has a catalog of replies. (8.27-30)

You might think that Jesus would just clear up all this confusion by stating his identity outright, but he does precisely the opposite. He shushes people who want to tell his powerful deeds. When he heals a man with leprosy, the man understandably wants to shout out about it, but Jesus says,

*After sternly warning the newly-healed man, Jesus sent him away at once, saying to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”*  
(1.43-44)

Then, when Peter tells Jesus that he's solved the mystery, Jesus shushes him as well.

He asked the disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. (8.29-30)

Jesus' tendency to silence anyone who gets close to the right answer about his identity – a pattern that a scholar called William Wrede dubbed “The Messianic Secret” – has baffled readers throughout history.

It's unlikely that you and I will solve the mystery of the Messianic Secret in these eight sessions, but we will keep it on our back burner for one worthy reason: Mark seems to want us to. Because if the characters in Mark's Gospel remain in the dark about Jesus' identity, we as audience get the answer in the very first words of the book. Mark starts boldly:

*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (1.1)*

And if the author winks at us as he announces this, he will also wink a handful of times later in the book, through non-human sources. Consider this refrain of non-human voices:

*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (1.9-11)*

*Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” (1.23-25)*

*Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, “You are the Son of God!” But he sternly ordered them not to make him known. (3.11-12)*

*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. <sup>5</sup> Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” <sup>6</sup> He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”*

Mark, like William Shakespeare and myriad other playwrights, enjoys dramatic irony. The Cambridge dictionary defines this tool of playwrights very simply:

*Dramatic irony is the situation in which the audience of a play knows something that the characters do not know.*

This Gospel features dramatic irony prominently. The narrator and you and I and the people in the room when Mark was first read out have insider info that the characters don't have. As we read, we'll keep our eye on those characters' sometimes frustratingly futile attempts to solve the mystery of who Jesus actually is.

## A Prophetic PR Man

The Gospel of Mark starts abruptly and races on. There's no nativity story here (*a la* Matthew and Luke) and no extended philosophical prologue (*a la* John). Instead, after a one-sentence prologue that essentially says, "Let's go!" Mark goes.

Our first encounter is with a rough-and-tumble wilderness preacher, called John. This popular, powerful prophet announces "one who is coming after me who is mightier than I". John is impressive enough himself, while he's here. In Mark's sense of things, he's the guy (Malachi and) Isaiah pictured as

"my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare the way, a voice crying in the wilderness, Prepare the Way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

John will announce and baptize and get off the stage. Mark does everything quickly!

## Fishermen Who Follow

Not long after his baptism, Jesus walks out to the sea of Galilee, not far from where he's living at the time, and calls four guys to join him. They're famously fishermen.

Jesus' invitation is brief. "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

Would you have gone with him?

## PART TWO – THE CONTEXT OF OUR BOOK

### In Search of Our Author

Before we get too far, we probably ought to recognize that we don't know exactly who wrote this beautiful book. We have no original manuscript of it. In fact, its title "The Gospel according to Mark", was added only later. Our earliest description of this Gospel comes 3 or 4 decades later, from an early-second-century churchman called Papias. In a document that recounts what he knows about who wrote the stories of Jesus, Papias writes,

*Mark being the interpreter of Peter, whatsoever he recorded he wrote with great accuracy, but not, however, in the order in which it was spoken or done by our Lord, for he neither heard nor followed our Lord, but, as before said, was in company with Peter, who gave him such instruction as was necessary, but not to give a history of our Lord's discourses. Wherefore Mark has not erred in anything, by writing some things as he has recorded them; for he was carefully attentive to one thing, not to pass by anything that he heard, or to state anything falsely in these accounts. (Papias, An Interpretation of the Sayings of the Lord)*

The picture Papias paints has Mark collecting all he can about Jesus from Peter and then rearranging it – "not in the order in which it was spoken or done by our Lord" – into the book

we have now. As far as we know, Papias did not know Peter or Mark. He gets his info from an elder called John. Partly because of that remoteness, and partly because there might have been reasons for Papias to hope that this book somehow connected to one of the twelve disciples, some scholars doubt the veracity of his claim. Nonetheless, Christian tradition has it that an early Christian called Mark wrote it, and we will use “Mark” to talk about our author, both because it’s more convenient than “the author of the Gospel” and in respectful deference to early Christian tradition.

### ***In Search of the Audience***

Since we know that every Biblical document is one side of an exchange, that there is a target audience out there somewhere in the recesses of history, you and I have the pleasant task of some detective work. We get to ask who the people who first experienced this book were, what we can know about them, how they would have received it, and a whole lot of other questions we’d LOVE answers to. In this space, we’ll limit our sleuthing to two questions: where were they, and what was happening in their lives.

The discouraging first answer, of course, is that we don’t know exactly who our author meant to address with his (or her) words. As we begin, though, let’s take Papias seriously for a moment. If Papias and some other early Christian tradition is correct, then...

1. Mark got his info from the apostle Peter.
2. Peter lived the last years of his life in Rome, tradition tells us that he was ultimately crucified upside down during the Emperor Nero’s persecution of the Christians.

Let me repeat: We do not know that either of these things is true. But we will proceed with that Roman audience in mind, because it will

So what happens if we’re wrong? What happens if the author and audience actually lived in Syria or even Galilee? Rest assured that the things we learn in these weeks together will not become less valuable or less transformative if we reach the pearly gates and St. Peter says, “Er, I hate to break it to you, but the author of that Gospel you read was actually named Maria and she lived in Turkey.” I think we’ll be ok.

With that in mind, let’s call our author Mark and let’s search out that first presentation of his book on a back street of the city of Rome in the late 60s. Here’s what would have been in the newspapers as they met:

*"Therefore, to stop the rumor [that he had set Rome on fire], [Nero] falsely charged with guilt, and punished with the most fearful tortures, the persons commonly called Christians, who were [generally] hated for their enormities. Christus, the founder of that name, was put to death as a criminal by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea, in the reign of Tiberius, but the pernicious superstition - repressed for a time, broke out yet again, not only through Judea, - where the mischief originated, but through the city of Rome also, whither all*

*things horrible and disgraceful flow from all quarters, as to a common receptacle, and where they are encouraged. Accordingly, first those were arrested who confessed they were Christians; next on their information, a vast multitude were convicted, not so much on the charge of burning the city, as of "hating the human race."*

*In their very deaths they were made the subjects of sport: for they were covered with the hides of wild beasts, and worried to death by dogs, or nailed to crosses, or set fire to, and when the day waned, burned to serve for the evening lights. Nero offered his own garden players for the spectacle, and exhibited a Circensian game, indiscriminately mingling with the common people in the dress of a charioteer, or else standing in his chariot. For this cause a feeling of compassion arose towards the sufferers, though guilty and deserving of exemplary capital punishment, because they seemed not to be cut off for the public good, but were victims of the ferocity of one man."*

Tacitus, *The Annals of Rome* (Early 2<sup>nd</sup> Century)

Imagine Mark writing in the near aftermath of Peter's death under Nero. What questions would be in the room? What virtues would be required to live faithfully in this setting?

### **Envisioning the Premiere**

You and I are readers. According to the C.I.A.'s World Fact Book, the adult literacy rate in the U.S. these days is around 99%. So, when we read the Gospel of Mark, if we don't pause and imagine our way back to the first century, we naturally assume that the earliest Christians read it, too. We need to adjust our imaginations.

Like modern commuters or fitness buffs who earbud their Audible, most ancient people listened to their books. Roughly 10-15% of ancient Roman people could read at a basic level, according to the most authoritative studies of ancient literacy. (E.g., William Harris, *Ancient Literacy*). So if there were 40 people in the room as Mark's Gospel appeared for the first time (a decent guess), a mere 4 to 6 of them could read. Mark's Christians are used to listening well, and their few readers were used to reading out loud. Mark wrote the Gospel. His Christian brothers and sisters spoke and heard the Gospel. We continue that tradition whenever we read and listen to scripture performed orally.

### **Finish**

We've barely opened the book, and already we've got lots of questions. That's as it should be! Mark sprints into action here and so do we. As we move breathlessly through the Gospel, though, with all of its quickly-moving parts, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus' identity – and consider who Jesus is to you, too.

### **For Next Time...**

Observing the Opposition (Mark 1.16—3.34)

*One of the ways Mark reveals the character of Jesus is by his brushes with opponents: the demonic powers that swirl, the Jewish leaders who challenge, and the Roman rulers who ultimately sentence him. In this session, we'll watch Mark do this and see how his characterization of these opponents help us better understand his Jesus.*

Preparation:

- Read 1.16 through 3.34, paying special attention to how conflict characterizes both Jesus and his opponents. What motivates Jesus? What motivates the people who challenge him? How does
- Demons will play an important part as characters in this drama. How do these unseen evil forces compute in your post-Enlightenment, post-Scientific-Revolution mind?

I'll see you next Monday!