



THE GOSPEL OF MARK

A YALE BIBLE STUDY

with Allen Hilton

Session Four – Dealing with Daft Disciples

Open – Disciples for the '70s

Setting the Scene for Mark's Gospel

Within two decades after Jesus' death and resurrection in Jerusalem, a Christian evangelist started a small gathering of Christians in the great capital city of the Roman Empire. And, while the Gospel territory expansion map owes many of its scattered dots to the apostle Paul, we aren't sure who first preached in Rome. When Paul writes his long letter to the Roman church, he has still never touched foot in that great city, but he can greet a laundry list of Christians and a handful of house-church leaders he has met along the way of his mission.

When you and I began our shared journey through the Gospel of Mark, we decided we would, during this reading, give the benefit of the doubt to an early Christian called Papias. Do you remember? Papias is the earliest observer to comment on how we got this Gospel in the first place. He credits another guy called John the presbyter (elder) with several bits of info about Mark's process:

- Peter was Mark's source.
Mark being the interpreter of Peter, whatsoever he recorded he wrote with great accuracy,
- Mark ordered Jesus' episodes by his own design.
but not, however, in the order in which it was spoken or done by our Lord, for he neither heard nor followed our Lord,
- Peter gave Mark, not everything, but rather what he needed.
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.
- Mark was a trustworthy scribe.

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. . .

It is great to have this information from such an early voice, but in a way, Papias does more to spark than to satisfy our curiosity. Don't you want to ask follow-up questions? Like where, Papias? And when, Papias?

Because we don't get the place and time of Mark's writing from Papias, we are left to search out other clues.

Some sleuths place Mark in Rome because, while he writes his Gospel in Common Greek (the trade language of the empire), "Latinisms" sneak into his language. Some of these Latinisms include (Greek/Latin)

- 4:27 *modios/modius* (a measure),
- 5:9,15: *legiôn/legio* (legion),
- 6:37: *dênariôn/denarius* (a Roman coin),
- 15:39, 44-45: *kenturiôn/centurio* (both Matthew and Luke use *ekatontrachês*, the equivalent term in Greek).

This pattern by no means proves by itself that Mark wrote from Rome, though, so we need other clues.

Another clue: When we search Mark's trial and crucifixion scene to find who instigated Jesus' demise, the Jewish authorities of Jerusalem come off far more culpable than the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Mark lays much more emphasis on the intra-Jewish conflict than on Jesus being any threat to Rome. In fact, the Jewish population and even Jesus' Jewish disciples abandon Jesus in the wretched drama of the cross, leaving only a Roman soldier – the centurion at the cross – to "get it right" about Jesus. This emphasis may reflect a setting in the city of Rome, the power center of the Empire, in which it would endanger Mark and his audience if his villains were Roman.

Most telling, though, is the association with Peter that Papias suggests. Quite early Christian tradition places Peter in Rome.

- The Letter of Gaius (170-180 CE) tells the wondrous house church in Rome (which turned out to be on the site where St. Peter's Basilica still stands today).
- The *Acts of Peter* is a second-century Christian writing that chronicles Peter's sometimes fantastic feats while in Rome. These include Peter's mystical encounter with Jesus where Peter asks his master, "Quo Vadis?" (Where are you going?) This tradition led to the later construction of the Quo Vadis Church on that spot.
- By the end of the second century, Christians made pilgrimages to what was called the *trapaion* of Peter in Rome – a sort of memorial that celebrated the apostle.

Some scholars see all of this tradition as manufactured to build the reputation and power of the Roman church in the now-expanding Christianity of the empire. But that seems like a lot to expect, if there was never a historical basis for associating Peter with Rome.

Life as a Christian in Rome in the '60s

"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* (2nd Century)

How Do Mark's Disciples Help Mark's Church?

As we have read Mark with an eye for literary elements, we have seen that this author took care to characterize the Pharisees with ulterior motives for opposing Jesus – jealousy instead of law enforcement. Now let's see how he characterizes Jesus' disciples.

First, though, let's consider the stakes. Given Nero's persecutions above, let's imagine the crew that has gathered to hear Mark's Gospel read out for the first time. Within the last half decade, two of their strongest and most revered leaders, Peter and Paul, have been executed during Nero's persecutions in Rome. Surely, that scourge still haunts them. We can imagine them sneaking their way to worship, walking fearfully through the city toward their Christian host's home. They keep their head low and hope.

Additionally, adept powers and persecutors tend to cut off the head (i.e., leaders) so the general population will be less of a threat. (E.g., Babylon exiled the upper crust from Jerusalem.) If that happened in Rome, which is likely, the people in this room gather without a

whole generation of their leaders and models. They may feel like they are not up to the task of taking the baton from apostles.

What would people who have lost their leaders and doubt their own ability to lead be looking for as they listen to Mark's Gospel read out? And which of the characters we've encountered in Mark's story would they be watching most closely for help?

- Jesus
They will focus on Jesus in everything, of course. He's the center of their faith and of Mark's story. But it's likely they don't "see themselves" in the character of Jesus.
- Jewish Authorities
Nor do the opponents of Jesus, such as Pharisees, Scribes, Sadducees, and Priests appeal to them. The majority of this audience were likely non-Jews, as a few side comments of our narrator suggest. (E.g., while reporting Jesus' dispute with the Pharisees about purity laws, the narrator has to pause and fill the audience in on something a Jewish-Christian crowd would have known well: "(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.)" That means these folks aren't beset by old allegiances. The Jewish authorities have never been their leaders.
- Demons.
Satan and the evil powers probably fascinate them and surely scare them, but these certainly won't be their exemplars.
- Crowds.
The anonymous "crowd" that we noticed growing exponentially might be attractive to Mark's audience, because they seem to favor Jesus, and Jesus has helped many of them. But would have been difficult to see any sort of detailed example in the multitudes.

The one remaining major character is group of Jesus' disciples. For their own circumstances, the people in that crowded room where the Gospel is first read out seem most likely to watch those twelve closely for any hint of how followers of Jesus ought to act. They daily face the fearful aftermath of a brutal persecution. And since Nero and others have slandered and defamed the Christians, these Markan Christians have likely become somewhat notorious in Rome. Their neighbors look at them with suspicion. So, they might especially wonder what is it to follow Jesus faithfully when the heat is on?

The Disciples – Early, Middle, and Late

With this in mind, let's track the disciples as a character in this Gospel, from the moment when Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, James, and John along the shore of the Sea of Galilee until the dark days of Jesus' trial and crucifixion in Jerusalem to the empty tomb of Easter morning. We'll recount and look forward in very brief form, to remind ourselves of their comings and goings. Let's look at them in stages: early (chs. 1—5, middle (chs. 6—10), and late (chs. 11—16)

Early Days (1.1—5.43)

At the beginning, as they first encounter and soak up the marvels of Jesus, these followers seem mostly in awe of him.

- Jesus calls some of his disciples from their fishing boats (1.16-20), at least one from his tax stand (2.14), and most, it seems, from the midst of the large crowds who followed him when he sifts for his Top 12 (3.13-19) Mark shows us only five of the personal invitations, but from those we gather that Jesus did not have to ask twice.
- The disciples seem to follow him to all his “gigs”, so they get to observe teaching (1.21-22; 4.1-34, etc.), exorcisms (1.23-25; 3.19-30; 5.1-20), healings of all kinds (1.29-40; 2.1-11; 3.1-6; 5.25-34), the raising of a dead girl (5.35-43), and even the manipulation of nature when he stills the storm (4.35-41)
- They get early signs that Jesus won’t be unanimously praised when the Jewish leaders accuse him of hanging with the wrong kind of people (2.15-17), violating Sabbath (2.18—3.6) and getting his power from Satan. (3.20-30) But in all three cases, their guy seems to win the debate.
- Watching all this, the disciples begin to ask who this mysterious, powerful man is, a natural question that we only hear explicitly after the stilling of the storm: “Who is this then, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (4.41)

For the frightened, faithful folk in Mark’s audience, these early-days disciples may have functioned as proxies through whom they could have their breath taken away vicariously. And if we were grading the disciples, they do well. They answer Jesus’ call, they watch him closely, he gives them a private audience for insider info on the parables. The only demerit, really, comes when they let the storm at sea scare them: “Why are you afraid?” Jesus asks. “Have you still no faith?”

All in all, though, the early returns are encouraging. So far, so good.

The Middle Period (6.1—10.52)

The next section features fewer wonders and more frequent windows into the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. It becomes clear that the disciples have attained a level of comfort with time. In this second stage, the disciples are willing to ask Jesus direct questions and even to disagree with him.

Sadly for the disciples (and for the audience?), in this stretch of road the disciples’ IQ or JQ (Jesus quotient) starts to descend. All of this happens as the first signs of opposition and danger begin to appear. Let’s listen.

- They Get to Fly Solo.
In a big win, the disciples do exceedingly well at field education. Jesus sends them out to do some of the things he has been doing, and they get high marks: “They went out and

proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.” (6.12-13)

- Jesus’ Salutary Power Continues.
The disciples see another brilliant sign of Jesus’ power over nature when he feeds 5,000 people with a few loaves and fish (6.30-44), walks across the top of the sea (6.45-52), and then feeds 4,000 people. He also continues to heal here, there, and everywhere in Gennesaret (6.55-56), for a Gentile woman (7.24-30), with deaf (7.31-37) and blind men. (8.22-26) And more! God even shows up at the Transfiguration to tell Peter and James and John, “This is my beloved Son. I’m pleased with him. Listen to him!” (9.2-8)
- Opposition to Jesus Grows.
They watch Jesus face his first public rejection, when his hometown synagogue throws him out. (6.6) Then they likely heard the chilling news that Herod executed John the Baptist. (6.14-29) Conflict escalates when the Pharisees and Scribes also pounce on Jesus a bit because his disciples don’t wash their hands correctly and he jumps back at them. (7.1-23) Jesus even warns the disciples of the Pharisees’ negative impact. (8.14-21)
- Jesus Foretells His Fate
Three times in three chapters, Jesus tells in increasing detail of his coming demise at the hands of opponents. (8.31-33; 9.30-32; 10.32-34)

In preparation for our session, give the disciples your own grade in this section. How do you assess their response to Jesus in the Middle Period?

The Last Week

Though we will not cover the last week in this session, we will remember together the disciples’ dissembling under the pressure of Jerusalem opposition in chapters 14—16.

- Judas will betray Jesus. (14.10-11, 43-45)
- In Gethsemane, all of Jesus’ disciples will forsake him and flee. (14.50)
- Peter will deny Jesus three times. (14.66-72)
- None of the twelve disciples will show up at the cross. (All of ch. 15)
- When the tomb is empty on Sunday morning, the women show up...and then run away scared and silent. (16.1-8)

The Impact of the Disciples’ Failings

You probably offer the same verdict of generations of readers for the disciples: D- would be charitable. But how would all this failure of faith have on the part of their heroes impact that first audience of Mark’s Gospel? Especially as they have looked closely and keenly for some clues about faithfulness, how do you expect they felt after 16.8 and the Gospel’s end?

We will discuss all this in our session. Thanks for your preparations!

For Next Time

Who is Jesus and How Do We Follow Him? (Mark 8.22—10.52)

Insights on leadership sell. Our bookstores and newsfeeds host a constant flow of gurus holding forth on the topic. Given the feeble, faithful disciples we recognized last week, Jesus could have fired them all and started over. Instead he formed them, and 8.22 through 10.22 give us a window into that process. This is a GREAT session for anyone who really wants to learn what it is to follow Jesus.

Preparation:

- Read Jesus' three "passion predictions" in Mark 8.22-33; 9.30-37; and 10.32-40. What do you notice about the disciples' level of comprehension? How does Jesus' reflection on discipleship in 8.34-38 matter for each of the other two times that he talks about his death?
- How does Jesus picture leadership for his disciples in Mark 10.41-45? How does it compare to the way leadership goes in the world around them?
- You've probably played the kids' game, "If Aladdin showed up and gave you one wish, what would it be?" Mark's Jesus plays Aladdin with James and John (in Mark 10.36) and the Blind Bartimaeus (10.51). What do you think of their answers?